

Anastasia

A Novel by

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PART ONE

Through a glass, darkly...

1 Corinthians 13:12

ONE

Vassily Sergeevich Ablesimov stared out at the full moon from his spare office on the second floor of the durable, well aged dacha, which was rumoured to have guest-housed some of the last Tzarina's favourites, including one megalomaniacal monk. Once again the power had cut out and the moon-lit snow below his window shimmered against a raven night. It was at such times, when his vigilant sleepless world nodded, leaving him more or less invisible, that reality seemed to reassert itself. The regional electric grid would be a time restarting, and the darkness conferred an insular sobriety he savoured. He could imagine some of his ancestors looking on, with mainly sad, yet merciful if not comprehending expressions. Did he then yearn for release? For a beneficent demise, the 'good death' a growing number of devoted progressives esteem? Was he, in these the peak years of his loyal and proficient service to the GRU, the dark jewel in the large reptilian head of Russian Intelligence, at last having second thoughts? Why, for instance, did he seek out this spartan office space in the old dacha, rather than remain in his trig office in the GRU's headquarters? He would not have been inconvenienced there as he was now. His late assignment, ascertaining the recent puzzling behaviour of an exceptional 'illegal' in the United States, whom he helped train, required his own space, he said. The skein of rumours would be less, speculation kept muted for a specified time. General Myshin reluctantly agreed, but had not officially sanctioned the alternate work space. Vassily would be on his own for the onerous period, the time needed to assess the late product, behaviour and longterm worth of the illegal. By doing so he was touching a razor's edge, dealing with a new, keen apprehension that belaboured trust. That his once prized illegal, one of three such exemplars, could now be a liability left him sorely vexed. The venerable planning, trust, camaraderie might be scuttled...indeed, being a former battle tank commander, the imputation of duplicity, betrayal from such a one came as an

unanticipated armour piercing shell: an inner ricochet and evisceration. Intrusive, jarring, suspicious thoughts couldn't, like an actual battle tank, wifferrill, hull down, face hug, cut and spin. Or flee!

Sadly there was more. As there often was in that contentious time.

In addition to his now enigmatic illegal, he also faced the newfangled dilemmas posed by the recent touting of glasnost and perestroika, the chi-chi creeds some pompous party mavens believed would allow a greater measure of freedom for Russian citizens, a wider remit and warrant for, yes, even the likes of — he winced here — the denizens of the criminal states, so active since the decline of central power, dominated by a sordid alliance of the ever opportunistic nomenclatura with the mafia, now trafficking in: stolen data encryptions, cipher modes and algorithms, particularly pertaining to Western business and governments, rare earth metals, identity theft, elaborate business scams, frantic asylum hopefuls and newly debilitating drugs — gigs for about three out of ten Russians Vassily soberly estimated. A new plutocracy on steroids — which had provoked a new 'enlightened' communism, seduced he felt by the West's late woke liberalism! The metaphysical Covid. Sometime ago Vassily came upon the phrase 'touched by genius', which was used, supposedly, to flatter an American entrepreneur. The phrase had amused Vassily, for 'touched' in idiomatic English, also meant barmy, hubristic. Today's reformers were so 'touched' he felt, enamoured of entitlement magnanimity, such that they had wildly extemporized its mandate. Now the plodding Russian Federation seemed susceptible to such fustian, such that a new frothy credulity had emerged, a rising tide that hid a cold slippery shore.

Here Vassily paused and stared at the ghostly snow. How inane to think that 'glasnost and perestroika' might ever have placated the suspicious taciturn Russian Bear! The toffy ideas sat as wryly on his sleeve as love buttons. President Gorbachev, the late toffy impresario, seemed then an auteur right out of an American film studio. Cosmetic phrases like 'eye shadow' always entertained — Vassily's key vocabulary reduced to greasepaint. The new exhortation became a canonical creed. "The Russian people want a new openness and transparency. It is a turning point, a watershed." What rubbish. Any spy — and what Russian was not a wily wary sleuth? — who expected such openness and transparency was an idiot. Vassily could have bit through a nail at that moment. And yet the hoary snow kept telling him of something else, something about his love of strength and acuity; of being one who valued acumen and selfless courage in this restless, subversive era. And the insight had little or no PR potential.

A recent ironic and reoccurring dream seemed to play to him alone. In it he stood before the authorities in an afterlife. They resembled the Party Faithful, not the airy beings he might have imagined. He was to be rewarded with a special prize and sensed a forgotten euphoria. He had been a decent citizen in a frequently indecent community, had not become disgruntled when the later fortunes of his career sidestepped his worth, while yet serving his comrades with distinction — and most knew it. He had given his only son to the wretched war in Afghanistan and remained almost faithful to his wife of thirty-one years, a woman he worked at tolerating, except during their early amorous liaison that led directly to their marriage. She too, he knew, had faced down disappointment and shunned despair. Occasionally content they stood by one another, and a stable and trusted unit of society survived. Now, in this bonus afterlife, he was to be commensurately rewarded. The Party Secretary came forward, shook his hand, gave him a medal, then beckoned to a figure in the audience. Vassily's wife emerged, with her characteristic lapsed smile. The Secretary took her hand, joined it

with her husband's, and pronounced them forever inseparable...

The cold barren aura of the snow seized Vassily's vision: he and his patient forbearing wife had fooled all, and now an eternity gaped before them. He sensed that only in the current miasma might such pathos intrude, such unctuous fumbling. Planning the thrust, the sally, ever duelling with feral circumstance, is the sane man's salvation! Benevolence, empathy, grievance the female habit. Tell that to the new ameliorists!

He then returned to the matter at hand, thinking in the seamless darkness of the late communiqué on his computer that had ushered in his dour mood that night. Anna Anastasia Karolovna Kniažnin, 'Zia to intimates, operational alias Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, mathematician and remote sensing expert who worked at the American Paleomena computer research complex — the best of his select smart 'illegals' — had not activated her minder's private message server for many weeks. This assigned minder was unable to arrange a routine briefing over a period of over two months, and Vassily was revisiting her last info drops — all top drawer — when the lighting in the dacha failed. As yet there was no word of an accident or defection, which he would secretly welcome, for as such she would be in some ways quantifiable, even predictable; but as a void — she had simply disappeared — she became an unknown risk, the kind of risk the GRU sometimes shared with the newly busy SVR...a fact that seemed to make the dark room colder than usual.

Frieda was the last of the four illegals he had in the past decade meticulously groomed for placement in the United States, and all these, including Frieda, were partly educated, even adroitly indoctrinated in, and largely at the expense of, the great United States itself — the net result of a recruitment and training program he had perfected. The Marxist 'empathy' in America's Ivy League universities provided a sustaining reinforcement for the concept of a Fabian-style socialist mentality. His former GRU boss delighted in the end results and duly informed the appropriate crony in the Politburo. As a result Vassily was awarded a rare citation (to select insiders the Rabkin Star, after Lenin's love-child), a recently instituted accolade for senior GRU officers that conferred a handsome subsidy to one's retirement — if one was still officially valued at the time. Part of that likelihood might rest with the newly enigmatic Frieda.

But Vassily was then transfixed less by prospects of pragmatic acknowledgement, than his own recent ideological consternation, which was shadowed by the possible turning or duplicity of this pre-eminent protégé. It seemed an omen, sullyng his last will and testament to his Maker, for he believed finally in an observant but stern Deity — One that might forgive if not sanction a flinty pragmatic life. A belief sullied by a newly dour solicitude.

As he sat in the dark, moonlight pearling the skin of his large steely hands, now interlocked upon his desk, his mind bearishly sought out the early scenes of 'Zia's spotting and recruitment — including the initially overlooked hazard, the minefield of the younger half-sister, Zoya Yakovlena Stolbanov, who parodied 'Zia's earnest dedicated genius with a rambunctiousness and inspired delinquency that became something of a legend in certain quarters of the Civic Activity Department of the FSB. Blat she had, must have had, vested in one or two influential apparatchiki, revelations he belatedly, sorely learned of...yet Vassily's mind leapfrogged that impediment, which he had overcome at the time by assuring the diffident recruitment overseers that 'Zia was a rare find, despite her family, and shouldn't be overlooked! Now he revisited the promontory where an overview of 'Zia's, Frieda's, early life lay open. He always worried he might have missed something that would have forewarned him of

vulnerable traits in his candidates. Ironically, Zoya's antics may have served at the time to sharpen 'Zia's perception of betrayal, of disloyalty to Holy Rodina. As the proverb says: a person without a Motherland is like a nightingale without a song: the choice between mundane truth, everyday pravda, and reverential istina. The social disparity was great: Zoya's father was a dishonourably discharged border guard, Anastasia's, a decorated intelligence officer killed in Afghanistan; the mother of both children a distraught idealist and eventual influential, worrisome dissident. As he sifted through the vivid recollections (again!) he could retrieve no dissimulation, no psychological tic, no tell-tale thread of circumstance that might hint at a betrayal now. And from the time of her indenture with service tutors, indeed, as a condition of her admission, she was sequestered from her restive family, including the later deviant japes of her half-sister, thus eliminating all input from that clever delinquent — who would remain in Russia when Frieda went abroad. Vassily's new boss, appointed that summer, had duly commented on the dual anomaly: the abnormality of recruitment of a *female* — from an *unstable* family! But even the flinty Lieutenant-General Myshin knew the difficulty in finding able promising agents, especially illegals, when the intelligence community was so implacably hated and feared, due in part to its own distrust of amiability, and the late Ballet Master's success in making life less factual, knowable, predictable for working stiff, apprehensive aparats and oligarchs, older academics, petty and mega-corp crooks, let alone village crones selling to fewer tourists their pitiful handful of raw cucumbers. General Myshin was likely envious of his assistant's oddly auspicious record and said his peace, for the record; otherwise Vassily doubted the General possessed any documentable reason to distrust or attempt to compromise his heterodox colleague, notwithstanding the portable suspicion that a particularly able deputy could upstage his boss if the latest 'costume mistress' fancied another scene change...

As was his habit of late, Vassily did not complete the thought. Perhaps he was losing his acuity and nerve, in his old non golden age. It was at such times that the American conservative kept him wryly animated. You have your provocative market panoply with its invidious advertising, and your topical duel with the new do-gooders who would reprove, even handicap, disproportionate ability; we continue to brook mediocrity, humble demanding work, and a second-hand pair of sneakers...at least until consumerism's frenzied 'peacetime' puts everyone in the trenches. Yet he knew the American conservative was not so pessimistic. One man's folly was another's vitalization. Intellectual and aesthetic squalor both were indices of freedom. At times it seemed so egregiously simple...but for the many pretty extravagant, extortionate images of 'things as they might be', in the new seductive wonder world. The 'Come Kingdom' one wag called it. Where whiners and deviants were indulged, humoured — even, in some cases, anticipating reparations, in the new woke America.

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

But was there an alternative? To the entitlement juggernaut — the fond retooling of reality? He even had difficulty finding words to describe the new audacious expectations.

In short, Vassily Sergeevich firmly believed 'bleeding heart' mitt readers to be history's resurgent mischief makers. Not so long ago it was the unimpeachable habit of Party expedience: the tribal

belief that arduous exaction sustained conscientious effort. Where there was no plan and no broadly accepted or endured governance, license held sway. What consumer culture had ever been accountable except unto its wily instigators? And what, in the modern fated fishbowl, but a slave, will do the exacting, unjolly, poorly remunerative toil? Not likely the new vengeful revisionists.

If the gospel of mastery was no longer read...he and his fellows would soon be extinct.

TWO

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

But where were the people?

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

But confusion cribbed even this assessment. The riders passed by before he decided the water afforded the more reasonable alternative. The blithe cautionary words of the cyclists further confounded. "Head up for the huffers!" the one loudly urged, seconded by the other. The sprightly phrase was meaningless, leaving Louis finely confused. Some kind of warning? Here? He was a universe away from an answer when a strange rumble touched his ears. His sense of panic returned and with it astonishment as a herd of fleshy steaming gals descended the gauntlet of the seawall, all but squeezing him into the sea. Runners! All female, or so he initially surmised, all in earnest, and most, after a few seconds elapsed while he concluded he would live a few minutes more, pudgy, peaky and grim featured. He was surely stolidly dreaming. Were there no *orchids*, *tulips*, even *sweet peas*, in this northern clime?...

He found himself looking over the field with a sore comfortless vigilance: women he liked more than food, which he relished, but could find not a single form he might excuse this loutish near-nakedness — bodies never in the gods' more Nemesis-fraught dreams to be looked on uncovered. Where is the bloody censor when you need one? To escape to a northern clime only to be plowed under by a herd of mainly heaving grimbo biddies — of the gender he ever believed Nature's best

shot. He looked upon the throng with growing wonder. He clung to his square foot of seawall and for the first time in his life felt little inclination to lift either of the two cameras slung about his neck and record what a promotional verbal description might have prompted him rising at almost any hour to see (in this case a clement YWCA sponsored run, in which less conditioned runners — those overweight, and/or with smaller oxygen transference capacity — were given a judicious head start).

All his life he had assiduously photographed what instinct told him were inspired variations of La Masterpiece — when not photographing, at least striving to: trendy pop bands, naughty fashions, snazzy bikes and motorcars, free-wheeling celebrities (their pals, pads, parties) seductive foods, sleek ships, immodest objets d'art, and other dishy items that form the quarry of the hopeful plodding freelance photographer. He was on the point of despair — in his final moments on earth venting the craven injunction, Woman Clothe Thyself! — when he did spot some creatures who would be forgiven the brief attire. His optimism rallied. Soon he counted half-a-dozen — and more on the way. He decided to cling to the dry land and display a becoming accord. He even fingered the nearest camera. One of the later lithesome runners even smiled at him. Unquestionably an engaging smile. Providence.

Else-wise, health and gracile beauty were subjects in his philosophy that begged for acquittal from the modern rebuke of undeserved fortune. Redolent scent and lithe bloom he savoured as much as any self-regarding connoisseur, and adamantly felt only dewy, sleek, and splendidly proportioned creatures might be publicly aired in states of raffish and sporty undress, and only when at least two observers were present, one to affirm the other's witness, like all dedicated birdwatchers. Naturally he kept these fond notions to himself, certainly amidst the present throng, where his peculiar sense of beauty and decorum would likely not earn him the square foot of earth he desperately clung to.

The runners had sporadically thinned, coming then in smaller groups, sometimes even twos and threes when, Lo and Behold, before him ranged the amber-haired beauty who emphatically had, in the traffic of happenstance, so recently garbled his life, left him in a mare's nest! She sped by as decisively and assuredly as any feature performer, even looked up at him, or rather his cameras, with a detachment, a non-recognition that spooked. She was several yards beyond him before he had her framed and cued his camera's motor drive to document her fluent movement. If she appeared a little more poised, aloof, or more trigly attired than the creature he remembered with such distress, he could not at that moment deny a jarring similarity. Several seconds later he began to consider the likelihood of a deceptive coincidence, a fluke look-alike say, or possibly his own unreliable (at that juncture) nervous system. Was the curiosity *not* to be a bit unhinged, at that time?

His stray life had been nearly tolerable — the customary mixture of boredom and anticipation which he likened to the thrifty rabbit stew: one horse to one rabbit, the rabbit the anticipation — until he chanced to fall into the orbit of a Russian dynamo named Zita. Because of her he had allowed himself to be drawn into what now seemed a very daunting, if not parlous, ruse.

Late one afternoon two laconic, grey-flannel gents came to his studio in North Hollywood with a commission to alter, in subtle yet highly consequential ways, a series of markedly futuristic illustrations. Some backdrops, skylines, costumes and vehicles were to be given more contemporary looks for a new, graphic novel. Sly piracy was of course a norm in that age. In addition to the scenic alterations, he was asked to photograph a young Russian hoyden name Zita, whose entry status to the U.S. he never

did learn, and interpolate her into several of the scenes as a principle character. At first he was warily intrigued, for the scenes were awesomely elegant, even, he supposed, eschatological. Using a series of litho masks on a two tier register easel, to soften some edging — a technique he had long tinkered with — he managed to interpolate a medley of less futuristic but still engaging images into the awesome scenes. He was just then sorting out the essentials of Adobe Photoshop, yet hadn't abandoned his proved retouching techniques, particularly setting new images into other images.

But as he began the work he became haunted by the originals, by what they might represent. He had never seen more arresting, exquisitely detailed pics, none of which had the precious imperious look of a sci-fi film set, which they yet slyly intimated. He could find no forthcoming movies, in or out of Hollywood's rostrum, that showcased scenes like them; nor could he think of a writer, in his small science fiction library, for whom they might serve as illustrations. The original scenes were unsigned, likely computer generated, but with a line-screen compactness — under a magnifier — that seemed greater than that offered by current programs. The enigmatic Zita — he now recalled — simply shrugged at his lingering wonder; publicity of any kind she coveted. "Is already summertime, okay?" Fall — the herald of old age — not far beyond for this career hustler he assumed. Queries of his retainers drew practiced smiles and the brief storyline of a realistic graphic novel. More characters were to be interpolated in due course. But once the early scenes were completed and delivered he felt distraught, strangely perplexed. Then, as if by decree — an anonymous admonitory phone caller. At first he imagined the caller had a wrong number, but for edgy detailed reproofs of some illustrations.

And now, the same allegro creature who last posed for him a fortnight ago, loped by without a smidgeon of greeting or recognition. It seemed but one more premonition, that included, before he hastily departed Los Angeles, his apprehension in dealing with possible wildcat patrons, an anonymous, menacing phone caller — even, of late, the suspected surveillance of himself and his studio! A week after he delivered his initial work, on a lax, forgetful night out, two goons hauled him off a busy street into an alleyway, where a police cruiser suddenly fortuitously emerged at the opposite end. To his rescuers, two taciturn officers, he gave a sketchy description of his attackers but could offer no motive or explanation other than ready thievery. He did look that night a little spiffy. The officer's concern mimicked indifference anyway, before the usual street mayhem. No authority subsequently called — only the husky anonymous phone voice that repeatedly urged him to lay off. The warning in the calls both perplexed and alarmed. His voyeuristic vicarious life seemed to magnify the menace. Vividly he recalled a childhood bully who made an entire school season a protracted hell, the stark memory of which chilled the phone calls.

The following week he left on a crash vacation. Only later, as he drove through the fresh coastal vistas of Oregon, did he wonder at the coincidence of the officers' arrival, even imagined some kind of shadowing — but from whom and for what? The officers' interest lapsed on learning he'd not been hurt. Their very passivity insinuated complicity in his then fevered imagination. That anxiety let up somewhat when he arrived at the border, at the quiet orderly green expanse of the Peach Arch Park near Blaine, Washington. But now, as the young runner disappeared beyond a turn in the Stanley Park Seawall, he felt again the wrenching dismay, also a newfound resentment. What could it all mean? Was the sly alteration of exceptional art work a travesty? Possibly. But for whom? The dissuasive phone caller remained a worry. He suspected his mind was in overdrive, yet the haunt wouldn't let up. He turned and quickly headed up to the much lauded Ferguson Point Tea Room that outlooked scenic

English Bay. Select food was often a reliable respite.

Then, on returning to LA, he was for a time undisturbed. He worked, sulked, and drank between infrequent but satisfactory trysts with Cody, his on-off girlfriend, a resilient cabaret performer who generally kept him upbeat. She imagined herself the incarnation of a celebrated Egyptian queen whose name he could never pronounce, a silver dollar sized icon of whom had been intricately tattooed onto her hip, almost as a clinician might mark the greater trochanter or outer hip bone. The symbol remained aloof against the spare pharaonic costumes she doffed at the Nekhbet cabaret, where she performed with a Czech gypsy and his coterie of smelly snakes. Louis had attempted to keep his late anxiety to himself, though Cody sensed his unease. He wasn't good at dissembling. A stray apprehensive dog seeking a home, a safe doghouse, was his usual, diverting 'cover' story.

"Some homebody," she said one evening, thinking perhaps of his recent bearishness, as she sat before her dresser mirror applying the Egyptian wedjat motif to sky blue eyes. She dressed at home for her first show. "Makes your arrival a somo event," she claimed. From the eyes, lips were deftly brushed into a crimson wound then, after vetting the finished face, she matter-of-factly began fastening small plastic menats to her wide nipples, the circlet eye of full low-slung breasts. She stood, cannily assessing face and torso in her bedroom's full length wall mirror, dandling in her hand a small replica of the famous Rebus pectoral, which would cover not her sternum but pinkish loin, still an exclusive patch of wispy blond curls against sun-burnished thighs. An also ran Miss America. She gave the menats a slight twirl. "About all the fun and games you can handle tonight, I think," she said, candidly eying him. In his fretful state he stoically agreed. But she told him to cool it: a red-headed stud she called the Orange Julius man, a recent Herculean regular at the club, had been highly entertaining and she wasn't going to work that night with a 'seasonal worrywart' pulling on her menats. He laughed at this. In turn she suggested he needn't wait up. "Take a Lunesta!" she drolly advised.

But he could hardly sleep. All mental energy seemed then unsparing. He was both chagrined and loath to think she might be at risk as well. To lose her, and her ready lissome teasing, would be unbearable. His selfishness seemed the one constant as his anxiety mushroomed. Was he going mad, seeing phantoms his own imagination conjured?

Then he began to sweat over — the Orange Julius man! Was Cody going to serve some kind of intrigue after all — innocently, willingly? Stealthily? Was Orange Julius but another of the area's seaboard hulks, an ominous enforcer say? Like a cagey player's attention coalescing on a game board, he began to collate stray events, prompting an intrusive hunch. Vividly he recalled seeing her Funny Girl outfit hastily shed when her agent unexpectedly booked her into Anteros's snake show that week. Was she not enthused by the sudden change in act? After a surly silent debate he got up, briskly dressed for a night out and, like the faithful mongrel he was, promptly followed her to the once elegant club where she was scheduled to perform within the hour.

As the taxi whispered down a section of Hollywood Boulevard, he sensed at-a-distance the visceral exhilaration of anarchy, where menace edged a gamesome scene. Where speedy elusive flight was the norm, whether from or to didn't much matter. Cruising was the intransigent, hypnotic all. Your eyes pulled you about like a kite — else you crashed.

The cabaret, named the Nekhbet, after the vulture Goddess of Upper Egypt, was planned and built as an exclusive club, but the well-heeled patrons came infrequently and the original owner, a mysterious importer, leased the space to another, who kept the place packed, at least on weekends, by

catering to the area's jaded drop-ins: randy salesmen, agog tourists, office dog bodies shunning home-sweet-home, stray cops, glazed groupies, a handful of untidy tipplers, and a few mannered observers of human decadence, like himself — a small but reliable crowd. And it was here that antiquarian minded Cody, who had been seduced by the promise of the place, exhumed the anointed marvels of herself to the omnivorous voyeurs.

The original club had been lavishly appointed and Louis, who usually welcomed pagan extravagance, was pained to see yet another banquet cushion with an ugly tear or stain, the elegant crystal drops of the chandeliers, shaped like Selkets, dwindling, the gradual deterioration of the once gilded restrooms into prosaic bogs and, worst of all, the sad comeliness of some of the performers who, like Cody, abided the naked damp, routine sleaze and irregular pay, a nosey kleptomaniac magician, and, currently, an irredeemable feature act, filled by an Eastern European gypsy named Anteros, whose snakes visited without noticeable enthusiasm the considerable attractions of his partner's venerable, taut, exercised body. It was Cody's infatuation with Egyptian arcana that gave the act a smidgeon of anticipation. A makeup artist at Universal with whom she sometimes slept for cocaine, loaned her a realistic sinuous replica of a cobra for her act. She performed with this theatre cobra behind a large half hexagon of plate glass — for the audience's protection the marquee said — on a dimly lit stage. The ineffable Anteros, garishly made up as an Egyptian pharaoh, 'cued' the snake with some portentous mumbo jumbo, and a small winch hidden in the cabaret ceiling that lifted the reptile into a menacing coil, via a thin wire attached to a disguised hook in the snake's makeshift hood. Eventually the snake disappeared behind a pedestal mounted cylindrical crown of Lower Egypt, the sacred uraeus on its forehead. Thereafter Anteros donned the crown while a transpired Cody, fatally bitten by the cobra in a late sudden strike, lay on a marble bier where an immature python slid over her munificent torso, while the portentous Anteros conspicuously laid out an assortment of sinister embalming instruments, including a scalpel, with which he drew a crimson line on Cody's torso as black-out lighting darkened the stage.

As Louis approached the Nekhbet's timeworn pillared entrance, a low moon loomed as a lurid tangerine bauble, owing to an unusual dispersion of pollutants into the troposphere that week, its phosphorescence unduly haunting with Cody's mention of the 'Orange Julius man' resounding in his head. The large bulky doorman, attired in the acicular crown of Upper Egypt, pleated kilt, loin apron and heavy garish pectoral, smiled luminously as he sought the door's large brass handle. Some nights, like this night, he pretended he could barely open the massive door, suggesting that Louis maybe wasn't welcome in the Nekhbet that night, thus absolving the ancients of all ancillary blame. He lamely smiled at the doorman.

Inside the club, his eyes active in the dim light, Cody's act with the flinty Anteros seemed imminent. The last of the interact dancers gathered sections of their moulted costumes. A faint musty smell clung to the place, and this night Louis was teased by a glass eyeball of remarkably realistic design staring up at him from an empty martini glass on the table he sought a seat at. The dancer coming toward the table, clutching wispy strands of sequinned fabric against her ceramic nakedness, smiled at the table's appreciative patrons, then gamely winked at him as she fetched the eyeball, only to raptly stare at it before popping it into her mouth! The prompt laughter from her onlookers suggested they keenly savoured this performer, whether or not they shared in an 'eye popper' pun — a prospect Louis mulled over, given his sedulous regard of a performer attuned to such drollery, as well as her

appreciative audience.

THREE

An old dark Zil limo propelled Vassily Sergeevich toward the unwelcome meeting with his Department Head, to join the official enquiry into the sudden disappearance of Frieda Van Eerden (the exceptional Anastasia Kniažnin) — and what form a reincarnation might take. Her absence seemed to parody glasnost itself, certainly the accessibility it touted. He then recalled Alexei Simonov's comment about glasnost being a tortoise crawling towards free speech. Not unlike the Catholic Church 'opening up', 'coming clean', thinking it had but a few pedophilic priests...akin to his own Party 'prelates' slighting their own dirty laundry. To pander to glasnost, the select if not open airing of social and political issues, which often incited raw complaint, flouted realpolitik. What had such resolve actually accomplished in the U.S. but a rebuke if not hatred of perceived privilege, innate 'undeserved' fortune, and an unprecedented rancorous division of the entire country? What culture had ever accommodated, let alone honoured, its vindictive, sanctimonious malcontents. My god, the necromantic Egyptians had more respect for wisdom!

Vassily particularly reproved the spiel of the modern, newly militant egalitarians, stumping now for wholesale entitlement nostrums. In his mind, adversity baptized the survivor, who might then be sanguinely acknowledged. Economics too he believed hopelessly convoluted. Only the resourceful might get things done; the rest made speeches, then coiled like adders to spit their virulence when slighted. He was of course in an emotive press that evening and, given his distemper at the moment, which he must keep to himself, solemnly willfully continued thus: Without a supreme central-government acumen a nation disintegrates; witness the chronic inability of the U.S. to check its subversive conspiracy mavens, so bent were they on facilitating a dramatic cultural revision if not aggrandizement, which American exhibitionism helped spawn. Yes, the serpent had escaped its Genesis — and peddled notions like glasnost, perestroika and uskorenje — in essence: envy, invective, and ants-in-the-pants! So onward Western love mongers — but leave my Anastasia alone! Give us a Eucharist that reads like the front page of Pravda and enshrines the doltishness of popularity. Onward American scandal ferrets. The free-wheeling media arena is the temple of suave gossipy know-it-alls. The exotic dung ball for all aspiring maggots. Happy days!

As we've duly noted — without respite! — Vassily Sergeevich was in a solemn careworn state. The overwhelming need throughout his life, beginning with one of the colossal blunders in radiation containment, which he witnessed firsthand and might yet perish by, was his measure of propriety — essentially, he flattered himself, the Republican Roman's attributes of pietas, officium, constantia, disciplina, industria, virtus, frugalitas, communitas — the legacy of his reincarnations, his mos maiorum (time-honoured principles), from which the fruits of civilization precariously flowered. Ideologues, like thugs with exotic tastes, were proud, chameleonic, subtly perfumed, and endowed with faulty synapses — badly in need of a lesson in humility, from a church that once knew its place, the care of only begotten souls, the church he willed when he listened to Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov and fretted over his vocation. That he might be so intimidated then was a further unwelcome encumbrance.

So, as the wide grizzled ice and snow of the Moskva River appeared beyond his window, briefly interrupted by some antic padlock-infested wire fences, Vassily Sergeevich wondered what his boss

would confront him with and how he would fare in the cross questioning. But unlike the wary habit of many colleagues, this was not the ordeal to agonize over. He had done his best at the time, his conscience was clear. If the humanly flawed, convoluted authority of the Party was to lash out when it periodically uncoiled itself, he must, would be, ready. Russia remained, despite its late, much touted gambol in ‘openness’, a study in the ordination, the ethos and sobriety of *severitas*: this he had ever acknowledged, particularly in the dead of winter.

General Myshin stood behind his large oak desk, rocking gently back and forth on his heels. An aide saw Vassily comfortably seated, urbanely noted Putin’s growing support from older politburo members, then poured Vassily a glass of Ararat brandy — a match of the general’s. *Comitas punctilio* Vassily thought; a lot at stake then. The General’s army uniform was impeccable, his handsome features a movie producer’s dream. Now, if he were just eight inches taller Vassily thought somewhat churlishly, and a little more knowledgeable of the many straining cultures that Russian Federation minders often crudely, but not pointlessly, sought to delouse...the tics and crotchets of ethnic groups became bloody when you scratched them repeatedly, as a child might a ripe mosquito bite. What better way to recruit, burn, or suborn the marginal member — a mutual infection! One of the timeless dynamics too often dismissed as crudely reductive.

“I’m grateful you came promptly, comrade. We have much to sort out and little time.”

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

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

Vassily said without hesitation, “I can think of no perplexity evident in her last report. Her radar and remote sensing product was always keenly anticipated and valued. As you know, I’m not in agreement with the policy of leaving our younger agents in place for an indefinite duration.”

“You wish perhaps to institute a re-evaluation of operational protocol with your former superior?”

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

“Not in this weather.”

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

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

Again Vassily was ready. “Not much. Frieda — ‘Zia — was often embarrassed. But her family happily receded when she began field agent training. She stayed then with a commendable uncle, a former warrant officer. I suspect Zoya’s gamy father was even relieved to see the back of her. Her mother too perhaps, knowing the stigma a child of hers might inherit.”

General Myshin looked up with a diffident calm upon his lieutenant. “Your office is perhaps poorly informed about late developments. Zoya Yakovlena has been missing a month ago today. She

vanished the same day she attacked a patron in the London club she performed in. The club, the Apsara, is one of Kissy Borozov's plush cabarets. Her disappearance, which roughly coincides with your illegal's recent silence, cannot be slighted. Her devious habits and rumoured association with senior party cadres are a concern."

For Vassily the void quickly teamed with creatures, and the comment that had lingered in his mind over prolonged assignments — keeping agents in place more or less indefinitely — promptly abandoned. The concurrence of Frieda's silence and her stepsister's disappearance was a knotty coincidence. What was not unusual was the Cheka information network being highly selective in communicating sudden cautionary occurrences. Vassily merely nodded and quietly added, "The two were never close. Antagonistic might be closer to the mark. She would hardly know the particulars of 'Zia's deployment in any case."

"Unfortunately, there is more."

Vassily drank in silence.

"In brief — the illusive Zoya may have left with information contained in a security file. Someone has been exceedingly careless. So I am told, 'in house'. It would be preferable for both of us if you can reflect and corroborate any anxiety you had relating to our esteemed agent." Vassily smiled at the wording. Myshin continued to look a bit coerced. Still, he used the possessive pronoun 'our', adding, "Thus far the Neighbours know only of the dancer's disappearance."

Vassily's facial features were then a deadpan mask as he wondered what specific info in a 'security file' might embarrass a party or armed forces big shot, and how such a one might be so careless with such a file? Had the imp so refined her larceny? Moreover, what role might a spy play in this drama?

Continued the impassive Myshin, "You were the closest intelligence cadre to the Kniažnin-Stolbanov family."

Vassily took his time responding. "Zoya was a canny delinquent, a recognition that surfaced after Anastasia left home. I assume the drugs the dissident mother was given in her one detention, before Zoya was conceived, had consequences. The select 'therapy' in such lock ups at the time was not always salutary, as recent assessments affirm. In any case, Frieda was never close to Zoya, Zoya's nutty father or late testy mother, and was long gone when the dissident turmoil surfaced, and she remains the best trained, certainly one of the most intelligent and diligent agents we currently have in the US. Ready adverse conjecture seems presumptuous. What Zoya may have gleaned in her recent adventures remains speculative, yes? From what you've disclosed thus far. I presume there is more."

The General retrieved a page from his dossier, then paraphrased aloud: "She had a tussle at the London Apsara Club with an incognito Muslim, who had gone there to threaten her apparently. Why we're still not sure. He lost an eye in the encounter. He too has disappeared." The General neatly replaced the page. "It would be helpful, Vassily Sergeevich, if you can detail any of Zoya's more recent adventurous history."

Vassily too managed a straight, even thoughtful face. There was obviously more to the story than an Islamic mobster getting injured by a slender show lounge dancer at a popular club. The story itself seemed posterous. Thus he soldiered on.

"If memory serves — it is a while ago — I can vouchsafe: indifference to her school's curriculum, like many mischievous truants, petty theft, for which I believe she has a spotty if not full record, promiscuous social habits — she liked older lads, even her oafish father, if memory serves. Also —

great expectations — she wasn't keen on farm toil. I recall a skirmish with a local activist, a Komsomol lad. She bonked him with a turnip I believe. In short, she was not a recognizable daughter of her austere dissident mother — in any ideological sense. Whatever ideals she had were likely sloughed off early on." Vassily added, after more careful reflection and a further sip of the brandy, "I can't recall any specific actionable mischief. Or imagine what information such a one might have gleaned that could prove detrimental. Unless some party whores now have security clearance."

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

"I will get to see the final draft?"

"I think so. You may be asked about it later." The General yielded to a brief sardonic smile as he voiced a terse summation after emptying his glass. "Actually, the case may be a safe steal. The SVR seems keen." Meaning: the SVR, likely with SFB input, would overlook the matter regardless, some in-house embarrassment sufficient to prompt scrutiny at home and abroad. As he left the building, Vassily reflected again on how this megalith had few windows on one side. The grandeur of suspicion...such that even a show lounge dancer might be a possible threat to some ranking plutocrat. All he had actually learned was that another Russian dancer had fled, ostensibly with sensitive information, and an accomplished illegal had disappeared about the same time. Knowing the family as he did, Vassily very much doubted there was a connection. Someone in the Cheka was simply gleaning historical grist for a reckoning with an officer, minister or aparat. Moreover, it was highly unlikely an outsider would know of a covertly placed illegal. The phrase 'cut and dry' was the key — meaning the GRU must promptly validate its illegal or share the investigation of the delinquent sister with its pushy Neighbours. That such confusion somehow implicated his pre-eminent protégé remained the stark fact to assimilate and requite. An inaugural trial in his protracted career.

On the return ride to his home, Vassily sat absorbed in thought in a twilight ghosted by the frosty smears of the lights to the Vol Goradsky further on. The driver of the limo crouched over the wheel in silence, occasionally blowing on ragged gloves, the car's heater barely functional that night. Vassily resembled then a plumped pigeon ensconced in the niche of a tenement, often with both eyes closed. He had no idea what the final communiqué would look like and was not one to add needlessly to his discomfort. A gas fire and menthol cigarette awaited him in his tasteful, comfortable apartment — his wife's doing. Only when his inside and outside were at least room temperature, would he attempt to plan his response if indeed the mysterious official, who was anxious a clever delinquent not sully his career, had to be placated. Already Vassily's breath summoned tiny icicles that clung to his fleece collar. At such moments he hibernated, his brain alone foraging. He had little to do with the daily tactical maneuvering of the GRU, and rarely took a holiday, preferring to see his wife off to Sochi rather than pass a week there distracted from his recruitment work, his avocation and lone consolation — the excuse of the insular strategist. Rarely was he cognizant of the sly catty seaside chatter that occasionally cued one to events that might never be publicly aired, as well as embellish those already disclosed. It was nearly a half-hour later before he sat in his study, his feet submerged in a heated water massager, a late birthday gift from his heedful wife, and resurrected the early encounters with his *nulli secundus* recruit. As he smoked he saw the dilapidated farm, the lame distraught mother — he still had

little idea what they did to her in one lockup — the initially beguiling children, the younger two conceived by a different father. An unwanted pregnancy surely, which surprisingly, had not been aborted. Zoya was an identical twin, her womb mate dying of meningitis as a babe — the official line. There was a late rumour that the ‘deceased’ twin was in fact spirited to another part of the country as a check on the mother.

Early on he had seen the possibilities of the first, older maturer child: a young science-math whiz with brilliant powers of recall, eager, diligent, ardent skier, gymnast, promising chess player, English already fluent, living with a dotty often inebriated step-father who seemed oblivious to his coming internal exile. The slight, newly distraught mother had readily championed her *first* child, ‘Zia, short for Anastasia, before she antagonized the authorities; a mother who seemed, when Vassily learned of her, impatient to banish her current alcoholic husband, Zoya’s putative father, a former border guard with the reputation of a ham-actor drunkard. Vassily guessed he came to serve as a reminder to the mother of her fall from grace.

Zoya, the *second* child — the ‘surviving twin’ — was not an exemplar. An indolent student, ‘cool’, sly, defiant, she seemed the sole mourner of her father’s predicament, something Vassily realized later, though it wouldn’t have mattered much in any case. At the time he chose to overlook what he imagined to be a ribald and possibly incestuous relationship. Whereas, he saw in ‘Zia a classic adoption scenario, where that disgruntled *first* child could become another jewel in the Kremlin collection he himself helped design cut and polish with enviable adroitness. An accomplishment he’d basked in for several years.

His first encounter with the family came during the time he was looking for a suitable country landscape to train a company of agents slated to be agricultural students in Canada, where they would assess NATO cruise missiles on site near Cold Lake, Alberta. It was a posting most GRU operatives welcomed for it contained little risk: Canadians were a remarkably insular, ingenuous, generally unsuspecting breed — and the Canadian environs afforded many prized recreational gambits. Hockey, curling, skiing, golfing, baseball, hiking, hunting, boating and fishing barely covered the gamut of activities Canadians enjoyed. Vassily was testing some new high-frequency radio equipment in a comparable geography near Kazan, when he spied a scrawny middle-aged man lathering himself in a galvanized tub framed by the open front doorway to a period stone cottage, an *isba*. A timeworn porch abutted a newer log addition that had never been finished. A bottle of vodka sat beside the tub. An extraordinarily pretty youngster of perhaps twelve or thirteen had just doused the gent with a pail of water too tepid for the man’s liking. He grasped her shirt and almost pulled her into the tub with him. The exclamations, Vassily recalled, were nimble and conspiratorial. When they sighted him, with notepad and watchful eye, the girl broke into brisk sniggering. The man poked her in the ribs. The girl was invitingly ticklish. Neither appeared intimidated by the appearance of this distant stranger. Vassily had simply smiled, casually nodded, and went on with his current task, though the memory of that antic day lingered.

Several weeks later, as he surveyed academic and party records of young students with exceptional IQs and exemplary Komsomol activity, a chore he undertook several times a year, he was struck by the photograph of a multi-gifted youngster with an exceptional memory, numeration acuity, and what was described as ‘a quiet perseverance’. The face vaguely reminded him of the girl he’d seen by the tub with the eccentric elder. The similarity was tenuous yet unsettling at the time. When he confirmed the

address, he was satisfied it was the same domicile and that week determined to find out; for if that girl *was* the singular Anastasia Karolovna Kniažnin, mathematically gifted and model Communist youth with exceptional recall, what was she doing fooling around with an old naked man in a vintage bathing tub during school hours? The brief summer break in that district ended a fortnight earlier. Hence a further reconnoitring was undertaken.

He had his driver park the dark Volga near a power substation that outlooked the distant isba, which sat on a hillock adjacent a new agriculture collective. A bosk of spruce and poplar separated the dwelling from the collective and its panelled buildings of frame and brick construction, unlike the older river stone and log of the ageless isba. The newly refurbished collective was one of the showcase farms tourists sometimes glimpsed on well co-ordinated tours. From the highway and visitation sites the cottage remained partly hidden by the power station's cooling towers. Vassily imagined the isba once a gamekeeper's lodging or, as he drew nearer, a coach stop, for he could see what appeared to be the remains of a stable behind. The older structure was perhaps too awkwardly placed to be useful as a restored historical site, for it outlooked, beyond the intervening power station, a large expanded munitions factory half a mile off.

The yard was as cluttered and overgrown as before. An old tractor sat rusting amidst dense scrub at the base of the hillock. Also, part of the lower ravine was discovered to contain some clandestinely stashed sacks of grain on a newly improvised platform, a detail he made note of.

He cautiously circled the isba once, finally observing it through field glasses from the shade-blind of the trees. A cardinal principle in his method of recruitment was to know as unedited as possible the environment his prospective candidates grew up in. From Anastasia's record he learned she had been admitted to one of the region's accelerated secondary schools at thirteen — another fact that heartened and indirectly cautioned, for she had worked her way into that district's Komsomol council well before her fifteenth birthday.

In the past decade he had placed four youngsters in universities in the U.S. with appropriate legends and rotating mentor-guardians. All but one — who was killed in a car crash — had in the succeeding years reached positions of vital importance to the Kremlin, and all were educated and serviceably 'conditioned' by socialist minded American professors themselves! How droll that so many wistful Marxists should reside in the U. S. It was a stratagem Vassily perfected, and it earned for him the coveted citation. Early in his career he put together three simple facts from which he derived a workable and ideologically assuaging synthesis. First: recruitment of capable persons had become an arduous task in the late Russian Federation, its exceptionally gifted young folk being more wary, resentful and suspicious than before, especially of an intelligence network with an ingrained contempt of immaturity and, above all, 'cool' diffidence. Second: America had nurtured many enclaves of radical if not subversive thought, including several in her prestigious universities. Third: the most useful spies in America were invariably 'home-bred' Americans. Thus Vassily proposed that the GRU begin recruiting younger persons — those whose idealism was still viable — and carefully place them in foster homes in the United States. For those who acquired scholarships, the state would recover some of the expense of their 'homebred' American education. It was a shrewd, audacious scheme — which initially struck his superiors as way too speculative.

He was acknowledged another nearly commendable workaholic and further deployed on difficult housekeeping chores. He had spent a brief time himself in North America in his younger days, as part

of a spetsnaz team in Canada stashing arms caches for the anticipated war with America, the tactical undertaking codenamed Cedar. He had also, on his own, stolen a selection of rust resistant grain seeds from an experimental farm near Swift Current, Saskatchewan, that proved to be essential in salvaging a portion of the harvests following the awful Lysenko period. Such a 'rogue adventure', might have got him shot when he returned to Russia, were it not for the prudence of Lysenko's emerging skeptics. Finally, he did convince one restive department chief that his illegal-spy recruitment scheme was at least worth a try, and the results were nothing short of galvanizing. Within a decade, of the initial four illegals who first entered the U.S. in their mid-teens, two had acquired strategic positions in corporations the Pentagon contracted to, and two in liaison staffs of the State Department, and all began returning quality information, while remaining as committed to their homeland hegemony as any single minder in a residency. All had attended Ivy League schools, where they learned many sorry truths about presumptive, arrogant U. S. meddling worldwide. Indeed, following their tutorials here, they were given full audience to the modish, retributive liberal-Yankee critic, an overwhelming experience for a young idealist. For instance, the fanatical Khmer Rouge was conditionally lauded by esteemed professors like Noam Chomsky! American's right wing 'paranoia' about communism was a sustaining anathema in its liberal academe! Even the Russian leaders were amazed, cautioned; most had long since abandoned such über sanctimony. But such fervent Yankee academics served to condone a socialist ideal! Vassily fretted over many habitual obsessions in his country, yet continued to maneuver behind his special vale of tears, which offered occasional (how else would one recognize it?) contentment — all that might legitimately be expected; a harsh but durable credo. He believed his protégés must see America for what it was — an often rancorous, dissolute country.

Whereas, the 'tapestry' that chronicled the Kniaźnin/Stolbanov family history, was fashioned from a very coarse irregular weave. The singular isba seemed unoccupied one day while several groups of workers toiled in the further collective's nearby fields. He was at first distracted by a line of women stooking hay, puzzled by the pale sheen to their coveralls which, in closer range, yielded light fleshy beings: in the heat the workers had shed their work clothes and worked in pale underwear. Particularly teasing among their number was a lively youngster who reefed her allotted swaths some distance from the others, very near a woodlot where a group of oil-smeared men worked on a crippled all-crop harvester — its incapacity in part explaining the laborious manual stooking. The men had paused in their labours to view the scene that Vassily sedulously took in — a comic drama unfolding with much Russian stealth and deliberation.

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

howling comrades.

Vassily had been caught up by the performance before him, which only teased his curiosity about the young minx stooking hay during school hours. This was not the student he sought. During the harvest season students not in special programs sometimes helped out. Quite openly, to many appreciative whistles, the minx exchanged the expansive bra with a well-larded raker who had simply tied the girl's top, a plain singlet, about her neck. Was there any sight more sobering to male optimism than the slavic woman in full-blown, naked, late maturity, or more reproachfully seductive than a very pretty, young stripling, already hosting lambent contour? As the stookers returned to their labours he decided to bide his time for yet half-an-hour on this fine fall day. By then the placid but heedful stookers and remaining machine operators would break for lunch and their conversations might be effectively tele-recorded. As he waited, the middle-aged chap last seen scrubbing himself in the galvanized tub, was newly observed approaching the isba shouldering a dingy carryall. Flushed and unshaven, he soon engaged in an insulting, largely mimetic altercation with a thin haggard, but still elegant beauty Vassily imagined Scandinavian. She stood in the doorway to the isba, the man an unresolved distance apart, leaving and returning, when returning prepared to withstand a barrage of blows. Both parties breathed onerously it seemed. The man finally sat down on an old tree stump. A small mongrel wagged its tail up to his waiting hands. From the threshold the woman suddenly shouted something Vassily could not make out then slammed a screen door. The man pulled an object from his pocket and offered it to the dog. The dog turned it down yet continued to expectantly wag its tail. The man popped the substance into his own mouth and began to lecture the pooch. Vassily squatted down in the poplar grove and waited. It seemed his young quick student had grown up in a family that classically produced clever delinquents and timely if not peerless saints.

Later, in examining the tele-recorded exchanges of the stookers and mechanics, he found that his newly discovered genius had this noisome younger half sister, a detail omitted from the gifted girl's exemplary school file; so, perhaps, he was not the only watchful minder then! That lacuna prompted him to investigate the mother's past, an adventure in itself as it turned out.

Liisa Mäkelä Uhlgren, a Finnish honours student, had been married twice. First to an intelligence officer, Karol Mieczyslaw Kniaźnin, who was killed in Afghanistan. He met Liisa Mäkelä at a Labor Day celebration. During the last stages of the Afghan War Liisa acquired a formidable reputation as an expressive, influential dissident. Theirs was apparently a heady romance, despite the later disagreement over the war, which surfaced in a last letter Liisa received from Karol, where it was apparent he'd sensed the war's dissolution but would not slight his commission. (By then Liisa's correspondence and deeds were being diligently scrutinized.) Liisa's daughter by Karol Mieczyslaw, Anastasia Karolovna, was later removed from the family, the turmoil caused by the mother's dissident activity the main reason, and raised by an uncle to Karol, who was a devout, even exemplary party member — a singular benefit at the time.

The troubled mother eventually accused that uncle of child abuse and was finally sent to Butyrka prison — in part for her 'slander' — and given a regimen of 'behaviour modification' drugs. Vassily recalled that the hangover of the Lysenko period lingered then, such that it was still believed 'aberrant habits' might be corrected by administering a suitable cocktail of drugs. When it was discovered that Liisa Mäkelä was pregnant, a further punitive citation was appended to her record: 'attempted

subordination of a camp guard', one Yakov Nikolaevich Stolbanov, who likely had nothing to do with the conception; the timing was off and he served then as a guard in the men's camp. From the spare but telling evidence, Vassily suspected Liisa may have been raped by a prison official who found in Yakov a serviceable gull. Nothing unusual so far, though he would have handled dissidents far differently. That an abortion had not been resorted to remained a puzzling oddity. But it was all too apparent that the exemplary student whose record he had chanced upon at the special school was the winsome Anastasia, who would soon be removed from her troubled home.

The story of the mother resumed, after the birth of twins, one of whom died of meningitis, with her placement in an agricultural collective as a common labourer along with Yakov Nikolaevich, the twins putative father, though by then her health was poor and her marriage to Yakov a dour Hobson's choice. Yakov, the wag Vassily first saw at the isba, was eventually dismissed for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. His union with Liisa proved in the end more or less fortuitous though, given their abject states. Someone may have taken pity on them. A couple with a child might be sanctioned a modest domicile. Again, nothing unusual, Vassily concluded, though the eventual tendering of his female Wunderkinder for service training prompted considerable flak, as expected.

Yet he prevailed!

FOUR

The brute was for Louis not a happy sight. Cody, her stage makeup removed, relaxed and cheerful, following her first show of the evening, which drew a partisan applause and some enquiries about her after-hour schedule, sat chatting with the powerful, bejewelled, red-haired Gigantes, the barefaced 'Orange Julius' man, Cody's latest stud-in-waiting Louis dourly surmised. The primped, scented hulk obviously pumped iron in the heavyweight category, yet this night wore the gold chains about his open robust neck like a martyr. Cody's transparent blue eyes followed his every gesture with a Magdalena-like empathy as he enumerated some of the day's trials which included, in Louis's diligent overhearing, a rash business partner who turned out to be gay and a ready admirer. Cody already helped shoulder this cross by tilting her curly head and softening fine expressive brows. A stylish magnolia-flowered house coat crisscrossed her torso leaving a layered neck opening which, seated as she was, encircled by a massive arm, allowed a private view of her cascading left bosom, possibly slightly more erogenous than the right, Louis recalled, from his own enamoured encounters with that frock. The hulk suavely continued the litany of his travail, Cody listening with the devotion of a slightly dismayed madonna which, given her open pliant eyes above a wedge-shaped chin, made Louis think of Gustav Klimt's Portrait of a Lady — the face of a pensive muse. He loved Cody quite as much as he had any human apparition, and though he would not have presumed upon her frequent amours, he now felt slightly sick. He knew a thug when he saw one and feared Cody just might be serving the phone caller who found him so inexplicably objectionable.

The recent past had turned him into Chicken Little.

Cody abruptly quaffed her Perrier, excused herself, rose and kissed the hulk lightly on his thin Tartarin lips. The magician was about to conclude his act and Anteros, his snakes and Cody, would follow. Again the entr'acte dancers collected their costumes, and Louis recognized the lithesome performer who had earlier approached and retrieved the realistic glass eye she dandled before the

nearer patrons to vouchsafe her reputation as an authentic Eye Popper. She did produce in one performance a hand puppet of the Cookie Monster who lustily devoured her against a carefully programmed black-out light. Now she drew Cody's attention away from the beefy lady-killer, a word Louis ruefully happened upon. Cody suddenly burst into laughter and arm-in-arm the two girls sauntered down the narrow side corridor leading to the 'Selket' change room, Cody's word, where the female performers lounged between acts, also donned and removed costumes before a long mirror that reflected on an opposite wall framed photos of the celebrity patrons who thereafter stayed away. The Eye Popper, holding her glitzy costume before her, exhibited a mignon's gracile form as she disappeared with the silk gowned, sveltely muscular Cody of the big heart and chest. 'Zita,' Cody called her. Twice. Louis sat numbly looking on, his mind a disconnected welter. Zita? Here? Then someone equally surreal remarked from a table across.

"The photographer you want — see him."

Anteros, seated at an adjacent table, had suddenly, unexpectedly pointed Louis out to the hulk, just before slipping off to his own dressing room.

By then Louis was quite speechless. Zita? The Eye Popper? He was surely going bonkers. No — a coincidence of names, a mishearing, a bad acoustic. So why had Anteros smiled so when he left? Anteros never smiled and generally lampooned photographers, believing them in point of fact mirages. "Take their lenses away and they cease to exist," the wrangler once said, in his soft canny undertone. Louis tended to agree and always felt a certain reassurance when the gypsy acknowledged his presence — which this night he mainly hadn't, preferring to glower at the crowd about him. Cody said he had fled Czechoslovakia years ago without the blessing of the authorities, then returned to clandestinely squire a brother into Austria, so perhaps he had reason to be distrustful of picture grubs who sometimes made livelihoods taking people unawares — making his suggestion to the hulk nearly as unexpected as Cody calling the Eye Popper Zita!

Louis's mind was a welter. Zita? Here? Though the sylphlike figure, from the back...he did his best to proffer a condolent smile for the approaching hulk who, following Anteros's suggestion, pulled up a chair to Louis's table, saying, "I may have another job for you. You're the one, right?"

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

"Like before, we need a photographer who knows his way around Photoshop. Melding pics, interpolation, filter work and such."

Louis felt his scalp begin to tingle. "I may not be your best choice. I still tend to work in a rather old-fashioned way. Most days,"

"I thought some of the pictures you did with Zita were super — she thinks so too. A pithy text is being added with more exceptional characters, and we've finally got a distributor for this unique, multi chapter, photo-graphic novel. A medalist effort, I think. The audience is there."

Louis adopted a sphinx-like silence. 'Super' was not down on his list of accolades yet he stolidly nodded: never object to another's taste unless you can soundly, safely and equanimously thrash him.

"The new job'll require a few days work. You busy now?"

"Moderately." Promptly Louis followed up with — "Zita? Here?"

"Yeah. You didn't know? She recently had some facial plastic surgery. She'll soon be performing

in the new posh Bellerophon club in Long Beach. She needed a time out to put together a new persona. It's a new chapter for her, this new graphic gig. One she's keen on."

For the better part of half-an-hour Louis listened to the hulk — who indeed possessed flame coloured hair and was called Julius — discuss in detail a job that was a near repeat of the last. In a series of snooty sci-fi pics by an anonymous artist — "a team project," Julius said in passing — similar subtle alterations were to be effected, including the interpolation of further live models, the combined work to be called, *The Zita Tableaux*. What especially irked was the hulk's — Julius's — expert grasp of both photography and computer imaging. When Louis belatedly told of the disturbing events following his work on an earlier set, Julius asked, "You surely can't think there's a connection? A whole junkyard of screwballs around these days."

"Just superstitious," said Louis, bitterly, incredulously.

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

That's when Cody returned after her much-applauded final show, the last act of the evening, which Louis barely noticed. She too displayed amazement at his strange aloofness and even odder indifference to this new commission. "Louis, that last set was beautiful, even Zita perked up, though she can be dippydro I know. Holy hell, you'll be famous. Maybe rich!" She then archly suggested he had been pill popping. "You know how it is. Again!" For Louis it became a hoary pantomime, the victim led silently, oafishly to his special fate. In the end, the arm-twisting became simple insinuating amusement. And this, in Cody, he could not stand.

So a day was fixed the following week when Julius would come to Louis's studio with a friend, who would bring a set of pictures that promised to be every bit as haunting if not consequential as the last set. Said the hulk, "Tell your supplier you've got a new granddaddy; that should keep you sunny side up till the job's finished." Louis was by then too numbed to join in.

Offering a wide indulgent smile, the hulk left arm-in-arm with a mesmerized Cody. Louis found himself staring at the ageless Anteros, who now resembled a vigilant jackal as he fetched his Egyptian stage props, while two waiters and a cashier noisily tallied the take, the magician sorted items in a large carry all, and the club's manager vigilantly inventoried the remaining stock of select booze. "Zita's sick," someone said. An intimate urinary infection was forensically discussed. The bleach Zita used was a suspect, then a depilation cream. "Has nothing to do with it, idiot," said another. Zita appeared briefly, looking wan and put upon. She lingered by a back table where two large well-dressed gentlemen rose up and escorted her to a rear stage exit. Not once did she look Louis's way. The night seemed full of furtive menace. His will and understanding had vanished as the magician's jar of milk. But for her laugh, he hadn't this night heard this Zita speak — a lack suddenly, startlingly remedied by an oath and stream of thickly accented invective, which ended in a fine summation: "Both you — mofo shits. You number one." The trio was out of sight then, behind the expansive gaudy backdrop to Anteros's set. A fire door closed with a resonant cannonade, a leftover from Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture Louis mused. Romantic classical music seemed his one respite then. Canon fire an apt 'obliterating beat'.

Reluctantly he decided the spirited voice might be Zita's. The recognition rendered him more queasy and derelict than ever. He seemed at times a bit player in a farce dying in rehearsal. And only he seemed to know how awful it was.

FIVE

Vassily looked forlornly at his stereo turntable. The drive mechanism had run slack while gears jerked and spun preventing a uniform rotation, thus 'needling' his preference for the richness of vinyl LPs. Plainly, the Berlioz Requiem did not lend itself to erratically alternating revolutions per minute. Until that moment the desperate robot usually corrected itself after a fillip or two. On this night of nights, however, it gave up, defying all adroit attempts to remedy the impairment. Vassily Sergeevich was not amused. Pandemonium as a quirky mechanoid was far too daunting — italicizing his late unrelenting distemper.

He had reached his comfortable cluttered book-laden flat intending to let the inspiration of the Godhead, through the genius of the troubled but ever stoic Louis-Hector, settle the dust in his dark cave: often the Party giants were ugly, brutish, short-tempered, relentlessly rooting and pig-headed, but rarely heedless and witless as well. He had decided a personal grudge or suspicion among some career aparats was festering, and Frieda Van Eerden, née Anastasia Kniažnin, his illegal operative, stood implicated as a possibly suborned or realigned player, and must be vetted now that her delinquent step-sister was fattening the suspicion and distrust. It was a situation too explosive to fiddle with, yet fiddle he must; he had banked on a little night music to baffle if not soothe the ferment.

Thus far the facts he had isolated were these: a) Frieda may have suspended or curtailed her intelligence work; b) with alarming coincidence, her sister, Zoya — whom Vassily had spied in the field that hot fall day — then a show lounge dancer in London — had disappeared after an altercation with a Muslim; c) astonishingly, the Western press described the attack in the club as an assault *on* the Muslim!; and d) an unknown officer in the reshuffled intelligence sector, or a party enforcer, cognizant of Frieda's existence (illegals were rarely known to more than their case officer and his chief), had urged someone in the GRU to engineer the return or disabling of a potentially compromised agent — as a means of insuring her isolation from the delinquent sister and her embarrassing skinny — her supposedly shocking insider poop. 'Embarrassing' for just whom Vassily wondered. The whole business seemed absurd. The very timing was as intimidating as the insinuation (at least at Vassily's level) that an adroit illegal might somehow be baited, co-opted by an impish venal information peddler! Moreover, how would such a scapegrace even know of Frieda's work or operational locale? Had the powder monkey so nettled or embarrassed a top level official or cadre that any and all options were 'go' when she disappeared? Indeed, at one stage, London dockers assisted Russian officials dispatched to find a stolen shipment of rare caviar. Two freighters were searched. Moreover, no reliable British contact could vouchsafe the dancer's whereabouts — whence the bone-rattling urgency: only someone with a lot to lose would chance co-opting the GRU. The confusion seemed madcap. Such that a missing or undecided Frieda could not be relied upon to assist a muzzling operation — the quarantine of Zoya or, if demanded, something more immediately lethal; Zoya was a suspected drug pusher and hence an 'induced' OD would credibly suffice for either option — hence the possibility existed that both girls might be classed as 'unduly prejudicial'. Vassily was expected to submit a succinct character appraisal that would underline the elementary distrust and enmity between the two. His statement

would further pad out the protocol of a discreet department investigation and so indirectly reassure the stung influential brat sufficiently to stop swilling absinthe. Otherwise, the peristaltic convulsions could disturb the entire Directorate, and hundreds of man hours might be lost to non-productive backlogging and maneuvering. The central worry was that Frieda, anticipating her own jeopardy, might turn up in U.S. custody seeking asylum, or be discovered consorting with unknown legmen. As he familiarized himself with Zoya's wayward noisome history, he cantankerously wondered if those were feasible possibilities!

For a couple of years Zoya performed in the chain of show lounge clubs, all named Apsara, owned by crime boss Konstantin 'Kissy' Borozov, which had outlets in London, Marseilles, Frankfurt, Moscow and Baku. Recently, in the London club, Zoya had some kind of altercation with an angry Muslim backstage, whom she apparently stabbed in the eye with a hair or hat pin. She survived but fled the club and subsequently vanished. Understandable. The owners would pander to the Muslim goons who sought to find her. That she might end up in a crate of caviar headed West, suggested someone was flagrantly head tripping. Improbability was ever a consummate tease. He tried to imagine the regional agents' reaction to such a yarn. Early on she'd been an adept mule and con artist, this twin child of a dissident mother whose womb mate putatively died of meningitis shortly after birth. He learned from Myshin's brief that Zoya was also reputed to be the friend of an investigator who worked for a Moscow procurator — further evidence of a possible in house tale bearer. That she cut short an apparently promising ballet career to perform in the Apsara clubs remained another curiosity. Was the training for a promising ballet career too exacting? She was a singular, beautifully proportioned beauty — in the slender rhythmic gymnastic mould — duly reminding one that Russian delinquents, when resolved, were a heady peerless breed.

And so Colonel Vassily Ablesimov firmed up Myshin's inter-department memo, having little difficulty positing bad blood between 'Zia Kniaźnin and Zoya Stolbanov — at least as youngsters. That would not be enough of course, but he would not posit likelihoods that begged for verification. Because he was as anxious about his early evaluation of 'Zia, nay obsessed now, he revisited, via a few tapes and some incisive notes made at the time, the colourful background and early life which, a decade-and-a-half ago, he concluded would not jeopardize her capability as a career illegal, a judgement not endorsed at the time — a sobering recollection that now intruded without the balm of his requisite Requiem.

Almost from his initial interview with her at her school, Vassily detected rumblings of a pitched battle on the home front — which ended in her removal to the home of the ideologue uncle. She had sat rather rigidly on a new brightly coloured chair in the principals's office the first day he arranged to meet her. She wore a neat trim school uniform and had not touched the cookies and milk a cafeteria attendant set out. She knew her family was often under scrutiny but mayn't have realized then that she too was a subject of interest. In any case, she must have anticipated more domestic mayhem given Vassily's coming. Indeed, she had eventualities so worked out in her mind that Vassily was a time tallying the extent of her forward perception: her calculated diminution of meat vouchers (and favours), the additional hours she would have to spend in queues, the number of calories she might imperviously salvage from her school cafeteria for her mother, when she was allowed to see her, and the vigilant individuals she must forthwith be wary of after her pathetic stepfather was finally, irrevocably

‘removed’ — which he was a few months later. Vassily had not encountered a fourteen-year-old as determined, alert, perceptive and resourceful as young Anastasia Kniaznin, intimately known as ‘Zia. Indeed, her poise that first day revealed a youngster all too familiar with alien busybodies.

“You don’t like cookies, ‘Zia?”

He listened to a tape of their first interview. He had just entered the vacated office where she sat looking rather put upon.

“Some days.” The voice an imposed deadpan.

He remembered winking at her. “I taste them first?”

“They won’t kill you.”

“Ah, so you’ve had them before.”

“Well, I’m here.”

“And you think that’s extraordinary?”

“If you had eaten Katya Arkadyevna’s baking you might think so.”

He remembered being irritated by this youthful impertinence and had witlessly picked up a cookie and taken a bite. It was indeed awful — little flavour or sweetener and the oatmeal stale — but he felt some obligation to ameliorate if not discourage the resistance facing him.

“I think Katya Arkadyevna must have a lot on her plate — right now.”

He now recollected a faint smile.

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

“Sometimes.”

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

An impassive nod, then a ready yawn, he recalled.

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

“Probably.”

The quiet heed and assurance seemed congenital. By then Vassily knew that ‘Zia’s Finnish mother, Liisa Mäkelä, for whom ‘Zia bore a love-hate ardor, became a religious convert after her stay in Butyrka prison — parts of Revelation being a mealtime subject that specific week, according to one of ‘Zia’s attentive teachers. Vassily also knew that teacher liked the films of Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Nevsky being a favourite she’d apparently shown and discussed in class. The next question seemed then ordained.

“I understand you’re familiar with one of Sergei Eisenstein’s films.”

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

“You believe in God?” Given the film’s anti-clerical bias, the question was the more eloquent because it was placed without noticeable pertness.

“Yes of course.” Candour was his own special pomp and circumstance. Yet he strove to challenge not discompose, a recollection that harried him of late, disingenuousness being a spieler’s fallback.

“You may get in trouble.”

“Almost guaranteed.”

My stepfather doesn't think much of God. Do you like your job?" This question rarely surprised.

"Yes. Very much."

"My stepfather would envy you."

"Do you like your stepfather?"

"Not much. He prefers Zoya I think."

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

Belatedly Vassily had learned that Yakov Nikolaevich Stolbanov, was once an officer in the Federal Security Service — Marine Border Guards — but was demoted to a camp guard in Butyrka prison after assaulting while drunk a traffic officer who requested his pass. Butyrka prison was the one Liisa Mäkelä Kniaźnin — a late translator of Scandinavian languages, widow of Karol Mieczysław Kniaźnin, and dissident — was eventually sent to, where, in due course, she was discovered to be pregnant.

Initially, following her charge of child abuse against 'Zia's uncle, Liisa was sentenced to a year's compulsory work as a janitor in a run-down women's prison. When she balked doing that demeaning job, she was sent, given the official account of her 'rank insubordination', to Butyrka prison — where Vassily believed she was raped by someone *in* the prison; she was still notably attractive. Her bleak fate was briefly interrupted by a German doctor the Soviets had recruited after the war. Felix Zveno Muerner had been quietly at work refuting the lingering Lysenkoists' presumptions, and attempting to limit some drugs given by them to select dissidents. He had apparently discouraged an abortion, Liisa being pregnant with one-egg twins. His interest in the rare conception lapsed with the death of the one twin, thus leaving Liisa, again, inimically on her own, her embarrassing dissident activities again under thorough review, particularly her early incendiary role in a subversive group vigorously protesting the protracted war in Afghanistan — a time she had lived in and out of police custody.

While in Butyrka's infirmary, she apparently befriended Yakov. She perhaps imagined, so Vassily thought, that a liaison with a former border guard might serve as a kind of foil for her own subversive activity. Because of the child, and perhaps the guilt of the prison official who raped her, her sentence was reduced and she and Yakov assigned a humble but durable cottage or *isba*, where the eventful drama Vassily chronicled unfolded — where Yakov began drinking more heavily than ever, and Liisa contended with an unrelentingly bleak, spartan existence, and a growing despair that stifled ambition, exertion, hope itself.

Following Yakov's lead, she discovered in vodka a serviceable 'escape', which abetted fits of her newly fathomless anger, an outlet that embarrassed her later, including her plaintive scolding of 'Zia's aloofness and quiet but empathic Party allegiance — behaviour noted by a staunch party caseworker assigned to the family to see the gifted 'Zia came to no incidental harm. One afternoon a drunken Yakov put one of 'Zia's notebooks in a commode. The caseworker petitioned for a behavioural evaluation of the stepfather, and arranged for 'Zia to take up residence with her uncle. On the eve of

the scheduled appraisal, step-father and impish Zoya stole away to Krasnogorsk where the two were apprehended together in a hotel lounge attempting to hawk some jewelry and semi-precious stones. The step-father claimed under age Zoya was given the jewelry and stones from a party pedophile who had been making advances toward her, a story vehemently denied by the accused of course — a mere clerk Vassily guessed; a higher up would not likely have been questioned. Following the psychological assessment, Zoya and her father were duly cautioned and returned to the isba near the farm collective — while ‘Zia was permanently billeted with the uncle to attend an accelerated school program in nearby Kazan. Vassily came upon the rustic scene of the potty bather and his water bearer a month after their arrival at the isba. Days later, Zoya (now free of her half-sister’s invidious example) had zestfully entertained her field worker audience of molested men — and the lonely protective women who loved at a distance nimble resistance to male duress, laughing heartily when the turnips bonked the unsuspecting lothario. Zoya’s popularity encapsulated that of the heroine who upstages the district bully then suffers the town wastrel — her waggish father — willingly, if not gladly. The relation with the father, for instance, appeared to be mainly buffoonery and some chicanery; the suspicion of incest had been shelved, Yakov Nikolaevich being dismissed as a chronic drunkard and frail potty voyeur (one psychologist’s assessment). So Vassily reviewed the first glimpses of his protégé’s early family life, intimating as it had, the chariness and longing of the too-bright adolescent, the *care full* ‘Zia: the waggish stepfather a focal point of her vulnerability and anger; the harridan mother — likely then at her wit’s end given her treatment in and out of prison — a newly cautioning if not disparaging parent; the stepsister a relentless teaser, destined to be a cabaret sensation. In all, a textbook case of adoption by the masterful magisterial state!

Only one item in the scene Vassily had forgotten — the mutt, called Skavki, who had warmed so to Yakov Nikolaevich’s outstretched arms. Had someone seen it as the stepfather’s namesake? Vassily was particularly alert to the uncommon name and wondered if the christener knew its erstwhile significance. The name literally meant scavenging mongrels but was used in spy craft to signify clumsy small-time agents — who might well haunt derelict neighbourhoods, at one remove from exemplary collectives like the one across the ravine from the isba. Sometimes Vassily believed he simply served as the coincidental tutor, that ‘Zia’s young cogent mind was made up long ago, the plight of her mother and stepfather central to her determination, strengthened by natural, state-confirmed talents which might overwhelm domestic tragedy. Her advanced school and its gymnasium, he remembered, had been perched on the edge of a valley, where he had gone on several walks with her, sometimes with the fawning mutt. “Onegin,” was a second handle ‘Zia had for Skavki. “An inbred moocher: same old same old.” The comment had prompted Vassily’s fastidious lecture on *variety*. Variation, he pointed out, often one of life’s enjoyments, was not possible without order because anarchy, a glib rendering of freedom, presumed unlimited variation and hence no explicit variation at all, one index of *monotony* — a precept ‘Zia understood well, he imagined, given the repetitious turmoil in her family.

They walked another day by a small creek that meandered through the expansive plane near the coulee. The twisted, thorny bushes bordering it were loaded with black currants. It was here Vassily first explained how the measure of a country’s integrity was the quality of its witness, its ‘eyes’ — a lecture that was part of his specialized curriculum, the protocol of lasting serviceable witness. Which included giving God and Christianity *Their Due* — one means to counter self-pity, despair, apathy and their rogue stooges — profligacy and cruelty.

Portentous words that had, unsparingly, taken their toll over the years. His paeon to form and order was embodied in the warning that many countries, acutely in the West, may have forfeited control of their destiny because their God had evolved into a bawdy entertainer and entitlement barker. The foregone result: an unwillingness, even inability, to toil or look ‘ridiculous’, democracy’s mass-produced narcissism, and hence its tailor-made neurosis. A by-product was a disproportionate status given the soft sciences; social scientists as augurs was the essential dictum here — little predictive capability but explanations, often dour and vindictive, for almost everything. Thus the coming of identity recrimination politics.

He had not waited a response.

Inflation, he continued, was as much the difference between what one expected to be paid, and what one would pay from one’s own pocket to have a job he’d done, done, as it was an exclusively fiscal or monetary matter. Attitudes determined entitlement, and entitlement was now a hustler’s gold seam. If the democracies were less philosophically robust they still could beguile. They were technologically adept at showcasing coveted comfort and enjoyment, as well as making unprecedented devastating weapons.

Then he got personal — and unsociable as Plato.

“Always a great urgency is to know, clearly as we can, what other powers are up to, especially their hostility. If we don’t understand who may wish to intimidate and sideline us, and how, we are at a disadvantage. We can hardly manage on trust alone. Indeed, trust is often a kind of crutch. An expedient need we sometimes must slight.”

Such canny topical words. His own insular soliloquy.

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

He poured himself another brandy, silenced the taped conversation, and listened to the distant night sounds — the muffled neigh of an American crooner in the apartment below him, the bleeps of a distant siren, the occasional faint welt of bald tires on the snow packed street, the intermittent scraping sounds of a distant snow plow.

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

After a further sober reflection, he returned to the fated tape and a newly inquisitive ‘Zia.

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

They never spoke of ‘spies’ or ‘spying’; indeed, the notion was soon irrelevant. Elegance itself: a vital career beckoned, and must not be slighted. “You will just carry on as before and pursue those subjects you have demonstrated extraordinary ability in. We will be disappointed but try to understand.”

“Will I see less of my mother?”

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

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

Such model candour before a juvenile. The displacement of worry, and divestment of unseemly elders. So he thought at the time.

Yet he never for a moment doubted the goal: to seal a capable youngster’s esteem with a noble estimation of the Party. The necessary deed... and from ‘Zia’s last words on that particular warm summer afternoon, he imagined again how one retrieved and roused the Russian soul, which his steely paradoxical belief in, was perhaps the single heresy the Party might excuse.

“My uncle, like my father, is a brave and patriotic serviceman...who often tells me of the many exacting assignments my father undertook. You and he would have got on, I think.”

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

Sadness, the lingering lyric...the most telling of symphonic chords!

SIX

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

They stayed no more than five minutes, never unbuttoned their expensive coats, and departed in a stretch limo. Julius winked, said someone would be in touch very soon, then, following a cursory inspection of the street, cued the chauffeur. For Louis the visitation reinstated his own familiar sulkiness. He imagined himself freeze-dried.

He was of course delighted to have Cody back, but annoyed she sounded off when she did — a preoccupied snort that came just as the two vigilant reptilian eyes got to the illustration section of his portfolio, which included the clever manipulated photographs that divided Louis’s audiences up the middle: craft masquerading as art some said; very fine craft, period, said others. Louis was happy with

any comment at all, as opposed to mute appraisal — in the present case coincidentally italicized by Cody's sudden backstage expletive.

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

“Someone you admire?”

Cody held up a resisting finger, determined to finish the piece. Finally she collapsed in a fit of full-throated laughter, her heavy loose breasts vivifying the taut fabric of the tee shirt.

“A Ruski escaped in a shipment of caviar! After stabbing a Moslem.”

More laughter — from an empathic comrade. “God, I love it.” Another sentence read. “Oh. She wasn't in it, just on a freighter that may have shipped it.” Then another chuckle, savouring her own gaff.

Louis decided she was just about perfect and grabbed a nearby camera.

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

Louis exposed four frames.

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

Finally Cody brought her knees to her chest and stared at him with a stern expression he thought put-on — inducing him to seek close-ups of the colourful toes, which resembled seabed polliwogs he thought. But Cody's stare darkened, intimidated. Reluctantly he turned away, limply relinquishing the camera to a nearby shelf, verifying first the camera back to the exposure log to reassure himself he had in fact been shooting the intended raw format. When he turned around Cody sat stark naked in a yoga pose with legs drawn up and back behind her shoulders. She began to laugh, realizing as she did so, that she couldn't untangle her limbs — which made her laugh even more. At first he was lasciviously entertained, then faintly alarmed. Finally he pried one of the golden boughs free and knelt to kiss the newly listing, invalided thigh and beguiling sex nearby. The laughter continued, ebullient as ever: Cody of the sun-burnished flesh, except for an oasis of blonde moist calamine, her amusement tickled by a topsy-turvy world and her own bewildering effect upon it, her dewy revelatory inner lips intimating a lush private Eden that begged for affirmation.

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

Later he lay by her thinking of his bizarre hapless trade, both ingenuously lifelike and gratuitously deceptive. Possibly, the most misread of the crafts (he never ranked photography an art; too many givens) and, for him, the least edifying, because one was ever seduced to believe the eye furnished a primed, telltale image of the external world. Even the healthy human eye, far more versatile than most camera lenses, told lies all the time, perspective alone being a problematic distortion for all lenses. Only pornography seemed to foil such cognition, its engrossment narrow, reflexive, unwitting — the beauty he lay beside an inescapable tease. What often bothered him about his profession (he really thought of it as a kind of opium club — but that was another matter) was its disregard of its own influence, its leverage. Dourly he believed most subjects could be, and were, routinely vulgarized. Food photography

was then a type of ‘eroduction’ he believed, dishy forms in vibrant colours often saturated to the limit of human perception, as it was in almost all visual presentations then. Sensuality was simply a naughty, wide-ranging subject, anyway you served it. Part of the reason it was so much fun; the rapt reptilian brain stroked, palliated for a time. The age’s wise men were those who would make it ennobling, therapeutic even. The joke about humans aping animals did not flatter the apes. The sensual impulses that ruled the gonads of *les visuels* had long ago worked their way into the living room of middle America. The enticement-entitlement apparition that touted license for all, more or less.

The networks now humped tales of cutting edge sensationalism: beautiful people wearing less and less, modesty nappies now necessary (apparently) in some film and video ‘meat inspection’ clinches, literal bodice rippers in some cases, where idyllic tits (never plain or ugly ones) burst forth like pollen. The vividly graphic sadism in many shows given a pass, flagrantly so in the *Outlander* series, where a gay dragoon leisurely, in the course of a protracted hour, gruesomely tortures and buggers an elegant nude cis-gender male — one more mature artful scene of coupling, the gay dragoon an apt agent of retribution for a politically woke producer, say.

Louis looked over at Cody, now asleep, sprawled rather ungainly at his side. The flinty realist would remark this the reality of life — the replete exhaustion, spent form, nude akimbo limbs, drawn mouth not quite agape, skin puckered here and there by age and too much sun fun, eyes shut dreaming (not likely of him); and the same ardent authenticator would move in and take a thousand shots, then in a comfortable edit room seek out the frames intimating the gestalt, the nexus of the scene’s anima, or similar layered arcana that driven editors fancied recognizing. As we’ve noted, Louis was then a mine of speculative complaint. Words his bargaining chips. As if exercising editorial comment one of Cody’s arms swung back hitting him on the chin. He might have complained but for her sudden bout of snoring. He sensed how starchy his concerns were in that shameless age. Yet he doubted the preying pandering ‘realist’ could give back a penny’s worth of trust or hope or civility. What film could ever describe for Louis the emotions stark and tender generated by Cody’s collapsed, double-duty form, its still-valiant musculature, desert gaunt waist and etched umbilicus; or the face that held the cast of a slightly impudent but awkward (conscionable?) smile. His incomparable Cody often spoke whimsically of the gawky besotted lout beside her, who often tentatively began by fondly caressing her feet and lower legs, her eyes then cerulean lagoons. What film could ever delineate his desperate longing, so bound up with the stout vines of lust and refuge, her ageless impervious form transcending his pornographic wish list. Well, he was a wordy, extravagant, notional nit, who frequently felt unworthy and courted melancholy, a durable moper who couldn’t pass up feeling sorry for himself — with fulsome expression only he might apprehend.

More to the point, he was angry at becoming so dour, listless. So the world might gobble itself up or inflate to the residues of thermonuclear spectra — the trick surely was to get a good seat in the media booth! Can you not hold that ten to the minus sixteen bang just a bit longer? What could the despair-ridden observer do anyway but look for more stars and prayed they came with their own, self-burlesquing Mad Mags. “Louis!” Cody turned away: Louis had been nervously wiggling a foot.

But all this came before he read the fine print of the new contract. Within the month he might be able to pay off most of the remaining loans on his equipment. What chary modern mortal does not find some succour in that!

SEVEN

General Myshin stood with his back to the door when Vassily entered. A window opposite Myshin's desk overlooked a small park, the Moscow Purple Metro Line appearing as a pale tendril near the horizon. A small skating rink in the midst of the park then hosted a scrub hockey game, some of the participants Vassily recognized as children of the current GRU office staff. A few younger children hovered about the edge, one of these in tears and bawling. A tall thin lad in a colourful scarf attempted to comfort the tiny martyr, the crabbed face of a beefy babushka nearby — a parody of the pretty sappy face that had so coolly checked his own person and papers upon entering the hermetic GRU Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Federation, its autonomic recognition system then being upgraded.

A secretary quietly closed Myshin's office door leaving Vassily and the General alone in the sparsely furnished office that otherwise served as a salon for model sailing ships, the main attraction being an intricately appointed replica of what Vassily knew to be a hermaphrodite brig, a two-masted ship square-rigged forward and schooner-rigged aft, which sat above a gas fireplace flanked by a cane-framed daybed and wide steel cabinet that housed hardware for data assembly and transmission. A wide Theodore Alexander desk faced the fireplace and featured on its one corner a small scale replica of the STS Sedov, a four-masted barque, also a late nuclear attack submarine, its quiet American propulsion system a past inestimable GRU coup. Myshin remained standing, turning only to see Vassily seated in one of the two chairs facing the desk.

"MVD anti-fraud investigator Pereversev will join us. He has been reassessing the Kniaźnin/Stolbanov family history, especially the possibility of a late interaction between the two stepsisters. Before he comes I fill you in: Frieda Van Eerden was finally contacted by an embassy cadre and taken to a safe house. An edited transcript of that formal inquiry you will study in detail. The questioning in part concerned the discovery of a miniature radio messaging device in a broach she wore. She stated the item a routine necessity where she worked, and inoperative outside. A perhaps frank declaration, given her sudden apprehension by the street team, though it didn't satisfy her questioners. The device's circuitry is still being assessed. She claimed ignorance of the flight or whereabouts of her stepsister, who has it seems arrived in Switzerland — all but confirmed. Lieutenant-colonel Vadim Morozov, one of the Embassy's new trade commissioners, supervised the questioning of agent Van Eerden who, he duly concludes, is still an asset. For now. The reason given for her recent silence was her suspicion that she was being tailed and sought to identify the agent. An advisement that appears credible. She has been returned to her flat. Questions, Vassily Sergeevich?"

Even the impassive General Myshin could not disguise the irony in the query. The fact that the mail-clad Morozov was put in charge spoke volumes. A headstrong brass cat representing an old KGB faction that readily kowtowed to Presidium hardliners, was a definite rebuke. His presence in Los Angeles attested to the stature of the party big shot who wanted Zoya muted, and her 'illegal' stepsister circumspectly isolated from the same Zoya. Vassily felt the pervasive well-conditioned calm that arrived with unwelcome news. "Is there any more detail about the reason behind Frieda's recent silence?"

"Only as noted. She claimed she was trying to identify a circumspect shadow. We have a description but no identity as yet. How's your report coming?"

“I have it with me.”

The remark helped displace the tension, for it meant the General's deputy and 'illegal' groomer had promptly acted as urged, namely, to vouchsafe Frieda's dislike of her 'neurotic and sometimes mischievous' family, and her presumed anger with their often noisome inebriated states. Thus the General would be less vulnerable in reassuring the mysterious bigwig who might think the 'illegal' unreliable if learning of incriminating information her stepsister might be peddling. Vassily was acutely aware of the difference even an hour or two could mean; more than one career hung in the balance in rearguard maneuvers, and sometimes a prudent delay kept down the number of inapt moves. Vassily had declared himself and the General was cautiously grateful. Though highly unlikely, the prospect of Frieda actually colluding with Zoya to disseminate info embarrassing to a state official or consortium would embarrass Vassily and possibly lead to a reassessment of all his 'illegals'. A pragmatist might resort to ambiguity. But Vassily believed the General worked to keep the status quo and needed all the ammunition he could muster. Of course backlogging Zoya's past mischief was another matter, the details of which could be annotated in several subdivisions of Federal Zone logs. The General then abruptly sat down and pulled out a thick dossier from a top drawer of his desk, his face an expressionless mask as he opened it. A buzzer on the General's desk intercom purred, followed by a soft winsome voice saying, “General, Yuri Pavlovich is here.” The General touched a door lock button near his blotter, then another button under the lip of his desk. From a lower desk compartment a narrow dumb waiter containing glasses, a water cruse, and bottles of Glenlivet and an Armenian Ararat brandy, rose up adjacent the Sedo. A moment later investigator Yuri Pavlovich Pereversev promptly entered, paused, then crossed to the two gentlemen, nodding to each. Briefly glancing up at the newcomer the General staidly said, “Yuri Pavlovich you have not, I think, met Colonel Vassily Ablesimov.”

After brusque handshakes the investigator sat down beside Vassily and plunked down a bulging portfolio on a free corner of the wide desk. “A bestseller,” he announced in a sleepy deadpan. “My American publisher wants a second opinion.”

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

“Some chippies do manage,” Pereversev added, mulling a yawn.

Vassily quietly debated Yuri's comments as parody while the General worked on his own concoction. Deferring to the SVR, as was likely, would serve as a 'second opinion'.

“A synopsis of late family events introduces each transcript,” Pereversev said after gratefully taking a sip of his drink. “Frieda van Eerden is a ghost in Zoya's escapades of course.”

Promptly the General said, “Begin with the first entries in the updated Zoya Stolbanov history. Age, deed, and location, and identify all party members in contact with the subject.” It seemed Zoya's past turned out to be sufficiently full to occupy several nights checking for potential serious mischief, intimating that a more germane list of infractions might require much additional study. Pereversev took a second longer pull from his drink, then sought in the portfolio a loose-leafed file which he opened with a seasoned resignation and began to summarize.

“We should note that Zoya Yakovlena was born to a dissident mother once held in Butyrka prison, a stay that remains classified. The first entries in the detailed updated history begin with Zoya's enrolment in the junior at-large program of her district's arts school — called The Rusalin Academy

— aged eleven. Considerable talent as a dancer. The first record of illicit activity — she was just thirteen then — a shoulder-pad pouch of Georgian cannabis and a lesser amount of cocaine found in her school locker. Promptly questioned by a district school superintendent, a nurse as it turned out” — Pereversev rubbed a blood-shot eye — “one Galina Viktorovna Prokovsky. Late night detention. Zoya claimed she was buying a medication for her father, from whom she was given the money. A district physician had prescribed the THC medication for ‘neuropathic pain’, poor bugger. Zoya professed no knowledge of what was in the pouch or how her father obtained the money. It’s now suspected she’d begun some precocious procuring in and around her collective. Wonder of wonders.”

From the outset a clear pattern emerged. At an early age Zoya had developed an adroit skill at theft and prevarication to sustain ‘wantonly delinquent and degenerate tendencies’ — so concluded one school superintendent’s report — that may have been the envy of every petty swindler and thief East of the Dnieper, Vassily mused. Her early dance training likely masked some mischief. But more interesting still, was the number of times she was ordered to sit for a spell of rigorous counselling which concluded in record time Vassily thought, then sent for similarly brief periods of so-called ‘observation’ to a clinic outside St. Petersburg that was attached to a long-term care hospital for ‘indisposed’ Party veterans (a discreet observational retreat). Twice she was subpoenaed to preliminary trial hearings for questioning, but never held over to a district assize. The fact the judicial system was so disordered at the time didn’t help. In any case, she seemed to have at least one benefactor with pervasive if not daring influence — leaving open the possibility of canny information collecting and peddling.

The few occasions in which she risked removal from that shield — most seriously when caught with expensive prescription drugs — implicated mainly her father, and pointed to an early conspiratorial pact, with the young daughter unusually protective of her frail dissolute codger. Vassily vividly recalled the morning when the grizzled man soaped himself in the galvanized tub and tried to pull Zoya in with him. Had the girl’s ready laughter not been free of care or intimidation?

A second serious hearing followed the apprehension of the pair in the adjacent collective’s recreation centre, where Zoya made inspired excuses for her ‘invalided guardian’. The two were apprehended late evening in the centre’s sauna — itself a violation of a segregation rule. Zoya had an arm about Yakov’s shoulder. An attendant saw them together and notified the collective’s marshal who summoned the police. Zoya railed against the charge of abuse against Yakov Nikolaevich, claiming she was not ‘indecently attired’, as the arresting officer reported, but became so during a search for contraband. Indeed, Zoya claimed the only molester there was one police officer! As adamant was her assertion that her father suffered from an arthritic shoulder and back, and took deep-heat massage when the means was available, the technique she learned from a district nurse. The fact that no contraband was found left the pairing of the two in limbo. Vassily suspected the collective’s marshal, well known for his rectitude, overreacted in summoning the police. All charges were stayed, though the mangy Yakov got another warning.

The more up-to-date transcripts that investigator Pereversev himself compiled using FSB surveillance tapes, suggested that Zoya and her handlers were adept at anticipating surveillance and sting operations. The evidence was highly suggestive: she likely aided in the trafficking of high-grade cannabis and cocaine, pharmaceuticals, smuggling/fencing stolen phone, credit and identity cards and, on one occasion, porno videos. One FSB written summation Pereversev reviewed, concluded that Zoya served as a ‘freelance mule’ for several underworld figures. But instead of ever being formally indicted,

she usually found herself assigned to the pleasant St. Petersburg clinic for another short ‘counselling’ stay — simple discreet whoring, most likely. Unfortunately the institution had no regular staff and Zoya had been ‘treated’ by several therapists there, all of whom more or less vouchsafed her essentially carefree exuberant spirits. Vassily was only faintly amused. A short time later she was ‘recruited’ into the Apsara club scene. A dual camouflage Vassily thought: the dancing veiling the contraband courier.

“I think young Zoya Stolbanov is a pioneer,” the sleepy Pereversev at one point ventured, “who works an extra bit harder. Just for whom the bell really tolls, the jury’s out.” After a self-conscious smile, he added, “Always been a bit of a Hemingway junkie. Usually easy to translate, his stuff.”

“And you’re quite sure the delinquent was never formally reprimanded or incarcerated?” The General doubted, as did a newly absorbed Vassily, that such insularity was sustainable without a patron or patrons high up in the hierarchy — a phantom benefactor who would not welcome an audience.

“I can find only the Prokovsky woman actually filing a detailed critical report. Which was never acted upon. To the best of my knowledge.”

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

“Not much. She was a nurse once assigned — I still have to confirm this — to the Butyrka prison where Zoya’s mother underwent a psychiatric evaluation. She works now as a district school superintendent, as noted.” Like Pereversev, both Vassily and the General suspected psychiatry had been ‘recruited’ as an easier way of finding deviants dangerous rather than expressly, evidentially criminal, the legal system then too often mazy and slow.

The desk switchboard purred anew. The General responded again in a slow adoptive measure. “Yes,” he staidly said, touching the door release button in a flinty silence that continued for a short quarter-minute which neither Vassily nor Pereversev interrupted. A leggy secretary of the Deputy Chairman of the SVR finally entered and laid three memory chips in a sheer packet on Myshin’s desk, turned and left without acknowledging either of the General’s two visitors. It was enough: a quiet acknowledgement of jeopardy and who they might contend with. Another airless moment crept by, then the General resolutely stood, quaffed the remainder of his drink, told Pereversev to get some sleep, and tersely instructed Vassily to see him the following morning at nine sharp.

Vassily departed the General’s office with the three transcripts, one of Frieda’s interrogation in the safe house in Los Angeles (its content beamed to a military satellite a day before), the remaining two highlighting the confounding Stolbanov saga, which a dog-weary Pereversev had relinquished to an FSB field man, when he discovered therein the gravelly voice of a Politburo deputy secretary in conversation with Zoya, an anomaly apparently unnoticed or dismissed before! After Zoya’s disappearance, the recordings were assigned an SVR oversight audience.

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

EIGHT

The work that orange Julius and his chary companion commissioned was solemnly underway. Louis

performed then in a languid protracted dream — without nerve or much anxiety. He seemed to have bypassed death and redemption. There was no reality beyond this reality. He imagined himself a kind of resigned concentration camp veteran.

Cody came and went, came and went — phrases she would find humorous, drolly lamenting, as she often did, the men in her life who ‘came’ — haplessly, heartily and for her prematurely. She identified herself as ‘a nomadic bisexual’, embedded in an ongoing pilgrimage that yielded too few empathic fellow travellers. Her most durable girlfriend, a one-and-only, killed herself in Cody’s presence with seemingly perfect nonchalance after climbing onto a balcony while drunk then falling off, an act Cody never quite assimilated. For Louis, the robustness of her laughter masked a mordant squint. And then to be a kind of outsider or ‘outlander’: he was not among her predestined mortals, one who might seemly serve antiquity’s beloved ‘best wife’ queen, whom Cody resolutely believed herself a late reincarnation of.

Only with Cody, and her lush imagination and jarring self-absorption, the spectacle could be vexing as well as touching. Louis was more or less reconciled to being a few whirls of dust awaiting oblivion.

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

She was at that time ‘gone’ — with a classically handsome coke pusher who likely had her muling for him by now. Just before she left, her agent got her photographed in a slick skin magazine from which she gleaned an offer to co-star in an ‘awesome porno flic’ — which she turned down when the Latin mignon showed up. She’d been away now over a week and Louis nostalgically recalled her return from an earlier ‘furlough’ — to find her demurely ensconced in his favourite siesta chair when he returned from an exacting but inconsequential day. She sat then mending a seam in her Annie Oakley skirt, the essential feature of her current costume. “Hi, I’m here, skinny as ever,” said the affable voice, as if nothing had happened, her manner palmy as a cheerleader on a qualifying team. Only a swollen lip corner, and that handily made over, suggested another path abandoned in her frenetic wandering. “I’ve made some curry,” she said as she held out the skirt, inspecting it candidly. “Thanks,” she added disarmingly, almost primly, as if he had made the costume right. With some chagrin, he remembered being relieved that adventure ended so summarily.

He looked now at the vacant, maroon-leather lounge chair. Traces of her nail polish clung to the foot stool. Her special ‘war paint’ he thought of it, which he was reluctant to remove, thinking it might be his sole keepsake of her one day.

He had been incensed seeing her so mutely barklessly naked in the magazine. He hadn’t imagined the porno world might commandeer his domain queen. He got drunk one night and bought up several copies of the issue — all he could find in his neighbourhood — and burned the lot in his fireplace, a task that took him well into the night. He awoke to find a single copy still readable which he listlessly opened to a ponderous article, buried amidst the swollen pudenda, written by a ranking university professor, who berated educated white liberals for thinking they might slight the opprobrium of historic *white* exploitation and oppression! He pitched the magazine into the grate and started the fire afresh.

Now he felt his tight disgust giving way to self-pity. If he accomplished all his paymasters wanted, would he not just as readily consign his laboured work to the flames — in the end? Would such work not simply add to the growing perplexity, the confusion of where one fit in? Could he find anywhere in his easy-going self the resource to spurn this second windfall and equanimously return to

a more stolid rendering of the American dream? The dream so many yet gravitated to, with such heady anticipation.

He decided, plodder that he was, he likely did not, and so continued with his extraordinary chore. Pictures of other new beings, including one of Cody, he interpolated into settings every bit as uncanny as the first. The original menace lingered that grubby weekend as a soft but detectable background murmur — his edgy characterization. He put from his mind what might happen when the work was packaged and delivered; he would then be bizarrely flush, even with some money in the bank. Perhaps he should hire a body guard and become jaded enough to shun all rueful gypsy-flavoured amours in favour of a beau monde arm piece, cold cash fostering sustained plush indulgence.

Sometimes he debated seeking out a struggling journalist who would publicly air his story. But not for long. He'd worked for a brief spell during his early apprentice years assisting a county sheriff's photographer, and would not soon forget the silent purple-red hulks that stained the pavement in the neon-searing hours — the chaps who usually acted hastily, imprudently. The sty in one's eye. Such recollections generally kept him mum, the menacing phone caller the latest scourge. His wry Kismet. Never had he believed in Providence or a decent God — too good to be true. One might simply escape notice — with luck and not too much show. Thus was he mordantly alerted when he answered his insistent phone and learned that a young woman, who had given his name as a surety, required emergency surgery at Mount Inyo Hospital near Lone Pine!

He froze. The clerk who phoned had few details except that she believed some bones were broken. Would he assume the cost of treatment because the medical coverage of the girl, one Martine 'Cody' Norstrom, had lapsed? In consequence she would likely be referred to a public hospital in Keeler or Fresno, a move that would delay treatment — not generally a good idea in such cases. Louis accepted the responsibility for Cody's treatment, then paged and spoke to a nurse on the emergency ward, who affirmed an initial diagnosis of a compound fracture to left tibia, contusions and abrasive lesions to face and left arm. The patient would shortly be conducted to an operating theatre. Otherwise her pulse was good. She was conscious and alert when admitted. Apparently she had a bad accident while skiing with a friend. Fortunately the slope she was on had a good ski patrol who got her down to an emergency facility quickly. Louis thanked the nurse and said a short tight prayer.

He elected to sign into one of the hospital's guest rooms, where he passed a sleepless night reckoning why Cody had the nurse call him. Was orange Julius, or the 'friend', elsewhere? Soberly, stoically he'd placed a call to Orange Julius, only to hear Cody's jaunty recorded voice invite the caller to leave a message — 'After the Sleigh Bells'. He identified himself, the circumstance, the hour, told Julius he would be a little late with some final illustrations, and left the hospital's address and number. Before going to bed he strolled the hospital's grey opal corridors and looked in on Cody's quiet four bed ward, which gave off the faint disinfectant aroma of pine needles, Cody's bed then shrouded in curtains and the shadow of a nurse or physician behind.

When he entered her ward the following morning the curtains were gone. She lay on her back, head and shoulders raised, her left leg fitted with a plaster cast that extended from painted toes to lower thigh. Gauze bandages dressed a wrist, elbow and jaw. A nurse said she might be in traction a while and that, in addition to the compound fracture, in which three screws were finally needed to bring the one bone in line, she had sustained several minor skin scrapes and bruises.

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

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

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

"I didn't know you liked skiing."

"It's a dumbo story. A friend of a friend...met when I was away. A tree got in the way. I spiked a mogul trying to avoid it...then the jerko harness jammed. You've been a saint. Getting here in 'one'."

"The ward nurse says you were lucky."

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

NINE

Sonja left a note. A bridge game would be in progress 'till elevenish, when he was urged to join in the canapés and conversation to follow. The soirée took place at the home of the director of the National Council on Russian-American Friendship, but a short block from their apartment. The director's wife and Sonja were fast old buddies and bridge fanatics. Vassily could not stand the game — rather the time spent at it — but would dutifully collect his wife, making elaborate excuses, which served for about half the scheduled games, leaving the other half a test of forbearance and concentration, for he hated being beaten by any trial, however randomly determined.

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

The first footage contained conversations recorded a decade and a half earlier, prescribed when stepsister 'Zia's basic training began and her family came under review. Louche domestic tumult was about as interesting to Vassily as bridge, but he listened intently to several excerpts, following Pereversev's highlighted intros, which roughly divided into three categories: Soya's brief spats with mother; finagling and sometimes witty jousts with Yakov, and rare, curt desultory exchanges between Soya and her stepsister. Only rare curt exchanges occurred between 'Zia and Yakov, 'Zia and Liisa.

The intro to the Stolbanov tape included some background details new to Vassily — one being how 'Zia's and Zoya's mother, née Liisa Mäkelä Uhlgren, grew up in Finland and later Sweden where her father, an oceanographer, was on loan to the Finnish government to improve water quality and fish-seeding strategy in the Baltic Sea and Gulf of Bothnia. Vassily knew of Liisa's marriage to Karol Mieczyslaw Kniaźnin, the army intelligence officer, who, six months after the marriage, died in a helicopter crash near Ashkhabad on the North East Iranian border (the official account a terrorist

sabotage). Liisa was five months pregnant at the time with 'Zia (Anastasia). Vassily did know that when 'Zia began school, Liisa had acquired the reputation of an intolerable dissident and refusenik collaborator, and 'Zia, accordingly, was placed under the observational care of a guardian, an uncle of her father, who had little sympathy for 'utopian inspired fault finders'.

Other pertinent details in the Stolbanov background Vassily avidly read: how one Yakov Nikolaevich Stolbanov served in a Western corps of border guards, assaulted and injured a check point officer who questioned his pass, was demoted and assigned to the Federal Penitentiary Service as a cell guard in Butyrka prison. For her noisome politics, and her charge of assault against the uncle, Liisa was eventually sent to a lockup in the same prison to undergo re-education training — essentially given a regimen of psychotropic drugs — where a month later it was discovered she was again pregnant — with identical twins — one of whom apparently died shortly after birth. Her claim of being raped by a prison guard was dismissed as a ploy to amend her sentence. Wryly Vassily wondered, again, if a Russian Mengele, resolved to see the effect the drugs might have on twins, forbade an abortion for a disesteemed and disbelieved victim of rape? Possible. Promptly Vassily sought out a prison official and asked about Liisa. He was told it was decided that with the demise of one twin and a postpartum hemorrhage — it had been a trialed birth — the newly enervated Liisa might be confined to a remote domicile that would limit her dissident activities, whereas remaining in prison could give her 'standing' in the growing dissident movement and in sympathetic Western press accounts of that movement. Being yoked to Yakov, summarily named the father of the twins, would be an additional hobbling. A district council member, directed to find a remote domicile, assigned them the aging isba. It was presumed Liisa would be a long time recouping, thus curtailing any brisk dissident activity, also any attempt to ditch Yakov who had in fact warmed to the idea of caring for a child — a circumstance frail Liisa managed to countenance.

Vassily was poignantly aware that what prompted Liisa's so cagey handling was her astute, often virulent criticism of Russian government corruption, and her never ending admonishment of past Russian military incursions into Afghanistan and Northern Iran — outbursts that became acutely embarrassing. Vassily knew that two editors at Komsomolskya Pravda and Znamyas were her flinty, 'likely advised', vilifiers, their scripted aspersions becoming part of a family file. Oddly enough, it was Yakov's unexpected droll sense of humour that often softened the plight in the early transcripts. Moreover, it was apparent that Liisa hoped Zoya might be allowed to enrol in the school 'Zia attended — an expectation Zoya's precocious delinquent activities soon snuffed. When the family was together, on weekends and some holidays, the impish Zoya sided with the wayward, often waggish Yakov; whereas diligent 'Zia, sided less with the distressed mother, than not-at-all the intemperate stepfather — and his adopted 'pet'. 'Zia of course, was then a ward of her new Russian guardian, and basked in the deference shown young prodigies of dual scholastic and athletic flair. Early on both girls excelled at rhythmic gymnastics and Zoya at ballet, though as an innate cutup she apparently never acquired the dedication to make such formal dancing accountable.

Less and less did 'Zia spend time at the cottage. Even her vacations were taken up with the education that abetted a study of mathematics and the physics of remote sensing — an early interest of hers. By the time Vassily met her in the schoolroom, she had all but turned her back on her mother, stepfather and sister, and was ripe for a further commitment to her Russian godfather. By then she had also become the focus of an engaging mathematics teacher who shared Vassily's exacting precepts. The

Stolbanov family's early history filled the first of Pereversev's surveillance tapes, those prompted by Vassily's recruitment of 'Zia. Several hours were needed to hear it through. Vassily planned to work through the night, glean background information as opposed to resting a sluggish overworked head in preparation for his sobering meeting with Myshin the following morning.

There were few surprises in the taped conversations. The bare facts were plain enough. Zoya's defection from a promising career in which she managed a brief debut as an understudy in the Moiseyev dance company, suggested the influence of a clever pander, not just a default on her part. Again Vassily wryly guesstimated how Zoya's early detour into a racy cabaret scene may have exacerbated the general disapproval of his own recruitment of 'Zia! It had been a captious time.

What did divert was the discovery, overlooked at the time, that Zoya's relationship with her father was not furtively carnal as first presumed. In all the taped encounters Yakov was too drunk and often whimsically or greedily self-effacing to taunt or inveigle. Indeed he seemed bent on turning himself into the penultimate fool, one who divines his own salvation in an imposing demise — and he badly needed an attentive audience.

Vassily was also newly cognizant of the fact that the young teen daughter who lingered to hear him out — the beguiling, by turn catty and serene, pawky and impetuous Zoya — may have, in fact, adored her foolish guardian. Vassily found himself touched by the sly endearments which the father in his drunken musing was too suave to render restive and the daughter too amiable to interpret as derisive! Had 'Zia ever been diverted by her permutable, slyly jesting stepsister, Vassily wondered — a campy being 'Zia's official guardians likely never knew? In one early segment, recorded one evening when Zoya was home from the ballet school, Vassily was several minutes into it before he realized it was not one of Perseverev's recommended passages, and one he'd not heard before! It began with Yakov's gravelly voice: "My gawd, to cheat your own guardian. Cunning little sun spot." It was soon apparent Father and daughter played poker. Zoya gambled swatches of toilet paper, Yakov a jigger of his Moskovskaya Vodka; if Zoya won she noisily dumped another jigger in a flask she would try to sell for a modest sum; if she lost, Yakov would take a guzzle and accept four squares of paper. Both players sometimes resorted to a sportive language. Zoya began one interlude.

"I never cheat, 'babushka'."

"Ha. Babushka. One day I show you the legendary Yakov Nikolaevich and teach you some humility."

"I've seen it and I wouldn't offer it to a pike. Another two or three?"

"Ha! None, vixen. You will fertilize the fields and I will win a medallion."

"No medals for power drinkers."

"Ha, squeamish are we?"

"You wish."

After a pause, Yakov affectionately mused, "My *own* child..."

"You better call, little onion man?"

A pause, then a wheeze.

"Oh shit!" Shrill disappointment in Zoya's voice as sounds of swallowing ensued, followed by a burp and a self-effacing pledge. "The last, I swear, on the head of Ivan the broad jumper. Three 'J's."

"Ha!"

A chair then slides across a plank floor.

A scuffle follows with intermittent shouts and whoops. Yakov had apparently tried to abscond with the vodka. At one point he began singing snatches from *The Happy Tiller*, a nearly ingenuous folk musical then playing in the district, the official theme, to encourage more births — predictably hammed up here. Zoya joins in and attempts to outdo him in mock earnestness, a squib that ends in grunts and fitful laughter from Yakov.

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

The pause lengthens, fewer inhalations. Then some unexpected mindful words.

“Back, you lost.”

“My own child...with such a sharp tooth.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“A cell hack. Liked scribblers. Chekhov for one. ‘So cruel the adored child.’”

“‘Adored’ — some adoration.”

“Dearest one, the vodka keeps the gremlins at bay. Never a happy choice to drink water or hang oneself.”

“You promised to stick to our agreement.”

A newly thoughtful Yakov replies, “Did I?”

“‘Home free’ you used to call it.”

A second, quieter moment, then, in a newly plaintive voice, “Salomé, daughter of Herodias, dance for me.”

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

“The Tetrarch pleads.”

“Bedtime, for dirty old Tetrarchs!” Zoya was suddenly determined: sounds of a body being pulled up then slipping back to land with a bump.

“That’s nice,” Zoya mutters.

“Find me Gogol’s *Overcoat*. Someone.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

An unsteady body is apparently at last upright and scrapes and stumbles onto a nearby cot with a creaky frame.

“My very own fleabag. Why are you smiling? Salomé.”

“Fleabag for sure.”

“A drink or I am blind.”

“Says the blind drunk.”

“Who can still see...a *rare* daughter.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Dance for me...for my fleeing memory.”

“No.” The voice was suddenly bitter, soon given to a sigh.

A glass clinks against a spout and what appears to be a large drink spills out, followed by sounds of glottal swallowing.

Then a daughter’s stoic query. “So when does the she wolf return?”

“Tomorrow, my own. I think.”

“You give her a bad time. Somedays.”

“She’s a viking.”

“Ha.”

“A noble dragon head.”

“A bit sea sick though, of late,” Zoya sadly added. “You’ve surely noticed.”

A pause. Then, from a newly wistful Yakov, “You think so...?”

More scrunches from the cot, the wisps of a coverlet, a light switch sounds. Then a boozier’s thin voice, occasionally unsteady but never undecided, given to ironic quips about Glasnost and Perestroika. The remainder of the segment consisted of more hoary burps dissolving into intermittent snoring, new bold footsteps in stocking feet, the striking of a match, a gas lit fireplace huff, an ensuing silence, followed by an old Emmy Lou Harris record, which was also in Vassily’s collection. The song, Satan’s Jewel Crown, surprised, its exquisite venerable tune sustaining the age-old lament. The song, actually *being* in Zoya’s collection dumfounded even chided. Had he so slighted the girl’s wit, perception, taste? The song faded into an undisturbed quiet but for an inebriate’s noisy and laboured breathing.

Because Vassily Sergeevich was never a womanizer, selections of Perseverev’s second tape — a later tape he had also not heard — proved something of a revelation. By then Zoya’s young, adroitly mischievous life was itself being scrutinized, a period shortly before her ‘entrée’ into the Apsara. He had assumed most career delinquents put in largely listless days and poltroon nights; thus was he a little awed to see how much control a clever prepossessing ‘Salomé’ can exercise with apparently little compulsion. And she couldn’t have been much more than fifteen then.

Indeed, Zoya’s brief visits to the St. Petersburg clinic for ‘observation’, which the General catalogued as carefully planned trysts with grateful and likely influential apparats, included dextrous entertainments which Vassily felt a raffish twinge listening to, while his wife was elsewhere awaiting his presence and making model excuses for her workaholic husband.

For one raspy voiced patron — a vice-admiral (the voice that likely intensified the surveillance and taping; Zoya rarely mentioned names) — she danced to music that Vassily imagined Moravian, then gave the old barnacle-back what appeared to be an expert neck and back rub. If there was any sexual contact it was imperceptive to the intent listener; indeed, after the music stopped the man talked incessantly about the joys of sailing and a twenty-four foot ketch he and his son were building. Dull stuff to all but aficionados Vassily dryly surmised, being a poor sailor himself.

In another later segment, also taped before Zoya began performing in the Apsara cabaret, a group of naval officers (one ship, a missile cruiser, was mentioned in passing) verbally extolled, in picturesque clinical detail, the nimble Zoya shooting via vaginal muscles, ping pong balls into tankards of rum and vodka. The betting was lively and extravagant, likely entire pay checks squandered by the end of the evening. Other girls serving less theatrical gambits were also present. If Vassily was a time reckoning how female anatomy might adapt to propel ping pong balls into tankards and blowing out lighters at specified distances, and a host of other antics the din denied a dedicated listener from discerning, the swabs obviously left with archival stories that would reverberate across the world’s oceans.

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

“So what about a small torpedo?”

“I’m a peacenik.”

A burly laugh.

“Well, a firecracker then.”

A bored female chortle.

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

“After? Oh...parading in Red Square I guess.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Yeah? Red Square?...”

“Yeah, I’m the encore entertainment — at Lenin’s tomb.”

“What the fuck does she mean by ‘encore?’” one of the tipsy swanks demanded.

Some burly laughter, followed by a second dude who declared, “Listen up people: in *my* theatre of operation, encores are redundant.”

At first amused asides, then a new voice says, “From the Boyar himself.”

A further scoffer follows with, “Shit, the cunts I lay, end in maximum geo-synchronous orbit.”

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

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

“Fuck’n dreamer.” The initial tipsy voice momentarily dismayed.

“You can only guess.” Zoya’s quiet, tuned voice.

More laughter, now from many sources.

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

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

Laughter, then some boos after someone says, after a burp, “Some fucking homeland.”

A husky unknown female voice follows with, “Amir, darling, you’re the reason God created a middle finger.”

“Bitch.”

The stung male appears to be restrained by his fellows.

“Amir old cock you’re pissed.”

Several affirmative mummers followed.

“And a mega bore,” from a new female voice.

Amir becomes newly incensed. More swearing. A scuffle ensues. Masculine grunts against mixed company taunts and jeers. The fracas lasts a near minute.

Amir, now heavily breathing, who doubted Zoya’s price, “Where’s the roach cunt?”

“Short selling her twat, what do you think?”

Several stoic groans.

“Pussy Glasnost,” Amir sneers, followed by a summation from the Boyar: “You Kazakh idiot, you think she came here for the likes of us? We’re just the fuckin’ door stops.”

It was a summation Vassily had overlooked: Zoya additionally serving as someone’s snoop and informant, for a few of the toffs here were well connected officers, some likely acting as bagmen or cutouts. More keenly he wondered who her handler or handlers were and how these conversational encounters might serve them. He decided Zoya could be a fine stalking horse in ‘Zia’s America.

The other parts of Pereversev’s second tape Vassily skimmed over, anxious to get at the tape of Frieda’s interrogation. In so doing he felt denied a choice diversion, like a rich dessert hastily put aside; yet he soon found himself bitterly absorbed in the new tape’s stolid solemn voices, specifically the mind set of an old transplanted KGB heavy, one Captain Vadim Morozov, who was heard grumpily dealing

with a cultured and erudite scientist. At times Vassily was stupefied. Someone was truly desperate. None of the questioners were competent. He could not imagine the exercise being part of a coherent plan; it seemed an unbelievably extenuated gaffe. The perpetrators had not even managed to play to the tape! He never ceased to marvel at the contempt he could feel for homegrown boneheads.

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

The ferret was making a point in reference to providing Frieda with a spectrum signal detector, a tiny device that would detect an aliens's use of a small drone tracker to confirm select meetings and dead drops. The comment was followed by a pause, further whispering, then a sharp command. The small broach was handed over and Frieda's voice, by then weary but apologetic, said the 'dactyl' served as an inter-department radio transmitter she wore when working in the remote sensing facility of the Paleomena space research complex, where she was currently employed as an engineer, researching phased-array radar. That she had not removed it merely served the ongoing innuendo. She claimed she forgot to remove it that day and, given the sudden coming of her interrogators, could hardly be seen trying to set it aside.

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

The Georgian urged the director to abandon the premises forthwith — but to where, under what auspices? More whispering, edged with recriminations. Then the radio expert announced that a tiny section of the device was missing — and both items, he believed, rather irresolutely Vassily thought, were necessary for its immobilization. A stark quiet followed this disclosure. Someone softly swore. The question loomed: must they summarily abandon the safe house, risk being linked to a neighbourhood themselves, and delay the urgent questioning? More cantankerous whispers outflanked Morozov's testy indecision. Then Frieda's anti-pathetic voice slipped into a tense pause: "It must be in the car, or somewhere coming here. It's not sturdily made." More whispers. It seemed most members of the team wanted to bolt, Frieda or no, while the stolid Morozov, groping still to comprehend the multifarious significance of the broach from his radio expert's rushed words, remained apparently undecided, if less incredulous. The agents favouring flight soon regrouped. Only a careful scan would reveal a tracking signal, one said — suggesting that they might have already been located, even listened to. Under his breath another called Morozov a rube — a word that nonetheless slipped out into one of the abrupt, ominous silences. "Is this true?" Morozov demanded of the radio

expert — meaning the outside tracking. The expert, now also on the receiving end of many questions, said he couldn't be sure.

What happened next was far from clear. The tension was electric, the animated whispering resonant as a power cable. Finally a consensus favouring flight emerged, though not before Morozov decided, on the advice of the radio expert, that the device must be carefully examined, for destroying it now would ghost it, thus the device must be placed in a leaded car trunk when they departed. Morozov's rough resigned voice then ordered the premises promptly cleared. Which it was — promptly.

At a Russian Trade Legation headquarters in L.A., where the offices and facilities of a referentura had been established, Frieda was herself searched and the device scanned, neither found to harbour materiel potentially offensive to the Russian Federation. Throughout the formal inquiry her voice was aloof and toneless — an oddity, for Vassily's recollection was of a dulcet timbre, evident despite her impatience in the earlier segment of the tape in the safe house. At times her responses in the referentura appeared to be printed before her. Had she perhaps given them the slip after all? The awkward drama would be complete if she had. Once only did the transcript seem authentic. The female officer in charge of the physical examination had made a special log entry: "Why", she asked, "did Dr. Van Eerden leave her shoes on?" "Because the floor is like ice," came the wan response. Frieda and all her attire were minutely examined, ostensibly for the missing part of the broach. Soberly Vassily listened as the requisite nyets were officially read into the log from the checklist, including even subversive nipples, which one older KGB team had disguised as tiny chip pouches. By then it seemed the strip search itself was a desperate if not retaliatory act.

The final segment of the tape, a private in-house discussion that excluded Frieda, dealt with the planned abduction and return of the 'renegade' Zoya. Vassily smiled: the show lounge entertainer now a renegade! Frieda had earlier been emphatically instructed to shun all contact, but remain alert. A special discreet squad would do the body snatching — if necessary in the guise of a trauma team servicing a victim of drug-induced delirium — a datum kept from Frieda who, Vassily assumed, accepted all the final stipulated instructions, if he could believe the toneless voice to be hers. Inevitably, a newfound diffidence must follow, innuendo being the sole pretext here. Only prompt dire torture might break strong smart personalities, especially when provoked, a general if belated understanding among most Cheka psychologists, who believed drugs alone were of nominal use in eliciting the truth, and required ample time to evaluate. Vassily was then exceedingly bitter, and annoyed with himself for not better controlling his anger. The assiduous planning, schooling, camaraderie, hope, trust, fervent dedication — all slurred by crudely provoked suspicion and a clever tart.

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

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

He was not given time to answer. He was astonished. The regulars were still at it! Suppressing an oath, he put back the receiver. He felt distinctly irresolute, his peculiar miasma at that moment. Perhaps it was time he devoted more hours to bridge, mushrooms and the soulful maverick Berlioz. Even at 12:30 AM. He tried to remember the affection for his round mindful wife that visited him from time to time, and encouraged him to recollect earlier engaging periods...the too-brief naughty period.

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

TEN

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

“How long since you went to America, Vassily Sergeevich?”

At first Vassily thought the question rhetorical.

“I left in 1994 General, after a nine year placement.”

“What do the Yankees call a carrier deckhand?”

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

“And a casting directory? For film, theatre producers.”

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

“And specious talk?”

“Nonsense, gibberish, blether.. One word I’ve always liked is ‘flummery’, another, ‘flapdoodle’. American idiomatic expression has many slangy colourful words, and is highly adaptive. Can take a while to learn and index them, depending where you are.” Vassily was becoming alarmed.

“‘Spinks turning daisy’ means what where?”

Vassily was a time answering. “Likely a black dealer toadying for a possibly white ‘Nark’. The expression may be contrived, and possibly a plant. How you might impugn a rival, perhaps. I’ve not heard it before.”

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

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

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

One snort and the General turned to stare upon a thick file on his desk, inscribed with Vassily’s code name beside a top secret insignia. “You leave in twenty-four hours Vassily Sergeevich.” A decisive pause then, “We’d better get at it. Our slippery Zoya has a head start, and your astute illegal is far from clean, as you must know.” He then paused as if an intrusive fly had come into the room. “One other matter has cropped up. Perseverev noted it and believes it may be relevant.” With minimal effort Myshin passed an American magazine to Vassily. Called simply OO, the logo suggestive of two agape eye circles. The cover picture featured an American ABN (American Broadcast Network) journalist named Catherine Whyte who had fingered crime boss Boris Borozov, known as ‘Bossy’, for initiating a baby formula scam in Western Europe. An engaging youngster with a wry smile — who looked uncannily, preposterously like Zoya Stolbanov! Vassily could hardly believe his eyes. The similarity was unnerving. Placidly Vassily asked, “Perseverev imagines there’s a connection?”

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

With that the General sat, opened a folder, and began reading aloud the precepts of the commission that Vassily was to undertake at 14:00 hours the following afternoon, aboard Areoflot flight 620 to Kennedy International. It seemed Vassily would be put to the test sooner than he imagined possible. He would liken his return to America to that of the elder family member brought to the trial or assessment of an apostate — the spectre of the past summoned to right the waywardness of the young.

Later, looking again at the OO cover picture, Vassily derived some satisfaction in thinking that Zoya might very well have had a twin who was alive and well, living in the United States of America, and fingering Russian mafia hoods!

He couldn't then imagine a more intriguing plot line for a story that would engage informed pensive readers.

PART TWO

Quips and cranks and wanton smiles, Nod and becks and wreathèd wiles.

John Milton

ELEVEN

Angus Dowd, a middle-aged, crusty, senior executive in the mega Paleomena Corporation, smiled into his weak sugary tea. His fondness for fine-tuned intrigue and subterfuge was a salient of his life, and the current dodge, to mask the corporation's success in crafting a new super computer, a dilly. Several fictive characters were being interpolated into a new realistic graphic novel, devised to foil talk about the corporation's new super computer, by transforming (photoshopping) some of its postulated future scenarios into lurid pulp fiction! The credible delineation of a future world was a corporation priority which the computer detailed after assimilating a hundred plus theses, societal and technical, thus revealing a feasible 'hereafter' the corporate heads were determined to examine 'in house'. An 'autogenous epiphany', as one wag put it. Being a computer sluggard Dowd, was ever mystified by such digitized forecasting, how it was actually accomplished, yet had come to believe, as other wary executives like himself had, that Paleomena's computer experts were, in fact, defining an inimitable, unprecedented world! Because Dowd would meet that day with a rising critic of corporate power (its wile and momentum), he wanted his meeting with such a critic kept private, off the record — no busybodies engaging in innuendo about his loyalties. He had his *own* select way of assessing and dealing with such faultfinders. Thus, with considerable deference he spoke into his intercom.

"Daphne, why don't you do your Christmas shopping today?" Daphne Charles was Dowd's pretty adroit personal secretary and esteemed tease.

"It's only March, Mr. Dowd."

"You will avoid crowds."

"I'm broke."

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

“I think so, Mr. Dowd.”

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

“Yes, Angus.”

Angus Dowd found women by and large a rather stolid species. They excelled only at bellyaching he decided some time ago, when his own sexual preferences were still ambiguous. But as he grew to recognize the pristine beauty in slender soprano-voiced lads, he found other faults as well. They were often seduced by quixotic visions and melancholic dramatics; by wistful sloths who derided their balls because sex was after all a hectic multi-lane street; and occasionally dishy beefcakes who haunted the soaps with marvy sex and plaintive grins. His short list. Absent in the female imagination was the mandarin acumen of transcendent Titans, of which he imagined himself a lingering archetype. Thus the advent of the inimitable futuristic forecasting by Paleomena’s new omniscient computer, named Abler, continued to amaze if not perplex their savvy engineers and scientists, and seemed to him a choice property for — in one early forecasting exercise — it presaged a futuristic community full of virulently inimical terrorist factions, many led by incensed women! Famished moose like Pechenpaugh imagined in this segment a pining for *le droit de seigneur*. “Like where have all the silly pinko cunts got us?” Casting earth’s future was an obsession of Paleomena’s minders, in particular its early founder and current CEO, Max Paleogiannis, for which Abler collated and analyzed a select trove of well over a hundred abstracts, scientific and social, then anticipated apt amendments — the postulated examples of future civilizations becoming campily known as the *ZYTA* ‘prophesy’. The one with the weightiest probability, so far, was a shocker. Was only Angus Dowd amused? Well almost, but Muerner was a newcomer and Pechenpaugh the resident social-science scoffer. Cressman, Voden and the others hadn’t yet weighed in.

Abler’s *ZYTA* was a strange business, the acronym fancifully proposed by a chap on Thirteen who said Zyta was a Rumanian fortune teller he once knew who amazed with her adventitious predictions, both yummy and dire. There was even early waggish talk that Abler was ‘influenced’ by an outer space signal hitting upon a Paleomena high orbit satellite and altering, reconfiguring its output to its receiver on Thirteen. ‘Thirteen’, it should be noted, was the fabled ‘missing’ floor — a whimsical designation; the actual ‘floor’ was the busy cutting-edge laboratory that housed the corporation’s computer research facility where Abler was conceived and birthed. The alien ‘influence’ joke lingered a while because Abler’s early product suggested to several specialists that the predictive program exceeded its capability — might indeed be the work of an astute mischief maker. Without doubt Abler’s output was initially a conundrum, bewildering, perplexing, so nearly absurd, but for some of the later readouts...Miguel, the project’s leading genius, was not entertained. Indeed, for a time he was distraught; he didn’t have an explanatory out. Abler’s initial heuristic output, from refined equations to reconfigured predictive algorithms, to *ZYTA*’s, astonishing futuristic historiography, alerted if not intimidated as it importuned. Angus was a computer plodder but sensed, as did others, that something was fulsomely inapt or, more likely, wondrously unprecedentedly sagacious.

So what *was* Abler’s *ZYTA*? At least *his* take on it Angus often asked himself, more as review than query. If he tried to explain the advent of Abler to Daphne — though of course he hadn’t; executive bewilderment you tend to hide from discerning secretaries — he might talk of its deft marshalling and integrating of so many variables, its very ‘husbandry’ — in particular, its pithy mesmerizing future

earth pictographs. Peter Selby-Smith, a cutup on the project's inaugural team, dubbed Abler 'A Busy Free Range Layer'.

One: The futuristic world, its science, technology, creatures and topography, derived from an array of hypotheses theses and equations fed into the corporation's initial programming of its new super computer, christened Abler, modelled after a living-cell molecular computer Paleomena had been a pioneer in R&D. Anticipating future events was one of Abler's first tasks.

Two: The first readings of how our earth world might look in a few score years — one of the corporation's ongoing requisite queries, as noted — at first perplexed then galvanized the project's ablest technicians and historiographers, due in part to the vivid detail in the 'prophesied' scenes. The inaugural futuristic societal read outs featured scenes that initially astonished their team's experts. As noted, the rumour that one of Paleomena's satellites had picked up an 'alien' warning — drolly debated by some sci-fi wonks on Thirteen — entertained some early coffee klatches. The imputation diverted few department heads though; pervasive wonder, dismay, addles joking.

Three: The stability of such a future civilization (such stability being a germane Paleomena priority) was perplexing and intimidating from the beginning — and latterly daunting. To Dowd's quiet guarded amusement.

Four: Scenes from this startling new world — what Peter Selby-Smith had cast as 'tableaux' — were fixed in a landscape ultra modern to the point of disbelief, some having a stark if not eschatological wasteland look, which Angus Dowd took in with some satisfaction.

Five: As yet Abler was deemed a Paleomena exclusive. A few rumours got out, along with a few pirated renderings of the futuristic tableaux. But a suspicious groundswell had been foiled by a set of slyly vulgarized fakes — Pechenpaugh's brainchild — featuring a pretty Russian dancer, one of several players, who were interpolated into the subtly altered scenes for the new graphic novel. The Russian newcomer, whom Pechenpaugh discovered in a cabaret, used the professional eponym Zita. In due course, *The Zita Tableaux* was the name given the graphic novel, which soon had a swelling readership!

Even Daphne was satisfactorily distracted. "So who's the gal?" She and Dowd stood looking over the shoulder of an office assistant manager who had just purchased a photogravure version of the first volume of the then serialized graphic novel. Daphne was munching her noon apple, about all she ever seemed to eat.

Dowd had smiled at her response. It was exactly what the Paleomena trustees wished, anticipated. Even Dowd's alert secretary, with as lively an imagination as any, focused on the tony players, less the setting. The book had become a serviceably distracting sensation for the remaining intrusively curious. Thus far the team responsible for devising the computer, desired, nay insisted on, an exclusive, at least for an insular protracted period: an intense recondite seminar, no freelance gawkers or gadflies.

Angus of course did nothing to derail Daphne's curiosity about the beguiling beauty who had been interpolated into the tableaux's futuristic vistas. The distraction of show biz was ideal if — the possibility was never ruled out, certainly not by Miguel — the new computer delivered one day all it augured. Were that to happen — its output yielding cogent, replete revelations of both a realistic future society and its technology — then the possessor of such knowledge would be blessed with a pithy shrewdness by any earthly standard. Miguel had so phrased his supposition to layman Dowd, and Miguel rarely committed himself, not unlike Daphne, whom Dowd often teased yet never attempted to suborn.

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

“*Naturellement*,” she said, wryly but promptly concurring.

He delighted in the wonder, simmering amusement, and feigned nonchalance that took hold of her. Her nimble lithe form then flexed into the animation that only an Old Testament mob would have coerced him into admitting he cherished. To concede such a thing publicly would betray his vaunted singular philosophy, which seemed to lose half its validity in the telling, especially in an age that shrouded ecstatic sex with death. (The effective drugs to combat AIDS were just then coming on stream.) Yet he savoured as long as it lasted the fleeting grin upon the unadorned lips of his fair, calorie-purged secretary as she sought her purse. The final broadcast look took place at the door. She turned, saw in his natty grizzled form something approximating a leftover Scaramouche, and departed displaying an aplomb that perhaps waned only when she disappeared into the elevator.

The reason for the cheque was not fanciful, however. Dowd, as much as he entertained himself with the moues and perfumes of his princeps secretary, was expecting a flinty caller whom he wished, for his own special reasons, to see alone and unobserved. Ordinarily, he would have sought out a dewy lad-secretary fresh from college were it not for his wish to appear orthodox and the discovery of Daphne in the pool, with her faintly androgynous figure and impressive business school credentials. Thus he was not unpleased this day to see her leave. She would return to accomplish new tasks with her customary speed and panache, and he anticipated more months, years — well, until she got pregnant, discovered pasta, or slashed her wrists — thoughtfully guessing how close that vernal form came to the striplings he cherished. One silk dress in particular, which had survived two summers, spilled fluently over a burnished torso and helped allay several hours of tedious but necessary office toil. Yes, yes, he had a closet fondness for his secretary. Whereas the creature who would advance through his office door within the next quarter hour garnered no physical allegiance from him whatever, but her mind — defiant, heretical, turbulent, skeptical (Abler’s dire forecasting, were she to learn of it, would prompt a further polemic on ‘corporate hubris’) — was another matter. She was a scold who readily execrated potent, seclusive power, especially corporate power. Hence a choice target for a curmudgeon like Angus Dowd who enjoyed both slyly patronizing and teasing such a one. Some irritable folk would pronounce Dowd a wily bigot given his mindset. He would merely smile at the imputation, for bigotry was often the baksheesh vice pays to chilly virtue.

Of course, he would add, after winking at a quietly amused Daphne, that bigotry was earned, like a sumptuous holiday. It was the accolade that sanctioned feasting with panthers — to borrow one of his mentor’s metaphors. Pederasty on high, for instance, was a kind of sub rosa Nobel Prize: the many-too-many need not apply — though many did, and often made complete asses of themselves. Angus Dowd was never more distrustful of ideologues who sought to make rapt sexuality accessible and respectable, and so neutralize the dare — the anticipation, the sail-filled adventure, the salt wit that daring engagements engender. Monogamy, after all, anticipated monotony. He would not argue the point in public, you understand, for to do that was to contend with the feckless multitude: he would have been embarrassed by a wholesale adoption of his mores as he was those of the progressive gay, who had already stolidly dulled their percipient esprit! The insular venturesome gay had once been the best satiric critic of conventional bonding around, yet he now seemed eager to exchange his *esprit*

for a nuptial knot, thinking domestic happiness awaited — the tuneless refrain. Hence the coming of the incomparable feminist, Ms. Gloria Leibowitz, the Jew-Dame-Liberal, to Angus's office study was of singular topical interest. And he wanted her to be at home, so he dismissed as many of his nosy factotums as prudence allowed on a working day. He had not the slightest interest in her anatomy or philosophy (which was laden with socialist dogma), nor her evaluation of him. She was simply one more strategic seer to reassure the *hoi polloi* that *succumbing to a taste for five-star fare could be corrupting as well as usurious* (as Abler had intimated in some of its seemingly eschatological scenes); as we've noted, only an *élite*, who must survive as Phoenixes do, have earned the right, according to the wisdom of Angus Dowd! A complex thesis few mortals could follow, let alone excuse.

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

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

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

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

"An intimidating secretary."

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

"A plaited world."

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

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

"I detect a fondness for her."

"Frequently."

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

Gloria often spoiled her remarks by adding stray nuances that Dowd interpreted as a tic of the edgy liberal journalist.

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

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

Dowd kept his smile perfectly respectable. Though he appreciated the update on his gamin secretary and her untimely Christmas bonus.

“So — that’s new.” Gloria’s eyes fixed on a silver-gilt Gabon Guardian Figure he had relief framed.

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

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

Dowd summoned an online banking account to his computer screen.

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

“I take that to mean — 700,000?”

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

“Two of our progressive college advertisers regretfully defaulted on their payments. Their ads reinforce our *enlightened* editorial message — which we’re loath to abandon.”

“You’re playing Santa in March?”

“Ha! They’re both institutions leery of the age’s trendy populist nationalism, which you oftentimes deign to find ‘ucky’, I believe.” This exclamation ended in a curt smile.”

It was the escaped invective Dowd had waited the entire morning for. Yet not the slightest acknowledgment was offered; he retained only an expression of immured patience, obdurate necessity.

“Ah,” he said.

“They’d been with us half-a-decade. ”

“Of course.”

She looked away with a soulful determination.

He typed in a computer bank code, then waited, almost as an indentured scribe.

“Look, I came here hoping for six, six fifty...seven hundred would be a blessing, however undeserved you must think.”

Deftly Dowd typed in an account number, the amount, and a code to affirm the consignee account, also an update to an independent financial overseer he and Muerner made use of, then sat back and studied his visitor with directness his smile nearly subverted.

“My own personal accountant is of course a learned man. He might have a suggestion or two. I’ll see if one of his team is available one weekend.”

Gloria was again caught flat footed.

“Heavens! I will of course return the maven intact.”

“Excellent. Now we must eat.”

Gloria hadn’t expected an invitation to dine and momentarily looked undecided, prompting Dowd to jovially say, “Daphne, I feel, needs a role model, someone she admires who’s not afraid to partake of elitist gourmet food, even with a curmudgeon like me.”

“That’s why you sent her away?”

“My secretary is an ingrained skeptic. Seeing is not always believing.”

“So she’ll get the word from a ‘trusted witness’ I suppose.”

Dowd handsomely smiled. “Often the best kind of affirmation.”

Dowd’s wily cryptic manner Gloria long ago deemed inscrutable, whereas the rare savoury fare being prepared before her now plainly beckoned!

In a sunny alcove off Dowd's office, furnished with Carlos IV chairs — a paean to the 'nice old slipper stuff' Gloria once mused about in her rag — Regency pedestal table, gold flatware, spun porcelain, and painterly halcyon landscapes — two deft waiters and a meticulous chef unobtrusively set out a six course meal while the fluent sprightly conversation covered a truly astonishing range of subjects, essentially Dowd's lengthy 'bucket list': the theatre season, a late venue for 'aspiring semiotic gadflies' (Dowd's slang was ever a bit fusty and rather all-inclusive); streaming TV series which newly touted explicit pornographic bundling, fond and foul; the recent skirmishing in Chechnya-Ingushetia, where the Russians were again taunting insurgent fanaticism, their ongoing showcase excuse; the plethora of virtuosic musicians as an index of prosperity; the stalemate in fractured government as ritual recrimination replacing culture; the lacuna of white skinned babies, in part due to a growing misandry and the ubiquity of abortion (discounting several million aborted liberals that year in the Western World, according to a forbearing Dowd, conservative folk often carried to term), to the black market sale of fetal material, organs and tissue, a lively 'growth' industry; from 'black holes' evident in many parts of the earth, areas so polluted only virulent bacteria flourish (Dowd suggested predatory nature had to have somewhere to regroup); to a promising AIDS serum (patronizingly mentioned by Gloria in passing); from continuing academic spoil in the social sciences, to the status of women, still abysmal to all feminists; to the budding career of an ABN journalist, one Catherine Whyte who had been intrepidly investigating Russian mafiya dons and who uncannily resembled the otherwise inimitable Zita — to eventually, almost lackadaisically (with the dessert claret) a new charming operetta by, oddly enough, the prodigious American nonesuch Arnold Storrier! Dowd astonished Gloria with his detailed knowledge of one of the late reigning male chaps of the decade — so oddly, preternaturally gifted and unpredictable. As a media freak, Arnold had begun to stupefy select élites. Gloria had slighted the puzzling chap, but another flash in the pan she thought, and the little she knew about him didn't square with him *actually* devising and composing a fetching musical!

Said Gloria, "He's one of the ostensible Wunderkind your friend Muerner daydreams about in his posh Bern Clinic? Or had a hand in mentoring, perhaps?"

Said Dowd, "Felix has taken an interest, yes, the man's history being a fine challenge. While a teenager Arnold diverted the underworld as a peerless brawler, then a kick boxer in mainly third world circuits."

"Where injury to another is the consummation." Gloria had little patience for what she deemed 'imbecilic ritual'.

"Yes, he does have a reputation. In settling a score with one Indonesian promoter, he did ruffle a few feathers. It nearly became a tale in the manner of — a Joseph Conrad novel, anachronous as that must seem."

"How do we know it isn't just all hype? The work of some Mad Man hustler."

"He does have a decidedly alert, vigilant following."

"So he inspires vigilantes?"

Dowd wasn't joining in. "Melts in your mouth — the dark chocolate truffles André makes."

"Yes, very nice. Have you met the chap?"

Dowd smiled. "Yes, at the reception following the debut of his operetta Coriolanus's Cat, where a Roman general and his retinue sing their hearts out to a selectively insular — cat. It has caused a bit of a stir."

Gloria stopped nibbling. “What?...”

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

Gloria managed a polite cough. “Only five nights. Goodness.”

“Yes, Arnold has an annoying habit of not hanging around. The dynamo’s curse, perhaps.”

“Angus, I do appreciate a good joke.”

“In addition to the engaging lyrics, it was partly the general’s tenor’s adoption of a soft lyric cadence, hinting at a mindful affection, that started the cat loudly purring — in a poetic diction.”

Gloria had had enough hype. “The Portuguese sweet bread is delicious. Wonderful texture.”

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

Again, Gloria looked as if she might gag on the delicious food. She’d met the mezzo-soprano and heard her sing the role of Leila in Bizet’s *The Pearl Fishers* a year ago at the Met. Dowd’s piffle was becoming so flagrant that she badly regretted being so outgunned.

Dowd was then obliging. “Perhaps your editors might one day consider writing about the age’s silent, able, resourceful, uncomplaining males.”

It was then Gloria, with some impatience, changed the subject. “Do tell me more about Felix Muerner’s precious Bern Cat — I mean ‘Clinic’.”

In response to her query she learned that Arnold was indeed a late out patient at the highly esteemed Bern medical centre. *And* a late protégé of Dowd’s crony, European maven and eminent geneticist Felix Muerner, whom Dowd nostalgically or whimsically marked down as an eccentric who had always dreamed of fashioning a collegium of durable supermen. — a noxious remark for Gloria which had been, at the time, blunted by the arrival of the luscious ripe gooseberries and tamarind tea. She decided, again, it was a Dowd hallmark to both tease and perplex. Arnold Storrier likely did exist, though the possibility amused at the time of the luncheon, given her relative ignorance of the man, and his august patron. As she would duly learn, it was the totality of the protégé’s near empyrean size, good looks, affability, and apparent polymorphic genius, that gamely teased. Was derogatory sexual innuendo now so incendiary that only a tenable seemly Apollo might past muster for the new exacting woman — the modern lampoon that seemed to lay in wait for all smug, lascivious sexist swanks?

Later that evening Gloria ransacked all possible info outlets and was indeed astonished to find she had indeed overlooked the Arnold chap, especially his pending accompaniment to the remarkable Marianne Fitch, a concert which was scheduled for Carnegie Hall that month! In her obdurate hunting, she also discovered that Arnold Storrier was, in addition to being an aspiring pianist, ardent gambler and tennis hustler, a chess master, and a graduate student in engineering physics at MIT. She went to bed that night with a slight headache, half wondering if the enigmatic Felix Muerner had indeed achieved something ineluctably exceptional in his toffy Bern Clinic.

It was just past nine when she returned to her tiny office the following morning, to stare at her online banking account for a heady five seconds before dialling her anxious publisher. It was then she recalled with a groan the long-handled spoon that came with the first of the soups she savoured with Angus Dowd — the safest way to sup with the Devil!

TWELVE

Lanky Professor Emeritus, Timothy Abathnot Ashly Scargill, gazed up rather moonishly in the half light of early morn at the creamy ceiling in his Santa Barbara snuggery. He had just balled, with an urgency and intensity that had *not* turned on, as it sometimes did, foxy gamine Frieda Van Eerden, his young, freckled, pliant mistress, coincidentally one of the notable research scientists at the Los Angeles constellation of the Paleomena multi-national. She lay now curled on her side, her pretty seamless back a lissome art study. Not long ago she removed one of his restive hands from a vanilla breast: she needed rest, she said; sorry. He had actually hoped they might proceed, after a short delay, to an encore instalment. He was vaguely aware some nonsense had overtaken her at work which confiscated sleep. He was also aware this was the first time he'd bedded her that month, and that she'd not permitted the usual 'philandering' as she called it, during the pauses. No wonder he was somewhat less than magnanimous at that moment — her arousal had apparently petered out, or was on the fritz, as it sometimes was of late. Young people were supposed to have more bounce than that! He pictured and heard the drinking-bird rumour-mongers at Lutece: "Why the dear chap at last abandoned her because she simply couldn't keep up — and her half his age! You simply do not toy with a Keynesian!" It wasn't after all as though he could take her somewhere, to Konstanz or Montreux say; his wife would not put up with that. And he did count on these weekly trysts, now sadly reduced, unlike the Neo-mercantilism he had to speak on that night, once again flirting with hedged tariffs. Would the general public always be at the mercy of conservative aberrations? Always the usurers hidden...in their damn posh snuggeries?

He switched on a narrow-beam reading lamp, fetched a typed speech he'd been working on from his headboard side cabinet, and began reading a section of it aloud.

"In the modern-day diversified corporation, it is somewhat easier to place an operation in escrow than modify it. Overall, an ingrained impulse resurrects in the executive the manifestation of the manufactured good. We factotums who concerned ourselves with industrial output in the aftermath of the Viet Nam War, were somewhat overwhelmed that steel barons might gag on silicon..."

Frieda moved further away, promptly covering her naked back. "Ash, darling, keep it pianissimo, please."

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

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

The top bed sheet was suddenly, smartly turned back. Frieda ambled off to the guest bathroom, her lithe Attic nakedness ebbing in the marginal light. This was really too much!

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

"Ash, please get out."

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

"Good lord!" he said, preemptively contrite.

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

The door closed on a flummoxed Scargill. What had the headstrong youngster got up to in his

absence? In no way could he resolve such marks — or sores! Brusquely he re-opened the door.

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

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

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

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

“But you’re...okay?”

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

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

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

He rose and decided to skip the steam room; the masseur would be there in a quarter hour. He sincerely hoped she sorted herself out and sought suitable medical intervention. In the shower the memory of her cameo nipples scaled before him, memorabilia he named them, which rarely in his embrace became the hardened inspiration of horny writers.

At the banquet he would pray for her return.

THIRTEEN

Angus Dowd skimmed the latest in camera report on one aspect of their super duper computer pro-

ram, specifically the ever startling results of the computer's facility for revising and refining rare and complex matter configurations — a further example of Abler's synthetic acumen. He had little idea what quantum tunnelling was but solar desalinization via condensation he understood in principle. A meeting of the Princes — the pre-eminent executives of Paleomena, of which he was plainly the most deserving in his well-reasoned estimation — was scheduled for eleven. As he expected, Arthur Pechenpaugh, the shaky blustering plug he shared the tower's executive floor with, had committed himself to the efficacy of Abler's expanding output, bell, book and candle. The man's nerve was legendary, also his past phenomenal luck. But unless Dowd was mistaken, which he rarely was, the testy swayback was about to break a leg.

In his bid to exploit Abler's recent postulates, Pechenpaugh — from the outset — had backed a speedy, relatively inexpensive sea water purification system based on some early auspicious data. Such promising engineering was catnip to investment sharpies eyeing the world's many newly parched landscapes and coastal communities like Cape Town, engineering that augured to confer upon the corporation a footing in oceanic research it had coveted for years, and so earn the admiration of its elderly chairman, Max Paleogiannis, who in consequence just might name Pechenpaugh his successor.

But!

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

"Ah, Daphne, you've located it," said Dowd with unusual acclaim, referring to a dossier on one of Abler's lead minders, Dr. Miguel Ibarria-Gomez, whom Pechenpaugh may have suborned. Dowd was methodically seeking out the vulnerabilities. He was mindful also of cat-soft corduroy culottes that ended just above admirable knees. Daphne placed the heavy folder in the space he cleared for her on his then unusually cluttered desk. Noting her distraction he said, "Miguel tends to remain wary of toothsome, unanticipated revelations."

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

"As adventurous *ZITA* continues to, well, boggle the mind," he added with a tolerant gesture.

What in God's name was he on about now, she wondered and, as she closed the door remarked, "Oh boy!"

Once more Dowd savoured his intricate, obliged world.

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

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

"That is a charming frock. New?"

"Recent." She avoided his eyes.

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

The meeting in the oval boardroom of red ochre, blue and gold Mycenaean decor, dragged on with the tedium of awkward melodrama. Pechenpaugh, ever raucous soap box bluster and lament,

again reviled poor idealistic Susanne Rothnie, Miguel's former able assistant, much as Dowd expected. The speech was in remarkably poor taste: you don't speak scurrilously of those you've diligently worked to see impaired, disabled.

Pechenpaugh was convinced at the outset that Susanne had cleverly 'misplaced' segments of one Abler readout and absconded with pertinent information. His evidence was a con-flab of select innuendo, mostly his own, and an error in Susanne's reading of *ZITA*'s futuristic anthropoid indeces which had skewed some early presumptions about appearance. Pechenpaugh belatedly discovered the lapse, but made the most of it when he did, giving full vent to his suspicions about the team Susanne once headed on Thirteen, even furnishing a tape of one acrid round table discussion!

Now the same bumptious Pechenpaugh zeroed in on Susanne's notable error, berating his chosen scapegoat more harshly than ever. Thus, the inner logic of Dowd's preferred scenario held firm: if Pechenpaugh lost his footing, better to have him anchored to erstwhile incompetents below than rumoured assassins above. The indefatigable Susanne was a bit of an apple-pie ninny; several times she had allowed herself to endorse the proclamations of environmental ideologues who constantly dogged the corporation. It was not done sensationally, but Karl Voden, their nuclear power expert, who now sat opposite Dowd clenching and unclenching his stubby fingers, had been embarrassed at a shareholder's meeting when Susanne drew attention to one incident: a small amount of oil from a Voden crony's super yacht that had leaked into the Holiday Harbor Marina. Luckily one of the marina board members was a Voden crony and the story remained 'in house'. The shareholders, many yacht folk themselves, proved circumspect in honouring Susanne's reproof. Miguel too, the team's hardware expert, had been a research headache. He had wanted to go public — where his distinguished genius remained influential. Yet he was finally as chary of the misuse of Abler's potent, ineluctable findings as was young blithe Peter Selby-Smith. Dowd gave Arthur Pechenpaugh a fortnight to gloat over his lone rebuke, then the newest of the Princes, the prodigious Felix Muerner, would demand a full accounting, — and replay the tape Arthur intended to further implicate Susanne with. Ha! Pechenpaugh, who had briefly misplaced the tape, so he said, would know only at the last minute that it had been altered! Fortunately, he'd not made a copy. When the tape resurfaced, mysteriously as it disappeared, it was discovered that the recriminatory bits were wondrously replaced with sounds of snoring! Muerner was delighted. Recreating the original tape would take some effort and delay an already stale reprimand. The clever ruse implicated someone on Thirteen. The wonks there remained protective of their own, and wary of ventures with mainly executive sanction. Yet they too conceded that Abler's surprises had to be impartially mutually discretely assessed.

For instance, the social dissonance in the one future civilization *ZITA* had disclosed, seemed to Dowd uncanny. That civilization's elegant singularity intimated a preoccupation with form — the discovery of an aesthetic 'gravity', or cross-cultural ideal. The sustained pertinacity of the Bell Curve. Once there, the ugly, stolid and rashly deviant were readily identified — as young Peter Selby-Smith stated with such immaculate sarcasm. Noblesse oblige.

Dowd smiled once again: his exemplary social wisdom would one day be in great demand. In a later *ZITA* scenario sex itself seemed to serve mainly as mordant entertainment — all that was left in dealing with yourself, now in your peerless godlike image! It was a tract Dowd could have written himself — without help from a sentient computer. For instance, was there a vision more amusing than physical science paragons like Arnold Storrier newly opting, if not hungering for, a sturdy musical fu-

ture with the likes of Marianne Fitch — thus slighting STEM grubstakers like Felix Muerner!

The meeting over, Dowd returned to his office to find it deserted. On such a carefree Friday afternoon his staff accomplished their lone act of solidarity at precisely five PM. He found a note in Daphne's small neat hand tucked behind the top-right medallion of the Florentine prie-Dieu, his disguised music centre. The niche was used for personal messages, the oval medallion turned to a horizontal position when on 'active' duty. The note read: 'Stanton wants meeting in Tuileries at 17:00 hrs. Re: Dr. F. Van Eerden.' The Tuileries was a busy, elegant, open restaurant with noisy vociferous chatter that made electronic eavesdropping a formidable challenge. Stanton himself came to regard it as a convenient venue for crucial private words; meeting Dowd in quieter venues too often alerted vigilant snoops, and electronic messages might be 'shared'. Dowd had neglected the smart Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, the engineer who had taken a sudden leave of absence from Paleomena — the very being Stanton, Dowd's security chief, had been cautiously monitoring — at Muerner's behest!

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

"It's apparent Van Eerden's not been in her apartment for some time. A real smooth legman, Russian likely, he looks Slavic, has been a frequent cautions watcher. The guy's a pro. Yawning finesse. My team briefly spotted him actually taking pics of Van Eerden's apartment and balcony. We nearly missed the guy; he was pretending to repair a bus stop shelter a block away. Full work van and everything. The one tele camera we got a pic of him using looks like an East German Praktica. We followed him when he left and sniped a hotel number from the registry. One of the desk clerks there helps out now and then." Stanton paused to clear a tooth. "You know, now that I think of it, the guy was also a tiny bit obvious. Maybe he wants to bargain."

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

But Angus Dowd had ceased to think of food at all. The revelations of a presumed Russian being a dedicated Frieda watcher pulled the rug from beneath him. If the Russians were onto Abler, the coveted capital pool that ever hung in the balance, pending the result of Pechenpaugh's late purification adventure, might be dissipated. As well, the electronic wizardry assigned a high orbit attack laser, a late Paleomena commission Abler abetted, may no longer be an exclusive before a deftly inquisitive snoop. Van Eerden, a remote sensing techie, could provide sensitive information on both the new laser and aspects of Abler as well. But Stanton was not yet finished.

"Another thing. One of my street guys, who's big on hunches, took a look at that new Russian Trade Delegation office off Wilshire Boulevard. Likely a referentura there as well; a lot of visitors at all hours. He photographed an incinerator which was all but hidden in the back garden. Some garbage awaiting burning proved to be interesting." He presented Dowd with a couple of pictures. "Note the fawn coloured shoe — sticking out of that tear in the one garbage bag."

Mutely Dowd stared at the picture.

“One of Dr. Van Eerden’s.”

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

“This.”

Stanton’s second picture, a recent identity shot Muerner had given him, showed Dr. Van Eerden standing, lecturing a group of techies in a computer lab.

“There’s a connection?”

“The shoes she’s wearing. The same scuff mark is on the one in the garbage bag. The left one. Faint but there.”

After a moment’s perusal Dowd said, “A fairly common design though, the shoe.”

“But not with the notable mark.”

A third photo, enlarged, dual framed, compared the two shoes.

“Matches up. The shoe in the garbage bag has been torn apart as you can see. But the mark on the one side is still identifiable. They match. Microscopically. Same shoe Mr. Dowd.

The silence in the room was momentarily deafening.

“Found back of that new trade office. A busy place.”

Dowd inwardly scowled. Then and there he elected to undertake the following. One: He must not further alarm the moribund Pechenpaugh. Two: He must ascertain more fully the corporate allies and disposition of Felix Muerner. And Three: As of that moment he would supervise the investigation of Van Eerden himself, giving Stanton whatever materiel and backup he needed. So determined, he further consulted his watch, made yet another decision, then sought the dessert menu. That same afternoon he learned of their earth surveillance satellite’s warning of sea water contamination in the South Pacific Bismarck Archipelago, near one of their oceanic research stations. Immediately he summoned the Bismarck Archipelago to his computer screen. The possibility of Pechenpaugh being involved in another wildcat venture set off alarm bells, given his late freebooting of Abler’s treasure. The prospect of leftover quislings on Thirteen exploiting such a mishap also chafed.

He had to reset his priorities. And carefully revisit Miguel’s team’s work on Thirteen.

FOURTEEN

Frieda looked at her reflection in the plane’s small washroom mirror. It would have to do. Her makeup artistry was exhausted. She daubed a damp towel over her ribs. The cosmetic application seemed moisture proof. Was she overly cautious? Nothing lost by being so. They would change into diving gear on arrival and she didn’t want any puzzled gals glimpsing her lesions before or after a dive. Such vagaries and turmoil!

She glanced at her watch. In a couple of hours they would touch down at Hoskins Airport at Kimbe in West New Britain, the staging hub for her trip to the Bismarck Sea, an area of which was recently designated aberrant in colour and temperature by the earth surveillance satellite they’d also modified with some help from Abler, the super sentient computer no longer considered aberrant. Even Miguel was reassessing some early data — thus slighting his initial diffidence about this new unprecedented computational paradigm, the awesome potential of which no one now disputed. The

surveillance satellite also had hardware that would soon enhance a laser attack satellite the U.S. military was about to test. Now, that satellite, via its terrestrial survey sensors, had issued a warning about the composition of sea water in an area North of Kimbe near a Paleomena research station, one of several that seined select ocean minerals and tested desalinization equipment, which might well have contaminated the designated area. She believed the newly assembled oceanic team — convened by her remaining friends on Thirteen — had a fighting chance of identifying the constituent alterations before a Paleomena proxy could have the area cordoned. Finding and describing this irregularity in the South Seas would increase the group's leverage at Paleomena — possibly by tabling alternative research priorities not entirely incompatible with current ventures — a serviceable possibility. More than her shaky future depended on it. This new team had been bankrolled through a contact in the Marine Bio Society. If Frieda was keen about this venture, she knew it was but a temporary fix, all future commitments still pending. The very exacting punctilious science she wished to pursue was, it seemed, becoming more and more contentious in that egalitarian, restitution-imbued age. To say nothing of her Russian minders who sedulously sought the gravamens of that exacting science.

For instance, the day's social science mavens, popular in the accusatory media, were front and centre in judging and disputing much current scientific research — the basic research she craved to pursue without dictation or constraint. Such 'mavens' had their own regard of progress, where reality — the scientific 'imposition' — should not crimp the presumed benefits of fairness, parity, affirmative action, and a pristine environment. A young very smart department newcomer named Daniel Frank was instrumental in imparting — or 'decanting' as he put it — this dogma for her, a 'sty' that blurred her outlook. Spry Daniel's interest in *her*, however, was candidly, fondly, if not forlornly, amatory! Only belatedly did she come to regard him as a bracing, witty, *perceptive* companion.

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

She also chafed over the exacting request they had made of Luther, their diving provisioner. A rushed assignment as it turned out — to investigate the anomaly before a Paleomena sponsored ocean team should intervene. She hoped they might fully document any manifest aberrations that could implicate research testing someone like Pechenpaugh might have initiated. The probability could not be discounted, the chaotic alteration in sea water constituents in one area several kilometres north of Kimbe had recently been documented by a local Marine Bio team. Frieda had finally fitfully, daringly, joined the small 'unofficial' faction on Thirteen determined to verify any Paleomena negligence. In working with this group she had to reschedule a deadline set by her case officer, who was obsessed with Paleomena's computer and remote sensing programs. By then Frieda balked at continuing to purloin key info for the GRU: the essential scientist in her at last lectured the spy! Almost imperceptibly had she discovered how invincibly she belonged to her speciality, in effect, a study of wondrous, blameless Nature — an undertaking that must minimize the usurious and political exploitation of it! Soon a second scheduled info drop had been missed, and a Resident officer sanctioned her seizure for questioning — a slighting of protocol she barely survived. Her excuse of being cleverly tailed was sufficient for her conditional release. Her recent disenchantment with both the implacable masters at Paleomena *and* the GRU brought about a strange mixture of exhilaration and resolution, nearly what a messianic terrorist might experience she wryly thought, as if she had truly glimpsed herself for the first time — only to be routed from such heady musing by the sudden coming of her all-but-forgotten,

delinquent half sister, who's flight from the London Apsara she first learned about via the news media! She found herself nervously laughing in the small washroom as she collected her makeup paraphernalia. When she opened the door, a brawny woman stood waiting outside, one of the marine biologists needed to help document the chemical sea water balance. Frieda smiled and offered an apology; she was returned a grateful grin.

Belatedly Frieda decided, with some collegial partisans on Thirteen, to help undertake this largely extempore operation to caution if not reprove some Paleomena department heads. She prayed that no one in the group got hurt. She looked out then upon the bright cloud quilt below. On the first leg of the trip a tiny distinct silhouette of the plane appeared on a white cumulus cloud within a sun halo. It was a phenomenon she had seen only once before and wondered if a mystic might see an omen in it. Minutes later the cloud cover cleared, and genial Luther arrived with a gin and tonic which she gratefully accepted. "A small reminder of the 'drinkable' stuff," he said. "For sure," she replied, and thanked him again for his commitment to the investigation. "A no brainer," he said. Soon she was fondly listening via head phones to a tape that included sections of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, a fine piece in sub-orbital flight for a fugitive she decided. The music evoked a detailed tapestry where the events of the past year reproduced themselves with haunting vividness. She couldn't exactly place the point-of-no-return, though her sister's tussle in London and subsequent disappearance coincided with her own recent disillusion — a concurrence that mauled when she was so briskly accosted and interrogated. That her questioners might imagine a wily trickster and budding whore gaming a staunch covert illegal struck her as laughable. Someone in the Cheka or military-political hierarchy must have an awful secret and ugly suspicion. The mischievous truant had never been an ally, and now might canker a newly budded life! She thought it passing strange she should be anything *but* Dr. Frieda Van Eerden — Anastasia Kniaźnin a mere, former, obliged self from whom she was the estimable reincarnation. But Zoya's sudden arrival, using the alias, Zita Krupka, yes Zita! to become an interpolated character in the sly, deceptive, graphic novel that caricatured Abler's capability and singularity — flabbergasted! The timing couldn't have been more antic. If some heads in the Cheka actually believed Zoya might peddle some crucial secret or aspersion to a newly problematic spy and stepsister, the suspicion could rearrange the priorities of an entire directorate! Such suspicion could only be hatched in desperation. Zoya, an apparent possessor of embarrassing info, now possibly networking the GRU and its Neighbours! Again Frieda yielded to a nervous incredulous laugh. Was it not just a little *outré*, as her new companion Daniel Frank might say? Mix in the advent of Paleomena's new wondrous computer program — a sobering sixth sense that transcended swank fiction! — and the bewilderment intensified.

Yes, Abler was as much to blame, if blame there be, for her new poignant resolve. The camaraderie among the small coterie of superb Paleomena researchers — initially a bracing conspiratorial involvement on her part — left her feeling an alien. In the end their respect she wanted above all, which meant pursuing an unwavering exacting technical engineering career — not a subversively ideological one. An authentic world beckoned — her gifted self pursuing pristine fields of inquiry! The experience of dealing with the unrelenting directives, from both the GRU and Paleomena, left her suspecting all power brokers, all plutocracy. "The hallmark of a budding iconoclast," said blithe Daniel about her misgivings with Paleomena. God, such dire collisions. An asteroid belt. What things to ponder as the Strauss tone poem fetched her imagination. What might

not Abler accomplish? What had Zoya, cute sci-fi Zita, already perpetrated? Could Frieda ever look calmly upon her mischievous estranged half-sister again, or selflessly resume her career as a liberated researcher?

As the gin and some homemade goulash ‘seasoned’ the concert of Strauss, Stravinsky and Gluck, she discovered herself oddly, even wantonly cheerful, aroused by the very animation of recent events, as if she could play the part of a courageous doer after all! It was the *élan* she’d noted in some *spetsnaz* companies, and occasionally in her own work, when a difficult assignment was underway. With a droll smile, she thought of the American plutocrat Ashly Scargill, whom she seduced and got to talking — when his wide mouth wasn’t full of filet tartare, his own academic blether, and sometimes her — about his trials as a former presidential advisor, from which the GRU et al were likely that very minute backlogging details of influential government advisors and lobbyists liable to coercion or enticement, as well as their likely actions in the future. She never really learned what it was about the man a U.S. administration might find useful or interesting, for he seemed both a parvenu and slick unoriginal economist — this from an unsuspecting Peter Selby-Smith — a finding she found apt. Her knowledge of economics was essentially command driven, while Scargill seemed a squeamish interventionist, as well as a ponderous and meretricious raconteur. But he was politically savvy, highly placed, and occasionally wryly entertaining, in a glib ‘radical chic’ way: he imparted his insights into economics and American officialdom, in hopes of impressing her. She recalled the bewilderment in his eyes when he saw the unusual lesions on her chest, and his concern when an insinuation of contagion set in. What a vain lucky aparat — American division. But one more in the band of lucky cocksure gropers.

So unlike — how telling the thought was — brilliant, resilient Daniel Frank, that irreverent, gifted charmer and tempter, only twenty-two when she first met him, a new brilliant research scientist Paleomena acquired, who livened up the brief sonsy interlude when they still imagined Abler an entertaining accident or ruse. How would he have responded to the sight of his — fancied elder sister? — standing before the mirror in Ashley’s guest bathroom, upper ribs ringed in pale sores? With disturbed, fascinated speculation? Hardly shame — or insulting insinuation.

And what an adventure those symptoms told — precipitated by her step-sister’s obtrusive coming. The word was out. The possible presence of Zoya in Los Angeles set off a chain reaction — on the eve of her own imminent duplicity! Had someone sensed her unease — her minder in the Rezidency or a shill informer at Paleomena? She could hardly believe that a clever deviant might prompt the GRU and/or SVR to try to calm, assuage some lax Party poobah. One of the persistent insinuations.

Instantly she recognized the perils and swiftly prepared for the GRU and/or SVR to question her in safe houses she might not be permitted to identify. She applied herself to the task of how to plot her own whereabouts in the forthcoming weeks and months; knowledge of such locations would be needed to cue later reconnoitring. She hesitated going to the CIA then, though going there might remain her last viable option — the ever vigilant, demanding, sometimes retributive Paleomena was now nearly as troublesome for her as the GRU. The trick in the coming weeks would be to caution her sister without jeopardizing her. As it turned out, the GRU group already seeking its illegal for recent truancy, descended before her plan could be implemented. Indeed, her prompt lucid refutations before these questioners may have served to briefly indemnify her. What they would have made of the lesions Scargill later saw would surely have greatly prolonged the interrogation. She knew from her training about such interrogations, but was surprised by what she deemed a highly irregular shakedown,

particularly the strip search — Scargill had nearly done as much to her in his more inflamed moments — a tarty prologue to the questioning before a team of questioners whose incompetence left them floundering, prompted in part by the confusion over the small inter-department messaging broach she neglected to remove before she left work, which was in due course found to be innocuous beyond her work space. After a craven apology and pledge to diligently keep on at Paleomena, she left the referentura with a more or less clean slate, though she wondered ever after at the insulting rashness of the strip search, which took considerable sang-froid to endure, especially with a sizeable audience looking on. Were the routinely titillating TV specials that week disappointing?...

Two days later she had the essential paraphernalia assembled to keep track of her whereabouts should she be questioned again — including minuscule diode, tubed chemical power cell, which she proceeded to meld into the under-band support stitching of a sports bra, the tracking to be furnished by a transmitter set in the bra's back fastener — the entire package intimating common lingerie, so she trusted, should she be subjected to another grilling — possible she feared given the haste and desperation of the first. The bra would be one of the first items shucked in another blitz. A computer in a receiver installation would track her position. The transmission could be cued manually or on removal of the bra, the receiver duly recording a tiny asterisk on a condensed city map. The receiving apparatus was housed in a neighbourhood garage she leased. Now that the Resident had a plausible explanation for her recently abandoned info drops, she would be left in peace — for a time. That her cover had been ostensibly blown was a measure of the desperation. Thus she must be vigilant. If she worried the technology she planned to deploy might be topical with some GRU experts, that anxiety lost its edge when the radio expert so misread her routine workplace monitor. In fact, she felt suavely confident until a week after the interrogation when the thin plastic tubing of the viscous power cell split and moistened the under-band of the bra. At first she sensed perspiration, the belated discomfort attributed to once again wearing a bra. The lesions were rawly discovered and assessed in her own suite's washroom, prompting yet another headache: what manner of industrial poison may have been in the tubing? She discovered via the internet and the Paleomena science library that some of the chemical elements, used in many applications, could irritate skin, though the long-term effects would not be onerous for small amounts. A mild Ph-basic salve was prescribed for any chafing.

But nothing sinister happened. Mainly some blistering she noted a day later. Not enough to interrupt the secret ongoing taping of her scheduled trysts with the American plutocrat — to keep the late GRU suspicions at bay. She would see the lights were kept low with the lusty Scargill. Again her nimble laughter dimpled her stomach. What a night it had been with him.

Again she wondered, looking out upon the fleecy clouds below, what may have transpired if, instead of Ashley blundering upon her that morning, impious Daniel had observed his neat colleague dressing the torso he'd made such pretty sketches of in its pristine mold a week before. The question was too amusing to shelve.

During the dog days when the Abler phenomenon was entertainingly suspect, the Princes seemed uncertain what to do with the genies who had conceived and designed the computer that outperformed expectations, only to be complicated by an odd, stray and unanticipated signal from the Paleomena high-orbit satellite. The signal bore the computer's address but lacked an identification code. The experts themselves were scrambling for an explanation, while the summary invigilation that descended on the computer designers added to the dismay. Neither spies nor comedians were welcome

then. The entire research team was buffaloed for a time, and hunted for an explanation, often with a suspicion of savvy outside mischief. The stray signal itself proved to be totally extraneous, due to a transmission mixup; Miguel was too embarrassed to fully explain. It was during that suspended period when Frieda found herself an object of observation that had nothing to do with Abler or the GRU. Indeed, the end result couldn't have been more unanticipated or antic. At the time she believed it was but another turn of Daniel's incendiary wit. But the curious obsession behind it drolly amused when he undertook his 'investiture' of her, as he so fondly put it.

It all began during a luncheon in the cafeteria when he confessed to admiring her from afar, though not because he wanted to bed her — though the idea had crossed his mind — but rather to paint her. Nude. At the time she guessed it another of his charming adolescent fits or ruses, but soon realized he was in earnest. "I'm a lame Van Gough anyway, and likely to remain so until some rare empathic Theo comes a calling. But the thought of you not being preserved for posterity makes no sense...if not already then someone must, soon...you've seen some of my work...I would be honoured...even while sounding a little desperate."

"You want to paint — me?"

"As God is my judge, and resident art critic."

She wanly smiled.

"Yes."

The plight in his eyes had been plaintive, if memory served.

"This isn't then a conventional portrait sitting you're suggesting?"

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

"Will it help you get a good night's rest?" Everyone then on Thirteen had been hung over with the dismay prompted by the stray signal.

"Almost certainly."

She now thought of that footling interlude in her importuned life as an initial awakening, the ironic realization of herself as a *distinct* person, a being with an individual *manumitted* body — possessed by heady, vaunted, sovereign urges to be a free being! A triumphant unapologetic self, admired close and afar! Also Sprach Zarathustra!

She had indeed seen Daniel's work. Two galleries in San Francisco were then showing some of his figure work with other artists. He claimed mathematics had seeded his interest in exacting forms and manifolds, and, in due course, his anthropological study of pervasive if not universal standards of physical human attractiveness, in essence, 'fit' humans and their genomes. Paleomena retained him as a physical anthropologist to assess the look, bearing and coherence of ΖΥΤΑ's 'idyllic' futuristic humans; by then Abler was being deployed to play out a variety of variables, from new particle physics modelling to futuristic earth topography and its attendant humans. He confessed he had long desired to paint her. But unattired. His digs boasted private floor-to-ceiling windows in one room that faced a heavenly late afternoon sun which left the room 'pleasantly equatorial'. That room also housed a storybook wonder — an old, sublimely comfortable, chaise longue that painters like Ingres or Manet would have cherished, he claimed. The timing of the request — as much a plea — was annoyingly apt. She was then all but committed to a new life, free of both the GRU and Paleomena. She knew in the end she'd have to devise some kind of safe comprehensive break with both masters — a challenge to be sure. She sought undemanding company and above all, that particular weekend, a more private

place to stay than her own apartment. Happy auspicious Daniel persisted. “How unattired is ‘unattired?’”, she had plaintively asked. “What comes between you and scandal,” he said with some diffidence...though by the Monday she had accommodated the lunar poses he craved. It was on that stark Monday morning that she rediscovered the other conundrum — the face of the journalist on the cover of the *OO Magazine* in Daniel’s study. The startling selfsame face of step-sister Zoya! whom she had so soberly learned the recent exploits of, including the late attack on a patron in the London Apsara club. We all have doubles she mused. But the face here was intimidatingly similar in both age and appearance to the remembered gracile, sly boots Zoya.

“Dr. Van Eerden, we’ll land within the hour. You wanted a call.”

Frieda looked up at the genial, smiling marine biologist, who was expecting a child in four months, a fact the woman had not declared on her application. Suddenly the insular reverie about Daniel was over, including his fantastical rendering of her in one painting as a modern Aphrodite, in the Praxatiles mold. Fifth Century Greek sculpture he found beguiling, because of its approximation of perfection few people objected to. But that was then. What if everything went badly now? Was the sanction for this ocean exercise so warrantable as to involve — entangle! — all these people in a dicy rearguard operation? Might she not get sick or injured herself before it was over? She imagined Daniel Frank looking for her then — in the one seminar room where *ZITA* became a weekly deliberation.

After a mental reprise of the hastily assembled team’s resource and operational undertaking, she pushed aside the oceanographic map. Her overall anxiety had lapsed somewhat. Also, as the plane circled to land, she felt faintly roguish. So many thoughts to clarify, index. The silvery surf perimeter of New Britain’s Northern crescent curiously reminded her of the gown she wore for an early honorarium event at Felix Muerner’s hillside estate! So pleased Paleomena had been with several of its young researchers then that it staged a celebration and retained the Muerner Sonoma mansion to display its munificence. She looked on the eccentric debonair Muerner that afternoon with a wan curiosity. Then she was oblivious to the inner complexity of the man and the awesome genetic and developmental research his eminent experts undertook in his exclusive Bern clinic. He had long since abandoned America as an impartial research haven. She had got drunk and over ate at the celebration. The meal was perhaps the apogee of her gourmet experience; the conversation, she recalled, a perfect blend of wit and attractively displayed information. The sunshine in the garden aviary was blissful. It was soon apparent, given the deference shown him, that Muerner was one prince to very carefully assess! Abler was still largely an X Factor then — improbable but intriguing, if not promising.

Less debonair, but as fondly nostalgic, was the night she got the rotund David Willardson, the shy, Paleomena art collection curator, Pechenpaugh’s confessor and unhappy shill, to assist her in bugging up the Pechenpaugh tape she had managed to purloin with the help of a plucky empathic executive secretary. She’d heard Pechenpaugh brag to Miguel about a tape that would incriminate Susanne Rothnie. Despite the hair-raising exigency in finding and returning the tape, its largely scurrilous info *was* reduced to the unbecoming bathos of sleep — Willardson’s enacted gravelly snoring! One of the commensurate successes. Poor Pechenpaugh. Blessed David. Luckily the tape was a one off. Pechenpaugh had just finished editing it when it was pinched and hadn’t yet copied it. Providence hadn’t been nodding.

That cleansing recording session took place a week after she confronted the late Zoya incarnation

— the Zita in the graphic novel! To be invited back to an attractive girl's apartment 'to stage a snoring', as Willardson put it, fetched one of his durable smiles. He performed admirably for her two microphones though, through several tapings, before she was satisfied and permitted him the tranquility of her guest room. He had whimsically, if not fondly, eyed her the morning after the emended tape was delivered — another keen attention she hadn't anticipated, being unslept, bone weary, and rawly exhuming her options. She smiled. A bookish old bachelor making her feel like a bemused tart. Sweet heedful David. Not unlike Daniel's apprehension of her that one 'morning after' she mused — the morning she first saw his Aphrodite.

"A bit stark, maybe," she recalled her young Ingres remarking when at last they surveyed the finished painting of his smiling, upright Greek goddess. She tended to agree, and wondered what Willardson would have made of the coyly smiling nude.

Luther touched her shoulder. "The landing strip looks a little bumpy, Dr. Van Eerden. Better buckle up."

The interlude of relaxation, retrospection was over. She looked over the restless waves and recalled reading of an earlier particularly devastating hurricane that had been christened 'Frieda'.

FIFTEEN

Gloria Leibowitz looked upon this gathering of theatre patrons through a highball glass spiked with caution and a dash of disdain. She recognized two tabloid reviewers of society illuminati, a lecherous film magnate (whose reputation as a horny lizard was burgeoning), a music critic from the LA Times, an ingratiating senator playing to a small mutating audience, and two straining art savants, one of whom once designated such folk here as 'paste jewel collections'. The beaming senator caught the eye of a very pretty, very young opera singer whose name Gloria couldn't remember. "I'm a huge fan of yours," he said aloud. "Any particular role?" the singer forbearingly asked. The senator smiled, mumbled something to which the singer placidly replied, "You may have confused me with someone else; I'm a contralto," before amiably disappearing.

Thus the discovery of John Cook — the dour, cultured critic of film, music and the theatre, who regaled his admirers by learnedly and eloquently reviling an entertainment Babylon that produced a handful of tolerable intellectual treats a decade — brought a compensating smile to Gloria's lips.

"John, you look overawed," she remarked. As far as she knew he hadn't yet publicly assessed the artistic pretension of Arnold Storrier, whose new one-act opera Tyche they had just attended.

"Well, sylvan lyricism is not the sort of thing one anticipates from a former rowdy." He referred to the enigmatic former kick boxer whose late opera was regaled in this post performance reception here in the lounge of the new San Francisco Music Center.

"Am I going to have to wait for your new book collection of essays to discover if you liked it?"

"Well, as I anticipate only abjectly fawning notices, it may seem an act of *lèse-majesté* to say it can be a little grovelling — that happy ending it inveigles us with for one. But as modern musicals go, one may acknowledge some erstwhile talent."

"You could recommend it then?"

John looked rather glum for a couple of seconds, still in consultation.

“ — With some reservations. A bit maudlin at times, especially when that small chorus of superannuated soloists he dredged up for his nostalgic reverie wavered forth.”

“The man is...fond of superb legendary talent.”

“Rather heartless though, given their general decline.”

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

“Well, at one time he ineluctably qualified.”

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

“Gloria, he’s either a universal savant or some kind of latter-day cyborg. What else?” Wanly he added, “There’s a fine rumour about that he may receive the E.J. Solvay Prize in thermal physics.”

“How nice,” said Gloria, at first amused, though not for long; quickly she recognized the resignation in John’s voice.

“The world continues on its way,” he quipped, giving her figure a brief once over.

“Says who? About the prize.”

“One of the ‘tenured’ experts.”

“That sounds a bit dismissive,” she said, rather pertly.

He took a token swallow from his drink. “Truth can dismay.”

“Of course.”

They parted, she resisting a scowl. Being keenly scrupulous, punctilious, was ever a kind of time trial — for the daily embattled feminist.

“ — Oh, Arnold won’t show up till later of course. He’s still too sober, Felix says.” The senator’s wife, newly present by her hubby, was speaking to the senator’s small coterie of well wishers.

Gloria sought then a better position to view Felix Muerner, who she’d just spotted, the small dapper man reputed to be the adroit mentor to the singular if not freakish parvenu Arnold Storrier. That mentor was also on the board of one of the world’s largest multi-nationals, thence one of the Paleomena Princes, as they were touted. The distinctive characteristic she recalled was the oversize head and a voice faint and nearly soprano pitched. She also noted a sprig of something green in his button hole and a dense curl of hair in the same company as an elf lock. Perhaps a wig. He wore a fixed smile and chatted with a racy video producer, who spotted her hovering nearby. Somehow the bouquet of roses behind the producer reminded her of the actresses the pander had inveigled into doing unprecedented nude sex scenes, both raunchy and sadistic. The producer took note of Gloria with a rakish smile.

“Gory! All decked out — just like the marchioness in the opera,” he suddenly drawled, pointing her out to the distinguished patron. “Gloria Leibowitz, Dr. Felix Muerner. ‘Old Glory’ to her boosters. Past Miss Utah.”

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

“Oh yes. Though he makes any homage a trial. He’s flattered of course, but likes to hang out with a few copper noses first. Less liable, as he puts it.”

“Does super-ma’am fancy genteel opera?” the swank producer-pander breezily asked.

Gloria ignored the remark, though she wanted to retort that unsung superwomen filled over half the audience. Instead, she asked Muerner when Mr. Storrier began writing music. A question that

seemed itself surreal.

“Truly, I don’t know. He does play the piano well, a prodigy’s talent. I do know he liked the libretto — it’s based on an early experience in one foster home that had a piano, a rare home it turned out, where the family dealt with misfortune by a trust in themselves and a religious optimism — short lived sadly, for he was hornswoggled into the fight world about then. The play of Fortune — Tyche.”

“Our good old Triads!” said the producer with a fine show of stoicism.

Muerner was momentarily embarrassed, or pretended to be. “Well, yes and no. We’re still not sure who his early ‘recruiters’ were — though he did end up fighting for a promoter in South East Asia — a kind of cock fighting using teenagers instead of roosters. Mainly in Third World capitals — including Bangkok and Chiang Mai. He was carefully watched when not fighting. He was first brought to our attention in 1996. A medical volunteer in a program we helped fund, pointed him out. You know the story?”

Gloria obligingly shook her head, believing the question rhetorical.

“Well, he was inveigled, enticed at a young age from a foster home in London by some thugs who were facilitators, promoters for edgy combat sports. A nurse who worked in my Bern clinic brought his plight to our attention. She knew how interested we were in evaluating and fostering exceptional youngsters. She spent a month each year working as a volunteer for *Médecins Sans Frontières*. She worked in Cambodia then. Arnold was one of several villagers she treated who were injured in a drone strike. Early on she recognized his wasted, stymied abilities and intelligence, and ongoing jeopardy. They became, for a time, keenly fond of one another, despite his minders. Shortly thereafter his promoter was seized by a Triad terrorist group. It’s an onerous story. The promotor was ransomed, not so his fighters, who continued in matches the terrorists staged. In short, when our rescue team got to him he was in poor shape. He had confronted one of the terrorists over the abuse of a child. As a result he was locked into cage matches with two and three opponents — how you ‘game’ a death sentence. In brief: ours was a timely if dicey intervention. We almost didn’t succeed.” Here Muerner paused to indulge a mordant chuckle. “One of life’s providential escapes. The man is of course truly exceptional from several standpoints. We promptly abetted the singular natural talents the nurse had duly noted. But for this dedicated observant girl, a veritable Fortuna, he mayn’t have survived.”

“You were then, it appears, a very timely mentor,” Gloria said into a portentous pause, wondering the while if any of the fantastic story were true.

Muerner resumed with a deprecatory smile. “The nurse’s apt description of the nonsuch more or less mandated it. What we do. When we can. Arnold is circumspect but learns mercurially when committed. The media have given him, well, a kind of Brobdingnagian aura. The Jonathan Swift allusion. Though I doubt he sees himself as an oversize freak. Media folk prize tall tales that beggar fiction. Very few such narratives feature taciturn courage, singular endurance, or near mystical numeration and verbal acuity — yes verbal — all of which we noted early on and sought to enhance.”

“Your intervention is damned appreciated, Felix,” the video producer said just before bolting the last of his drink. “We think so.”

Gloria could barely keep from snorting. The allusion to verbal skills astonished.

But in the weeks that followed, she began to comprehend the allusions to Arnold Storrier’s dire early life and prodigious talents — those of a ‘non-idiot polymath savant’ one buffaloeed columnist

ventured — and she did confirm that he first went to Bangkok under the sponsorship of an outfit called Sports Majesté. The story ended with his hospitalization in 1997 for what was described in a Hong Kong journal as ‘festering wounds, dehydration, ecchymosis and nausea.’ As Gloria would shortly learn, eccentric, dynamic stories attached to the man like barnacles. His insular inveterate gambling habit being one such add on. Brazen macho cardsharps were not on her bucket list, yet she did take a wary, cautious look at this one.

In due course she learned he played tennis — with a grace and craft, despite his size, that impressed professional experts, but with a hustler’s incentive that cautioned, if not galled the same experts. This singular talent surfaced during an exhibition tennis match between a low ranking seed and the hustler-challenger. The seed reputedly lost \$90,000. After the game several reporters crowded in to get a comment from the wunderkind — only to discover that he’d vanished. “Fled like a gypsy,” one reporter squawked. The absence seemed then inadvertent not planned. The presumption that he would return took a while to dissipate. Gloria suspected the media had a singularly talented, insular if not taciturn performer on its hands, who might serve many interests, and she further knew that many touchy reporters might be slow to assimilate this fact. Gloria suspected the exclusive behaviour belonged to a prodigy who well knew how to game a ravenous media: ignore them — this otherworldly paladin, John Cook’s wily comment about a latter-day cyborg still simmering.

A week later, when the absences were beginning to wear thin, a cagy newcomer managed to get a word in edgewise, asking Arnold if he really preferred boys to girls — a question placed on a live improv street interview the censor did not delete. Gloria suspected the whole incident staged. The fact that the singular question was answered promptly, naturally — Arnold had actually openly replied to a question in public, in what seemed a mannered Austrian accent — added to the unprecedented circumstance! The ‘awakening’, as one reporter called it, so surprised everyone that a momentary paralysis set in. Indeed, Gloria was at first confused by the voice, as if it might well belong to a placid cyborg’s locution — not an innate human.

“I think (sink) actually I prefer ladies who are happy being ladies,” the rarified hombre replied.

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

“Some experts call such people — such ‘ladies’ — a bit old fashioned.”

“No, they are just rare. They like men generally, even white men like me, jah.”

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

“They approve honourable mention. One mam’selle, a sibyl I think — Leibowitz, Gloria. But she never returned my calls.” Gloria wryly wondered if the swank had said *menschen* for ‘mention’.

Despite the improbable words, which seemed to her eerily phoney and badly scripted, Gloria had felt used, exploited and immediately phoned her lawyer, who was annoyingly well-informed.

“Yeah, I was actually watching the program. Glory, the oddball’s got warehouses o’ dough I’m told. Or access to them. You want the bluer details of your life showcased in the media again? They’ve been slighted for a while now, right? And given the quizzical nature of the words let alone their bathos, I doubt you would have a defamation case anyway.” A pause. “Want me to ask Sheila?” Sheila was the most recent partner and only female to grace the firm’s letterhead.

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

Which to Gloria’s surprise she ostensibly got, before an afternoon talk show audience in which

they both participated, though the Arnold ‘in attendance’ spoke in a remarkably dissolute Georgian drawl with a deft earnestness that Jimmy Carter sometimes blew with a grin — a fact that actually caused Gloria to suppress laughter — a laughter no wayward southerner ever elicited from her before. It seemed that day that Arnold might well be the ‘latter-day cyborg’ John Cook spoke of. The wry possibility ever intruded. Whether due to insanity or arbitrary arrest, the Muerner factor she mused, the phenomenon of Arnold Storrier then defied rendition!

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

“Well, I cannot be held responsible for a media that thinks truth ‘plain’; I have a responsibility to my audience,” he said in a rare offhand sally that few garrulous witnesses made note of. By then Gloria was becoming impatient with the Broad Punter Phenomenon, a by-line in the Los Angeles Times, for the media had become so convoluted in its reportage that, as she editorialized, ‘the ever mutable words were inciting endless tabloid piffle.’ She wrote a long essay berating both the scandalmonger media and a ‘wily brat who ought to better discipline his media skills.’ The trenchant column got her a spot, opposite Arnold, on a late-night talk show, then hosted by a shopworn but still handily abrasive Don Rickles. Gloria wasn’t sure what had happened when it was over, but she did find herself more bemused by Rickles than ever, and far less clear what indeed Arnold Storrier represented. At one point in the lively exchange she managed a simile of both Rickles and Storrier as historic robots, with indestructible engines but hopeless electric circuitry. Rickles began the show with a sly patronage of Arnold’s Solvay Prize. Which no one of account then disputed.

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

Arnold stolidly nodded and said in his faint Austrian accent, “Jah.” A dismissive smile followed.

To the audience Rickles said, “Arnie’s a world class punter. Luck being his ‘Special Lady’.” Grinning at Gloria, he added, “Hang in there, kid.”

Gloria stifled a ready laugh.

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

Rickles then noted a scowling, unamused guest in a front row and attentively asked if a kidney stone was acting up again. A commercial break followed, during which Arnold was heard in a prolonged talk to someone on his iPhone, almost as if rehearsing a speech. Rickles was amused and said when the break ended and Arnold’s conversation ceased, “Arnie, you talk a lot to yourself.”

“Jah. Ze guy who needs convincing.”

Rickles mordantly chuckled. Then, after a deprecating moue, said, “Stay awake and hang in there kid. Your ride’s on the way.”

“Jah. The Uber mensch.”

“Just nod, Arnie. We’re cool.”

Said Gloria, “Freeze dried.”

Rickles then glowered at Gloria; Gloria smiled, a bit too cutely.

Rickles loudly consulted the set director. “The censor cleared that? Fine. Being dirty in Esperanto is okay then? Fine.” Then, in a demure aside to Gloria added, “We’re okay, Leibo. A little nervous, but okay.”

By then Arnold had reverted to his everyman smile, a James Stewart understudy, Gloria mused. Rickles wiped his brow, now drenched in rivulets of perspiration, and said to Gloria, “Grinding your teeth won’t help: you’re still an airhead.”

Gloria broadly smiled.

Rickles looked intently at her. “You use Polygrip?”

The audience laughed in unison.

Said an earnest Arnold, “‘Polygrip’ is what please?”

Matching Arnold’s gravity Rickles said, “What Maiden Form puts in their bras, Arnie.”

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

Rickles stifles a snigger. “Always a gas, Arnie. But we’re cool. Won’t ask around.”

Arnold agreeably smiled.

And on and on it went: Rickles, Smithsonian pander of the leat, gamy innuendo, broadside slight, leading on his unacclimatized ‘foreigner’ with his electric non sequiturs, Arnold answering in a stolid Austrian American, which Rickles marvelled at in the manner of a well-paid stooge. Gloria tried a few times to steer the language toward the coherent, comprehensible, but found the effort giving Rickles a Catherine Wheel of impromptu wise cracks.

At last she gave up, and stoically listened to the droll exchanges. If indeed Arnold was some kind of cyborg, his words were too often engaging and seemingly impromptu, despite the preposterous inferences in some, to constitute programmed conditioning — her sober interim conclusion.

Rickles dumped a few last scatter-shot insults into the final fifteen seconds, the tensors dimmed, and the crew hastened to clear the deck. Thus it was a surprised Gloria who received the flowers in the lounge after the show from one of Storrier’s factotums; the preoccupied Alter Pop left after a swift but genial handshake. The accompanying card was both an apology and invitation to dinner. Gloria had promptly chucked the lordly buds into a trash can, yet kept the dinner invitation — to which she was late, due to a last minute irritation with the frock she had on. Ordinarily she would have summarily turned down an invitation to dine with a man she hardly knew, had every reason to deride both his motive and civility, but decided to go the moment the ostentatious buds crashed into the waste container — an impulsive act indulged before some members of the crew which she upbraided herself for later. Actually, she would have preferred to put the unexpectedly fragrant petals into her apartment’s piezoelectric air freshener.

SIXTEEN

No sooner had Dowd returned to his quiet residential estate from the revelatory meeting with Stanton at the Tuileries, than he noted again the advisement on his computer of a problem in the South Pacific. It originated from their space orbiter headquarters and told of their earth surveillance

satellite's warning of an ocean mishap in that part of the Pacific. Abler had been instrumental in designing some data reduction codes aboard the craft, a later version of which was intended for cislunar orbit. The message had been sent to Muerner, Dowd, and the Paleomena South Pacific research station — where one of Frieda's colleagues promptly learned of the potentially dire incident via a friend on that station! The other Princes would be told of the mishap later. Muerner promptly acted to secure an initial examination of the area, engaging the high tech naval group called Seabe, which served several corporate research installations, seabed exploration and study projects, and recovery of lost or pirated materiel.

Dowd placed calls to Muerner's office and hillside estate. Muerner was at none of the above locations but would be in the Paleomena Tower within the hour, to where Dowd repaired in due course after reviewing the potential liability posed by the sea water mishap, and dispatching one of his loyal subordinate executives to quietly question the remaining colleagues of Dr. Frieda Van Eerden, the engineer who so recently and perplexingly absented herself from her post in the Paleomena research complex. He thought too of the ambitious little defector Pechenpaugh had put to deft use. The graphic novel that Louis Peak helped fashion now had a growing following, mainly among sci-fi groupies, thus serving as an expedient diversion. Later, of course, when Abler's product was more properly understood and severally patented, the novel's anonymous author and its illustrator might be given laundered rewards. Fine. But other matters intruded now. Not the least being Van Eerden's unexplained late leave taking, enjoined to the advent of the Russian agent Stanton mentioned, and the wily Zita, whose own story intimated a past as sensational as her presence in the graphic novel.

Felix Muerner, however, when they met, seemed altogether optimistic. They sat in the film screening room, the lights dimmed to a soft reflective mantling.

"No, no Angus. Your imagination's working overtime. Why Frieda left when she did, and the coming of our piccolo player, as Cressman calls the canny Russian tart, are more non sequiturs that will sort themselves out I'm sure. Remember Frieda usually ran shy of that pack of ideologues on Thirteen. She was wary of their motives — according to Miguel — particularly those who wanted Abler's treasures shared. She struck me as innately cautious and observant. Some insurgents in that pack of ideologues may still scramble to purloin some data. Difficult with the new security measures. We see who they are and legally sequester them. Simple."

"I trust it can be done competently, quietly."

"Of course. We're a progressive firm."

"The location of the South Pacific incident does not concern you then? Near one ocean research project?" The topical intrusive question.

"A small glitch. Our project overseers are improving."

"And if Frieda is perhaps an embedded spy?"

"Unlikely, and irrelevant — at least for now. That wary faction on Thirteen won't flout their newly commanding work. They now stand with cautious Miguel on that issue. The fact that Frieda's now off on her own, with so many things pending, is not I think the act of a diligent vandal."

Muerner was silent for a moment, then resumed in a soft emphatic tone. "Angus, the important point is that the ideologues, our so conscientious in-house cavillers, are coming around. They won't go behind Miguel's back, and Miguel wants a comprehensive review — allowing a time frame for a further exclusive study of Abler's product. He's mindful of what happens should the wrong people

have access to what in effect is becoming a computational seer. The satellite that supposedly sent the stray signal to Abler — a wry supposition that was a time waning — is ours. That anomaly helped disclose a few remaining blabbermouths, yes? It was expected some outsiders would do some fishing.”

“Stanton noted a Russian legman, who he believes to be top drawer, carefully watching Van Eerden’s flat.”

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

Dowd continued undaunted. “I was simply surprised to find anyone in place so soon after Frieda’s recent leave taking.”

Muerner then rose, rather impetuously Dowd thought, as if to extricate himself from the well-reasoned distrust. He paced before the large projection screen and was about to reply when he threw a switch on a wall panel raising that screen — to reveal on a utility table near the rear storage vault a laptop computer. Both men stared at the oddly situated computer in silence. Dowd was the first to speak, observing carefully the newly fixed cast to Muerner’s concentration.

“It tells a tale, I presume.”

“It is an oddity being — here.” Muerner seemed to await his own explanation. “The log said the comptroller’s gang was last in here, to view some holiday scenes. I wonder what this computer — it is Arthur’s I believe — offered that the main console could not. A curious even careless placement don’t you think? When did Arthur leave today?”

“Noon, his usual flight.” The presence of the computer baffled Dowd. What would Pechenpaugh be doing looking at his laptop here, with or without the comptroller’s team, then leaving it behind?

The confusion lasted twenty-four hours before the denouement of the Anomalous Computer, as Dowd thereafter thought of the incident, was candidly revealed. Regrettably, for Dowd, it disclosed little about Zita’s arrival and casting in the tableaux, or Frieda’s ‘truancy’.

The sappy facts were disclosed in the rare manuscript library that overlooked the Lichi-Chinaberry grotto in Muerner’s Sonoma mansion. Low sunlight vivified the stained-glass Echeveria flowers in the Came Glasswork windows. Dowd had received an invitation a day before. Shortly after he arrived, and settled into a comfortable wing chair with a dry sherry, Muerner launched into his update — not the canny discourse Dowd anticipated, rather something more on the order of a favoured anecdote. For fastidious Dowd it was a wonder — coming from this sobersided autocrat, who affected the role of an avid docent in his telling of it!

“Our video librarian confirmed Arthur came to the gallery when the comptroller’s team left. Arthur said he would tidy up. I know he’s been obsessed with the surveillance tapes of Louis Peak’s studio, the photographer and retoucher Pechenpaugh and Voden commissioned.”

“And that’s significant, is it?”

Muerner briefly smiled. “You’ll recall Arthur has had Peak carefully monitored and, well, periodically frightened. He is as you know rather head up these days. Well, it was the excellent video bugging of Peak’s studio and loft that wary Arthur’s been discreetly scrutinizing on his laptop. Traces of recent chip downloads from a canny deployment of *Recoverit* all but confirm it. He’s always concerned about snoops — corporate, academic, foreign. He must have been finely distracted to forget his laptop, as he apparently did this day, our budding worry-wart.” Muerner affably smiled before continuing.

“Our sci-fi fantasy, as you know, has a growing fan club. It’s now apparent our Zita is in fact Zoya Stolbanov, given her celebrated dancing performances, and the plastic surgery she’s had. She actually sought out our clinic in Bern to have it done. I happen to know the surgeon. He assured me the face was pristine before he began. A fine fortuity that. What is being newly considered is that Van Eerden may know her, even in a familial sense, for Zoya’s blood type matches Frieda’s. We know this from Frieda’s yearly physicals here. Though what the two are now up to does not impede our present agenda.” Muerner then nimbly smiled, while Dowd mutely looked a little coerced. “Naturally the excitable Arthur was always dogged by the imputation of a plant, a scout — a late informer, say — discovering Peak’s work. Hence Arthur’s ongoing vigilant video bugging of Peak’s flat and studio and any off-stage visitors.” Blithely Muerner added, “It’s a sensational ‘tableaux vivant’; let’s have a candid look.”

On Muerner’s cue the large video screen descended from a slot in the tray ceiling.

Throughout the takes, only Louis Peak, his friend Cody, Zita and some agency models Peak photographed, were seen. Peak’s late interpolation of discrete images into the expanding *Zita Tableaux* were being accomplished without extraneous visitors apparently. Astonishingly, it was the later brief domestic scenes between Louis Peak and Cody that Muerner seemed most absorbed by, an insouciant turn Dowd was unprepared for and became indignant with.

Remarked Muerner early on as he and Angus watched the video, “Only the cast keeps it strangely civilized don’t you think, Angus? Cody’s supple fluidity remains remarkable of course.”

“I shall take your expert word, Felix.”

“Have you never imagined nimble Daphne behaving so?”

“I imagine Daphne quite incapacitated with a leg cast, especially with all that graffiti on it.

“One amusing line Louis wrote on it — just readable if you zoom in. ‘Those who will play with cats must expect to be scratched.’ ‘My very own scratch pad’ she called him.”

“Ah. Cervantes, I think. The ‘expect to be scratched’ bit.”

Staidly Muerner mused, “Haven’t had the pleasure.”

“I am consoled Cervantes might still be read in Pomona.”

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

Then Dowd got patronizing. “Another line in that popular couplet may be as pertinent.”

Wanly Muerner said, “Do tell.”

“Yes. ‘Raise a hue and cry.’ A hoped for consummation, one may presume.”

“Ah. No mystery there.”

“Not in the fabled, mystical sense, no.”

Muerner smiled. “Always a pleasure, Angus.”

But thoughts of Daphne ‘behaving so’ lingered in Dowd’s consciousness, and he felt a little angry with himself for being distracted by such swinish lovemaking.

“I bid you adieu, Felix. Do keep in touch.”

SEVENTEEN

The calm grey-blue sea Frieda knifed across in the hydrofoil was uncommonly flat that day, an expanse

of tabled chiffon creased by a coursing bow sprit. The shroud of a distant storm hung ominously to the North East.

The problematic area proved acutely dismaying as they began documenting the anomalies in one section, a half mile or so from a massive ocean research station they knew little about. This day Luther had drawn her attention to some odd looking echinoderms, sea urchins and sand dollars in the area, their unusual drifting and, in some cases, odd colouring, intimated some alterations in sea water constituents. It was her third day at sea and second dive. She ran a slight fever, the cause elusive.

Below the ocean surface the insularity of the great silence was broken only by the neighbouring faint sounds of regulators and the distant but close bumping of specimen cages, as the divers selected one more suggestively ailing creature for further study. She followed Luther to a stray fragment of coral, perhaps four meters long, about ten meters from the home population they thought. A recent displacement. It floated in a sun-flecked aspic above a seamount shelf. Biennies, Gobies and Goatfish lingered about its projections, gills moving rapidly, some covered in an odd mucous, others with chewed or eaten-away gills and fins. Frieda knew the anomaly had been documented by a local team, that the characteristic homeostasis with surrounding symbiotic populations was anomalous if not chaotic. She and Luther descended further to the ocean bed off the shelf, where other divers pointed out more listing creatures. Several divers shook their heads amidst strands of bubbles. Everywhere they looked in that vicinity curiosities affronted — from assorted torpid fish with reddened abraded skin to strange clouds of tiny coloured fragments. It seemed this ocean desalinization and mining plant — she knew uranium recovery was of topical interest to Paleomena — just might be altering if not killing vital micro-organisms. Should the plant be discharging some concentrated waste back into the ocean, that area could be full of salt concentrates, anti-scalants, surfactants and alien acids. For a brief half-hour Frieda believed they might at last secure some concrete data to confront the directors of the plant with, and possibly Pechenpaugh and Paleomena if the plant was exclusively Paleomena's.

Then a disturbance nearer the surface attracted all eyes in Frieda's company of divers. Luther made the sign for Shark Swarm — a likely problem with several feeble listing species about — and headed quickly toward the activity. He carried with him a late shark repellent that emitted a protective electronic field. Another diver armed his own shield and turned in the direction Luther had taken. The newly armed divers soon moved beyond vision perimeter while the documenting divers stoically resumed their survey of the area.

She had reached a shallower sea bed where the light fingered down bright enough to read by. The sandy floor was littered with a motley array of creatures. So it seemed. A beautiful but sluggish Parrotfish near the coral remnant listed on its side. She was on the point of signalling the team's lone oceanographer to ask, via her magnetic slate pad, to what extent some migrations might also be influenced by residual sand banking off the nearby seamount, when a freak surge of sea water suddenly raised and thrust her backward, then as dramatically downward into a dip that drew her to the surface again with fearsome force where she moved at an alarming speed, only to fall precipitously back and downward again. She was then disoriented, suffering acute dizziness and choking on inhaled sea water, after her mouthpiece was dislodged, yet managed to free herself of her newly wavering tanks. Her head cleaved and throbbed, her heart pounded erratically. A large fragmented section of wood thwacked against her, trundling her into a further precipitous fall. She flailed about in the next dip — only to be caught by a steeper wall of surging water that drove and tumbled her about. When

she surfaced again, she realized she rode the surging buoyant swell of what appeared to be tsunami bore waves. She must have submerged several times before again slipping along the surface at an alarming speed, fearing she might be raked over the seamount in a further precipitous fall, for her team had been but a few hundred yards or so off its rise.

As unexpectedly, the blurry disc of a helicopter loomed above her. Then, with startling suddenness, a figure hung about her in a kind of sling. She was vaguely aware of forceful hands hefting her onto a seat harness, then being fluently trolled in a rising arc for a short minute above incoming waves, making out in the distance the large dark opening in the side of what appeared be a modern stealth frigate moving directly into the bore wave rises. Another diver some distance from her hung from a similar harness and was soon trawled into the wide open portal. She sensed her own flight as a reverse fall, a silent film in rewind before she too entered the opening and the clutches of two deft catchers. Too dizzy to stand, someone hefted her into a sitting position. Another helped release and deftly cut away her wet suit, towelling her in the process. People talked, rather lips moved in a vast alarming quiet. Someone's ears and nose bled — the oceanographer she thought. Someone took her pulse, another thrust his arm under her shoulders and helped her through a doorway, her feet tripping over floor skids. Her knees suddenly buckled, just before she was strangely imperviously airborne, gliding on a gurney. Someone looked into each eye after raising a lid then took her pulse, while another carefully aspirated her throat.

Next she was cognizant of being in a long elevator, some observers newly congregated about her. Her throat was soothed with a swab of something warm and agreeable, an arm needled, the figures about her becoming blurred, ghostly.

She imagined she never quite lost consciousness. She would remember vomiting, more infusion cleansing of her throat and ears, further drops placed in her eyes, then an oxygen mask reaffixed to her face while busy fingers worked about her aching head and sore neck. By then she rode a wave of emotional buoyancy. The world had sheepishly come right beneath a fuzzy white light...where the people about seemed pleased. She imagined her old GRU tutor smiling down. Enter a grinning father and lame mother, newly reunited, showing fond silent countenances from the end of a crisply sheeted bed. Someone bore a medal in a champagne flute, another a large bouquet. An enthusiastic audience burst into applause as she ascended a dais, to the additional sharp whistle of a lone bosun who reminded her of young Daniel Frank. Beside him stood a pretty girl who resembled the journalist on the OO Magazine cover. So the hallucination played out.

When she 'came to' she lay in a very modern carafe-lucid room that smelled faintly of lavender. Gradually she made out the glassine top to a hyperbaric chamber, her own gowned self sprawled on a trig pallet bed, an IV apparatus just outside the chamber, an oxygen unit nearby, and a large, light green form of an attendant beyond, who wrote something in a chart. She thought with sudden clarity of the stray large wood or substrate fragment that smacked against her. Just barely could she raise her one arm, which seemed then a vestigial, alien appendage.

Nothing and everything made sense to her. She noted preparations for what appeared to be further medical interventions. Someone — Pechenpaugh? Muerner? — had boldly, swiftly acted, so she rummaged about in her ever dissolving consciousness. But why bother? Surely better to have the entire crew lost...in such a serviceable tsunami? Which had sprung so suddenly from whatever

earthquake, volcanic eruption, explosion...that had preceded this daring *specific* rescue. Who would have known about their dive? It was intimidating to think that some in her crew were implicated. She believed the origin of the sudden tsunami could not have been that distant from their dive position, for there was no warning of a coming wave front. She felt the vessel veer starboard. The engines remained remarkably quiet — turbine boosted electric drive, possibly — or was she still deaf, partly insensate?

The same large woman who'd been there a while, lifted the hyperbaric cover, took her pulse, then fluently gave her another injection. "Doing nicely, hon. You were lucky."

She could hear! She believed she asked what was going on...as a new wave of euphoria enveloped her. The woman's smile lingered.

She fell asleep imagining Daniel dining on a hermit crab.

About the same time, in his mansion in San Clemente, a dour Arthur Pechenpaugh, nearly fazed as Frieda, had just learned that Seabe saved some divers from a tsunami in the South Pacific. The spare information left an uneven wake. He knew Muerner sewed as much confusion as clarity these days, but just who he now sought to flummox and derail wasn't always clear. The divers alluded to were unidentified. Divers? Hum. At that moment Pechenpaugh pegged out. Seabe was doing its job, diligently looking after many oceanic projects, intermittently their own. Fine. God bless.

He glanced again at his ungainly legs. Very poor sailors both. He had just finished cutting his ugly toenails, a job that was becoming more and more contentious, some nails then of a rhino nose-horn density it seemed. But this night he was expected to dance and he wanted to keep the physical complaints to a minimum. He'd been hornswoggled into attending a masquerade ball. The costume of a period French aristocrat lay upon a daybed. His tall doughy figure was clad then in a cotton singlet, plaid monogrammed shorts, and diamond patterned silk stockings with straining garters. He knocked back a large scotch, shivered luxuriantly and hesitated over a refill, studying the glass as if it merited attention. Indeed, he sensed a sea list to the room. He replaced the glass on an end table next a carved African caryatid figure with flared pointed breasts. Ever since his late giddy infatuation with a British-educated Peul, one of the ever thinning nomadic, pastoral, matriarchal people of the Djenne in Mali, he had acquired a taste for 'primitive' art.

The proud creature worked at Paleomena's international banking head quarters as an exchange buyer. In her spare time she freelanced as a commercial product presenter, utilizing her direct engaging eyes, elegant hands, arms and torso, all rendered somewhat less exemplary by thinnish, somewhat bowed legs and big feet, which she shrouded in long full skirts. Pechenpaugh was immediately smitten and proffered many gifts, some of considerable value. The liaison lasted a year, by which time she had capital enough to launch her own line of jewelry and cosmetics, whose colourful design she derived from her mother's tribal decoration, a strategy that won her products an exclusive following in North America and West Europe. Both Frieda and Susanne acquired necklaces.

But the adventure left Pechenpaugh strangely parched, her ebony form with its stark watchful eyes daunted as it bewitched. He seemed the vainglorious hunter in a taut plain-burnished heat that dazed his sight and enflamed his ardor. Her resilient being or pneuma he glimpsed in the smooth mahogany skin that never seemed to welt nor wet...a deft elegant survivor from an exasperatingly harsh often insufficient land. So he struggled to find the words.

The creature had her ears subtly stretched and perforated to accommodate decorous variants of vintage designs. A month after the surgery, the delicately laced and hooped lobes graced a page of the *American Vogue*. Pechenpaugh accompanied her on one of her sojourns to the marketplace in Djenne, where she further amazed with her designer acumen in selecting tribal motifs that would touch many North American women ever eager to revise spent self-esteem. His adopted penchant for ‘primitive’ art was slighted by her decision to sell some of the same select gifts he’d given her. He began drinking, rarely to preachy excess, but frequently to doleful states. Her absence he felt keenly, poignantly even, when the French costume was placed upon the day bed with immaculate care by his manservant, the grandiloquent braiding and piping evoking a frothy mawkish courtier. He would have gone to the masquerade ball in a New Britain Tolai mask and shield and little else, except that his most recent partner, a divorced tallow-skinned librarian with as great a love of alcohol, was anchored in the Eighteenth Century, especially the bustle of Jacobin France. So, to the masquerade in honour of Paleomena’s first half-century (also, secretly, the fourth anniversary of Abler’s coming and realization) he would go as satin, ornament laden Louis XV, his sallow consort as Queen Marie Leszczyńska.

Could he be any less in a partying mood with his career at Paleomena in such disarray? The embarrassment of the wretched tape, which he’d not initially replicated and would take some time to reconstruct. And with the patsy Willardson now sidling up to the spooks on Thirteen, the growing innuendo surrounding Susanne’s late demise, the new protracted spy question, the gadfly Peter Selby-Smith’s widening audience — no, this was no night for celebrating. He felt something in Louis XV’s waistcoat. What, more *billet doux*? Berni, short for Berenice, often spiked his clothes with crumpled notes, often inscribed with waggish sketches. On this one she had simply drawn a large oval blimp with many tiny hair-like limbs, the face within given a broad smile. He withdrew from a desk a small magnifier to read her diminutive script.

*As I lay in my bed on the flat o’me,
I was shocked at the sight of the fat o’me,
So to keep my nerves steady
I concocted and edited
This luminous, lim’rick anatomy.
No matter how grouchy you’re feeling,
You’ll find the smile more or less healing,
It grows in a wreath
Around the front teeth,
Thus preserving the face from congealing*

And this bearded lick from Queen Marie, Pechenpaugh wryly said to himself. He had never been comfortable with clever naughty allusions and recalled his surprise the night Berni went home with him. It seemed up to that point drink would be their sole joint enterprise. He snorted as he made too much of the hairy image of the oval blimp. While he clumsily fiddled with the cravat to the lavishly embroidered coat, he could hear her low owlish voice intoning the ‘fat o’me’, one reference likely to the leftovers of her surgically pruned and tucked face and torso. She drank to escape and, he suspected, put up with the likes of him. She had been a noble creature in her un-disfigured youth, her legs still those of a show lounge dancer, and he was not unmindful of that fact.

But even her cozy appeal to his sensual instincts was largely in vain that night, for he was angry with his own thorny collapsing world: the intemperate Saudis who had turned turkey at the last minute; the precious Mullah (Muerner) so slyly usurping *his* one ocean mining and desalinization coup; the ever fastidious Dowd, the devoutly insular Cressman, jelly role Vodden, ever aloof Paleogianis, and his own incompetent field men who could report so little. “Goddamit all to hell Berni, you’ve saddled yourself a spavined stallion!” he heard himself say as he stood before his study’s full length mirror and placed the heavy peruke over his spare unruly hair. He was vaguely aware that a guillotine had finally separated such curls from Louis’s heir. He swore and recalled, again, the crafty little dancer who once caused such a stir in London’s Apsara club. A clever, cute, demanding whore is always a damn nuisance, Berni, but when she turns out to be a daring Russian escape artist with possible spy dicker in hand — a Russian specialty — you got to keep an eye on the dark horses.

“No bankable GGs this year,” he lamented to himself with a foreign earnestness, while staring at the long extravagant cuffs. He then briskly sought another glass of the Roberts Reserve Glenfiddich.

About this time, in a small flat near Dodger Stadium, Gloria Leibowitz wrestled with an analogous imposition: how to play a part unsuited to her prudent nature, certainly that advised by her professional mores. The problem was Arnold Storrier — and his late dismaying ‘proposal’!

She was preparing for bed, a rather stately ritual in her case, for her body was a temple she refused to neglect. Plainly, the reality of *humble* endowment was one of life’s enduring infinities — a fate she manifestly escaped. So be it. Several creams she deftly applied and removed with a liquid grace that ‘soothed’ the interval before sleep when thoughts of fond liaisons divert. Only one human Gloria disliked as much or more than the smug unobservant male, and that was the equally assured impetuous femme who believed Gloria gave too much slack to the enemy and too meagrely to her own ideological kin. The fact that female beauty seemed the fifth column against which the feminist movement struggled in vain, was for Gloria a pun she simply must endure — as urbanely as possible. She had in fact tried two intense lesbian liaisons and discovered that a jealous male was no less harrowing than a wounded comrade-in-arms. Also, when quite literally all was said and done, he might prove as entertaining when appropriately encouraged. The poor doughty fellow might even be inspired: the awkward powerhouse incestuously eager to please might be enjoyable as any Beethoven rondo.

Such were some of Gloria’s apostate thoughts as she managed a slow roll updo to her then café au lait coloured hair. The outsider, if given to a wide delectation of female casts, would note with pleasure the strong unique figure, somewhere between the Eve of the Ghent Altarpiece of Hubert and Jan Van Eyck and a buoyant non-tristful Toulouse-Lautrec. The viewer might be especially taken with the creamy Junoesque breasts above a relaxed tummy, when the noble creature came to sit cross legged in a cool hip bath reading with a magnifier Arnold Storrier’s so recent ingratiating ‘book proposal’, which he’d detailed for her in the course of their ‘conciliatory’ dinner date — a chronicle, a life history, he’d asked her to write about him! Despite an assiduous reading of the draft proposal, she found no words she would, could object to. At least at present.

During the meal she had revised her estimation of the man, ineluctably human she concluded, such that she believed him sombrely at odds with himself, his very identity illusive, evanescent. With growing amazement, unimaginable before, she listened to him candidly if not solemnly parse a fractured life, the words artless, sincere, even retributive for his past impromptu play acting in public.

His mottled past had proved to be as elusive, conjectural as his late sojourn with Muerner, an obdurate and largely apathetic mentor. It was this ‘elsewhere’ past she was asked at the end of that strained meal to eke out and chronicle! Carte blanche! If she worried about his motive, she *was* promised full jurisdiction over content and editing; he did not even ask to preview the instalments, and there were no taboo subjects. Was his life, mundane, scientific and ‘runic’ — her word — so relatively benign that a feminist’s accounting of it might stymie influential philistines? Yet she believed him when he lamented Muerner’s patrimony, of being what he wryly called a ‘newly awakened automaton’. Would her own credibility suffer if her reports turned out to be largely sympathetic? But were those confusions not outweighed by the immense captive readership she would gain? Dear God, was it not positively galvanizing for a not so tiny dragon slayer, seemingly emperor confessor, and eminently talented and dedicated journalist? The readership possibilities were immense! A novelty for her.

Gradually she added hot water to the bath, having made her decision, and as the warmth enlaced her groin made a note to comment in the first instalment upon Arnold’s penchant for blue water sailing, a surprising and belatedly discovered pastime that demanded some concentrated research. She decided the man was not the ‘latter-day cyborg’ John Cook spoke of, though she could not entirely rid herself of the aberration that such creatures might exist; some Merlins were ever ahead of the curve it seemed. Yes, Arnold, let’s have a look, a long careful look — and I’ll crucify you if you attempt to cross, spoof or dandle your biographer before the final compilation goes to press!

In another part of the globe, almost but not quite the antipodal match of the bath Gloria finally reclined in, Frieda Van Eerden had just climbed into a neat stateroom bunk. She too was awed by intrusive happenstance, but unlike Gloria could make little sense of it — and wondered if this were not part of the strategy. No one on the frigate would tell her what was going on: their operational mandate, they said, might only be disclosed to persons their contractors sanctioned. The crew members she met were kindly, gracious even, including an executive officer whose knowledge of both her crew and purpose was disarming. He did let her know that the oceanographic consortium he worked for was called Seabe, a diversely talented company that served many clients. The medical attention she received — for the respiratory trauma she sustained in the violent wave surges, a rib injury from the stray whirligig board that slammed into her, an arm sprained in the rescue sling, and the largely innocuous side-effects of the earlier transmitter’s chemical burns — all were carefully, competently examined and treated, it seemed. Physically she had rarely felt better. She was rested, ate with often witty personable folk who, while not expansive of their commission on the Shivalik-style frigate anchored now before a breathtaking tropical isle, regretted saving so few of her divers — only four, including herself, out of the number she began the adventure with. “There were nine,” she had frankly informed them. More might still be found she was assured. Of the four, three, including Luther, had been airlifted to an emergency facility in Melbourne. She alone did not require extraordinary medical intervention. She did learn the outfit called Seabe served many companies doing business in the South Pacific, though they wouldn’t specify their sponsor here, nor their particular reason for being in that area. She did learn that a submarine landslide some distance south of Guam caused the tsunami — a curious and alarming incident that seemed to have bypassed public scrutiny thus far. Only a fierce storm was mentioned on her cabin’s radio and TV, all outside news carefully screened for ‘guests’ she presumed. Her few glimpses of the ship’s manifold activities above and below decks and in the ocean

confirmed her wonder though: these were almost certainly extraordinarily adept experts in whatever they undertook. That was what finally got to her — such extensive diligent activity in the South Pacific she had little idea of when she worked at the Paleomena research centre. Were the world's hegemonic brokers now routinely surreptitious, cryptographic? Finally, she just sat back, resorting to a mild sarcasm when things became too settled at mealtime, the crew responding in kind. Usually then the fun began, and one card would burst forth with a wily epigram or two that often prompted lively anecdotes about earlier idlers and plodders in *other* oceanographic exploits!

But during the mandated rest periods, when she climbed into her smoothly sheeted bunk, the old deep resentment welled up. She was truly at sea here! Their method and purpose was too fixed to accommodate diffident bystanders. They would say nothing about her precipitous, underfunded operation to document debilitated ocean fauna. Such words may have been redundant in any case; they seemed fully abreast of her venture. That they had known her team's theatre of operation suggested a snitch or shill in the group she assembled. A default she hadn't anticipated.

But this was all before debarking onto the picturesque tropic island with its rising volcanic chimney, where the ash grey, antenna rich frigate she left behind revealed its awesome dimensions; not as grand as a nuclear carrier, but intimidating enough, which must serve, in her reckoning, oceanic research stations and staging areas for a myriad of well-coordinated projects, some undoubtedly convened by satellite — so she surmised as the cutter slowed to enter the island's vivid jade green waters. That such endeavours could largely bypass public scrutiny suggested Seabe might be an adjunct arm of some jointly cooperating navies. The surreal aspect of her position never wained, and when they left her in a posh tourist hotel and casino with ample cash for an extended holiday, the disbelief mauled. Whereas, Muerner's sudden appearance on that same beautiful isle knocked her galley west! The fact that he was there to reprove her, not for engaging in a subversive marine investigation, but yielding to a progressive social philosophy, seemed downright surreal, as if her dreaming hadn't lapsed. What she did not then know was that the resort itself was a favourite haunt of the maven himself!

EIGHTEEN

Felix Muerner was speaking. "It is a mild risk, Angus. Please be reassured: she knows very little and will simply perplex the Russian, whose name, incidentally, on the Canadian passport he carries, is James Edward Stanhope. He is, according to our late source in Interpol, a likely GRU officer, one Vassily Sergeevich Ablesimov, last observed on this continent in the late eighties. Thus, a feasible minder of Van Eerden, who may well be related to the entertainer Pechenpough recruited, for their rare blood types match up, Frieda's from her medicals here. Remember: one of my Bern surgeons gave Zita a new face after the Apsara attack. The world connects in sufferable ways, yes?"

Dowd and Muerner sat in Muerner's damask study off the tower's manuscript library. A fire huffed in the fireplace. The chimney piece above the fireplace showcased a reproduction of Botticelli's *La Primavera* gals. Dowd was then sorting some documents in a corporate correspondence file. The file also included some blood and sputum tests of Zita's who had suffered from bronchitis on her arrival on this continent, and was treated, adventitiously, at a clinic Paleomena helped fund for research into pulmonary maladies. As Dowd quietly read, Muerner fussed over his drink, while wryly

noting, “You’ll recall that Pechenpaugh was treated at the same clinic for emphysema. He happened to see her there, and offered her his media handler’s card; the graphic novel was in the works then. You still on call Angus?...”

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

“Excellent. As for spunky Van Eerden, we simply let her rest a bit, after treating her, then left her flush in a resort used by well-heeled cruise fanatics.”

“Most amusing. A trifle smug — perhaps?”

The understatement made no immediate imprint on Muerner, who once more eyed the dark concoction in the mug he’d just returned to his desk. One ingredient was not right. A vial dispensed a pearl grey powder into the brew, which was stirred briefly with a seal-top spoon before being again sampled. Satisfied, he leaned back in his ergonomic chair, placing the cervical vibrators on mild stipple.

“ — Possibly. Luther, who is our man, survived you know, and will tell the proximate authorities only about a routine reef inspection being interrupted by the tsunami. The remaining members of that team may wash up in diverse locales, though most likely drowned. The whole lot were really awful sluggards. Frieda and Luther exempted, not an employable one among them. Since the venture was largely covert, no officially sanctioned account of it survives. Do remember that the South Pacific communities that ocean plant serves are willing partners. Pechenpaugh got us started, but backed the wrong consortium — as we’d hoped, yes?” After a moment’s reflection Muerner added, “I doubt Frieda got any help from Miguel. It was from the start a desperate ad hoc exercise. I suspect she’ll simply run out of steam — if she eludes the vigilant GRU. Her liaison with scholar Scargill raised many early questions, yes, the why and wherefore, his sometime rash private chatter about corporate malfeasance being a concern. As you know we bugged his flat at one time — that coincided with Frieda’s liaison with him. I daresay we weren’t the only player interested in the man. She’s slighted Paleomena now because Cheka stalkers know where to find her were she to stay on. She wants to ditch us all I think — meaning a subterranean existence for a time. She’ll return in due course. She’s very good in her field and just may, in time, fill us in on some aspects of our ‘cousins’.”

“A comely thought. Arthur is finally being treated for his emphysema in the Swiss clinic, I see. A late resolve.”

“Yes. Most regrettable.” ‘Regrettable’ was given an ironic inflection.

“And the graphic novel’s cryptic writer and illustrator?”

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

Dowd took a moment to stay the pique he felt then. Hardly a team, he said to himself. But he knew the entreaty must not be slighted. He collected the papers into a neater bundle, then sought the updated *Žita Tableaux* broadsheet which he studied — again. After a pensive moment he concluded, “The *Tableaux* readers do not yet know of Abler’s science wizardry nor Its awesome *ŽITA* — her peerless, revelatory societal forecasting.” It was both a summation and latent query.

“I think not.”

“They may suspect the *Tableaux* have exceptional origins. It would be unusual if they didn’t.”

“Peak accomplished the retouching of the second set in a highly adroit, private and conscientious manner. And was well paid. He and the writer are both still being watched, of course.”

Dowd loathed plodding, but felt obliged to continue.

“They will one day want public acknowledgement of their craft and accomplishment; perhaps they’re tired of being part of a recondite consortium.”

“Yes, perhaps.”

“So: is it time to have some outside curator discover them?”

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

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

“And the few dicey contracts Arthur left in escrow?”

“Irrelevant. They’re being dealt with, as you know. Angus! The letters.” Muerner glowered over the rim of his tumbler.

“Yes.” Dowd checked his glasses obliquely against the fire, replaced them and looked alertly about the room, then glanced down at the papers on his desk. “Young Peter Selby-Smith is an adroit Cassandra. Two letters. To a friend in London, who forwarded them to me. *ZITA* has turned wily Peter into a ‘prognosticator of mayhem’ you might say.”

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

Dowd savoured Muerner’s unease and duly attended to his beverage, an Irish coffee embellished further with a sweet treacle molasses. Peter’s letters served as Dowd’s own fortuitous ace: an eminent physical anthropologist’s cross-cultural collating of the indices of Apollonian-style physical charisma. Those physical and cognitive traits that prove so hegemonic and thus often invidious in an age flush with alluring imagery and craven demands for parity even dispensation. In *ZITA*’s case, the emergence of credible paragons in her tableaux seemed to preface squalor and pandemonium at a mundane level! Seemed. A simplistic provocative thesis for some — but not Felix Zveno Muerner who was then, at least in Dowd’s reckoning, particularly anxious to repudiate information that might slight his own intuitive presumptions, and thus umber his research into forensic medicine, neurosurgery, neuropharmacology and genetic engineering — the means to create an exemplar human being. Was it not amusing the vexation Peter’s problematic thesis was rumoured to have cost the maniac seated across, who continued to believe in and seek the physical and mental indices of human transcendence? What gave Muerner’s mania its piquant quality was the fact he strove to rescind or temper all critiques. He actually believed a preeminent if not utopian human possible, and Peter’s two letters deftly postulating some dour effects of preclusive stand alone huminal perfection — i.e. form and intellect as measured by proficiency, astuteness and splendour; ‘concinnity’ in somatic form — was something Muerner had always downplayed. It was an unexpected anomalous chink in the formidable armour which Dowd hoped, in his lifetime, to derive inherent satisfaction from. As we’ve noted, Dowd believed his innately captious, eccentric caste would be disparaged, rebuked in an ‘idealized’ world, a fairly boring world in his estimation. Envy, disappointment kept the wheels turning. After all, singular pretties were lewdly abused in popular adventurous videos — not ugly curmudgeons.

“Angus, you do me a disservice.”

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

And with that the meeting came to a slyly forbearing conclusion.

Dowd and Muerner would of course continue to facilitate the astute merchandising of Abler's ever more galvanizing product, but the critical details of Peter's ontological comparisons, as outlined in the letters, Dowd would classify under his mandate as the firm's executive correspondence minder and overseer. Thus he would log and preserve Peter's warning to keep Muerner from peremptorily confiscating the letters. Peter believed *ZITA*'s future 'exemplary' civilization pointed with chilling insinuation to an unwelcome fate. The hegemony of idealized form and intellect that *ZITA* portended, was now pursued by earthlings like Muerner — with similar audacity! Angus Dowd resisted giving such wise men free rein. The precocious comprehensive tinkering had to be tempered, reined in. The time had come to count heads, and fussy ill-favoured Angus Dowd would be among the exempted if not chosen. His philosophy demanded it. The 'adjustments' he measured in decades, and by then he might be deemed an unsalvageable misfit: the ugly ill-tempered eccentric. He simply could not trust Muerner to modify his crusade. Peter's letters the Princes must acknowledge. Though he knew the other Princes were far from careworn or edgy as he. Nor as maniacal as Muerner. An advisement he hadn't shirked.

When he returned to his office atop the Paleomena Tower, another message awaited him behind the music centre medallion. This time the news brought with it the content of the Unicorn itself. Clipped to Daphne's memo was the coded text he had coveted for over a year. His own Asian mediator had renegotiated a lion share of one fretted capital pool through an alternative grouping of brokers — the likely sponsors of many future mega capital projects — which meant he, Angus Dowd, and not Pechenpaugh, might bask in Max Paleogianis's last smile. He must reconsider the oxymoron 'banker's trust'. He was now free, for a time, to stalk Muerner's grand design; homeliness, awkwardness, mediocrity, oddity and eccentricity were, after all, *shared* human conditions!

NINETEEN

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

The hotel receptionist waited with an idled smile, stylus poised. She had one ear tuned to an altercation going on in the office of the Maitre d' across the floor; someone had been called to account for their negligence during a comedy special hosted by Don Rickles in the hotel's Amber Room the evening last, where a diplomatic guest had been embarrassed — so the receptionist remarked to Vassily Sergeevich who had watched the event on television in a nearby bar. During the special, where Rickles mingled with the front row audience, he unknowingly singled out a Russian diplomat with an immense nose seated at a front table. "Great handle, sonny. You lead the pack, eh?" To a waiter, he added, "You can't help the guy out? No hoodies? Pity." The man, nursing a head cold, had faintly but audibly coughed a couple of times during some pauses in Rickles's opening spiel — suggesting urbane disapproval. After a further muffled cough the diplomat wryly smiled, then again tried to clear his throat. Rickles 'discreetly' declared to the guest, "You're an airhead, sonny." The incident may have passed without notice if the diplomat, one of the few not in Cheka harness, was by himself. But next to him sat the bulky Vadim Morozov, Frieda's lead interrogator, acting then as a discretionary babysitter for consular staff, who had handed the diplomat a glass of water with a pill.

Said Rickles, "A laxative won't help."

Morozov, more or less immune to stand-up comedy, then stolidly stood, apparently to seek a rest-

room. In doing so he nearly collided with the hovering Rickles. Rickles dryly smiled; the impassive Morozov condescendingly patted him on the shoulder as a tavern regular might a newcomer. Rickles then fondly addressed the king-size patron, "Always a pleasure, Barbie." Morozov promptly grunted. The Amber room manager, who had stepped out of his office, was unsure what to do. Was Rickles upping the anti in his act or what? Morozov then thumped his table, shrugged, and was about to head off when Rickles added, "I'm cool. No embarrassment. It's Georgina, right?" All the while the diplomat, recovered from his initial embarrassment, attempted to intervene but seemed to freeze in midair, a grim smile contorting his face.

To a nearby waiter Rickles said with entrepreneurial flair, a camera in close-up after Morozov passed, "A great pentath trans. Find out where she trains." It was then Vassily decided the new Sheraton Touchstone Inn had the ambience he desired and registered the following day. If he'd temporarily forgotten the wondrous display of immaculate nonchalance America fostered, he sensed a renewed exhilaration partaking of it again.

"About a week, mam'selle," he said to the receptionist, whose attention had returned, the contretemps in the office of the Maitre d' now background noise. He was then offered two rooms, the upper one with a better view of the bay.

"The lower will be fine."

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

Glimpsing 'the kosher American Beast' (one wag's description of LA), reminded Vassily of the natives' ingenuity in showcasing scandal, vivified by the new woke rebuke of unmerited privilege, and the fervid resort to wanton, often sadistic sex and retribution in film and video productions. Blacks and minorities strove to join this media Babylon, matched by transgendered folk wanting their very variety given more exposure and sanction. Also noted, doubled up police cruisers (the measure of much ad hoc rancour), long entertainment queues (the few queues Vassily spotted), and a variegated assortment of mendicant and madcap street folk. America's fascination with livid, impromptu, wholesale anarchy appeared to be metastasizing. Well, more or less.

He did meet people who stayed his optimism — the uniformed school youngster who stopped to give him directions, an elderly short-order cook who made his favourite coffee custard, most cab drivers, the generally prudent, able police men and women he saw in action, which the media seemed bent on demeaning. The street level protests were rarely entertaining, often given over as much to shop store savaging as demonstration. Most folk here had lost the knack of sinning he thought — and craved release. Perhaps most unsettling was the obliteration of sex. He witnessed in the streets of Los Angeles few unambiguous men or women. Gross parts of each, rarely a harmonious ensemble.

Yet compared to his adventures the following weeks, he would concede he had indeed 'heard and seen nothin' yet'. At times the unrest seemed apocryphal.

In attempting to find agent Frieda Van Eerden, he looked to Frieda's last employer, the Paleomena Corporation. He made use of the Freedom of Information Act to reaffirm some of the company's government contracts. This information, coupled with Frieda's most recent drops to her minder, alongside several prospectuses obtained over the counter at the Paleomena Information Center in Modesto, verified those critical computational areas where Paleomena ostensibly 'briefed' the Pentagon and corporations like General Dynamics, research Frieda was instrumental in abetting. Her last drops were all dated though. Vassily, in his hermetic bower, hadn't realized Frieda was silent for so long. It was obvious someone in the department was newly diffident about her commitment, which had until then been plainly exemplary. So why then was he, her early tutor, here? To prove a department critic right by not vindicating her silence, or to discover her using a deeper cover for more arcane work, say.

Presenting himself as a private dick, he boldly asked a clerk in the same Information Center to let him glance at the file of an employee (Frieda) who had been a petitioner in a patent violation suit. He wanted to know her employment status to see if the patent held a Paleomena registry in her name. The clerk was an older indignant gal who, Vassily rightly guessed, would disparage clever forgers. Quietly the woman said, "Dr. Van Eerden is employed here, though you'd need a court order behind you to get her file." This, of course, Vassily knew. What he didn't know was whether the classified researcher was still a benefitted employee, which the secretary indirectly affirmed — thus making the sparseness of Frieda's final reports puzzling. One case officer said she may have been onto something crucial and was being particularly vigilant, but admitted her recent protracted silence was a puzzle. An understatement Vassily managed to keep from smiling at.

For almost a week he laboured to verify Frieda's late research work and the circumstances surrounding her apparent neglect of her spy minder. A week later, from a second clerk at the Info Center, he learned of a late 'sabbatical' Dr. van Eerden had taken from Paleomena! A corporate dodge, he wondered, to minimize speculation? As unexpected was a tabloid story about the corporation's ongoing disappointment with its current research into a super computer — a tale the GRU wasn't buying. Then he saw a poster in a Hollywood shop advertising a clever sci-fi graphic novel entitled *The Zita Tableaux*, featuring a lithe dynamic principle player who had a marked resemblance to the problematic Zoya! Credit for the text and illustrations was given to an art consortium, The Unicorn Group, with a Paleomena affiliate listed as a leading patron — a fact that amused and alerted.

He also learned via the editorials in current business journals of executive stirrings at Paleomena: the anticipated ascendancy of fabled financier Angus Dowd and bio-medical genius Felix Muerner, and likely waning fortunes of Arthur Pechenpaugh, Karl Voden and Stephen Cressman. Muerner's middle name, Zveno, 'linchpin', struck Vassily as perhaps prophetic, for Muerner's Bern Clinic was in the vanguard of medical therapy, as well as tissue culturing, aggressive gene mapping and editing, 'intimating an awaiting Utopia' said one editor. The recent behaviour of his protégé, given the late suspicions and the executive shifts at Paleomena, intensified the perplexity.

Hence the sudden yet sly appearance of the stranger and the message he bore — from the Paleomena Prince himself, Angus Dowd! — caught Vassily askance. He was accosted on a busy street corner. At first he wondered if his career was not finally over. Was his trail so transparent that a wily powerbroker personally sought his hide? Was he but a pawn to some pre-configured Cheka ploy? The stranger, who identified himself simply as Stanton, said his boss was interested in a mutual exchange of

information, but would not persist if Vassily wasn't interested — an option Vassily assumed to be unpleasant. Luckily, he was still working solo.

That singular meeting got off to an unsettling start after a swift, scented elevator lift, to an upper floor office in a building a block away from the Paleomena Tower — one of Dowd's private elsewhere offices — where the compact gnome, behind a large credenza desk, drew from a folder an old picture of a person who resembled Vassily in a somewhat compromising posture — standing near a bank customer endorsing a cheque, a small camera lens peeking from one side of his backpack. Vassily then recalled a field maneuver in Chicago's financial 'Loop', as it was called, over two decades ago, yet suspected the picture had been photoshopped, for he could not remember acting so. Anticipating his guest's ripe unease, Dowd pressed on with his disorienting speech. "The identity is a recent revelation from a newly serviceable source, Vassily Sergeevich" — this 'admission' being one Dowd had crafted himself.

Fearing his cover prejudicially blown, Vassily inwardly winced as Dowd resumed.

"Now you and I have, I suspect, a great affection for a Dr. Frieda Van Eerden." The gnomish Dowd then sat back in his high-backed cordovan chair and crossed his hands in front, looking but not focusing on the photo. "I have no wish to complicate your business here, but I would like to know what has upset one of our abler scientists." What Dowd did *not* tell Vassily was that the team Frieda worked with on the sentient computer program had been carefully assessed from the start, as well as their liaisons outside of work, and that the early assessment of Frieda herself revealed a 'fondness for gym sports and swimming, science fiction writers like Robert Heinlein, a self-deprecating sense of humour, and a quiet meticulousness at her work' — and now, with Vassily's coming, a more comprehensive heed Dowd imagined. He then said, agreeably, "Stanton noted you liked a coffee custard and an Ararat Brandy, when available."

Vassily wryly smiled and wondered where in hell the enigmatic Stanton might have noted such nugatory details, a shadow operative he had completely overlooked, and why the knowledge of such trivia would be invoked here. Was this another sly American squib, lampoon?...

Dowd coughed up a bit of phlegm before speaking, via his intercom to an office assistant in a quiet but determined voice.

"Daphne, the custard and that Armenian elixir, with my usual."

The nimble Daphne entered with a tray after a short interval during which Dowd had apportioned the few papers on his desk to accommodate the refreshment and two encased memory chips he retrieved from a valise by his chair. Vassily imagined the girl one of the rare slender American adolescents with muscles toned by Nordic, Peoloton and Nautilus workouts. He also suspected Dowd maintained a heretical interest in her. The bitters vial sat beside the brandy.

"Ararat Akhtamar — a late speciality here," the exceptionally pretty girl said with a camp smile.

"A hopelessly pertinent lass," said Dowd after Daphne left. He then briskly began to lay out the ground rules. Again Vassily had to reassure himself he was awake. He was particularly irked to find the sly surprising offer persuasive. It was nearly as humiliating as seeing his identity disclosed, to be asked to assess an agent he supposedly knew, intimating a tactical sellout in his own department. Yet the prospect of a mole in the GRU seemed 'Hollywoodian'. In summary, Dowd debonairly proposed the following:

Vassily was to receive in instalments a set of recorded conversations — initially a heated exchange of ideas between Felix Muerner and Frieda; later, less formal dialogues with three persons, one business, two pleasure. Dowd concluded with, “We wish to learn the degree to which Ms. Van Eerden might be paced and intimidated by ‘willful outsiders’ — what we may presume for the time being, for many players strive to influence Paleomena’s experts, a longstanding effort. A seasoned inquirer may be useful at this time.” A puckish smile followed. Vassily was advised to not return to Russian for a fortnight; after that period he would be urged to quietly leave the United States.

Vassily assumed staying on could well be as perplexing and taxing as leaving.

It was an exacting assignment Vassily wryly noted, while mentally tallying his *de facto* jeopardy. He suggested they might at least begin and hope for the best. Dowd agreed and handed over a single chip — to be complemented by an interesting second one on their next meeting, to take place in forty-eight hours. “When you return, ask the doorman for the executive elevator. He’ll ring Daphne.”

A brisk handshake closed the meeting, as Vassily mutely soberly assessed the situation. It was as if he conversed with a crafty asylum official, and he had little idea of the institution’s practice or reach. But an hour later he wryly found himself reluctantly sympathizing with the ineffable Felix Zveno Muerner, whose high-pitched yet modulated voice opened the first recording. It was a fine dilemma to hear a cardinal enemy think as yourself. A fine gratuitous taunt. He and Frieda were locked in acrimonious debate, somewhere in an exotic clime, if the faint birdsong and whispering surf, detected in the rare pauses, was authentic. Vassily was poignantly aware of the time expended in listening but he could not repack his curiosity. The exchange itself seemed preposterous. Fantasy fiction. A gremlin within him refused to inform the General of his ‘lost’ cover, or the prospect of Frieda balking to disclose major Paleomena research findings, until he’d heard both recordings to their conclusion, the extravagant fiery words in the first a veritable call to arms. Muerner began that unreal polemic.

“Why could I so easily ‘slight’ your entire crew? Because they represent the metastasizing morass of incompetent plodders, my dear, who will destroy what remains of our proficient age if we let them. I realize you were hard up and in great haste, but except for Luther and possibly one marine biologist, you were saddled with dregs, Frieda dear.”

Frieda was apparently stung. “How easily you dismiss some human beings as superfluous. We simply wanted to know what’s going on. What any intelligent being desires, for petesake. We were well briefed by the Marine Bio Society after all.”

“Well, some in your crew I understand *were* concerned about the suddenness and covert nature of the proposed investigation. You were engaged, for all intents and purposes, in an impromptu maneuver. Essentially, a desperate off-the-cuff escapade.”

Vassily was astonished. He had no idea what ‘crew’ Muerner spoke of, but he recognized a kindred spirit in the man’s complaint about improvised hustling. His own special cat nip. He also wondered how thoroughly Dowd or Muerner had edited the tape. That the tape given him would include a lengthy precious philosophical harangue struck him as bizarre, the motivation strangely defensive. It seemed Muerner himself sought reassurance, validation.

“You’ve been buried too long in your lab lair. You haven’t seen or at least carefully observed the trends at street level in our metropolises. Our efficiency in reducing infant mortality — due in part to fewer pregnancies and more abortions, at least in the West — is matched by our declining robustness, self-resourcefulness, our preoccupation with diverting gismos and videos, and ongoing use of cheap

labor immigrants. Democracy has thrown up a multitude of image-crazed dupes bent on gratification and self-image, and a tribe of social ‘scholars’ who cling to their professional jargon and woke nostrums as blindly as punkers. The first group are making many public areas seamy and chaotic, educational systems custodial and prone to misandry, entertainment often porno freak shows, welfare and penal systems dark comedy, while the second pretentious clique continues to make ever more wooly excuses for the first. If you looked carefully at the credentials of your crew — even you, with your empathic sensitivities would be chagrinned. What did you possibly hope to accomplish?”

“We coped the best we could. And it wasn’t all that bloody furtive or ad lib given the time frame. We would have garnered some crucial ominous documentation but for the tsunami — which abetted your intervention.”

“On that one point I wish we chose to disagree. *Real* investigations are crimped by haste and stealth. The tiny area you looked at has more onerous examples throughout the ocean, ‘polluted’ by the growing hoard of business hustlers who think democracy can ‘accommodate’ licence!”

“Well, some of us would choose to detail what examples we can. The area we looked at was not fouled by accident. And Paleomena may well have had a hand in it. It is the care honest enterprise mandates. Especially in vulnerable island communities. You look out for your neighbour.”

“Ah, the modern ‘love monger’ mantra. Coming from the wondrous credulous visionaries who haven’t yet recognized that the Good Samaritan is no longer flush nor that Marx is but a lesser Marx brother. Your whole democratic hubris simply has no viability today except through vengeful punitive means. The aesthetic collapse began ages ago. I intend to leave the drowning rats to sink or swim. They have noisily proliferated on my — I’d love to say ‘our’ ship long enough! We must begin somewhere Frieda; the current witless, cranky, maniacal, over-populated world cannot accommodate itself.”

And on it went, a near half hour of it, with Frieda ever more dismissive and sarcastic before the steely maven. Vassily could not have written a better screed himself. He too, like Muerner, believed in a pre-eminent authority of a few individuals, free of an avid and vengeful community demanding penitence even reparations for past behaviour judged by precious modern egalitarian standards. They accepted as a cornerstone of their constitution the ageless fact that generosity could not be mandated or indentured, except among racial and culturally homogenous beings with a like-minded habit of thought, outlook, expectation and compassion. Individual parity in a behaviourally diverse and cantankerous population was an oxymoron. For instance, Muerner objected to Frieda attempting to be both a socialist and a scientist. The painful fact was that Vassily would agree. Science, indeed STEM, free of rancorous egalitarians, anticipated if not vindicated stratification. At times Frieda seemed the idealist who cannot abide conspicuous dissimilarity, and must resort to egalitarian nostrums.

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

The subject of societal propriety was a Muerner focus, and newly liberal Frieda seemed at times amused before the awesome incensed tirade. “Propriety is a human right only in so far as each human selflessly earns it; freedom is the wellspring of rights but only the able, adept individual is free; freedom never obtains for the stolid, incompetent and rancorous — indeed, they haunt many knotty mazes, vide the many louche, berserk twitter feeds, Facebook rants, shrewish media organs, even some doughty affirmatively woke colleges. Your own beauty and intelligence give you an extraordinary advantage in human relations. Believing such endowment might be limited, even handicapped and

reproved, is cruel and unusual punishment. Consider the popular mantra of Equality as Redress, in punitive terms. Such yoking facilitates retribution for the disgruntled, the ones who cannot recognize let alone accept their own subordination. It is the new 'human' mantra."

"Truth," Frieda interjected at one point, "is not a monopoly. Prejudice haunts science too, particularly when directed by monied plutocrats. Equality seeds benevolence, yes. Some have called it the 'gift of grace.'"

"Such 'grace'," Muerner asserted, "is accretionary, memory the paramount faculty. The essential beneficial templates lie in the past. The crucial examples have all taken place, and the gleanings of the scattered truths is now the pre-eminent task. Art, satire, esoteric post-structuralism and the like, let alone envy and rancour, grow no corn after all." By then Vassily guessed Frieda wanted out — a new unobliged life! The freedom of the budding iconoclast. So Vassily suspected.

Frieda resisted the fulsome oratory by resorting to personal criticism: "So I'm to admire your devout conviction and nimble rhetoric, I suppose, as some hundred proof augur. Your ingrained fascist mentality seems to have totally eluded even your vigilant perception."

Muerner laughed. "*Fascism*: the enlightened do-gooder's *one-fits-all* accusation."

Vassily swore at Dowd, and indirectly Felix Muerner. To listen on was to slight his blown cover. At times it seemed he was coming apart. What crew? What bloody crew! How uncanny of Dowd to know the addiction of his prey. Was the tape itself a sly fabrication? In any case, where Frieda's stray liberalism came from, a bearish Vassily was to learn in the latter half of this first recording — and the whole of the second. On hearing again the voices of Frieda and Ashley Scargill, he was nonplussed by the thought that both Paleomena *and* the GRU had bugged Scargill's hideaway pad in Santa Monica! How sobering that Paleomena should have its own special interest in the swellhead. But if the GRU tape of Frieda and Scargill he once listened to affirmed the acumen of his protégé, this *new* recorded conversation, which concluded Dowd's first tape, contained a foreign note Vassily was unfamiliar with or had overlooked. Was he now listening with a new discriminating ear to the nasal-toned complainer, the highly placed academician Frieda got talking, endlessly and wide-ranging, to the delight of the Cheka's tactical intelligence networks?

The equally sobering second tape contained words with two younger, gamier mentors. Frieda had two Casanovas going at the time, both work related and more or less chummy. Vassily assumed the second tape came from Paleomena's periodic surveillance regimen that Frieda must have anticipated yet seemed unconcerned about 'playing to'. The first voice there, a young animated voice, seemed to be unrivalled, for few critical comments interrupted *his* thoughts. It belonged to a wily witty apostate Frieda actually listened to for bits of timely au currant hearsay and skinny that entertained and informed. The lad's esprit and fond self-regard obviously rubbed off. By then, Vassily decided, his once committed and adroit illegal wanted out. He simply had to know more. Before leaving America for a last time.

The transcript with the plutocrat economist, featured mainly the man's precious jokes and useful long-winded anecdotes about his government involvement! Vassily had been initially confused by the man's accent, until he realized it was a Canadian maven speaking, not a Yankee plutocrat. What had also surprised was the eminent circles the man travelled in. It seemed few officials in the State Department, liaison staff in the House Appropriations and Ways-and-Means Committee, the Office of the Budget, even the Press Secretary's personnel, he was not on ready, if not familiar, terms with. As in

the earlier Carter administration, he remained an economic *éminence grise* for key presidential advisors. He was a Professor Emeritus on loan then to the West Coast, his specialty budget control. He presented himself as a Keynesian pragmatist. He was also a concise study in liberal optimism. Vassily could have used segments of his palaver as exhibits in his own succinct seminar on American turpitude. Like a kind of tenured Paraclete the man held that the treasury was a regrettable but necessary breeder reactor of needed cash: “Observably it’s got to come from somewhere, I told a congressman, and as long as you luddites refuse to impress substantial taxes on the well off that actually stick.” His presumption that private wealth could sustain legions of poor was axiomatic: “If the bugger (a publisher) desisted for one season poofing about in his silly extravagant sail boat, twenty thousand — and that’s a conservative estimate — would be alive in the Horn of Africa next year. Possibly even more. Long overdue, such recognition.”

“Bad apple sailors,” Frieda wanly replied, barely interrupting Scargill’s treasured monologue, which continued by postulating that a humanist school system would lessen such insularity: “Lookit, what each kid wants, deserves, is respect, understanding of his special interests and sexual proclivities. In short, schooling that enshrines acceptance of behavioural diversity, recrusent expression, as well as some numeration, social studies, composition and vocational skills, of course.”

“Sounds like a lot,” said a sleepy Frieda, prompting Scargill to cite an ongoing *prejudice* that blighted American culture. “Look at our civic policing. The ongoing shooting of blacks by white cops, for instance. That one fellow recently shot in the chest — all he had was a knife, apparently.”

Said a newly quizzical, animated Frieda, “Well, the current crime statistics are surely not *all* bogus — the black hegemony in most categories making law enforcement innately ‘prejudicial’, yes? No one mentions the number of blacks killed by blacks. Why, I’ve often wondered, are Hispanic, Latino, and Native Americans so relatively staid — so less, well, protean, animated, improvisational? Stealing, property theft, now apparently rampant, is considered ‘small potatoes’, certainly less onerous if perpetrated by blacks. A solemn ‘prejudice’ that, don’t you think. I do read an assortment of authors.”

“The moot point,” retorted the academician.

Scargill’s ingratiating prose, which he sometimes read aloud, often tended to skirt contention. *I am really quite far from being at odds with...it may seem not unlikely...in far less obvious fact...tariffs are in no real slight measure...will not be so routinely persuaded...the slight tendency to an unrivalled proliferation of...has recently addressed vague attention to...is judged in undue measure...I have little ongoing substantial sympathy with...must occasion some relevant astonishment....* Yet for two years Frieda had elicited the pertinent intelligence kernels. Which Kremlin wonks continued to study today.

But it was while listening to the intimate conversations in the tapes that Vassily began to identify the new dull ache within himself (distinct from his anxiety about Dowd coming to possess such transcripts as well as select dope on an ‘alien’ agent!), which otherwise resembled the distress of bolting too much American fast food. As the words of the tapes disclosed their story, Vassily detected in himself a foreign queasiness, an antipathy he had not felt before. His perplexity with Angus Dowd was then acute, his disbelief almost a rebuke.

He was not unfamiliar with intimate sound effects. Indeed, the boudoir conversation of a target was sometimes crucial. Though in the Eastern Block the urgency and dispatch of the couplings, as often as not, precluded the leisure, the wile of eroticism. The participants at the clandestine level were often too rushed, too cold, too impassioned, too fearful to indulge languorous wiles. An ever present

apprehension kept the trysts largely functional. But in the present tapes the ambience seemed pure caprice; what one noticed time and again were the routine dalliances, which taunted and chafed.

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

In a similar manner he elided the role sex might play in a given assignment. He knew all his students would be unceremoniously counselled in such matters in due course, and dourly left off any addendum of his own. Beyond the technical details of spy craft, he deemed his responsibility the intellectual ‘bonding’ essential to recruitment, and he prided himself that none of his protégés had thus far disappointed their masters. His record in fact was without blemish: three exceptional, strategically placed illegals sent weekly and monthly information Russian rulers consulted hourly. And none of these individuals, he believed, was currently at risk. Until now...until now...when the third in this coterie had apparently ‘taken a hike’, a phrase that implicated but didn’t rule out a return.

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

Now, he sullenly listened to the unexpected ‘dalliances’: to the plutocrat peevishly remarking that only an over-engaged little showoff found side-back coupling anesthetizing (Frieda had apparently nodded off after seeing to a condom and lubricant), as well as foxy Daniel deploying his electric wit, precious sketch book, and exuberant direction of some wayward pose, against which Frieda one day smoothly quipped, “Daniel, khydozhnik, chelovek, quit fooling around and get on with it!” Such wayward antics chafed. It was Frieda’s occasional use of pert Russian words and phrases, which she claimed she found antic, that clued Vassily to the affection she held for the lad. These interludes, in a veritable sea of allusions, underlined the malaise he felt, and caused him to again question American informality and glib spiel — requisites for the confidence game — that were so inimical to a wary Russian, for whom threat was usually the *sine qua non*. He had rarely witnessed people lasciviously prey upon one another quite so impulsively, narcotically, though it must be said *debonair* Daniel did have entertaining hopeful antics in the intervals, when he and Frieda worked together over a puzzle, compared notes at meal or snack-time. Perhaps that’s why Daniel’s influence was pronounced: pressed, heedful Frieda had found a prototypical Van Veen — Nabokov’s prodigal in *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* — and vicariously savoured the wily audacity. Chief among his ongoing heresies was the one all young people find irresistible: no one over the age of twelve or thirteen was to be trusted. He claimed he was about ten and Frieda a still recoverable fourteen — a differential that roughly fitted their mean ages of a ‘mature’ twenty-one and a ‘pubescent’ thirty-something. An encounter during a computer game reimposed for Vassily the often cloying nature of familiarity, and he wondered, again, who was the instigator of such tapes.

A wry argument over the correct name of some taxing puzzles left both Frieda and Daniel whimsically diverted — Tiresome Irons, said he, Troll Irons, said she. A playful scuffle followed.

Vassily believed beer spray the main instrument, though one brief skirmish ended with some kind of compote being tossed about, given the occasional enigmatic ‘splat’, the horseplay infectious for a time. Then Daniel wondered how many of the sixty-four hexogram configurations of the I Ching they could convert to sexual postures. A door closed, and Frieda announced in a muted voice that the Hanoi Tower, with its three phalluses, offered more reliability and solace to dynamos like her. Then a door opened and a brisk splash of liquid started Daniel giddily swearing (earlier a faucet had been turned on and off). A frisky tussle ensued, ending in buoyant activity on a sofa or bed with fulsome exclamations from a veneurative Daniel. Some listless words followed as the tryst wained. Words of sober reckoning for wary Vassily.

“You enhance the flavour of mango, sister.”

“From the court taster himself.” The voice for Vassily had a newly dismissive edge.

A street siren came and went. An indefinite pause, then Daniel spoke more directly. “You pussyfooted yesterday about my continued involvement with Paleomena. ‘I just hope it works out,’ you said. Something I’ve missed?”

“Probably.” The voice remained unengaged.

“I am a stubborn sort. You often say.”

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

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

Frieda too was irked. “Susanne talks a lot.”

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

Something new had begun or Frieda changed her mind — the sound of a pillow being robustly plumped intervened. Daniel sighed and apparently desisted. When Frieda again spoke she seemed miffed.

“You’re really ready to commit yourself, further — another three, four years?”

A ready Daniel dryly responded. “There might be a need. Noblesse oblige, Peter calls it.”

A silence. Then a further lament. “Some ‘noblesse’.”

“Is it another chap? Want me to interfere?” But as quickly the wiseacre was distracted. “You’re a genie in this light. Even with over-ripe fruit. A missing Cézanne!”

No response from Frieda. A drawer was suddenly smartly opened and closed.

Daniel was then wryly reflective. “I can probably defer to Arnold Storrier.”

Frieda staidly joined in. “That’s handsome of you.”

“Anybody at Paleomena?” Daniel had apparently begun a sketch. Vassily could just make out a stylus whispering over a sheet of paper.

“No.”

“Does he have a name. A handle? — No, leave the elbow where it was. Thank you.”

Silence. Perhaps a mute demure.

Wanly Daniel continued. “A special investment portfolio? A castle, storybook sail boat?”

Yet her route seemed complete. “I’ve rarely used his real name.”

“Oh dear.” Mock alarm.

“Call him ‘Abel’...as in the Bible...free our computer lingo.”

After a brief pause a prompt query from Daniel. “ — He’s ancient history?”

Frieda’s voice seemed suddenly more distant. “Some people may have wished it...envious, for the

most part I think.”

“Still around, then — this Abel?”

This time Frieda stoically mused, “A kind of shepherd. In a desert.”

“Ah. Keeps an eye on the flock.” A nonchalant comment.

From Frieda more abstraction. “Observant, yes. Perhaps too...”

“So, often nosy was he?” Growing boredom in Daniel’s voice.

“He saw a lot. Too often perhaps. It was enough.” A tap is turned off. Someone, presumably Frieda, returned to the room.

Daniel’s voice was again animated. “Excellent. Fredi...you are ravishing. I mean spit to die. I could devote a millennium to each one.”

“What do I do in the meantime?” Frieda asked in a pallid voice. Daniel laughed. Yet the question lingered.

“Help me learn all about those Hanoi Towers, I guess. ”

The remaining exchanges simply served to underline that plaintive note, exemplified by the phrase, ‘It was enough.’ The imputation, that keenly observing, witnessing was a risk, Vassily dourly smiled at.

Dowd’s set of extraordinary recordings, a measure of Paleomena’s vigilance, formed a telling narrative: the plutocrat Scargill suavely patronized, Daniel distracted as he entertained, and, in the last segment of the second chip, the wily anthropologist Peter Selby-Smith estranged, provoked and dismayed. His blithely droll comments about the Paleomena Princes may have triggered Frieda’s belated concern about Abler’s exclusive custodians. The gadfly with a poetic brilliance is a modern piper. His wit alerted one to Abler’s possible gamesome portent, vivifying the early imputation that *ZITA* might be a subversive tease. The craft of a fox, with the itch of a cut-up, reminded earnest Vassily of those grey margins of schizophrenia — and here in the hands of a closet gay to boot! — which lingering ‘Soviet’ philosophy and psychiatry were as powerless to deal with as the sociopath was to a doughty Catholic conscience. Some things man seemed singularly unequipped to deal with, one of these being the comprehension of himself — parenthetically his sometimes terribly undecided and often divided self. Only hubris, obsession might work hand-in-hand to shroud that reality. As the modern age exemplified.

But in Vassily’s scheme of things pestilence, pollution, famine and anger ravaged the land, and the prudent wayfarer learned what he could from his past then made his bed. What he could not presently know would not influence daily obligations. The student of manners, style, and the flights of supposition and fancy, operated as a rogue ship, which the heedful either saw berthed or maneuvered into a different sea — such were Vassily’s reflections on blithe, self-dramatic irreverence and disgust. And so, as he listened, he allowed himself to be only mildly entertained. He would remember few of Peter’s sly pronouncements, for he was by then nearly despondent. Somehow his own ideological redoubt was shadowed by his pupil. Her consternation umbered his own outlook. Clever mischief makers abounded in a United States, a sobering reality that had intensified the ongoing turmoil. Never before had he felt so slighted.

With assiduous care, he managed to keep the meetings with Dowd and the recordings a secret. He told the resident he was cautiously reassessing Paleomena’s current programs and wanted his toil to remain discreet. He cited a single shadow, Stanton, who was verified a Paleomena agent and a fre-

quent Frieda watcher. He was promised, in due course, a backup team.

The topical information about the corporation's contracts he was able to provide the Rezidency, helped allay his anxiety about his operational venue. The recordings Dowd provided he listened to via head phones in his hotel room. He swam daily in an Edendale spa, occasionally played chess in a quiet, stately treed park, and also assessed potential uses of the civic officials he came in contact with.

He remained irritated the earlier recorded words between Frieda and Muerner lacked serviceable details. Muerner's mention of a 'crew' for instance. He was of course not a little chagrined to have to rely upon the discretion, cooperation and affability of an erstwhile adversary. It was a novel bind he had to endure, at least for a time. Some new knowledge about Paleomena — its corporate structure, security apparatus and research focus — could later be used to mask his own involvement with Dowd if his standing with the Rezident deteriorated. When at last he traced both Frieda and her twin, he had to ask for a postponement of the meeting Dowd requested. The sisters were engaged in a too strenuous cat and mouse game with several stalkers to honour any prearranged gathering. At least at present. He'd concluded that Frieda appeared to be acting on her own. But just what her current plans were, he would need more time to fathom. Indeed, he doubted she had any settled agenda then. Hence he would need much more time than Dowd had initially sanctioned to fulfill his mandate, which the wily gnome reluctantly agreed to. Vassily did give his contact in the rezidency: the current addresses of Daniel Frank and Peter Selby-Smith, two restless Paleomena employers Frieda stayed with during her last days at Paleomena; two recent addresses Frieda had used; a likely disguise (a wig, moulded mouthpiece to distort the lower cheeks, dress and sandals found in a janitor's trash cart); and the name and address of an environmental lobby she furtively visited one week. Vassily's one hope was that Angus Dowd genuinely sought a meeting with the former research engineer — one she would not feel railroaded into attending. He also requested of the Rezident and thence Moscow more time to make his evaluation of both Zoya and Frieda, and to appraise a canny executive in the Paleomena Corporation whom he met while playing chess, so he said. (The man who so neatly allocated his own current moves!) The answer was swift, direct and, despite the ornate coding, came surprisingly from the apathetic interlocutor himself.

'Do only the necessary minimum. Get the finger out but keep it handy. Myshin.'

Vassily agreed: the only way to maneuver in America, in the current 'normless' America. Which meant shelving any further contact with Angus Dowd or the wily Stanton.

TWENTY

Gloria Leibowitz, the newly commissioned biographer of the Storrier Saga (her journal had been bought by Random House), sat with flushed cheeks between the oversize showpiece himself and Antoine Plombiers, a blossoming couturier, budding auteur and, of late, Arnold's mentor of things both esoteric and ambiguous. One of Antoine's friends, a bi-sexual cellist, had a 'thing' for Arnold. Antoine told the enamoured friend the queue was long and Arnold likely 'right-handed' the rest of his natural life.

The trio had taken an impromptu Moroccan holiday. Arnold liked to gamble, his skill unworldly it seemed, Antoine to take in North African bazaars and their denizens, and Gloria to upgrade her

rag's knowledge of North West African cuisine and cultural folkways. Now they endured the last gasps of a happy hour in a lounge in LA's International Airport. They had just returned to LA via a liquorish flight from what Arnold cast as his last Casablanca poker weekend ever. He had given out, after being blacklisted by two clubs, that no more would he suffer the indignity of ostracism from clubs where only stolid addicts might regularly play high stakes blackjack and the like without concern for expulsion. All the variables had become 'intervening' he said. Glory had in the past written with fond disgust of the two vices Arnold often indulged — hustling and gambling. She soulfully berated instincts that seek and savour the humiliation of ill-starred opponents. Her dislike of gambling was less scathing because the odds were at least less certain — but another drug with 'patented impurities'. Her phrase. But in her journal her recriminations were somewhat blunted, for Arnold was then using the proceeds from both lapses to encourage a consortium of investors to build a fleet of Dyna Rigged sail ships augmented with additional LNG dual-fuel engines. The projected fleet of four craft would ferry 'fair trade' goods with far less pollution than conventional shipping. Gloria found the project commendable. Even on learning of the amused chorus of some ship owners, she remained equanimous. Arnold had proved to be a broad spectrum genius who dramatically, if impulsively, decided one day to put to the test a design he envisaged for a more environmentally benign way of getting goods across water. Initially he managed to strong arm some former Asian mobsters at *Sports Majesté* to help underwrite the project, via shelved submissions to the International Criminal Court, for some of these same tycoons were now in newly revamped governments. Muerner got a Paleomena think tank involved with some seed money of his own. Moreover, Gloria was intrigued by the prospect of 'air-borne' sea travel. She spent an intense week learning the electronic plaintext to work huge Dyna Rigged sails with Dual-Fuel engines, and determine a ship's position via the vernier scale on a Plath sextant, one of Arnold's 'foundational sailing stipulations' — initially learned upon the pitching bridge of the sizeable stay sail ketch he leased to 'rekindle the allure of sea-wind travel', as he stolidly put it. It was aboard that craft that she reacquainted herself with the often touching, sometimes spendthrift enthusiasm he imparted. He seemed at times to belong to the sea, in the manner of an 'ably buoyant creature in a wind-turbulent deep', as she fancifully put it — only to find herself diverted by the description, several months later, when, aboard the first of the Dyna rigged ships, the power on one calm stretch of sea was mainly the Dual-Fuel propulsion, a rare occurrence aboard the Tau, the inaugural test ship. He was both a kind of Billy Budd and Captain Ahab, she mused, and on dry land a sobering sight when nearly drunk, especially with a black, swollen, nearly closed eye — so manifest now in the airport lounge, the result of a bourbon glass hurled by a Casablanca patron after a final game of Texas hold 'em poker in which, for an extra raise, he had pledged the first serial rights to the history Gloria was writing — a breach of contract Gloria learned about later, when it no longer mattered. The money was electronically settled by the loser, who lost an earlier game and demanded a rematch (which he also lost), rematches being a covenant in the clubs Arnold frequented, where one's word was usually as immutable as the cards one gambled — inside. Outside, one left nothing to chance.

And now the trio, Arnold, Gloria and Antoine, seated in the orderly lounge, waited for a militia team to give its blessing to an entrance foyer that a kook or terrorist had attempted to blow up. A hostage was taken, eventually released 'unharmful' — the requisite euphemism — after which the kook shot himself in the head. A rumour said he had planted more than one explosive device and special

details now swept the area. Gloria rather marvelled at the stoicism with which many people generally endured what was now deemed more or less inevitable — the seemingly inherent mishaps in modern life, including disruptions caused by berserk individuals — such that staid resigned folk usually responded by getting out their particular ‘knitting’. It was at such times that Arnold’s eccentric friend, the dapper Antoine, dated couturier (early Twentieth Century chic), art and queer fish connoisseur, essayist, poet, optimistic poofter and sometime film maker — a gifted auteur — became indispensable. His faint stutter often ‘italicized’ his observations. He was at his best explaining cultural inanities and interpreting Arnold’s ‘anachronistic’ infatuation with heterosexuality — also despairing of the current rush to marriage among his own tribe. “When the institution itself is in f,freefall.” Affable smiles were an invitation. His list of gay liberation blunders and inanities were spawned by ‘richly farcical motivations’ — his choice phrase.

“We were the finest c,critics of wedded bliss at one time. Now a disturbing number of my cherubs can’t w,wait to tie the knot, the late euphemism for garrotte. People today are p,poorly instructed in harness hitches and s,slip knots. I believe there’s actually a knot called a c,cuckold’s neck. Sadly, even Arnold’s mundane Windsor needs a special hand to p,put it aright.”

Unfortunately Arnold was not a resilient drinker and could not then be relied upon to appreciate the finer points. The topical and dismaying curiosity was that black-eyed, partly soused Arnold was actually engaged once again as the piano accompanist for the accomplished, crippled, renowned mezzo-soprano Marianne Fitch, who would give a benefit for the Shriner Hospitals in approximately five hours! Some months earlier, she had heard Arnold play some Schubert at a party — to general astonishment — and thought his presence at a recital would enlarge her audience with flush curiosity seekers. The fact that he learned her chosen pieces in record time, as the promoter duly affirmed, challenged the devoutly skeptical. Now, seeing Arnold so inopportunistically tipsy, inspired Antoine’s wide ranging apocryphal pronouncements.

“It’s altogether too m,macabre. And you, you shameless b,bawd, slyly patronize the boyar. You are simply too m,much. And a Jewess as well. What are we coming to when the s,seeing-eye dogs slight the blind.”

“Antoine, you’re sounding like a disgruntled hairdresser.”

“My dear, someone m,must at least act the part. If we cannot rely on the modern Od,dettes to lead the way.” He looked again at Arnold’s bruise and rolled his eyes. “What indeed can one p,play looking like a shanghaied stevedore? Dame F,fitch will swallow a pit. Perhaps we might m,manage a fubsy strip show.” He shrewdly eyed Gloria. “That frock of y,yours, my dear, does not bear wearing.”

The comment was not inapt. Gloria had been rushed leaving. She slept like a log on the plane and wore then the same rough-chic navy outfit she last sailed in. It had a rakish tear across one shoulder. She found herself pulling her shawl further about her.

Antoine eyed the gesture with flinty gamesmanship, then looked quizzically again at Arnold. “Yes, it m,might work splendidly. If he can remember any honky tonk d,ditties.”

“He’s off ditties. You, of all people, should know that.” But the word ‘fubsy’ still resounded in her ear.

“Must we then allow our eminence suffer another c,catastrophe? *La Vierge?*” In French it sounded both elegant and naughty. “You are a singular dove my d,dear, who, we have noted, excoriates terrorism, while slighting the w,worth of Zionism. P,patronizing the Jew as victim, but not as survivor

or ruler. A delicious ripe girl. It is too much.”

“Antoine — way too much volumizer in your spiel.”

It was then that Arnold startled them both by placing and stretching his fingers on the edge of the table as if on a keyboard. Soon his fingers suggested the playing of scales, in thirds, perhaps. He’d just removed his head from a briefcase softened by a rolled-up blazer. Both eyes remained closed — correction, one eye closed, the other had still to open entirely on its own. The sudden movements suggested a peripheral computer printer suddenly lurching into activity.

“Now that is what I call superb legwork,” said Gloria watching the long newly active fingers.

Said Antoine, “He radiates trust. Note how he tilts his head. Appraising the overtones I daresay.. A too delicious genius.” Eyeing Gloria he added, “An awesome lad...so alive even in prosaic company.”

“So the show must go on.”

And it did. Preposterous as it must have seemed at the outset.

Arnold, the Sports Majesté kick boxer, late mathematician and engineering physicist, sometime gambling hustler and entrepreneurial seaman — the better known ‘schticks’ of the then acknowledged wunderkind — now, ostensibly, a pianist of classical spirit enamoured of female vocal richness. The ineffable duo — he and Dame Fitch — walked on stage at Carnegie Hall ‘in a credible Pre-Raphaelite glow,’ as Gloria would write in her notes. But once her accompanist sat at the piano Dame Fitch calmed down and the evening was more or less hers, due perhaps, in no small part to the ‘accompanist’s surprisingly syntonic and deferential playing.’ So said one mindful critic. Antoine attempted then abandoned with a sigh a cosmetic application to the bruised black eye. The audience had at first held its breath. Then a few stray laughs, which Gloria was partially responsible for instigating, cued the diffident to an appropriate out, and a gradually swelling amusement took hold, rallying even the ineffable Dame Fitch.

Arnold did not, of course, as Gloria surmised, welcome the trappings of a freak, and in anything he undertook rather ruthlessly aped the best in the performance tier, smitten as he was by the ‘knock off’ label that had stuck to him for a time. His pianistic pretension was no exception. Chiefly, he got tired of the insouciant matinée mold that had set about his ‘laminated, deckle-edged talent’ — this tropism from an early society column in Vanity Fair. The suspicion that he just might be a credible, preternatural multi-talented savant was beginning to tease a few former critics.

Entrenched suspicion takes a while to dissipate.

Endowed with perfect pitch, and that rare associative skill that cues the finger configuration to a given notational or melodic line, allowed him to ably sight read most music, while expansive hands and uncanny reflexes facilitated what is aptly called ‘liquid fingering’. Slighting a bravura virtuosos’s repertoire, he began to create his own singular renderings — in some ways easier, more fun, and handily provocative — opening first the few timeworn doors available to ensemble players, his debut performance with some gifted amateurs, now an historic event. The performance with Dame Fitch was the result of a protracted illness suffered by her regular, long-standing accompanist, and the initial social gathering where Arnold discovered in the host’s elegant drawing room a rare re-conditioned 1936 concert Beckstein with a vintage Alpine spruce sound board. He began softly playing some Schubert on it before the guests entered after coffee, was discovered and politely urged to continue.

The guests were further entertained when Dame Fitch approached the piano and began humming the tune Arnold then played — Schubert's *Ständchen*. One guest wryly suggested Arnold would make a fair accompanist — to Madame Fitch's erstwhile consideration. Indeed, her music was the first he learned note perfect.

Well, the rest is history, more or less. A few early observers were struck by what they imagined a considerable if upstart and footloose talent — recalling his sudden almost chance emergence as a plenary scientist. But such innuendo was well behind him when he walked on stage at Carnegie Hall wearing 'an absolute beaut'.

Otherwise, what the attentive audience awaited, in addition to the soprano's ravishing voice, was the control a parvenu exercised as a seemingly nether partner. The emerging synthesis proved irresistible. A transcendent voice was never better served one critic wrote. Another said he might believe musical marriages could be consummated on stage. Thereafter Arnold seemed bent to the keyboard as if he had discovered a rare regnant inner self, a budding nonesuch, as he fondly imagined it. Something happened at that concert — for one, a venture entirely free of Muerner, Gloria thought. Afterward, returning from the post concert reception and lightly drunk, Arnold told Antoine he'd "succumbed to the wider promise of Lieder with a sisterly nuance." Antoine perhaps winced, recalling the concert's program, which Dame Fitch decided had to be lovingly humorous or not at all — given her venture with this "displaced Victor Borge understudy" as she called him. The first half consisted of shortened arias from Rossini's operas *La Gazza Ladra*, *L'italiana in Algeri*, and *Semiramide*, Arnold occasionally pretending to conduct. "Two alert bohemians plundering another," Antoine wrote about it. What the music made intriguing were some baroque ornaments — a lapse for the purist, perhaps, but "musically sound and fondly evocative of the spirit of the works" to another. The crowd was charmed, and if Gloria was not misty eyed, she detected Antoine squinting more than usual. Wrote one reviewer, 'a prodigious duo discovering themselves is a moving spectacle.' 'A rare and wonderful servant-savant,' from another, the one phrase Arnold lifted from the papers and consigned to his growing chapbook-style journal. A framed copy of the comment eventually hung on a wall in his soundproof townhouse music room.

The second portion of the benefit concert consisted of two offerings, one of Andrew Lloyd Webber ballads, the other favourite German *schlager* tunes like *Shalalaika*, *Late at Night*, and *When the Music Stops*, with a small backup jazz band — a romp that actually brought the house down. By then the impious joking had subsided. The concert was a triumph: a virtuoso sustaining the promising genius of the other. Even Antoine was amazingly muted at the reception that followed the performance. By then someone had given Arnold an eye patch, which he wore with the panache of a fine patriot.

On reading of the concert, Vassily Sergeevich drolly wondered if perhaps Arnold *was* a variety of cyborg, a being the Russians had toyed with erratically, yet compulsively, researched. Thus was he again tempted to believe Abler had delivered some awesome tools to her Paleomena custodians, including Muerner — tools which Frieda, given her specialized focus, must have abetted. He wired Myshin for assistance. A day later he was informed an exfiltration team would be in the U.S. within the week.

However, the phrase 'rare and wonderful servant-savant' alarmed Felix Zveno Muerner, especially

when he reflected on the supplementary arts education he'd sought for his late human approximation of a male idolon. Such that he began to doubt the wisdom of having exposed his protégé, a budding STEM polymath, to a romantic's aesthetic canon, select studies in 18th and 19th Century music and literature, including some influential philosophers — Kant to Kierkegaard as Antoine glibly put it — studies which Muerner thought would evoke in such a robust constitution and incisive intellect, a keener wider inter-disciplinary focus. As it was, his Prometheus appeared to have discovered the wile or lure — Muerner would settle for either noun — of genteel Sense and Sensibility, a buffer to reality's immutable harshness — Muerner's domain. 'Nature's nerve' someone called it. 'Some nerve,' Arnold was reputed to have said with some sobriety. Muerner was not amused.

The following week a secretary in the Shriner Hospital chain announced to a group of directors a take from the concert, dinner and record contract of over three million dollars. It was further decided, with Dame Fitch's sought and received blessing, that part would go to help Arnold with his solar-assisted sail ships. Despite the relatively modest sum, it was one of the few times Felix Muerner felt outflanked. Charity he believed a nub of dependency. The entropy in generosity.

TWENTY-ONE

At the time, Frieda was doing her best to comprehend the 'coming' of Zoya to America! One could make little sense of the fragmented picture, a scrambled jigsaw, many pieces seemingly forced.

Leading the entertainment pages of the Los Angeles Times was the opening of a new show lounge club, the Bellerophon, a new addition to Avalon Hollywood's nightlife. One touted performer was a Slav with sturdy ballet training who had performed in the European Apsara chain. She was called Zita Krupka, and had recently appeared in a hyper realistic sci-fi graphic novel. Such details, now alive in the public arena, left Frieda reassessing her own identity and jeopardy! The media, particularly the tabloids, found Zita's career absorbing. 'A patron in the London Apsara club went berserk during her late performance there — her dancing being such a galvanic tease,' one tabloid stringer wrote. 'She specializes in popularizing roles of classic heroines like Giselle and Coppélia, including a gracile Apsara dancing to segments of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade score, her audience keenly attuned to the lissome craft. The spare but elegant costumes serve to index the supple, gracile form, the incidental nudity a rapt revelation.' The few spare biographic details also added: an unfortunate mother Russian authorities disapproved of, an unlucky father, and a twin who died in childbirth. No mention of an older stepsister. One toffy reviewer imagined 'an escaped free spirit from pervasive timeless mythology!' Only belatedly did Frieda fully recognize Zoya's new face. An exceptional eye mask she'd worn in the Apsaras revived the recognition. Another account of the tiff with the Muslim sounded more antic than consequential. Had the club owners bartered with the Muslim to 'titivate' the performance? Then to learn the delinquent had fled with embarrassing information someone in the Russian hierarchy badly wanted kept in house — not passed on to a spy so recently suspected of discord and dereliction! The implication that the SVR worked to silence two potentially wily conspirators made Frieda cringe.

Thus, it was a shock almost as deranging as the enigmatic Zita embellishing the slyly vulgarized tableaux, to hear the familiar measured voice calling from a pay phone just beyond her most recent hideaway, a small three room condo she had rented a week before. At first she despaired: the Cheka

calling from a stakeout? Her current domicile so ‘evident’ then? Had Daniel been indiscreet, compromised, his apartment ably bugged — as seemed now likely? Her comings and goings diligently monitored. But the voice, a dark echo from her past — none other than Vassily’s ancient bass voice! — assured her she was in no danger of abduction or assault and requested a private meeting. He added that he could not restrain the ‘nay sayers’ any longer, as he warily put it, if he did not know what she planned. He also advised that, should they meet, he would urge her to return to her calling, and be prepared for the worst if she declined. The grace period was over. He gave the number of the pay phone he called from, told her to return his call within two minutes or she would not likely see or hear from him again. When she called he gave her a time and the address of a waterfront oyster bar, saying she could meet with him there alone for a time. If she remained when he left, a second person would join her. This second person was a Paleomena security agent. (He never revealed his bargain with Dowd to Frieda. He did tell Stanton that if she left on her own, he would not meet again with the Paleomena executive.)

Vassily’s mention of a Paleomena security agent baffled, cautioned. She almost didn’t go — the prudent thing to do she thought. Indeed, she almost fled. But prudence was not a telltale. That he knew where to find her was a sorry revelation. Her desire for a new redemptive life seemed then an ingenuous illusion.

They sat on stools facing the street. She had come early and carefully studied the environs, then furtively him and his expression when he arrived, concluding he came unattended. Almost forgotten was the granite cast of the man, including his frost-bitten cheeks and Asian cast to eyes. Her own face she imagined a lifeless mask. He did not presume upon her caution. Moreover, he was hungry, in the way some Russians are venturously hungry in America — a measure of the remembered restiveness that left her less patient and convinced she really had nothing to say, her heady resolve newly fixed and necessary; she would die before a return, before a craven atonement. His mouth full, Vassily faintly nodded. It was a terrible wrenching spectacle that only increased her impatience.

Noting her sullen regard of him and his fare, a crème caramel with assorted condiments, he drew from his dark jacket a silver flask, from which he poured a clear liquor into his coffee — which she declined for hers — then stoically began speaking softly and distinctly, in an idiomatic Russian.

“I believe from observing you this past week that you have decided to defect, or strike a bargain with our pushy Neighbours.”

“I have decided very little.” Indeed, plans, even placatory words, eluded her then.

Vassily reflectively paused. He suddenly doubted the explanation he’d fabricated for his presence in Los Angeles would satisfy. Instead he alluded to the furor over her recent silence.

“I’m here simply to determine your current activities, and assess your sympathies. General Myshin is on standby to intervene.” He had not attempted to engage her eyes. A further sip of his coffee resulted in a second top-up from his antique flask before he continued.

“If you decide to stay here you will need help to eschew the GRU.” A further swallow of the diluted coffee hardened his features, as herald to a mindful resolution. “I’ve been instructed to kidnap you with some GRU agents tomorrow night, if necessary. I can fail, and be arrested by a duly warned American team. You can then seek American protection; your best outside option. I will end in U.S. custody and be exchanged in due course for someone the U.S. or an ally want returned, or some other

favour. This I am prepared to do. If you shun the GRU and join an affiliate not sanctioned by, or inimical to, Paleomena, the corporate player you've also apparently neglected, you will contend with its own marshals. The reach of this network you've slighted perhaps. The Princes value their principle assets. One tactic could be a contractual legal suit, leaving a tainted and easily co-opted researcher. I have until tomorrow night to bring you onside, fortuitously or not. As you've perhaps anticipated; the grace period is over."

Grace. Only Vassily, she thought.

He paused as if waiting her entry, yet still did not look her way. She had forgotten how composed he looked when reflecting. But as he began again his words contained a plaintive foreign note, and she realized he was perspiring. His presence here suggested a reduction in service stature that must be disagreeable. So she believed.

"As you will have surmised, the trust in your product and cooperation here has lapsed. I ask you to come with me now. You will be returned, via Mexico and Havana. Your talents will not be squandered. With a formal apology and detailed explanation you will soon be redeployed, likely somewhere in the Federation, but the post will be commensurate with your acknowledged abilities."

She mutely smiled. Such a 'reinstatement' could take a year or more, and might well incorporate some form of coercion. She all but marvelled that he could deliver such a speech with a straight face. Again, silence seemed her best option. He continued after glancing at his watch.

"If you do not come with me now, and plan to remain in the West, you should be in your modest flat tomorrow at twenty-three hours. I, and my team, will be apprehended in an attempted abduction. You must present a struggle, not too resourceful I think. I will see some CIA agents have been discretely advised of the apprehension, who will cue the FBI. It is your best, safest way to enter U.S. custody. My team's attempt will further alert the Americans to your importance. This I'm prepared to do. Reluctantly, of course."

The alcohol, she assumed, helped credit the pensive, ominous words. That she might find the offer antic or disingenuous was the bugbear without name. He, in turn, kept to himself the fact that his most challenging deception would be to appear stung and outraged as FBI agents stanced and arrested his team. Yet he believed he could pull it off. Being surprised and outnumbered his team would desist. To Frieda he continued thus: "The General of course knows nothing of this ruse. I do not beg. You are an adult. When I finish this cigarette I leave, and walk slowly. On the morrow, if you remain 'at large', as they say, you have my condolences."

The traffic beyond the restaurant front had increased and Vassily finished his coffee in a laden abstraction, which cast his face, his profile at least, in a kind of death mask. His offer indeed seemed selfless, not ingratiating, despite seeming preposterous. She had not imagined an intimate confab, but carefully worded pronouncements eluded her. His presence brought with it both the old preciousness and imperiousness. How could she explain Abler or mesmerizing *ЖИТА* to him — in many ways forever a layman? She said nothing. But he had one further surprise.

"Your half-sister Zoya remains a target. The fatwa has not been lifted. So far she's eluded her many late hunters. My lone mandate is to verify her recent activities, though I believe someone, somewhere, is still determined she 'sprouts wings', to use a fine bit of American idiomatic lingo. Better a death here than there. You alone may survive."

He released three bills to the counter and was gone. She had no intention of following, but his last

words baited the confounding coming of her sister. For a brief moment she thought this might be another sly gambit, a way of keeping her negotiable, near to herself — routing an impetuous trust of freedom. And it seemed to be succeeding. She almost chose to ignore the shuffling chap who took up a stool next to her — the other half of the stillborn compact with Vassily that night. His sidelong coming simply augmented the tension that newly gripped her. But one more ominous observer. Somehow he verified one of Muerner's modern Yankee behavioural salients — affected poise, being innately 'cool'. The guy was by turns visually slattern — a rather tawdry camp look — and suavely genial. So she thought. He lived, she guessed, in an insouciant avid rock era, where campy nonchalance reigned, burlesquing authority, consequential importance, consequence itself — most anything that belaboured ready gratification. Without the inauspicious *ZITA* would she ever have taken note?...

"I won't impose on you miss. A yes or no is all my client wants. You staying or going?"

Frieda stifled a laugh. The terrible part was the man seemed in earnest — he actually expected and on-off response. For one brief dread moment she thought of rushing after Vassily. But the moment passed and with it her renewed commitment to her new, lone, gasping self, to awesome Abler and consequential *ZITA* — to the last dogfight. In or out of Paleomena.

She uncharacteristically told him to piss off, paid the cheque with Vassily's three bills and swiftly left, moving away from a static Vassily who stood under a store canopy. The shuffler too came into the street but did not follow. Unlike Vassily he seemed perfectly satisfied with her curt response.

"No parlay," Stanton told an impassive Dowd in his Paleomena Tower office several minutes later.

"She said as much?"

"No, she told me to piss off. No mention of a meeting. This one's freelance all the way, I'd say."

"And that follows?"

"No, but you see I've seen some of the guilty ones facing repatriation. They smell of ketchup and look like cut cheerleaders, or footballers who flunked the draft. This one had, in my estimation, Mr. Dowd, a trunk full of unfinished business, and was hot to get at it. After the guy departed, she promptly left by a rear exit. Had I been Arnold Storrier himself I doubt I could have flagged her. And she left the busy waitress a decent tip; you don't burn your hard cash when you're off to the Lubyanka or wherever. That's my considered opinion, Mr. Dowd."

"And you don't think she and the Russian may be handling that unfinished business together?"

"Not likely. I thought the guy in tears when I came out, and they weren't from the joint's food, which isn't half bad if you're economical and most of the time hungry, like me. Also, the guy was slow giving a cabbie instructions. My guess: he was stood up — almost certainly unable to arrange the meeting you sought. I doubt we'll see him again."

Dowd sat very still for several seconds with his eyes closed, his fingers flat upon his desk. He was thinking of Stanton's canny assessment of the two — how Frieda had promptly 'decamped', once again, all future parleying off, it would seem. Would he ever see, meet with, the lovely Van Eerden again?

"Thank you Stanton. Please proceed as instructed."

So, the Paleomena researcher could well be a newly diffident spy. Would Muerner be assuaged Dowd wondered, with his suspicion affirmed. Even perhaps planning his own heist — an intervening

breach of contract tort? Were she still findable. One serviceable reprimand.

TWENTY-TWO

A grimly resolved Vassily awaited with his team in a noisy truck stop as the hour approached, when he would proceed to Frieda's small flat. He thought of the word 'patsy' in recalling a character in American lore — which intimated in his mind his own thankless chore, now so flagrantly near. How readily one sensed impatience in America — awaiting the sensational, oncoming reel!

Not a block away Antoine Plombiers attracted the notice of several patrons — Gloria being his select companion that day — at the opening exhibition of paintings and installation art of two celebrated West Coast artists — both recently, eminently featured in Gloria's rag.

Antoine's suavely announced himself to the soft-spoken receptionist, a quiet committed girl named Tiffany, who greeted all attendees with admirable deference until Antoine arrived and requested at once a vodka martini. "There's only champagne," Tiffany curtly stated, "and it's served with the alderperson who will be here in due course." The alderperson, a feminist confidante of Gloria's, was to bring a commission from city hall for one of the exhibition's artists to create a set of murals for the new headquarters of SARA (Sexual Assault and Recovery Anonymous) which Antoine called the 'priory'. The alderperson, also known as the 'croaker' among select critics, in part because of her low gravelly voice, represented perhaps Gloria's single unblushing venality — the resolute pacing and patronizing of career politicians. A comrade too zealous by half, the woman yet represented a constituency of largely single mothers in a dense Black-Latino community in Los Angeles which contained an irresistible block of votes. Thus far the electoral boundaries kept the vote marginal but Gloria hoped to change that, and even worked with radicals to see it accomplished. As we've noted, Gloria's feminism favoured the 'of necessity' muster: where the existing welfare programs remained spartan, and token fathers behaved as feral tomcats, women, especially those with children, needed protection. That many fathers behaved so, merely confirmed her resignation in dealing with the cocky machismo male. Thus with a nimble smile she took in Antoine and the staid receptionist.

Antoine declaimed to her in his notable stutter, "My dear, I am ticketed with impertinence."

"It's called mentoring today, Antoine."

Tiffany appeared slaked on hearing Gloria's advisement, and politely inquired if Antoine wished to check his coat and cane. Antoine wore about his shoulders a camel hair Spencer and carried an ivory swagger stick that concealed a pepper spray canister and mechanized blade which had stalled more than one rowdy. That this implement might be deemed a cane, Antoine could not let pass. With a dramatic turn he whispered to Tiffany, "The c,cane, my dear, is a select halberd. Its historic pedigree p,plain to all seasoned warriors." Tiffany managed a token smile. Antoine then arched fine brows, though not at the girl, and took Gloria's hand.

"I've come to see the w,works of art. I will explain them as we go. And by the l,look of things, my dear, I think we ought to p,proceed with some dispatch."

In keeping with his specific gravity, a coterie of curious and leery onlookers soon surrounded them. At one stage the group stood before an assemblage of tiny musical instruments. By blowing on,

strumming or hammering one of them, you touched off a programmed accompaniment of the rest. It was claimed the computer that alerted the remaining instruments did so with a singular adaptation to each individual's exertion. It was one of the show's highlights. A small crowd waited Antoine's turn. It seemed for a moment he might pass by with another of his plaintive hums. Instead he elected to blow upon the trumpet. The resulting cacophony was awful. Indeed the artist, then at the periphery of the group, wryly smiled, then frowned, and began tinkering with an engineering component.

A few sniggers surfaced after Antoine postulated: "Of course, I d, don't always play accurately; exa, attitude can interfere with emotional vibrancy."

Gloria valiantly remained silent.

Before another exhibit, a somber painting, in which a young hermaphrodite was crucified in stark nocturnal chiaroscuro, her small penis fully erect, Gloria said quietly to Antoine, "The artist is reputed to be an exceptional atmospheric technician — often compared to George de La Tour."

"The 'n, night shadow' artist."

Before another display, a picture of a fat, ugly, wolfish man dressed in a tight Little Red Riding Hood outfit, captioned *YumYum*, two young women in stylish fatigues were plainly amused. "Looks like he's going to burp or fart," said one."

"Or puke," said the other with ready nonchalance.

Both girls leisurely moved on, one thrusting a knowing hand into her companion's back pocket.

Gloria faintly smiled as Antoine voiced his assessment.

"A d, duly delectable behind."

A little later Antoine was more or less silent, simply tilting his head to one side with a faintly stoic expression before the exhibits. He said as they concluded the tour, "I think it is time to eat; I know a d, delicious little cellar nearby."

"I accept."

"During the apéritif I will explain the e, entire ruse."

After retrieving their wraps and a final *à bientôt* to Tiffany, Antoine and Gloria waltzed together into the toasty evening air.

At a crosswalk, to which they promptly repaired when Antoine spotted a flower stall across the street and insisted on buying Gloria a 'sprig of something n, natural,' they were nearly hit by a large dark van. The vehicle stopped just in time. The driver, a burly chap in dark fatigues with smudges of lamp black on his face, called Antoine a string of select names. At least one other pair of eyes peered out from the darkened interior of the van.

Recomposed, Antoine sauntered on after lightly knocking on the bonnet as if to summon good luck. Engine in throttle, the van crept forward, hurrying Gloria but not Antoine, who maintained his balance by jabbing the metal head of his walking stick — against a headlamp, as it turned out. In doing so he neatly, inadvertently punctured the headlamp lens, the plastic shield of which was already cracked and easily penetrated. The van stopped, the driver freshly molten with insult, barely restrained by another inside. As the noisome words mushroomed Antoine straightened his lapel carnation. Gloria dragged him the remaining few meters of crosswalk. The van jerked forward, paused, then careened the corner, leaving a noxious whiff of abraded tire. It was not the first time Gloria had witnessed such immaculate calm on the part of her old school chum. He claimed to have many times suffered the thrashing of beefy boys and long ago discovered there a perverse purification. Speaking staidly as a

UN ambassador he now said, “How may one partake of rude b,umptious company, our *boeuf gras*, and resist teasing such g,uilleless pit bulls? Only through exemplary charm will you m,make the embittered among us yield to unreserved p,politesse. N’est-ce pass?”

But that night Antoine’s veteran cool would wreak consequence far beyond the accident or antic of breaking a headlight lens, for in the dark van scrambled the security agents newly charged to nab some Russian operatives in the attempted removal — ‘exfiltration’ — of a consequential American traitor. The signal to alert the crucial ample street team was a thrice on-off flash of high-beam headlights. Two working headlights.

The desperate livid agents frantically sought a vehicle to commandeer — a replacement vehicle would take too long to summon given the timeframe — succeeding finally in depriving a couple of their camper, reassuring the owners via identity cards, that they assisted Uncle Sam by yielding up their means of transportation. A limo was summoned and a rental payment promised to the couple, with a further pledge to return the camper. But while hastily parking the two vehicles on a side street — to transfer the weapons, face masks and restraints — the agent driving the apprehended camper managed to hit a motorcycle. In an adjacent ice cream parlour a patrolman gave tongue to a raspberry cream cake and glimpsed with a missed swallow the collision with his Gold Wing Honda. The subsequent sight of dark suited men swearing and hectoring an anxious couple, opened adrenalin floodgates. From the blind of a garbage bin, his revolver levelled, snarled upper lip a trim raspberry pink, he yelled “Freeze!” Newly exasperated oaths of the darkly clad men only added to the patrolman’s sense of urgency. He had recently been admonished for under-performing.

Backup cruisers arrived within the minute, the shouting from all quarters soon venomous.

In the meantime Vassily Ablesimov had dourly set off with his close-haul team to Frieda’s address. But to his relief — also chagrin and bitterness — the room, a rooming-house nook with a single naked cot, rickety table and chair, stained sink and smelly bathroom, was empty. Indeed, it looked unoccupied; there was no sign of recent habitation.

He left just before the estimated arrival of the CIA button men. He had delivered his final speech, and would not electively watch any further instalment of the drama.

About the time Antoine began describing the age’s ‘hostage galleries’ to an amused Gloria in a seemly nocturnal hideaway, Frieda sat in a small room off the office of the Eriopis Casino, in a palatial entertainment complex, the interior of which resembled a period Hollywood back lot under a faux night sky ceiling, featuring in its ‘store fronts’: broad spectrum gambling, gourmet dining, boutique shopping, and classy show lounge acts. It was a serviceable hideaway she’d sought through an employment agency using a new disguise and fake identity. She badly needed replete anonymity for a time to recoup and reconsider. The camp suggestion to seek work here had actually come from Daniel himself. “You want to hide for a time — why not work in a club where most folk don’t want to be singled out and photographers are usually verboten.” She had rented an agreeable flat long before Vassily’s dicey offer; the room he would not find her in that night she’d used as a cover address. Indeed, she believed she’d eluded her Cheka tails for a time; the casino job seemed tailor made to sustain that escape.

Desmond, the gambling floor manager, welcomed this attractive newcomer, and instructed Poppy, a veteran employee, to begin instructing ‘Anna Able’ (Frieda’s new nom de guerre) in the functions of

the ‘score board’, which included affirming reservations for some wealthy gamesters who savoured anonymity, and keeping a tally of the payout monies vouchsafed each gaming table, as well as substantial sums lost and won. It was while Poppy confirmed a supper club reservation for a Siggi Manin that ‘Anna’ particularly perked up, detecting a slavic patrimony in the man’s faint sibilance of voice as he confirmed the two tables he’d reserved in a restaurant with belly dancers. Newly tense, ‘Anna’ pulled her dark wig further forward and checked her excessive makeup in a small mirror in the nook which featured a period Budweiser ad — prompting the alert talkative Poppy to extol the club’s security regimen for the newcomer.

“The usual story: they assume every newcomer a potential crook or head case. A friend of mine works here as a croupier and claims all casino patrons are routinely monitored. The security detail acts promptly. You’re unhappy about something just say so. Good for morale I guess. To quote Gloria Leibowitz, ‘The expectation of the élite patrons is discrete gaming; party animals tend to go elsewhere, as the protocols all but guarantee.’ You don’t know Gloria?” Anna shook her head. “Anyway, the money honeys are even accustomed to the bod scans — to exclude all personal sensing equipment on the gaming floors. We had one electronic wiz who nearly tied into our surveillance cameras for a time. That’s progress I guess. ‘How you caress the kitty,’ the big boss says — our onliest A. J. Lachance, who we rarely see.” Poppy then shocked newcomer Anna with some favoured house skinny.

“Of course, they all loved Zita, the recent much admired guest performer in our popular Merlin show lounge. She’s not here just now. A couple of the older tycoons you just pushed upstairs were actually fascinated with her and brought some gifts. She has a dance repertoire that includes belly dancing and tricky traditional Indian stuff, as well as ballet of course. Yes I know — ballet! It’s just fun watching how she puts her act together. We’ve quite an assortment of talent here. She’s apparently suffering from the flu just now. She’ll be missed, but back on form soon enough I hope. Have you ever seen her?”

“I don’t think so.” That this ‘Zita’ performed *here* took Frieda’s breath away. At times she seemed awash in a fish bowl.

The genial Poppy, persuaded at last that Anna might do some verification on her own, watched as Anna checked off the arrival of a Mr. Roald Licchavi, who spoke in a lilting Hindi English and had a reservation for a party of six, mostly American businessmen, in the Merlin show lounge. One man from the group requested some accompanying music by Saint-Saëns — Salomé, to be precise. “For that new girl.” The message was relayed to Desmond who was then just outside the toll booth. The voice making the request belonged to Ashly Scargill. He seemed disappointed ‘the singular dancer’ was not performing that night.

Somehow the evening passed. As usual, Frieda’s vigilance sustained her. She was not optimistic about her chances but saw no alternative. She needed a particularly safe hiding place and had sought out this job at the exclusive and grandiose Eriopis Casino — on the very tails of Zoya’s performance there, as it turned out! She lived in an unwelcome limbo then. Above all she desired a wider, knowing public audience for Abler, and a career for herself not dictated by corporate warrant — probabilities that still seemed remote as ever. Paleomena’s pervasive influence even the CIA was not immune to, given the corporation’s state-of-the-art computer and remote sensing research, which the GRU had eyed with such vigilance. Hence her double bind. Even Daniel was reluctant to venture beyond Paleomena’s orbit. Continuing her liaison with him meant that Paleomena, thus the Cheka and a

newly alerted CIA, would know her whereabouts and possible intentions. She was convinced she must function for a time underground, being too great a target and bargaining chip in bureaucratic hands. She was particularly bemused by Vassily's intrepid plan, which would have left her at the mercy of the CIA and indirectly Paleomena — possibly her only option in the end, the compromise she must postpone as long as possible. Relative independence still beckoned. In any case, she badly needed an indefinite time out to reflect and plan. Now or never she thought. Hence her coming to the vast, softly lit Eriopis Casino.

Later that evening she noted that Mr. Manin's crowd was in a jubilant mood on leaving. Someone joked about Uncle Sam coming across once again. The Slavs had a fine word for it, Siggi said. Then he pronounced *pipiska* in a credible Russian. Frieda got a brief look at the man, placing him as a likely escort seen with her second 'American' guardian, a Cheka aunt, a stern but unassuming woman with whom she stayed as an ostensible au pair while completing her undergraduate studies at Caltech. The man had called several times. Often, from her small third floor window, Frieda saw him arrive or leave in a taxi. The woman supported herself by working as a registrar's assistant at Stanford University. Frieda wondered if their's was one of the Cheka's arranged marriages, for she had detected a certain curt visual telegraph system between the two, one sign of long-endured trials that usually ruled out affection or passion.

"I've not seen you here before, I believe." The sudden stray words from the mellifluous Hindu startled her. The man stood in part shadow just outside the club's employee entranceway, a short distance from the transport kiosk. She had planned that night on using a taxi to get her swiftly to a hotel.

At first Frieda did not speak to the well dressed stranger, nor move off. The man partly blocked ready access to the outside sidewalk and she resisted causing further notice by pushing him aside. The man did not look athletic, was in fact small and rather fleshy, and she felt reasonably assured she could thwart an attack if such a one were planned. Yet the more she hesitated the more cautious she became...his face seemed vigilantly watchful she thought, that of a *borzois*, as they were sometimes called, a street slogger about to signal backup. Then, in the same confident voice, he asked if he might squire her home, pointing to a dark limo at the kiosk.

"You knew I would use this exit?" The accusation passed unnoticed.

"I was told you might welcome an escort."

"How nice." Her prompt glibness appeared to delay his response, and whatever gambit he had rehearsed.

His voice then said, with some candour, his smile never wavering, "It is easy to say 'no' — at this stage."

Such words! Glib, mocking. So she imagined. A benign escort of almost any kind would have been a boon at the moment...never had she craved solitude more nor so readily distrusted kindness or thoughtfulness.

So: was it all over then? Tightly bound on the conveyor! Up in smoke! Yet her new resolve prevailed.

"You're right of course; good night." she said at last, then shouldered past him into the side street, anticipating he would follow. Slowly, almost inadvertently he did...yet soon quickened his pace as she

strode on. His presence behind her alarmed and angered. The long dark-windowed limo awaited almost as a Black Maria she thought, its very presence an ominous threat. Promptly she turned and slapped him, a final craven impulse perhaps — but his ready astonishment caught her unawares, for his dismay seemed wholly genuine, intimating a pained disappointment, and for her, at that dicey moment, as no other body materialized, an unheralded windfall, a gift of Providence. Dear god, she might as easily walk off! He gestured plaintively. “I can, at least, offer you a ride home.” She almost burst into laughter. Instead she turned about, smiled and promptly climbed into the limo even before the puzzled driver scrambled to open a rear door for her!

When her votary joined her, rather stiffly she thought, she promptly asked why he had sought her out. He answered when they were underway, his genteel, cadenced English speech an entertaining diversion.

“One of the managers I know personally. I asked him about the new receptionist. He mentioned your name was Anna Able, that you were new, arrived alone, and might welcome a lift home — at this hour.”

Frieda had little difficulty appearing amused. The thought of the manager being a GRU or SVR cutout, using this nebbish, was a fine tease.

Still, she spotted two possible shadows in the street folk: a taxi driver with one watchful passenger; then a motorcyclist with a side car caught her eye. But neither followed the limo. She was in the clear.

“You are a dancer also?”

She laughed. “Of sorts.”

She said no more. He was taken with her he said. He noticed her the moment he entered the club. His parents were British and Indian. He was a naturalized American and worked intermittently for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. He also owned the Padmapani and Tara Textiles Mills, and was a director and principle shareholder of Consec, a computerized robot research company. He lived in a villa modelled after the Kensington palace gardens residence of Lakshmi Mittal. He was not religious but loved the arts and architectural motifs of Vedic, Buddhist and Persian inspiration. He pronounced himself an informed hedonist with allied and pragmatic business instincts. He tentatively, delicately caressed her hand as he traced the outline of his life, ending with an idiomatic poem by Rabindranath Tagore which, he said, many men instinctively knew. He then yielded to a private smile as he fondly recited, “*Have I not seen you in numberless forms, numberless times...In life after life, age after age?*” adding, “poetic words that return, from time to time...often plaintively.” Again his insider’s smile. The irony of her seemingly ‘numberless’ guises summoned a blush of her own. Apprising herself so at that moment finely amused. Still, ‘Anna Able’ would do for now. Only a few people had in fact known her before; hence Anna Able, with new wig and facial makeup, might meld with the elsewhere crowd. Wryly she imagined a providential ‘exfiltration’, Anastasia Karolovna Kniaznin the core being she would one day revive. Soon she wryly contemplated ‘staying the night’ with her timely consort, who appeared to be infatuated with her! Lakshmi Mittal — surely a serviceable ‘bed and breakfast’.

As the new expedient ‘Anna’, she was wanly amused to see her dress front open before the large gilded vestibule mirror. The pale sliver of flesh added a further footnote to her rather tacky wrap and inherent tiredness. In the car his voice had been menthol anointed but forthright, his obvious desire cultist yet deferential, even, in his stilted protocol, amusing — a fine parody of her graceless, furtive,

clandestine existence. He noted her wary exhaustion and did not persist. “Perhaps tomorrow you’ll allow me to show you the gardens.”

Her need for solitude was thus sensed and honoured. For a time she lay numbed but awake in the large, lavishly furnished, well made up guest room, several ornate-framed wall niches illustrated with gambolling deities. She recalled a line from Pushkin: *How beautiful the flower...that yields without duress*. The arabesques on the coffered ceiling stymied ungraciousness. Abler would, could wait...had waited. Her tears had dried when she fell asleep.

In the coming weeks she allowed the infatuation of her opulent Indian to blossom and his lavish attentions anneal psychic and ideological riffs. She imagined herself beginning anew. For herself and trans-mundane Abler! She needed a hiatus she told herself. In due course she conjoined the sensuous ritual of Roald’s form of Nepali courtship — ‘where the Gods are young’. She would leave her Paleomena past and Russian background in limbo. As long as needed...her necessary, hungered-for ‘time-out’.

She married Roald Sambara Licchavi within the month. Her Paleomena stint became a faint glimmer perceived on terraced nights before the gingered, claret-marinated plums arrived, sometimes next a cocaine strip — and the ubiquitous estate body guards fanned out for the night.

Her idiosyncratic content had a durable smugness to it she wryly sensed. A necessary sabbatical. She might even take a liking to being the Tara he imagined her to be. She was luxuriously pleased and commanded a veritable army of graceful concordant servants and advisers — rusticated paranympths she thought of some of the older attendants. Her rare understated beauty had at last achieved licensed institutional status! She presumed herself more or less ‘exempt’ from bullying threats as an influential, rich as Croesus nabob’s wife.

TWENTY-THREE

Felix Muerner looked out upon the ornamental shrub garden from the Chinese drawing room. He liked particularly the lichen-softened stones and mossy stream banks. These alone facilitated miniaturization — of a scene into which the tiny but heroic play figures of his childhood might ‘realistically’ fit in, many of which he had sculpted himself, to enact his personal Pelasgian Creation Myth, which began with the Goddess of All Things, his own timeless Eurynome and her protean serpent Ophion. Most of the garden’s bigger, brightly flowering flora gave the miniature scene away, and most of these he could not name. He knew the azaleas and hostas, but many of the other blossoms he guessed at. Yet all of these paled against the remembered vividness of his storybook realms. A life he’d never abandoned.

How *real* were the memories of those ecstatic moments as a child, when a troupe of small metal (later clay and metal and finally clay alone) daimons coursed the seas and forest landscape of his youth — in small scale-modelled penteconters, bi- and triremes he fashioned himself out of softwood and balsa, old handkerchiefs, thin butcher’s twine and redolent varnish. Had he been urged into the sports lists, debating and chess forums his father advocated, his life might have been quite different. The Nazi era only spurred his ‘flight into a private Arcadia’ — one of the few times he might take seriously some theoretical postulates of Doc Wilde, his clinic’s psychiatric windjammer and reliable tease. Wilde, a

forensic psychiatrist, headed the Bern clinic's smallest department, psychiatry being mainly a speculation game for assertive, obdurate Muerner. All things considered.

"— Scars! What did you say, Eve?" He had lost the thread.

"Well, to be precise, an old cut to the sagittal inguen, and a recent incision over the lower transverse arc of the liver. Some stitches were begun but left off. He nearly fainted at one stage apparently. He's been at it again — our tawny Arnold."

Eve was the clinic's oversight duenna as well as Muerner's timeless life partner in sustaining the emotional sinew they used to deal with improvidence, initially the horrendous Nazi chapter they survived by cunning and mutual support. Eve was an indispensable factotum, in the present case a medical diarist who maintained up-to-date archival notes on the changing physical and emotive aspects of Muerner's multi-gifted protégés. She was a special genius, a perceptive and ageless beauty inclined to understatement. She played the piano well with exquisite hands, the third and fourth fingers of which displayed an amazing dexterity — one of Muerner's many early interests in her. She reported now on the latest of Arnold Storrier's troubling self-inflicted injuries.

"And you say the opening over the liver was not closed when he was admitted to emergency?"

"Yes. It appeared he attempted some kind of histological section — he would not elaborate — except to say the internal pain became greater than anticipated. Prompting him to summon emergency help. He's performed similar operations on himself before, as we know, but not quite as extensive."

"That other cut frankly dumbfounds. A wag might suppose it a means to inconvenience sexuality, its urgency at least. The ensuing pain would daunt most men. Something else must be afoot here, though. Something to do with his newly wistful, elusive self-identity, I suspect. The identity private pain can verify. But what he conceived of actually accomplishing beggars 'cutting edge' wisdom, so to speak. Not a dilettante, our Arnold."

Said Eve, smiling, "A netted shuttlecock,' Antoine Plombiers reputedly said about Arnold's ongoing tryst with romance."

"Ah, the indispensable poofter."

Eve quietly smiled.

"And what does the godly Wilde say?"

The third body in the Chinese drawing room belonged to the studious Doc Wilde who then clutched a string of prayer beads. Muerner found him childish and often reliably wrong in his diagnosis. Time and again by simply turning his assessment on its head (sometimes a bit of a trick given the jargon), and a realistic appraisal might be forthcoming.

"A deep rooted plea. Nothing less. You savage yourself to affirm your reality. I did warn you how lonely it can be. He burned some of his latest atomic energy notes — even a summary of last year's efforts. Some university trustees must be furious; a few military snoops as well, I daresay."

Expecting some kind of retort but hearing none, Wilde winked at Eve then fluently continued.

"The psychalgia neuroleptics I said then, and now; have them, use them; leave the man his soul."

"We did."

"Some."

"Yes."

"Well that sum is not ergo and its dimpled ergo we need. My god, he's a disaster in waiting, the subject for a reassessment seminar at least."

If Wilde was his usual reliable self, Muerner reasoned, then Arnold had interrupted his scientific career, at least in academe, because there were other things he simply urgently wanted to get on with, free of all irksome distractions — possibly even lust! And yet to destroy — burn! — the late fruit of a burgeoning career in engineering physics (muon-catalyzed fusion). It was a radical departure, the irony being that the willful ‘plea’ Wilde invoked — vivified in Arnold’s late resurrection of his love of romantic classical poetics, especially its music — was hardly a plea any more, but a sturdy retrofit resolve! To deploy more such neuroleptics might precipitate a total truncation, not resurrect a ‘balanced’ re-alignment. The supplemental arts input, time-honoured learning Wilde had recommended to widen Arnold’s smarts, was maybe a blunder. Muerner knew a bit about renowned symphonic composers, transcendent poets like Milton and Shakespeare, also scolds like Hobbes and Nietzsche, but little about the likes of Swift, Hardy, Yeats, Eliot or Durrell, though a Hardy novel called *Return to the Native* struck him as prophetic...but was such study enough to convert his polymath into a fervent romantic, a composer of lush poetic musicals...self-inflicted pain a ‘scourge for imagined past collusion perpetrated by an abeyant self?’ Only Wilde would put it so.

“Arnold’s late one act opera is popular — a sellout for a fortnight I read.”

Eve’s placid voice was not reassuring to Muerner. Her comments he always took at face value.

“About the entry near the liver he said nothing?”

“No,” Eve said promptly, “except for his inability to complete whatever he was up to — the unexpected pain, as I’ve said.”

Wilde was a little miffed his remarks were so swiftly skirted.

“Really Felix, one does not rationally perform major surgery on oneself. With as far as I can tell, little or no anesthetic. The man yearns for an empathic audience.”

Swagger impeccable Wilde, thought Muerner. Of course what the psychiatrist didn’t know was Arnold’s sojourn with injury. One legacy of his ordeal in South East Asia. But some pain one could not mitigate and remain efficacious. This Muerner was poignantly aware of. So what was the laconic, spartan, ingrate protégé up to? That stray inguen cut a fine puzzle. A card might well suggest a desperate someone foiling a need for fornication — how to temper the allure of a distracting lady, say.

— And Arnold’s friends of late — a feminist and sodomite, the sodomite promoted to secretary. Wilde, you are a great tease, Muerner wanted to say, while knowing he had underrated the influence of a venerable music and literary input, the soul of equanimity Arnold called it, which seemed to reinforce his solicitude *and* his new concern for the ineluctable effects of implacable scientific transformation, the endgame that tends to overlook clemency — a main theme in his late opera! The imputation being that exemplary physical transformation — Muerner’s universe — slights debate, rendering leniency itself forlorn, if not derelict.

“A master stroke!” Wilde happily suggested about the academy’s durable arts influence.

The sway of overweening sentiment, Wilde old heart.

So. It was time to have a fireside chat.

As if in anticipation of this Eve said with an offhandedness that distracted Muerner, “Overdue, sayeth Arnold.” She added with some deference, “He must assume you would be curious.”

In a rustic eatery in the noisy city, an equally disappointed human, also aware of needling circumstance, was at that moment begging for some kind of renewal into the human group. Not unlike

Arnold Storrier, Louis Peak despaired of most available options. He had paid farewell to Cody once again, as she waved back at him from the disappearing Porsche. An hour later, in a bayside coffeehouse he patronized, a hurrying lad in the street outside was knocked to the sidewalk and his backpack snatched. Another collision in the ongoing traffic of daily life, Louis thought, barely noting a small envelope that slipped from the backpack, unnoticed or ignored by the attacker. The nearby pedestrians cowered in shop doorways; no one attempted to help the victim, at least initially, for the attacker was large, swift and resolute. The coffeehouse manager called the police.

Louis sipped a latte and watched two patrolmen attend the prone victim, make assessments; a third sought witnesses among the onlookers. The victim appeared conscious but disoriented. A trickle of blood braided one ear. Louis felt he had nothing to offer; the assailant had his back to him throughout the assault. “Café entertainment,” someone said inside the coffeehouse, to a few nervous chuckles. An ambulance arrived, the man placed on a stretcher and borne inside.

Louis had returned and was inside his studio when the odd aroma hit him. He’d encountered nothing like it before. Rancid yet somehow sweet. A candied rat he said to himself. But in his study the humour sickened. The room had been ransacked, again turned inside out, his computer plainly disrupted, his Time Machine erased, several of his older DVD’s cut to the centre, some late seeded memory chips gone.

The earlier intruders were not nearly as thorough. He found he was crying. The destruction, so purposefully outrageous, and for what for Godsake! Was he actually *here*, seeing, witnessing all this? The scene beggared imagination! Could the *Tableaux* be so consequential or intimidating that unknown power brokers sought to trash it? Surely not. What artist, however envious, would sanction a ruin comprehensive as this! Something truly rank or alien must be at work here.

Then he recalled the small envelope that slipped from the backpack not twenty minutes before. Several such manila envelopes lay scattered on the studio floor before him now — the very envelopes he sometimes used to deliver printed proofs to anxious clients.

He ran into the street, to the area where the assault took place. It had begun to rain — the first and only downpour that spring. A few stray droplets then a cascade. He could hear the sluice of gutters, smell the stale sweetness. The few recent blood stains on the sidewalk began to smudge, spread. He saw the small envelope, now open, by one storm grate, and a proof of Zita holding a stun gun slipping into the drain below.

As Cody might say — an ‘astral event’ in the arcane cycle of transmutation — the face vanishing into a whirlpool, not unlike the face that had swept by him on that Northern Stanley Park seawall, without a hint of greeting or recognition. Would the face reappear aberrantly a third time, in a baffling guise he might again observe and dumbly wonder at, if he got through the night? And what oh what was so bloody important in the backpack the ruthless attacker sought outside the café? It all seemed but another hopelessly abstruse, crime drama, the suspicion that he had, once more, been witlessly gruesomely mistaken for someone else — ongoing!

Returning South, to a quiet grotto in a manicured surround — Muerner’s Japanese garden — Arnold Storrier met with his exclusive mentor. It was late afternoon, and the star set — Muerner’s preference to sunset — rendered the garden greens mulberry, cochineal and claret brown, a time when daytime pales and many flowers fold their tents. Muerner sought an evening calm for this talk. He

wanted the words to flow. There was no animosity. Arnold was at heart a plaintive idealist and Muerner scientist enough to honour sober diffidence. He simply wanted to glean a few 'whys'. Arnold dismissed his self-inflicted 'surgery' with a spare shrug and dismissive comment: "A lay confirmation." The likelihood of a singular genius being prey to such 'self-doubt' troubled Muerner, prompting him to table his greater immediate concern.

"I have perhaps the greatest difficulty understanding the burning of your late nuclear energy equations — of what — nearly half-a-decade's distillation of peerless deterministic models?" Muerner scattered some fish feed on the pond's surface. Some Mandarin fish darted from the margins, newly vivified by shafts of late sunlight filtering through the Butterfly Maples.

Said Arnold, judiciously. "It was the compactness and relative inexpensive cost of one possible device. What a suicidal misanthrope or terrorist awaiting paradise might readily do...with a feasible, procurable fission bomb the size of a large snowball. It won't be warehoused tomorrow, but it's not that far off. Indeed, an analogous future fusion device may be easier to trigger."

"My word. You are not slightly embarrassed to condescend to fools?"

"I don't want the responsibility. You must have much of the information. One of your new protégés surely will, in due course. Shouldn't take long to catch up."

Such words Muerner wryly smiled at as he ran the fish treat through his hands. "It's a question of viability, confidence. You bring credence to the table, a ready trust. Without abundant, reliable, relatively clean, cheap energy, the coming decades will be unsettled. People anticipate convenience with ever greater primacy and vilify its lack. The current remedies are all ebbing stopgaps."

Calmly Arnold replied, "It's a vindictive era. Wholesale grievance. Expectation has upstaged endowment, circumstance, inciting an explosive blame game. Science being patently differentiative, hierarchical is antipathetic. The growing constituency of virulent extremists I hesitate to enable with handy tools that allow for maximum devastation, even future ones with minimalist pollution. That may sound affected, doleful, antic even, but other things have a more lasting value for me right now."

"The 'other things' being a heady musical adventure. Hum." Impatiently Muerner added, "Yes, well, the important matter is what you retain, most of it I imagine — of the crucial formulae."

Arnold elected then to be silent, which Muerner quietly humoured. The sky was then a graduated purple from the vault to an amber through the trees, a faint aroma of caramelized sugar from the late Katsura leaves, then an Indian red, occasionally wafting toward them. Arnold smiled. The question was he knew, largely rhetorical. The memory Muerner had initially primed for him was, it seemed, immutable. The important figures remained engraved in a well-lit crypt. Burning the notes simply kept out friend and foe alike.

The figures and models Muerner spoke of applied to one simple fact: compact plasma energy — relatively cheap, abundant, simple, miniaturized and, in select variants, menacing — for assorted devices large and small, from power cell grids to omnipotent compact ordnance — the variables were coalescing. Much of Arnold's experimental work at MIT had enucleated many of the remaining inessentials. The results pointed to small, awesome, potent serviceable components which, as he intimated, one might ably work, or fulsomely devastate, with.

But Muerner, who had maneuvered out of more than one technical cul-de-sac, seemed willing to bide his time. He produced two cigars, prepared and lit them, handing one to Arnold. They smoked in silence, the evening lengthening before them. A mellow sweet aroma, perhaps melding with the late

Katsura scent, gave pause to the two bodyguards standing a short distance off. One closed his eyes for a moment. Where else did one find fragrances like that!

Arnold was the first to resume speaking.

“You never did tell me with what you actually began. What I really was, how debilitated, dis-oriented, drug addled — in the beginning.”

“No.”

Both men seemed then resigned to a hiatus though not perhaps mutually. Muerner expended a perfect blossoming smoke ring, which was soon followed by another. Arnold broke the intervening quiet with, “Is the past so inimical for you?”

“No, quite the reverse,” Muerner replied buoyantly. “Mine is highly seductive. Most of it,” he added after a moist cough. “The late Nazi period was unpleasant, as my quaint contra tenor voice reminds me. The one beating. A stale gay inference perhaps. Your South East Asia adventure may have been as bleak. There, decades ago, the U.S. began its game-board politics. The tragedy of the Viet Nam Boat People was slighted, as was the fate of those South Vietnamese soldiers and officers who fought so selflessly for American commanders who had long since surrendered to the political accommodationists back home. Some Vietnamese were resettled of course. But the new political hymnal proscribed plenary force. The generals’ hands were tied. The irony, at the time, was that Ho Chi Minh City, once known as Saigon, would remain the only remotely civilized community in the region. But another variety of resilient durable venture capitalism. An irony we managed to live with — then. The many Middle-East military adventures since, are deemed travesties today. Our day’s love monger culture sanctions the use of force only in support of that precious culture.”

Being a diffident listener, Arnold changed the subject.

“Have you seen the musical?”

“Yes. A deserved success, I think. Tender. Perhaps apologetic.”

“You were surprised?”

Muerner was about to relight his cigar when the end blossomed in a renewed breeze. “Surprised, yes. Indeed, I have rarely witnessed so refined a sense of mischief.” He noted Arnold’s amusement. “Clemency — a pervasive theme in your work — has been commandeered by leftist bigots, and slights stoicism, resignation, realism.” A model smile. “But to sum up” — Muerner did not like the staidness of the interval just before dark, and glanced at the faint crescent quarter moon — “You will embark on a romantic adventure while ever remembering your scientific patrimony, specifically those equations that made even your earlier notes spectacular. You will amaze to a degree I can only guess at, but your old following will stay largely in tact I think. Hence, we await a return. In the meantime, we cultivate a paradigm brother, perhaps two. One for sure. You have my blessing — and trust. Perhaps I will yet fathom the musical-literary legacy of solicitude and seasoned melancholy, how such extravagant poetics can serve to effect a changeling — in your case the mindset of a serene romantic, given over to a largely classical oeuvre, yes? Finely cultivated music that most of today’s anarchic youngsters will never hear — yes?”

If Arnold smarted in silence, he gave nothing away.

“Eve tells me you hunt your past. I tell you this: your calamitous early years nearly expunged your peerless talents. Environment is crucial to development but largely independent of talent. I was lucky to behold the composite abilities in time. Your pretty devoted and courageous nurse was instrumental,

indeed crucial, here. We did indeed look for her, afterward — without success. I fear only that I have been too taken with the trappings of the Renaissance — with its spirit of renewal, the promise of enlightenment. The ineffable ‘Rose’ that purportedly ameliorates life’s ongoing winters. Perhaps I must settle for the mastery attached to the essential learning. Perhaps the favoured embellishments have to go. The fond distractions that abet a heady emotionalism.”

The cigars were finished in a staid silence.

The Paleomena security officer who especially savoured the aroma of Muerner’s special tobacco, noted the smaller of the two men return to the shaded garden house of the villa, the larger, after a momentary pause, to the limo on the driveway below the garden shed. He was amazed such simple acts could be so accomplished, so final.

TWENTY-FOUR

Antoine Plombiers was speaking. He, Arnold and Gloria sat about the operational focus of the Boundary Lily, the second of Arnold’s newly conceived LNG engine assisted Dyna rigged sail ships.

“My dear ‘estuary’ (Antoine’s late epithet for Arnold), the way you’ve been steering Gloria is too, too charming. It’s almost as if Gloria herself welcomed being c,close-hauled. I avoid ‘keel-hauled’ because such vessels as this f,freakish wonder of yours have no historic mystery — parenthetically, no bosomy b,bowsprit to calm the often angry Poseidon, who hasn’t m,mellowed, over time.”

Arnold readily mused, “Gloria’s busy, handily charting a very stormy coast line — mine. With some success and little duress I might add.”

Given Muerner’s silence on the matter, Arnold was determined to seek out his origins, however elusive, convoluted or turbulent (lacking a kindly bowsprit), and he had commissioned Gloria to do the digging for him — the commission she accepted with fine disciplined calm.

Said Gloria, after putting a strand of hair behind an ear, “Early fearless charting *has* revealed the following. One: a sketchy scrappy childhood and early deceased single parent step mother. Two: the ‘retirement’ of two foster care homes, young Arnold being a nether-world brat. Three: a brawl in a remand centre where an unknown promoter muddies the record and recruits a promising stellar street warrior, the prelude to a South East Asian cock fighting circuit where young teenagers ape roosters. The few historic threads, so far. Raw adult entertainment. An engaging toil, though.”

The first speaker was not appeased. “I see n,nothing remotely healthy about toil. It is r,remarkably salubrious to dream. Or w,watch a demonized child throwing up. But there is nothing more p,precarious than toil. One may be observed. Even r,recruited.”

These words were heard by some guests gathering on the slips of the Holiday-Harbour Cabrillo Marina for the celebration of the maiden voyage of the Boundary Lily, Arnold’s late addition to his LNG Duel Engine assisted sailing fleet. The entertainment for the fête was devised by the age’s burgeoning impresario — the epigrammatic Count Antoine Philippe Mirabeau du Cresse-Plombiers — in the shortened calling-card moniker. His latest venture was an innovative music theatre in which select virtuosic musicians were backgrounded by ghostly dancers. For instance, in one early video, the venerable violinist Joseph Silverstein played the poignant lyrical solo that concluded Richard Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben* on his Guarnerius violin against a distant backdrop of sylph-like forms, the lone form of the fiddler lucid against the faintly out-of-focus, slow-mo dancers, who intimated a medieval tapestry, a

haunted ethereal one not unlike Uccello's *The Hunt in the Forest*. Such unabashed and elaborate artifice had become a Plombiers' hallmark.

In another video a Peter Ustinov double, impersonating an esteemed choreographer, took an agile ballerina through a rehearsal in which his critical interventions — cryptically intimated in the fillip of a finger or toe — were converted by the girl into unfailingly elegant moves that became transcendent during the 'awakening' segment of *The Sleeping Beauty* — in a lavish promotional teaser Antoine devised for his initial venture into the world of ballet. The video ironically reminded Gloria that she had once dismissed the vintage Ustinov as a Soviet dupe, given his patronizing documentaries on Russia, one featuring in his mellow voice a 'rare, lone, historic Siberian cadaver with a mouth about to speak!' The many rotting 'unhistoric' Siberian bodies that Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova wrote about, some sheared off by bulldozers trenching a new oil pipeline (many such bods being around at the time of the Ustinov eulogy) were not worth mentioning in the Ustinov scheme of things. The nimble ballerina in Antoine's video became a telling foot note.

However, the program this time on the wharf by the Boundary paced romantic idylls by opening with a spirited *Eight Step Hornpipe!* The *Jig of the Ship*, as Samuel Pepys called it, tin whistles consorting with fiddlers, bagpipes, choristers and soloists — including a soprano student of Marianne Fitch — the dancers, a polished troupe, decked out in late 18th Century sailor costumes, their agile inventions prompting a standing ovation.

Arnold, be it noted, had come to believe the female voice a peerless instrument and without at least one lyric practitioner, exaltation, however momentarily alive with wit and movement, was diminished. Indeed, male voices had become incipiently strident for him. Over time his devotion to the 'pure female instrument' became idiomatic — a special regard Antoine himself soon fondly if not galvanically emulated in his inimitable musical productions. The evening entertainment this time proved to be a delectable success and the interest in Arnold's innovative sail ships finely augmented — as was public interest in Antoine's singular theatrical gambits.

His *divertissements* were then often sought out by an affluent and exclusive clientele, one such entertainment commissioned for performance by Roald Licchavi in his Kensington-Gardens-style villa! Drinks and canapés were served in the main drawing room, the walls of which presented *trompe l'oeil* pastoral scenes of nimble gambolling sprites, while the engraved hardwood floor, patterned in floral arabesques, screened paramours only the vigilant might see. Four elegant Venetian chandeliers added their own playful touches to the gamesome scene. In addition to the ballet-imbued music-theatre Antoine was renowned for, this night's performance would begin with a 'comedy-of-manners' skit. A curved stage surrounded by plush fauteuil seating filled one end of the drawing room, flanked by richly embroidered screens of sylvan beauty.

The skit, entitled *Two for Cheek*, was an abstract of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, set in North America's late ultra-liberal stomping ground, as fastidiously devoted to correct form as any etiquette espoused by Lady Bracknell, the daunting termagant in the Oscar Wilde play. The chief characters were Randal and Jock. Randal fondly laments boyo Jock's social habits and craven patronizing of two singular women named Gloria and Cecily. Jock affects an Austrian accent with stilted German-sounding epithets. The play proceeded thus, most dinner guests complaisantly taking the words at face value — for a time.

RANDAL: Goldilocks, Gloria is a very special lady. She still thinks girls might be openly friendly

with lads, even complacent lads. And before you have your way with her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. Yes, it is a matter of some urgency.

JOCK: (in a faint Austrian accent, while continuing to eat): You think I know a ‘Cecil’ mensch. Dankesdhön.

RANDAL: Cecily.

JOCK: Cecily...?

RANDAL: The last time you shacked up in my noble lair, with a decidedly deciduous companion, you left something behind. (Retrieves a small elegant vest case.)

JOCK: You’ve had it all this time? I paid almost someone for it.

RANDAL: I wish you would. I am a little short.

JOCK: Well not when it’s now here.

RANDAL: Ahh. Anyway, I see from the inscription that it’s not yours after all.

JOCK: Verpiss dich.

RANDAL: Yes, but it isn’t yours. It’s a gift from someone named Cecily, and you know no one by that name.

JOCK: She happens to be the one living tante. Jah.

RANDAL: Aunt? You come from a progressive family.

JOCK: She is a sweet lady. Lives in the Vineyard. Just return it, fotze.

RANDAL: Yes, but why does she call herself the ‘unlicked nymphet Cecily’ if she is your aunty, and lives in the Vineyard? ‘From the unlicked nymphet Cecily, with her fondest love.’

JOCK: So? Some tantes have runny noses, others racy minds.

RANDAL: Yes, but why does this aunty call you her uncle? ‘From the unlicked nymphet Cecily, with fondest love to miserable Uncle Jack, the man who may have everything.’ I don’t object to a runny nose, but why would she call a nephew her uncle. Besides, you’re plainly a Jock not a Jack!

JOCK: Arshfotze.

RANDAL: You look like a Jock. You answer to it often enough. You sound like one. You even (whiffing the air) have that special ‘essence’. In fact, you’re the darndest looking Jock I’ve seen. You’ve been mooning us all along.

JOCK: I’m Jock in the city and Jack in the Vineyard. And the packet was given me in the Vineyard, depp.

RANDAL: Ah well, that readily explains why the unlicked nymphet aunty, who lives in the Vineyard, calls you her dear miserable uncle. Whenever you’re ready. (He gestures to the guests, a few of whom softly applaud.)

JOCK: You are a dullpen opera. Schweinepriester.

RANDAL: Excellent. Slow and stately. The whole thing. I’ve long suspected you of being a cheeky Twofer and my instincts are as you know infallible.

JOCK: First the antacid. (Some piecemeal laughter.)

RANDAL: Now please be good. (Hands over a packet.)

JOCK: It is, jah, very simple, duncauf.

RANDAL: My poor boy, the simple things in life are income tax forms and Marxist philosophers — we shred both eventually. (Blows a mock kiss.)

JOCK: The old wicher who adopted me left a will. (Resigned sigh from Antoine.) He left a small

sum with the proviso that I knock up his zickig tante — she was younger then. She calls me ‘onkel’. Only a relative would think of such a thing, she said.

RANDAL: Oh dear.

JOCK: She is very bright, a great looker, and almost nearly untouched. Jah.

RANDAL: And where is this marginal untouchable?

JOCK: Nicht in the Vineyard.

RANDAL: Oh I believe that. I’ve Twofered all over the Vineyard. But you still haven’t said why you’re Jock here and Jack there.

JOCK (obdurately): The parental shtick.

RANDAL: Polishing the old apple?

JOCK: Jah. The Dutch Uncle role — scolding turpitude, sleaze.

RANDAL: I’m sure, schwanzlutscher.

JOCK: When you handle the protégé...

RANDAL: Oh I know. The anticipation.

JOCK: When you take on the parental duty, you adopt a low moral tone. Kinder tend to listen to you then.

RANDAL: Isn’t it so.

JOCK: Take work.

RANDAL: That is a dare I presume.

JOCK: No, just a proposition. (To the audience) Er ist dummer als die Polizei er laubt.

RANDAL: Ahh.

JOCK: Anyone can work his ass off — even the jerk. So the guy who does is maybe a bit short upstairs.

RANDAL: How de rigueur.

JOCK: What observant mensch can take the risk? Think of the confusions. It’s the lie of the land. Vom Schicksal bestimmt! The comparison with the jerk is the ‘tit in the wringer’.

RANDAL: Ah, so you say.

JOCK: So, to bed the perceptive, independent, unabhängig Cecily, I decided to become this dedicated yuppie, decorated Iraq vet, great looker, talented but also loaded — the entire sickie schmeer. He gets the shit beat out of him for purely theoretical reasons. Then he discovers the guilt excursion. He can’t get enough weeping and hugging. It’s the guilt and regret that, well — parts the cymbals, jah. That’s the truth, filthy und tortuous, arschgeige.

RANDAL: Truth is beauty you gargantuan stud, hence the popularity of deformity and hideousness.

JOCK: Verpiss dich!

RANDAL: My divine pisshead, dry acrobatics is not your forte. Besides, the currently excusable preoccupation of society is navels and buns — and what can possibly be more enduring.

JOCK: I rather like legs. And tits. Especially tits. Die weiblichen Brüste.

RANDAL: Yes, but tits can be misogynous.

JOCK: Misogynous?

RANDAL: Yes, to ogle mainly ‘titties’ trivializes the ‘fairest of creation! The last and best of all god’s works’ — to cite an early grubstaker. Only navels and buns are hunky dory. Everyone owns

three. Here the voyeurs may gloat in relative peace, at least for now.. And you, my dear precious Jock, are a masterpiece.

JOCK: But ogling, fondling titties primes video streaming, spawns wunderbar climaxes. Jawohl. Das seltenhiet of great orgasmus!

RANDAL (newly reflective): As la fem sits astride her pedestal...greasing the pole...hum.

Rises from a few damsels in the audience, general laughter. Someone wanted additional advice about greasing the pole.

Roald Licchavi was pleased with the evening's entertainment — thus far. Anna too, he noted, was amused by the droll affected words — a hopeful sign.

Since the birth of their son the marriage had unexpectedly altered. The amiability Anna displayed at the outset of their marriage, a near tease of his own meticulous carnality, was slowly replaced by an introspection that had at first foiled then blighted their union. He had for a time even rid himself of a choice mistress whom his wife seemed to make allowances for. But Anna was unmoved; he could do as he wished. An apathy that perplexed Roald.

A specialist informed him about the classic forms of postpartum depression, but very little in Anna's behaviour corresponded to the doctor's criteria. She delighted in the antics and care of the child, Roald Jr., and still assisted the mise-en-scène of the elaborate pleasures Roald pursued; but the participant in her had gone — most nights he seemed to entertain solely himself, his wife the front row of a forbearing audience.

At first he saw in her state the resurrection of a Western prudery which, when he reflected, may have been there all along. Had she not behaved as one impetuously moulting a past, and once the shedding was more or less complete, found herself shocked by the sensitive tegument underneath? Such were the notions filling his mind just before he selected one of Antoine's entertainments to lighten the disenchantment, even perhaps revive the esprit of his wife-mistress, whom he did not want to abandon, at least not yet.

With some resolve he'd begun a secret investigation into his wife's past, which had many gaps he'd overlooked for a time. She was glibly disparaging of her life before they met and, of late, strangely active outside his estate. He'd been given to assume she once lived the usual deflected, beset life of an orphan and humbly placed foster child, ending largely unequipped to cope with a workplace that demanded specialized training. His fondness for her had numbed any initial skepticism. Like most lucky insular voluptuaries, he deemed enchantment and delectation anecdotes to vulgar mundane routine, which often ended in drudgery and/or discord — as in hidebound societies, ones that would slight if not disparage hedonism, even conjure the very notion of prurience. It had ever struck him as scurrilous, even cockamamie — he was, after all, a patron of delectable halcyon mental states, which enshrined eroticism. As a fortuitous entrepreneur he might pursue a delectable life as an avocation! But now felicity itself, as countenanced in his observant yet often apathetic wife, seemed periodic, notional. Indeed, it was chiefly Anna who lately imposed considerations of leniency and sacrifice upon him, a novel state he was slow to apprehend, as if avidity, carnality, might be jaded, overrated — depraved even! — and thus condescended to. The sources of his late anxiety were many and sometimes intimidating.

He had come in due course to doubt her prior reclusion and artlessness. Stolidly working at a casino seemed then inapt, spurious even. She knew and had done far more than she let on. Her

curiosity about many of his investments and exclusive artifacts was sometimes shrewd. A social political acumen made light of much American myth and bluster and some of his own ethnic-familial conventions. She could be particularly blazé when the cocaine or another palliative worked its humour. Home grown Americans rarely savoured caviar. Her very methods of hygiene insinuated complexity. Depilation she assented to with wily amusement, to accommodate his sculptural form of lovemaking. Her otherwise gracile musculature was surprisingly well toned, including what seemed like a prehensile perineum. Nor would he soon forget the efficiency with which she curtly arrested his initial attempt to take her arm outside the casino — a ‘tetchy’ memory that lingered.

Less apparent, but as plausible, was her anticipation of his curiosity about her habits and past, and the likelihood of an assessment being underway. All feints — hers, his, and finally hers — offered clues to her watchfulness — when around him. He had made enemies, both physical and spiritual and, like some Asians, the hidden or expedient could be keenly double-edged. He execrated deception and acted piteously when evidence of duplicity or disingenuousness was uncovered in the actions of a servant or retainer. For him it was the touching of pitch. The irony was that Anna had never been more desirable in light of his misgivings. The pregnancy left her with a melded relaxed form closer to his ideal of obedient wife, less disturbingly suggestive of the expensive, slinky wanton, whom he might purchase for more wayward trysts, but purchase only. Essentially a man who wished for one consort, and that consort beautiful in a sovereign temple way, Anna then epitomized his yearning. Thus his disappointment might be the more implacable, and he suspected she perceived this. It contributed to her lenient insular sufferance — words that came to him late at night. Thus the sight of the distant, Nirvanic wife, so newly delivered of his son, smiling knowingly at Antoine’s clever societal wit, both encouraged and cautioned Roald Licchavi, as he heeded his newly laden life.

Among that evening’s theatre guests, a patronizing observer, one of Antoine’s pals, drolly declared himself.

“I daresay reproof today is a female preserve. The non-complaisant male is ever the target — the slings and arrows a veritable modern blitzkrieg against ‘undeserved male fortune’. Particularly ‘white Western male fortune’. Many of us end up, well, hibernating, before the vigilante Gynocrats. A flinty asceticism may be the lone option for all unrepentant straight males.”

“Ah, such timely winsome optimism,” said one rather tipsy listener to terse laughter.

Then Anna spoke, her voice and question, for Roald, surprisingly nimble and sure-footed.

“And how do you regard the new ‘Gynocrats’, Monsieur Plombiers?”

Antoine immediately sensed the beguiling tension and answered with a stagy roll of his eyes, and a nearly stutter free diction.

“Many women become memorials. The Bible w,ould be impossible otherwise. Even in laden cast systems women often become the fated arbiters. Judith we remember, Holofernes is all but forg,otten.”

The largely amused murmuring that followed these precious words seemed mesmeric — given their origin. The following comments were soon too overlapping and dense for any further lucid eavesdropping — as Roald became aware when he listened later to a tape of the after performance chatter. Only the words of two guests belatedly stood out, one the wife of a congressman who might one day be useful, the other a friend of bumptious Paleomena senior vice-president, Arthur Pechenpough, a panjandrum not yet to be slighted, though the man seemed to be losing his footing in

the corporate hierarchy. The congressman's wife was the instigator of the apprehensible exchange, which centred on Anna.

"I'm told she almost didn't come. I can well imagine some poor seamstress staying up half the night to let out that frock. Beading like that you just don't spread around. She wears it like Edwardian Lily Langtree wore that first silk blue-black dress she became identified with. 'Compensatory forbearance' Hedda says." A self-congratulatory laugh. "The cut is remarkable, of course. One might never know she must be at least ten pounds heavier."

"I think they both suit her — the dress and the new comeliness."

"Dear Berni, you needn't be indulgent. They say she has turned into a perfect shrew and poor Roald fears for his pretty dildoes."

"Ethel, that is atrocious."

"You think so?"

"Berni, you must get some contact lenses."

"Hardly that."

Roald was amused by the offhand comment about objects that were part of a prized exhibit in one of the most treasured museums of erotic memorabilia in the world — his own private collection! Invidious Americans! To think such footling and gaudy objects might still be serviceable distractions in that efficient day, was but one more rapt delusion of the stolid mind. Most objects in his museum served merely to call attention to man's boorish hedonism. 'Gullible,' he called it. Occasionally he had placed some period pieces on loan. The New York producers of a recently revived Elizabethan comedy had enthusiastically sought four of the satin-brocade dildos for their costume designer. One went missing and the company had a lawsuit to contend with. Roald was thus cautioned by the object's discovery and return. The eminent corporate gentleman alerting him to its presence, in one of the guest bedrooms, came as a shock that initially summoned disbelief. Later, while reflecting on the object's recovery, in good condition, he acknowledged a promising introduction: the recovery had allowed for an unscripted meeting with the powerful, enigmatic Angus Dowd.

The festive evening had not flouted its promise.

Angus Dowd, of course, distrusted, even reviled the gaucherie of most gamesome festive occasions. "Vivacious witlings" — one of his more laudatory descriptions of chirpy café society patrons — were always trouble. The centre of gravity ever shifted and aligned persons often lost their bearings. But Antoine's entertainments — to which Angus had once stooped to fabricate his own invitation — were another matter entirely. He recognized an exemplary aesthete and fellow sojourner, and became a financial backer of the eclectic's entertainments. He had avoided a public meeting because of Antoine's prominence in the gay community. As we've noted, Angus Dowd coveted privacy. Thus, he had, to date, observed this night's host, the enigmatic Roald Licchavi, only at a distance. But on seeing his remarkably lovely wife, Anna, Dowd barely quelled his suspicion he'd seen her before. That curiosity added to the night's allure and wonder.

The Licchavi fête, being promising as any, Dowd, now a premier Plombiers' benefactor, attended many of the auteur's entertainments, and readily took a forward seat before the versatile stage in the Licchavi drawing room. A short comic ballet followed the witty skit, the dancers at first sedately moving to Mozart's *Missa Brevis* in F, sung by a small chorus, the Kyrie morphing into spritely

Neopolitan dance numbers — one dancer being the remarkable if enigmatic Russian girl who'd undergone facial plastic surgery at the Bern clinic. The incomparable Zita now performed in select venues here, and prominently figured in the 'arresting *Zita Tableaux*', as it became known in sci-fi collector circles. 'The Inimitable Zita' headlined one *Tableaux* poster. It was all working out rather nicely, Dowd thought. Muerner had signed the two final cheques to Zita's surgeons, Pechenpaugh being no longer the custodian of their chameleon fund.

The current dancers were applauded heartily at the end of the risible ballet. The performance over, the large drawing room was being cleared for a masquerade or, the invitation said, Un Bal Costume, what Dowd would call an Anti-masque. Just before seeking a washroom, he heard an assured young voice describe the ballet as "*une pièce bien faite*" — the words of a cocky lad dressed then as a Hussar. Had the lad been less patronizing, Dowd might have shown some interest. As it was, he left before the galleried hallway off the drawing room filled with costumed folk.

The washroom he sought adjoined a dressing room, a cotton-shirred chamber with a crystal chandelier and large armoire, where a second inconspicuous door by the armoire led — to where? Dowd found the Licchavi villa splendidly evocative, its many chambers full of rapt storybook intimations, and he yearned to see more. He tried the door and was delighted to find it readily open. A key protruded on the other side.

He closed the door and stood in a spacious bedroom lit by a large ornate candelabra on an Italian credenza. Medieval court tapestries beautifully enhanced the wide bed's lush quilt and canopy, lined in gold appliqué, a rich Bayeau arras of a chimera on the wall behind. On the expansive bed, laid out in sleep, two pretty spent bodies intimated a naughty postcard. The one form invoked a nude El Greco odalisque, had El Greco rendered such a creature, for the limbs were elongated and in the marginal light ethereal for Dowd. The second body curled up at the foot of the bed faintly snoring, parts of a livery clasped to his breast. Portions of an ornate costume backed a fauteuil. Dowd had difficulty imagining the scene coincidental to its luxuriant setting — particularly its erotic aspect, given the reputation of their host. A few youngsters attended the fête, but these two gamins he'd not seen.

Initially he imagined the slumberers — both drug inebriates he guessed — male and female. Their breathing unexceptional. Then he wasn't sure about the sex of the one figure. The El Greco creature, slender and pale, he had subscribed to the gentler sex, but nearer was struck by a mere camber to the breasts, though their near perfect round symmetry and prodigal nipples added his doubt about the creature's sex. An upright hip with spruce cheeks remained vertical against shoulders flattened, smoothed to the bed, a hand beneath the head, the under arm eggshell smooth, the face burnished in a bronze-gold makeup, the hair swathed in a yolk-yellow turban. Strands of carnelian body mail lay in the clutches of the youth curled at the foot of the bed. On moving closer to the side prone El Greco figure, he noted anew its beguiling beauty. The pelvis, so turned against the graven ribs, formed an alcove of timeless mystery.

The particular poignancy Dowd felt at that moment was weakened by the discovery, as he stole to the other side of the bed, of a loin decoration, a vivid richly seamed dildo, which masked the genitalia. He felt gulled, cajoled, and was about to leave via the washroom when sounds of a door lock being thrown, which he could not place, caused him to slip behind a shaded dressing screen just inside the bedroom. He reached the screen when a seamless door in the opposite wall opened to disclose two costumed youngsters, the Hussar and an English curate. The Hussar, the lad Dowd noted earlier,

brandished a small camera. Dowd was too embarrassed, if also intrigued to leave, and remained behind the screen, observing through its narrow interstices. The dominant Hussar took in the bed with a commanding sweep of his eyes, waltzed by the screen, fetched a jar from a nearby wall cabinet, returned, paused to lock the washroom door that opened into that bedroom, saying, as he did so, “He left the fucking door open — our fucking bed-y-bye sentry. Sacredie!” He then whacked the knee of the lad curled at the end of the bed, who, in consequence, slowly unwound, coyly smiled, and ambled out of the room through the further seamless doorway. “*Lock* that one you asshole!” the Hussar curtly commanded.

After shaking his head, the Hussar took off the coat of his ornate Hussar’s costume, then his trousers. He wore no underpants. His companion looked on with preoccupied satisfaction. The half-naked Hussar gestured toward the bed with a courtier’s flourish.

“Behold the precious *charmeuse*! *Une belle tournure*! Moxie Midge says the Liquid Ecstasy she concocts wears off in an hour or two. So — tempus fugit, Samuelson!”

The Hussar then suavely approached the bed and took several frames.

“Now to business, Samuelson. You do the honours.”

The fey Samuelson knelt and applied a condom, then some lubricant from the jar the Hussar handed him, to the then very large and somewhat curved Hussar.

“The tidy twat dildo can stay in place. We’ve a little brown business to attend to here.”

By then Dowd imagined himself a furtive Polonius spying evidence of wrongdoing that keened his dismay, while the wantonness left him too stupefied, if not fearful, to leave.

The *charmeuse* — Dowd was further irked by the glib identification — the Hussar then rolled onto her front and lifted her pelvis above bent knees. “Please note the knee-chest, genupectoral position, which you covet in your most vivid wet dreams.” Samuelson required detailed instructions to lubricate the anus, the abusive imparting of which the lad obsequiously accepted. After a second application, the Hussar doffed his hat and proceeded to don an Alfred E. Newman head mask and instruct Samuelson in a demonstration of ‘beam hefting buggery’, with biographical asides, which the vigilant Samuelson proceeded to photo-document.

“A decade ago the *charmeuse* was a sullen uppity *charmeur* — actually a bit of both,” the Hussar declared, his new grinning mask capping the current atrocity. “A surgeon I’m told resolved the dilemma, as we shall shortly partake of.”

A palsied Dowd, ever fearful of intent beastie boys, who’d injured him before, listened less to the words than their supercilious tone, learning that the earlier *charmeur* had too often humiliated the lordly Hussar in nimble verbal sparring, and reprisal was sought, the Newman cartoon being a ‘cuntboy’s’ apt partner according to the depraved Hussar. By then Dowd was in the grip of a perverse fascination. The ‘performance’ left him guilt laden, restless to leave, but for a stray arousal that teased him throughout, the ‘girl’ being endowed with a gracile loveliness he’d rarely seen!

He stayed his own fervour by considering how the vengeful recreants must be confronted, reprimanded. Several scenarios teemed in his mind. To storm out now made his own position ambiguous, and from past frays he knew he could be easily overpowered, possibly injured, while the delinquents fled before he could rally support. Dowd saw none of the recreants contrite nor owning up to any wrongdoing, adolescent haughtiness being what it was...his own cowardly prevarication an intensifying rebuke.

The Hussar then moved to the nearer edge of the bed, his sleek bundle in tow. The slight change imposed on Dowd a distinct sense of déjà vu as the girl's lithesome back hove to. The elegant cervical vertebrae and wide low scapulae had he not observed many times in his office as Daphne knelt to retrieve or return folders from lower wall cabinets? He was further stung to see a faint tan outline that seemed to match in oval contour a low-backed dress she'd worn that week! He began to quiver in a novel way he found himself unable to control. He lapsed into a dumb irresolution which twinges of a scurrilous sexuality made harrowing, as did some traces of blood on the Hussar's condom when he withdrew, only to promptly turn the figure over, remove the dildo and finger the sex, excursively applauding a surgeon's handiwork as he did so. "Looks like the doc added a neat purse...three, four rod fingers at least. Pretty realistic vulva too. Even a yummy little clit! Did he convert a tiny penis I wonder, or just tidy up some ambiguities? A fine queenly job in any case, Samuelson. Do take special note."

It would be a long time before Dowd rid himself of his craven witness to this hideous assault, or the louche Samuelson fingering the vagina, then fondling the swell of breasts and jutting nipples, or the sight of the motley dildo abusively re-strapped to the hips by the Hussar when Samuelson desisted.

When the the departing ghouls vanished through the seamless door to which the Hussar had a key, Dowd stole to the bed, decided against straightening the legs or drawing remnants of the gold costume over the new-mown form, though he did remove the dildo from the girl's seemly flossed sex. Looking a second time upon the burnished face he ruefully decided the creature was indeed Daphne Charles. Directly he sought out Roald Licchavi to whom he explained *minimally* his incidental exploring, the discovery of a vintage sex toy near an unconscious, possibly drugged girl, some inauspicious blood, and the hasty departure of two costumed lads from the bedroom she lay in. He suggested Roald summon a trusted medic, for he suspected, given the telltale blood, that the girl may have been assaulted. Roald Licchavi would later smile and decide that the questing Angus Dowd was the man to cultivate at Paleomena, not the bumptious Pechenpaugh.

A prudent trusted doctor attended the then sullen pensive girl — the doctor citing the host's concern after a guest's chance discovery of her. Staidly she told the doctor of the pretty gilded invitation to the Licchavi masked ball she'd received in the mail from a former waggish school mate. She'd been offered a costume on arrival at the villa, consumed some wine, and apparently passed out shortly after. She accepted the doctor's concern about some inauspicious blood, and the possibility she'd been drugged and assaulted. She consented to a hospital emergency visit. An ambulance arrived minutes later.

A day later the doctor informed Roald that the girl, one Daphne Charles, had been brutally sodomized. The next day a perturbed Roald invited Dowd for a further discussion of the event. They met in the villa's study. There, the Hussar was soon identified from the guest list, his father a petroleum engineer Paleomena retained as a consultant. Further inquiry revealed the identity of the Prelate (the third lad would be named later), also the elaborate masquerade ball invitation someone had sent to Daphne Charles, found on the credenza, a telling revelation Dowd left to Roald's inquiry — which would disclose, in due course, that one of Roald's own stewards pinched the eminent invitation and the dildo, for a 'friend', who turned out to be the Hussar! Fortunately none of the above facts disclosed Dowd's own dereliction. How to interrupt the delivery of the photos was his paramount concern then. The physician had been quietly, discreetly attentive...the host resolved as was Dowd to identify the

alleged perpetrators...even as a newly plaintive Dowd discovered he felt for the fated girl a tenderness mixed with a desire that had eluded him since his early teens — a desire, he primly decided, must be exorcised in his own austere and circumspect way. His craven cowardly inability to have acted when he should must also be fulsomely castigated. Only a cynic might doubt his resolve.

Two of the fathers were promptly informed of the boys' possible jeopardy, as Roald insisted on, none of whom withstood the threat of a public prosecution: one of Roald's lawyers showed them the draft of an indictment based on the statement from a rueful chance witness who wished to remain anonymous unless subpoenaed. A gamble but one Dowd suavely undertook. Discretionary Roald, of course, wished the matter settled in camera. Two of the fathers did give handsomely to the SARA foundation that year — Dowd's suggestion to mindful Roald — deeds that left the accusation in escrow. A distressed Daphne also shied away from media attention. She would confront her former school 'friend', the one who presumably sent the invitation, in due course. As for the Hussar, Prelate and their serviceable accomplice, the following punishment was privately exacted a week later. The fated comeuppance intimated a pending gang reprisal.

The boys were apprehended outside a noisy pub by a team of Roald's well-paid underworld bravos all wearing hoods. The boys were blindfolded, taken to a shabby warehouse, whipped upon trestles, their backsides covered with leather pads, then given Rohypnol injections and left in a busy district of Los Angeles where they were booked for vagrancy. The Hussar's Corvette was later found with a broken windscreen astride a street sidewalk. None of the lads could remember their attackers, in part because they'd been heavily drinking, and claimed they must have been mistaken for someone else. An inference no one then disputed! The Hussar's reputation for rash adventure didn't help: he'd already been accused of common assault, a hate crime (painting swastikas on a mosque), and embezzlement, but never convicted; the family lawyers were 'till then ever on form.

Thus Dowd accomplished the first half of his particular purgative bargain with himself. As we've observed, the meticulous gnome looked upon deviance as an earned consolation, provided decorum, style and the civilities were not crudely or inanely mocked. The Hussar and his ignoble side-kicks had violated all the rules and suffered the consequences. Dowd reserved for himself and his sin of prudent but ignominious default, the sentence of pursuing but not finally possessing what a new unsettling but telling desire revealed — a rarified lust he thought himself truly incapable of harbouring. He would use all the potty charm he possessed to win Daphne over to what Stendhal would call a sympathetic seduction — what a canny pietist might reasonably anticipate — then inconspicuously stand aside, perhaps by seeing her adventitiously introduced to several handsome, solicitous, highly intelligent consorts. That prospect, a challenging assignment to say the least, was about what the debased Pharisee in him must honour. His fastidiousness prescribed it.

Yet he would have been the first to note the finer dependencies — such as the profane sometimes being a fastidious reverence, or the sacred an innocent parody. Had, for instance, the limp faun the Hussar kicked from the bed, not locked as he left the trick doorway to the sumptuous guest bedroom, where the sordid derisive drug-aided assault took place, Arnold Storrier might have blundered into the room and quickly put an end to the piquant barbarity.

But that door Arnold found locked, then ventured down an adjoining corridor in search of a study where a coy friend of Antoine's had 'misaid' his guitar. The friend was then being coaxed to perform

in a quiet salon off the drawing room with the usual lame excuse. Both Arnold and his friend, along with Gloria Leibowitz, had been invited to the fête at Antoine's behest. On his way, Arnold passed a lone pensive woman seated on the lower step of a circular staircase that led to an upper loggia. At first he did not wish to intrude — the woman's look appeared private and unwelcoming. Yet he wanted the instrument, offered an apology and pressed quietly by, detecting a slight shudder in the form as he passed, a reaction he sought to disown by explaining his search. In response the woman, whom he then recognized as the ineffably lovely Madame Licchavi, who had put the fond telling question to Antoine when the skit ended, pointed out a second door further down the corridor, lightly smiled, and urged him on his way.

When the classic guitar was at last giving forth elegant motifs of Granados' Goyescas, and the salon's audience suitably rapt, Arnold again sought out the staircase with its shadowed occupant. He had above all been charmed by the voice, a pure musical timbre, which the women's apparent unease hadn't thwarted. Such vocal purity — a clear mellow unaffected voice — was ever an exemplar in his late estimation, the purest of choir voices, as often as not female, and often a lead vocalist in his rhapsodic music. The more he considered the few words the woman spoke, the more he willed to thank her and possibly hear more, while telling her of the guitarist's appreciative audience. Her voice's mezzo-soprano pitch, that of a mid-register viola, he'd recently keenly listened to — a fine 'dark' soprano whose speaking voice intimated buoyancy and ready wit. He was further daunted by his inability to better place the voice geographically. This lack vexed, invoking as it did another of his late preoccupations, matching a voice to a likely domicile, his own being so tenuous then. There was, of course, a further lure. The fact the woman was a singular if understated beauty rather teased any special notice of the notable voice — a vision he also wanted reaffirmed!

The staircase was empty when he returned, though two small puzzling mementos regaled his quest. A small gem-beaded corsage lay solo on the creamy tile floor some distance from the staircase. A fragment of what appeared to be a frayed swatch of pale blue chiffon — a portion of a dress's cap sleeve he thought, laced with crystals of pink, purple and pearl — lay by the lower step to the staircase that led to the upper loggia. A faint but quite wonderful perfume issued from the material. He then recalled a dress material Antoine had earlier extolled — something pointillistic, intimating ocean coral. Antoine had been speaking of the dress Roald's fair wife wore, an 'undine' he called her, and Gloria, ever attuned to Antoine's assessment of rich epicures, reluctantly agreed that Roald had indeed been blessed. "More than he deserves," she had added while regrouping. Roald after all provoked some feminist derision with his lavish patronage of beauty pageants where women were the indulged prizes some gals find irresistible, and his firm's ancillary making of singular sex bots that had a devoted following — details Gloria had derisively cited earlier in the evening, words Arnold recalled as he lingered by the step where the immaculate *she* had sat, in a solitude that now seemed unpleasantly circumstantial. A wily dark curiosity had been summoned.

Gloria noted Arnold's preoccupation when he returned, taking up a side seat in the salon, and considered the likelihoods. She'd earlier glimpsed him genially speaking to Roald and his heedful elegant wife who stood nearby. Men as ready infatuates remained her principal presumption, though something about the lady in question, perhaps her composure, and the canny question she placed to debonair Antoine, intimated a rare, agreeable, nimble-witted nature.

Gloria had at the outset of her employ imagined Arnold a bit of a rake, but as her journal grew

she discovered very little to report on that front, not that she felt it a crucial part of the story, but its absence pointed to a lack. The fact was he had no girlfriend — or boyfriend for that matter — or he practiced a stealth she saw no evidence of. There were rumours — mainly from Muerner's coterie — of psychic scars left by the murky Asian adventure, but Arnold rarely mentioned that experience and Gloria, though ever curious, respected what she called 'bone matters'. She had discovered a proximal renaissance man, a likely singular universal genius — not a cyborg — possessed of a belated, guarded romantic streak, who, once resolved, often displayed a misleading nonchalance as he quietly steadfastly proceeded. His stellar work in the field of thermodynamics appeared to have been temporarily suspended, at least in the short term, though he continued to review some journals' research abstracts. Nor was he the idiot savant the press initially briefly toyed with — a moniker she dismissed early on. But just what unusual psychic engine drove him she sometimes believed only an astrologer might guess. He continued tirelessly to see his fleet of engine assisted Dyna-rigged sail ships into production and, despite the many proposals from respected agents, gave mainly benefit concerts, the most recent a Pasadena solo piano performance that won plaudits from a leading critic for the synthesis of architecture and lyric splendour — prompting one critic to pronounce the music 'serenely compelling, the sight of the performer putting it together irenic, the actual finger displacement inconspicuous to the vast but seamless tonality produced.' Thus far, Arnold's piano, and his two one-act operas, earned him the status of an 'idiomatic romantic virtuoso — a bar sinister in the escutcheon of Richard Strauss.' Another comment Arnold duly assigned to memory. He continued to play master-class chess, blackjack, 'blind pig' poker, and gave sold-out lectures to canny mongers of chance in Las Vegas — a small outlet for his idled mathematical and statistical genius. As a coming American phenomenon, rumours attached to him like barnacles. His flight from academe remained the only anomaly — one he brooked without comment.

The burning of his late notes and experimental data at MIT remained the single dismaying biographical datum. It earned him the undying ingratitude of the scientific community. His breach of a research contract was destined for a high court, a litigation he was ticklishly fated to lose. It was here Gloria felt genuine alarm because the defendant seemed at times indifferent. Chief Council Allan Dershowitz sombrelly shook his head. The consequences of a loss were vivid to all but Arnold, apparently. He could become a research community pariah and likely fined for stymying a crucial university research program. Two exculpatory letters from Arnold's early mentor and physician, Felix Muerner, produced no apparent amelioration or respite. Arnold's lingering obsessive preoccupation then was his past, specifically his parentage and childhood, which so far eluded verification, and his early twenties, following Jillian's disappearance in Cambodia, which were given over to Muerner's timely, adroit, if not eerie intervention, which he barely fathomed at the time, a lacuna that haunted him now. Muerner said he had taken in a foundling — making his influence, given his foundling's subsequent prodigious feats, daunting for those who'd kept track. It was here Gloria provided some solace for she was a practiced historiographer, having traced her own motley ('indiscriminate' she said) lineage back to the expulsion of the Huguenots. Her Jewishness was actually the result of a singular distant grandparent who married a shtetl beauty, adopted her religion and even changed his name! Before that her genes had dispersed through Catholic-Protestant slugfests in the tessellated lands of Central Europe.

Arnold, however, had only the barest record (his adoptive welfare mother dying of cancer when he

was nine), one early conspicuous document being admission papers to a reformatory when he was twelve, the consequence of ‘contributing to the retirement of two foster homes’. His fighting and eventual fluent kickboxing skill derived from a street brawling prowess that impressed a venal underworld. That past life was uniformly depressing until he was adventitiously discovered in the clandestine Asian ‘real combat’ circuits by an associate of Felix Muerner. Thereafter the menacing machine was discovered to be a computational savant, though he exhibited few of the notable idiosyncrasies of many savants, his mathematical talent first noted in identifying most prime numbers. Muerner turned him around, he said; indeed Arnold’s numerical talent shoe-horned him into the esoteric physics he became famous for, the later particle formulations becoming the minefield he one day summarily shunned. He had acquired a nagging distrust of ‘applied (invariably commercialized) science’, and a private (if seemingly hopeless) wish to begin anew — confidences thus far shared with Gloria. His apparently acute anxiety over origin and prescribed vocation gave his biographer both an urgency to her inquiry and many glimpses of the man beyond his shell, where the fragility was sometimes disarming, despite the showy equanimity, a discovery that reinforced Gloria’s briny thesis that the female better adapted to neglect and loneliness without resorting to manic depression or physical mayhem.

Thus the sight of the solo laconic Arnold Storrier logging interest in a singularly elegant but married woman — Gloria’s premonition — whose disposition, interests and intelligence he might only guess at, one of several equally fetching women hitherto impassively overlooked, opened for Gloria familiar hazardous territory. Only the remarkable Marianne Fitch had Arnold openly paid court to, and that devotion seemed entirely a theatric-musical liaison. Dame Fitch appeared happily married, and Arnold and her husband jointly planned many operational details of their recitals. It was rumoured Arnold’s new, mystical opera, *The Pneuma*, then in rehearsal, was in part undertaken to give the crippled Marianne a new stage signature. Gloria believed the ‘lyric marriage’ a happy affirmation, for Arnold had been, as he put it, ‘hoarding lyrical themes and symbiotic orchestrations for months.’ If Gloria sometimes played surreal matchmaker, she would give someone like Marianne pre-eminence, but now wasn’t sure. Moreover, tarred as he was with the indictment sought by MIT, Arnold was in no position to complicate the life of the influential, hypersensitive, private, reputedly grudgeful and vengeful Roald Licchavi, an entrepreneur engaged in tele-mechanical research and production, including that undertaken by some MIT graduates. Gloria had intimations of a feral animosity that ended not in a court of law but a duelling ground.

Thus had she been alerted to see Arnold return to the ranks of the music lovers in the salon looking more self-absorbed than usual. She particularly desired an early end to that evening’s festivities because her own escort, a visiting classics professor, had so far displayed a practitioner’s knowledge of French cuisine and the wines that enhanced it, a rarified sense of humour, the tact of an attentive listener, plus an espoused interest in sailing which she hoped, sooner than later, to facilitate. If he was nearly five feet tall...well, she would leave off her stiletto heels, which she sometimes resorted to when the chosen chap was six feet or more.

As Antoine’s group filed into the stretch limo, once more spearheaded by the witty auteur himself, who planned a tour of several gamesome cabarets. Gloria begged off from the escapade, being reasonably assured that nothing momentous would transpire the remainder of that evening and so leave her journal lacking pertinent information. The last few entries had been rather bland. Her new

friend's offer of a Moscato d'Asti and fresh strawberries while ensconced in a stately waterfront carriage, was fetching as anything the town's booze parlours or boob traps might offer. Besides, she felt an abiding obligation to eschew institutions whose performers ended lying on snake-infested catafalques, as happened in a tarty dive called the Nekhbet she once blundered into.

TWENTY-FIVE

During a weekly strategy meeting with his newly marshalled security team, Dowd was reminded that the Touchstone Inn, where the team met in an executive suite, was esteemed for its food service. Watching Stanton wolf down the *pâté de foie gras* almost as a goose might itself bolt a meal, recalled an earlier Pechenpaugh 'wolfing down toxic Saudi appetizers', as Dowd once cast the executive's misplaced trust. He now wondered if Stanton ever took his time eating. Did his mainly clandestine life simply proscribe all repose, leisure?

The decision to meet him and his lead scouts in the Inn was to mislead other in situ snoops, including the Russian; such a one could be servicing any number of clients he surmised, given Paleomena's many diligent reconnoiterers. Stanton knew the gist of Dowd's recent compact of course. The lone gamble now was making Daphne part of Stanton's team. By then Dowd had cautiously, discreetly unearthed the salient details of what turned out to be a sorely androgynous past: a slender, intelligent, tormented 'boy' from an exceedingly affluent family, had belatedly sought replete female indemnity — info gleaned by the doctor who attended her at the villa and relayed to Roald. From the outset of her employ at Paleomena she proved exceptional — her tact, social alertness, deft, quietly ironic manner, honesty and an omnibus memory. Thus, when Dowd suggested she might assist Stanton and delegate some of her office chores, she displayed her nominal Quaker reserve, a sign he had come to accept as approval; upfront enthusiasm, he now surmised, had sometimes incurred remorse for her. He had also momentarily forgotten the simple fascination espionage can be for newcomers. For one who had passed most of her young life vigilant to the harassing predatory nature of others, suddenly becoming one of the pack was perhaps a wry toothsome high. Indeed, he could carry on displaying the old ironic lightness that so eluded him on that initial fated Monday morning following the attack, when her oddly static form, staring into a void, chilling even to her morning coffee, nearly left him despondent — a rare mood for Angus Dowd. Her absorption confirmed that the 'incident' at the Licchavi villa remained unresolved, the disposition of the photos unknown, for one. Daphne never mentioned the assault, and the felons' identity and chastisement would remain undivulged — a requisite for Roald. Moreover, Dowd's brooking of the assault remained *injuria*, an actionable default.

Yet Daphne now seemed to share his relish at the spectacle of Stanton picking a tooth with a Gorham pickle fork while gazing up at the Chinese tea papered ceiling as if a helpful reflection of the fork's maneuvering appeared there, then bending briefly to snatch his linenfold off the carpet, all the while talking from the side of his mouth.

Of course most everyone in the room recognized the jaunty habit and happily looked on as Daphne offered him more *pâté*. "Thank you, Daph, ye ol' *foie gras* keeps my puny corpse on call," he remarked as another helping slithered onto his newly cleaned plate. The comment was apt: a delicatessen he patronized in the hotel's underground mall sold such fare.

Daphne quietly sought a napkin of her own, which Dowd took note of as he reflected on this generally pleasing if expensive rendezvous.

“Now,” Stanton resumed, “about the Ruski wizard I’m not so sure. He’s disappeared. Early retirement maybe. His replacement is a cold moe with no lips. Stock Cheka wrangler and swineherd.” Again he sought the pickle fork. “As for Lady L — our late study due in part to the Storrier tie-in — her current outings extend to new, unanticipated destinations. In addition to the couturiers and gift shops — an art museum, a retail banker, a theatre impresario, also a large endowment foundation with a very choosy investigation arm. Something’s up or on hold I’d say. A couple of times we’ve ended nose-to-asshole with the swineherd and Roald’s own pit bulls. Daph’s got some late yummy details I believe. What’s odd is the presence of a third squad tailing the Russian — we think. One yo-yo team even commandeered a private van and left the owners on a side street where one guy engaged in a hollering match with a policeman. Everyone in my front line squad worried about ending up as material witnesses if they stayed too close. Curiously, we’ve also recorded the swineherd photographing some of the folks Zita, the cabaret dancer, travels with — the very dancer who appears in the *Zita Tableaux*.” Stanton sought a memory pad: “It’s quite a list: a promotional agent, a Czech gypsy called Anteros, a fashion-tabloid stringer, or two, a drone bodyguard one assumes, and a toffy Maserati dealer — the main stay ons.”

Dowd listened as one hearing his own thoughts and mentally completed his own summation. One: busy Zita, given her many keen ‘onlookers’, an ongoing success — in the smart graphic novel named after her, a fine distraction from Abler’s moxie — which the Russians had investigated with likely limited success, discounting Frieda’s possible connivance. Two: Zita’s tenable kinswoman, the benighted Frieda, now AWOL from her Abler team, idled as Lady L. — Dowd’s late suspicion, which he’d kept to himself thus far; someone sooner or later would unearth her former identity as Frieda Van Eerden, ostensibly an orphan left to the mercy of the Yankee state after a boating accident swallowed her lone surviving relative — a legend Dowd admired in its detail. Three: Zita’s implicit jeopardy from her jihadi menace seemed then in abeyance; perhaps her new celebrity staunched reprisal if not surveillance. Four: Muerner remained vigilant and pucker-assed with his Wunderkind’s, Arnold’s, change of heart, and Peter Selby-Smith’s astute dour pronouncements on preclusive human perfection. And Five: the lone holdout of the original Abler team, Dr. Miguel Ibarria-Gomez, was coming round to a composite settlement. If anything, it was the very aptness of the season’s turnings that continued to soothe, including the success of his new investment team. Providence was smiling. The sound of Stanton chewing prawns brought Dowd back to the moment’s reality. The shells and tails seemed too insubstantial for him. Except for a single tiny claw, his plate contained not a trace of the garlic seasoned litter when the *cœur à la crème* was served. Again he picked at a section of upper teeth that lacked one bicuspid. Dowd decided he must keep the team in place for another month. Muerner too would also welcome a full reappraisal, sooner than later.

But the surprise highlight of that session was Daphne’s placid, detailed account of a brief if rather self-conscious meeting between Madame Licchavi and Arnold Storrier that very morning in a large client-sparse sportswear store! The atmosphere in the room changed dramatically: curiosity and urgency joined hands. Daphne herself seemed somewhat awed by the attention. Stanton let loose a tuneless whistle that deftly set the tone. Not for the first time Dowd sensed the great performing sense his secretary harboured. Beneath that composed exterior lived a fine versatile actress, who had

‘demurely’ agreed to delegate some of her routine secretarial work in order to undertake this new surveillance undertaking.

“One unusual thing,” she continued in her thin but articulate voice, “was the purchase, sought by Mr. Storrier — a pair of hiking boots.”

“Maybe he has a yen to climb the Eastern face of the villa,” said a momentarily waggish Stanton, now nursing an Irish coffee. He referred to the Lichavi villa which bore a resemblance to the Mittal palace in the Kensington Palace Gardens, London.

“But you see the boots were for madame. He was insistent and paid cash. They looked highly functional and came with custom crampons. It’s not a shop Madame Licchavi patronizes. She looked anxious most of her time with Mr. Storrier, and left on her own by a rear exit. But with the ‘boots’.”

This revelation produced a general hush, which Dowd quietly interrupted. “You may be on to something, Daphne. I’ll see Stanton adds an extra watcher to your group. Felix Muerner will be grateful as well.” Indeed, it was Muerner who urged Dowd to include Arnold in the team’s surveillance.

“For sure,” blurted Stanton, giving Daphne a thumbs up as he lifted one of the silver candelabra to light a cigarillo.

The bi-weekly meeting ended with all postings in place. In Daphne’s purview — the surveillance of the Licchavi household and the movement of Roald’s newly active wife — the personnel allotment was increased to include two more street folk. Dowd watched through his field glasses from the suite’s tinted windows as the group randomly filed into the street below. The ‘boyfriend’ waiting for Daphne would take her home, change cars in an all-night garage, then return to spell another near the Licchavi villa. As a possible consort of Arnold Storrier, Muerner would insist that ‘Anna’ be closely tailed, and where possible kept from harm. Dowd saw the wisdom of this, though he felt little personal affection for the former researcher he and Muerner had all but concluded to be an evasive if trialed Russian spy, who at one time aligned herself with the team that sought a wider remit for Abler’s pearls. He also believed, with some recompense, that Daphne’s new found will and finesse partly derived from her fixed observance of another suggestively trialed human, a heedful restless wife beset too by happenstance — one with a shared kismet, perhaps. He was disposed then to allow such allusions to pervade and hone his thoughts. As he sat in his limo homeward planning the morrow, he found himself wondering if Daphne ever imagined perfumed lamps enhancing a love tryst on a folkloric night. Was Middle-Eastern lore so captivating because human desire was finally so inherently imperviously daring? Particularly for bored mundane Westerners.

Early the following morning, electively within a scene from Arabian Nights, when the early hour quiet seemed to blend a distant whispering waterfall with rustling snake, Anna Licchavi mutely looked on as her restless husband took his leave. She had thought of finally locking her apartments, but decided to do so was imprudent, at present. Almost furtively her life had become delusive, chimerical even. So preoccupied was she with ‘other matters’ that her transformation was barely noticed...at least for a time. He came as he sometimes did, being a natural nocturnal, just before midnight and stayed usually until one, when he went to the first of his daily meditations. That night he switched on the soft outside lighting that detailed the pretty arabesque window grilles, and stationed a free standing oil Devotee lamp by the bed. He had liked her best in the guise of Tara, and of late, expressly, literally,

in the green form — his initial pertinent casting of her she thought now. At first he wanted to use vintage pigments but his own physician warned against it, even with the underlay. Instead, once a fortnight, two very young artists painted the mainly jade green constituents onto his wife's torso in hygienic pigments, a labor that took the better part of an hour. The doctor had the glycerin tempera tested and gave his assent; Anna was then indifferent. Her own maid, a superstitious nosy woman, who seemed at times as much *un objet trouvé* as Anna herself, was at first chagrined then diffident as she wiped up after the artwork was complete, averting her eyes from her lady painted in the attitude of the seated goddess, one lotus hand positioned between the breasts, the other on a cantilevered leg, a sole against a knee, the legs clothed in vintage pyjamas with strands of precious gems interlaced on several seams, the artistic detailing that night including an arabesque that framed the navel — the pyjamas rode just above the pubic bone — which had started Anna laughing as the poor artist persevered, florid faced, his frail urchin's hand showing signs of strain, desisting only when his subject relaxed, stretched, and once paused to ditch her amusement and blow her nose.

She danced, notionally, to nagara, tabla and sitar in the oil lights, the musicians sequestered in a walkup, while her sanguine witness sat Buddha-like on a prayer mat, mildly drugged. The villa fused both Hindu and Buddhist art work as it was in places like Nepal, where the gods remain blithely active and young — an early recognition of Roald Licchavi. Thereafter the baths were drawn, the green pigment ritually washed away from the live corporeal goddess, the incense lit, while sweet smelling emollients vivified creamy skin, Roald's questing hands sculpting a raw Tara, acutely detailed before him...how gradual, almost imperceptible her collusion with this visual engrossment had been.

Now, afterward, she would lie alone vaguely listening to a faintly stammering void, her disbelief her lone ally. He had no abiding interest in esoteric science or politics or, for that matter, much art. As an essentially one-dimensional voluptuary, he engaged, once the early anticipation had ritualized, only an atomized part of her. Like most voyeurs, his was a fetish that eschewed witticism, repartee, even solicitude, her stark form alone the trigger of delight; intercourse itself, where another might share in an embrace, almost extraneous. Such 'coital minimalism', as she deemed it, at first amused. What was it Daniel had said, quoting a second author — the prurient mind a perpetual optical feast? Daniel too cherished the visual, but one who embraced the nexus of the senses, not their isolation and specialization. Roald primarily wanted to behold and fondle a quiet, compliant, gracile, starkly-naked figurine, to be fondled with an assortment of balms and emollients. But for this titivated carnality, its manic sumptuousness and surfeit, his interest in her own world, her personal interests and self, was nominal, so she mused — her effacement in his monomania, a sobering reckoning, a lapse that seemed ordained, given her options, until that rare revelatory night when Antoine arrived with his blithe irreverent performers, resurrecting her sense of shared, whimsical, sportive — extemporaneous — engagement!

She still spied the hovering motorcycle as her chauffeur took her on her rounds, the café patron who kept an eye trained to her unease. She guessed them to be Roald's spooks but could not be sure. To leave the seraglio was still the hapless heroic choice, while her frequent drugged exhaustion, so allied to the ongoing effacement of her will, her soul — which she had once interpreted as the reverse! — returned her slyly, 'custodially' to the exquisite fabric wall murals, her beautiful Persian miniatures and the cosmic alchemy of the roshandon-style light in her rooms, the lambrequins of the window arcades, the friezes etching the muqarnas, and the nonculpable child beneath; to her prayer rugs,

allegoric cushions, Tala music centre, dedicated masseuse, the delicate yet munificent curries — the manifold attentions embroidering the edges of her sheared life, including Yathrib with her morning tray, daily itinerary, and secreted Remington. Did she not wryly, commiseratively greet the young artists who came once a fortnight to transfigure her disembodied self into the mythic green Tara? Only laden words invoked her state — those of a castaway, her recollection of a once independent ‘self’ harder and harder to recollect, reinstate.

It had all been so until Antoine’s nimble-witted performers’ visit — with the alert, seasoned guests and their fireproof laughter. A gambit Roald may have regretted. That same night, again alone, the sight of her pale turncoat skin, once part of an accepted acquiescence, arguably benign, left her leaking laughter, the cocaine laced persimmons awaiting, though not for long.

During the second trimester the precious attentions became ornate, unforeseen and often bewilderingly alluring: four leading couturiers designed cosmopolitan and byzantine frocks for her; Antoine was commissioned to write a dramatic monologue on the phases of pregnancy, entitled Lovelock, first staged at the villa, which proved to be seductively charming and a modest success, in augmented form, later in the Geffen Playhouse. Anna herself wrote some early scenes, her lines subtly changing to match the moods and image of her condition — lines that became favoured, highlighted parts of the playlet. The recognition of a fine stage actress playing herself left her awed, wonder laden. Had she been *too* disparaging, dismissive? A video was made of an induced colour image of the infant in-vitro, ciné and still photographers were contracted to take regular in-house sittings, including the water birth, destined for Roald’s exclusive collection. Photographs taken of the two maternal frocks Anna particularly liked were published in the American and British Vogues. ‘Anna’ Licchavi was ostensibly alive and well.

With the interruption of the Tara interventions, to accommodate the regular feedings, came the regimen of attentions she at first ingenuously lavished on the child, with Roald’s specialists cueing a devoted maid/nanny whose own private miracle was water.

Yatrib, always it seemed a shrill echo of Roald’s many specialists, waxed pastoral when Anna bathed with the child. She readily assisted when Anna and child entered the skylit frescoed wading pool, where Roald Jr. first floated, dabbled about, on a small vinyl raft-mattress. Roald took several select films, often urging his singular Anna to enter the surround with Roald Jr. nude. Roald Jr., who loved every minute on the raft-mattress, learned to hold his breath when Anna gave him brief trial dunkings, and usually bawled when the gig was up. Months later they went to the deeper, alabaster mineral pool with the early Hindu relief murals. The chamber was in essence a select arboretum hosting many tropical plants and trees — one of the infinities of her surround. From tiny projectors in one curved pool side, slivers of multi-tinctured light formed slowly shifting holograms of Vedic miniatures just below the pool surface near an opposite wall. Equally amazing was the subtlety with which the images grew in lucidity as one entered the waters — geometric abstracts gradually, magically changing into lucid form and background. Even the jewels in the crowns of the Hindu gods became lustrously faceted. The images invited Roald Jr. to put on his goggles to view the underwater scenes. An ingenious way to ‘seduce’ a child (Roald’s word) into experiencing the wonder of water. As the images slowly undulated, moved about, so did the child, Anna keeping watch. It was the one time she might slight her own dilemma in the exquisite surround. This ‘investiture’ became a norm, and for several months both mother and son ‘marinated’ (Roald’s word again) in the picturesque womb. On

days when the ablutions might be curtailed — due to an anticipated engagement — outspoken Yatrib chided and the outing was sometimes abridged.

But well into the second year Anna was becoming restive, impatient with the pervasive intimate carnality, in and out of the pool. The many specialists Roald retained spoke of a retentive meagre outside world where a child must not be stunted or risk isolation. The danger of unwitting neglect was denounced as the ever-returning blight. *Unwitting!* Anna smiled. Before nosy Yatrib and Roald's omniscient Eastern Medicasters, her lament registered as waspishness. Roald Jr., as crucial inheritor, must not end up in a neurotic hex. Her incredulity devolved into forbidding pauses when she might curtly dawn a housecoat. Yatrib threw up her hands. “ — The child displaying ‘impertinence’, sensing the familiarity of a women's quarter? Madame, please.” Anna was fed an upgraded sedative, and sensed a kind of creeping catatonia in the ever disabling encounters with possessed husband and child-changeling. As she watched the dreamy tableaux in the pool, she vaguely subsumed the many ways Roald Jr. was precocious. Roald Sr. pressed esoteric tutors on him and shamelessly bribed with sweets and extravagant toys. Anna knew that some Asians, including Hindus, were known to badly spoil their male children, but encountering it first hand here was disconcerting. One day she found Roald Jr. with a soft exquisite figurine that uncannily resembled herself. She disposed of the form immediately and began anticipating the dissolution of a marriage...somehow. Rationalization was no longer an option — nor the rite of ‘compensatory meditation’ — one backup recommendation from Roald's quacks.

But the series of events that caused her to threaten Yatrib with dismissal and finally lock her chambers — which required the services of a discreet locksmith — were unrelated to her domestic malaise. Yet they drove her beyond Roald's stable of experts. The first incident followed the first week of the performances of Love Lock.

When the dramatic poem opened in the Geffen Playhouse, there were several unsettling demonstrations outside the theatre. Despite the wistful and sometime ironic overtones, Lovelock was essentially a celebration of fidelity, fertility and child rearing. For several radical women's groups, annoyed by the patronizing tone of the play which abetted an upcoming abortion bill, the play celebrated, indemnified the wrong kind of lady. The pickets were generally orderly, though one particularly cool October night a group noisily huddled just inside the foyer. A cavalier Antoine ordered them into the street to ‘solicit small change’. Due either to his words or sarcastic notice of their granola attire — the anecdotal recollections varied over the coming days — a couple of lusty slaps rewarded his presence. The groupies were fairly straining with venom when Anna arrived with some theatre patrons and their close friends, including a wealthy banker and his heavy, personable Spanish-Catholic wife Rosanna, whom Anna saw too little of and Roald loathed. The picket ringleader watched the limo arrive, noted Anna's departure backstage to greet a new director, then flashed her placard next the dark majestic Rosanna as she checked her coat. It had Rosanna's picture on it and bore the jibe — Pope Joan, the Lebensborn Connection — directed unmistakably at Rosanna, for the crime of directing a well known adoption agency that visited abortion clinics and offered assistance to women who carried to term. Indeed, one of these mothers ended up on one of Arnold Storrier's solar-assisted sail ships. The doughty lass signed on announcing that if she were going to be sick in the morning for several weeks or months, it might as well be while sailing — a passion hitherto constrained by financial inaccessibility. The idea, a headline grabbing human-interest tale, caught on and several

‘midshipmen’ came to sail the Boundary Lily in pregnant states, a supplementary nurse being deployed on each ship when needed, and initially each ship’s hardware included a small helicopter. There were complaints again of exploitation or ‘wildcatting’ as it was deemed, mainly from union flacks. But the institution of family shipping, in part adopted by a small number of the former Vietnamese boat people to whom Arnold extended a free lease to one boat for a year, became tenable because it was altruistic, comparatively inexpensive, and scored points with environmentalists — then noisy and often eloquent lobbyists world wide.

When the imposing Rosanna moved to enter the house she ignored the picketer but tripped on a curled foyer mat. She went down with a promptness and finality that all but italicized the display of the Pope Joan placard. The concern of the theatre patrons was immediate. For the groupies it was at least a pyrrhic success, particularly when the woman loudly ardently swore at them then dramatically slipped again in an attempt to rise under her own steam.

When at last upright, she entered the theatre without comment and minimal assistance, went directly to her seat, and sought attention only during the intermission. It was then Anna saw the bruised knee and elbow and learned from the ushers the circumstances of the fall following the protesters’ contretemps with Antoine. By then Rosanna wanted the matter ignored.

The pickets abandoned the theatre only after the first curtain, and Anna commiserated with her friend in a dressing room occupied by a young pregnant Brentwood actress who played the current expectant wife. Both urged Rosanna to lodge a complaint with the Civil Court Review Board. By performance end someone had altered the theatre marquee to read: ‘Babies for Sale,’ and underneath, ‘Pope Joan, the Lebensborn Connection,’ followed by the phone number and street address of Rosanna’s organization.

Anna, piqued by the Nazi slur, immediately called one of Roald’s lawyers. She knew, in Roald’s case, his lawyers were ever ‘on call’. The man was away for the weekend, according to the firm’s answering service. A second number fetched a colleague who responded in a flat apathetic voice. Anna explained with almost spy craft economy the belligerent pickets, libellous marquee, and subsequent damage done to the theatre marquee and its entrance doors. The colleague said she would look into the matter on the morrow. Sullenly she added, “Mind you, that bitch has been a stalwart in recidivist circles for years.”

Anna was at first speechless, then further numbed by the apparent futility — on all fronts. “Please do what you can,” she said finally.

When she arrived home Roald met her and complained of the late hour, which he could forgive, unlike the presumption in bothering one of his solicitors. Anna was at first calm, at least outwardly, a demeanour Roald readily accepted as contrition. To her condescending, dissolute Maharaja — as she then imagined him — she curtsied and proceeded directly to their suite, he trailing after. Promptly she prepared for bed, readily changing into a tart’s ugly body wear (impulsively bought the week before), and fell asleep staring sightlessly at the blurred image of a perturbed satrap pacing back and forth between the Kang H’si palace vases, two of the holdouts from her hectic apartment days.

The following morning a laconic note in Roald’s florid hand arrived with the breakfast tray. She was to be at the solicitor’s by eleven. “A summons,” she told Yatrib, who had just scolded two housemaids for loitering — ogling — the elegant reclusive bed-sitting room and study Anna had recently refurbished with Chinese vases and paintings, comparable to ones that once graced her first

apartment's loft and living room. The note rendered Yatrib smugly, conspiratorially silent, prompting Anna to lose her temper. She threatened to dismiss the woman — an idle boast for the staff Roald appointed — yet Yatrib was suitably distressed. Anna informed her a locksmith would come mid-morning the following day (when Roald would be at work) and must be circumspectly received if Yatrib valued her employ. The locksmith would place dead bolts on Anna's bed-sitting room's two doors, the room a late favoured sanctuary. "I do understand, madame," said the watchful Yatrib as she fetched the largely untouched breakfast tray. It was a pert daring ploy Anna actually carried through. That same morning, after a 'chat' with Roald's lawyer — Roald insisted the suit be dropped — she decided to eat most of her meals outside the Licchavi household — a recourse she swore abetted both her alertness and resolve!

But the one single act that finally unravelled the domestic knot was her overdue decision to consult a lawyer *outside* of Roald's family of solicitors, which she did the morning following the meeting with Roald's chief legal council where she apologized for her 'impetuosity' in calling Roald's law firm 'after hours'. Roald had seemed relieved until he joined her in the limo and berated the casualness of her concession. An admonition she silently, fondly ignored.

The new lawyer was in fact recommended by feminist Gloria Leibowitz, a fact Roald was left to discover on his own. A career feminist must know a suitably empathic lawyer or two, Anna felt. She rang Gloria at her office, citing their introductory meeting at the inaugural performance of Antoine's theatre company at the villa. Gloria clearly, avidly even, remembered the otherwise agreeable voice and spare words of the beauty Arnold had 'duly noticed' — the fair lady who had so far eluded the veteran media gossips, despite a persistent record as being one of America's best-dressed women. Still a beauty herself, Gloria had been badgered by professional bossmen and panders, and remained alert to plucky beings confronting undeserved revilement — here a circumspect peeress working to exonerate a defamed friend.

After Madame Licchavi described the assault on Rosanna and some damage done to the theatre entrance — a late discovery — Gloria promptly recommended a lawyer friend, adding that she'd personally be grateful to be kept up to date on the case. To her surprise, the elegant madame suggested that they might meet for a coffee one day soon, a proposal Gloria promptly accepted. She'd always been curious about the woman, her circumstance and past, and her possible sway over nonesuch rookies like Arnold Storrier!

When she rang off, Gloria began thinking of her own juggernaut in dealing with maniacal hustlers and snooty critics — updated in her case by the topical 'woke' consternation with providential endowment, physical, fiscal and mental — she being a lingering 'molesting' example of such fortune. Such endowment, when added to the era's patchwork schooling, the common lot, had equalled many years of largely wayward jostling in her case. It was less the relentless maneuvering that irked now, but simply the lack of any time-out reflection and quiet study — that may have rendered some of the inevitably frenetic moments less toxic. As an envied, fussed over teen model she sold millions of dollars of lingerie, and a lesser amount of shampoo and skin cream — facts that incessantly dogged her intellectual affirmation. She'd made a soft porn revenge film in which a dedicated stunt girl ended as a paraplegic after a car crash mishap. Minutes before the girl's splendid form doubled for a spectacular high cliff dive. Gloria had now less contempt, if that were possible, for the unstinting pornographer than his slicker, pandering, film producer and his seamy advertising cousin — both she sensed to be

self-possessed harriers. Inanities like ‘erotica’, so often used to flog neither craft nor romanticism but drolled up voyeurism, which even feminists themselves tried to resurrect to stem the torrents of flagrant pornography, also depressed her. Belatedly she had come to rethink the indemnities of stolid stoicism and mediocrity — how they tended to ‘humanize’ pretension and conceit. She also wearied of audacity and cheek, how America’s brazen players often titivated its ‘naughty-bit’ films, cosmetic advertising, stiletto-heeled runways, faddish exercise and health bars. The pretty fat-scourged player happily exploiting gracile leanness, thus vivifying invidious disparity, became for her one reigning dubiety on the sleepless networks. No wonder some awkward, unschooled, unprepossessing folk were susceptible to fanatical foment; their insignificance if not irrelevance manifest in a sumptuously showcased wonder world, the promised land she’d so belatedly realized the sly delusiveness of.

In a few escaped vexed comments Mrs. Anna Rana Sambara Vajra Licchavi had revealed herself another mindful, principled gal in the world of seething unrest — a revelatory reminder for skeptical Gloria.

Antoine had been Gloria’s sole resilient companion during the worst time, when she finally walked out of the studio that had assumed she knew the secret truths about elusive stardom. She was thirty-two, had contravened her latest contract, would likely be sued, was broke and without agreeable work. Antoine’s indirect counsel came close to a benediction. “You merely squander yourself before the insatiable lens, my dear. The ranks of beefy boys in the front rows are never satisfied until they eat you alive, and even then the clouds end up with indigestion. A daunting story line simply makes it all the more seductive. No, my dear, you must strike out on your own, do something original. Have you ever thought of actually publishing a sisterhood journal? I daresay I can scrounge a few shekels myself for such an enterprise.” He looked at her then with amused candour. “Be yourself; everyone else is taken. Tell your wily producer to sod it. Let that gamy pander wend a creeper up another trellis, or whatever venus trap the crafty ponce has in store.” The film in question was a clinical take on date rape; Gloria was to play a shy teen with a vindictive mother. Gloria made a stolid comment about the film being as much a guide as entertainment, its stark realism an *aide-mémoire*. “My dear,” resumed Antoine, “the imagination of the nation has been progressively deformed by unrelenting ‘realism’ in film, video and advertising. We cannot tell fiction from fact any more. The producer-panders in your film simply want to see your inestimable torso frequently strung out, a delectable sight I’m sure for the inappropriate sex — but only in quaint gangrenous lodges where one can attend such sleaze in peace.” He added, with closed lids, that if the “medicinal, healing arts’ advertising world could temper its slighting of stoicism, its disdain of carnal oddity, idiosyncrasy, ungainliness and aging, the world might be less vulnerable to the presumption of disparity — and it’s adverse, alluring, provocative, ‘entertaining’, carnality.” A heterodox thesis that ‘needled’ Gloria to this day!

It was decided Antoine was a pietistic poofter, but one of high caste. They discussed the likelihood of hypocrisy being the tribute vice pays to virtue. Antoine said it was at least a reliable source of spare change. By then Gloria sat in his lap with her arms about his proud bulging head, his eyes looking off with the settled reassurance of a canny brat. She did not love him but was struck by the fact that the one human she could have shared that time with was finally not interested. “That is why the earth teams with so many fancy cripples, my dear. The guilt felt by the terrible Jove is baroque. But my darling Rosalind, I have a few exotic birds of my own dauntlessly awaiting.” With that they said their

adieu that day and Gloria committed herself to publishing a magazine that might glean the wisdom of her late stark re-visions, however gauche some of those revelations may be to the dedicated red-baiter.

Thus the call from Anna Licchavi, at first tentative, soon relaxed as some fond recollections surfaced and diverted. But when the specific reason for the call was tabled — the slur of Rosanna on the theatre marquee, and wanton damage done to the theatre entrance, Gloria perked up. She knew Rosanna, and though they championed different ideals, she had never picked a quarrel with the outspoken lady. Several times her magazine investigated Rosanna's agency's sales pitch and concluded the proposed contract was indeed pro-life but not condescendingly so (Gloria was finical about contracts), and when Arnold was discovered signing on the first crew of the Boundary Lilly, Gloria was surprised to find Rosanna previewing the nursery Arnold's marine architect had incorporated into the design of the ship — itself an unexpected innovation that Gloria was not untouched to discover!

Anna sought an apology for at least the marquee slur and the breaking of some theatre entrance glass panes, the marquee light panel, and an external poster shield. She believed the persons responsible could be identified in the now viral cell phone coverage. The late discovery of some vandalism in another theatre may have been done coincidentally because Rosanna acted as a patron only for Antoine's work. Gloria was asked to recommend a lawyer who would seek a public apology and prepare a writ for specified damages should an apology not be forthcoming. All legal expenses would be borne by a patron of Antoine's theatre company — an unknown in Gloria's purview at that moment. Gloria realized the circumvention of the Licchavi retainers might be a sore point but didn't bring it up. What lessened the concern was Anna's recent and apparently warm partnership with Antoine, prompted in part by the success of the theatre entertainment at the Licchavi villa and the later Lovelock playlet. As Gloria proffered her own lawyer's number, she sensed again her ardor for female assertiveness, however removed from the central fray, much as she welcomed attention from any august quarter — the belated coffee invitation from the heedful, resolute Madame Licchavi being an unexpected and welcome engagement.

That same afternoon the recommended lawyer phoned Gloria and said he would pay her a nifty retainer to turn up rare Birds of Paradise like that. All the female secretaries hated her at once he said. Did she screw he wondered? Or pay by grant? Gloria yawned. Alfred's scurrility was rarely unpredictable. Then he surprised her.

"She asked me to arrange repair payments ahead of any public apology, or hearing if it comes to that, and wants to assume all expenses herself — a late revision apparently. She will privately reimburse the two theatres' current lessees — a proper young lass — from a source I suspect may be foreign. It could be a sizeable sum given the specified damages to both theatres. I trust you Gore to keep this editorial to yourself but I would like to know what may be mouldering. I smell bad breath."

Gloria belatedly joined in. "So she's resolute, determined. What could be simpler? She wants to see the theatres promptly repaired, not wait for some iffy mea culpa. She *is* married to a mogul after all."

The mute pause was not reassuring.

"Meaning?"

"Alfred!"

"O.K. You're the boss."

“Lookit, I’ve a mountain of leaders on my desk and some long faces beyond. If you want to spell it out I’d be grateful, otherwise please go and do what you do best.”

“Gore, she has no money of her own. It’s a trade secret. I’m a talking trusting jerk this day but I think you’re holding back. There’s maybe more at stake here than some vandalized theatres. The lingering suspicion.”

“So she has a friend, influence...somewhere.” Gloria was mildly intrigued but also restless to get on with her own multifarious chores. Dowd’s payment had accommodated the consideration of some fresh new pitches.

Again the huffy pause.

“It’s like this, Gore, and may Lord Brahma forgive me: there’s talk of a separation. If we’re seen servicing a cheque from an unexpected source — a reserve investment fund say — we’ll have the Licchavi warriors up ours. Half of them we do business with. Yes, us. You maybe didn’t know. I simply want to find out if this tacit, alluded to account is clean, and if this proposed draft is the precursor to establishing a claim. The cost of the repairs could be substantial, given the estimated cost of repairing the one theatre entrance and marquee, and ancillary damage done the second theatre. Do a little prodding. She likes you a lot, I think.”

Now it was Gloria’s time to sample a quiet moment.

“Gore, you still there?”

“Whose ‘talk’? And what’s this ‘claim’?” By then her assistant editor was listening in with her sanction.

“Well, the schnoz tells me the Licchavi warriors are striving to tidy up some ends, which naturally includes us. Sorry, can’t specify. Meaning: maximum coercion. If the lady has a separate claim she’s covertly engineered to some elsewhere family fund, then the parameters change. The coercion gets messy. I have no way of affirming this but I suspect Roald Sr. wants the child and a new consort. A difficulty under the present marriage agreement, which I also cannot discuss. Why he would after meeting Madame only Brahma knows — maybe He wants her Himself. That’s what my long nose says and when I doubt my nose I run into things. Usually backwards. A single cheque in some favoured jurisdictions, Swiss law for instance, is sometimes enough to establish credible joint title to a larger estate. A sizeable cheque, mind. The Licchavi clan loves revenge — a staple you may have encountered yourself. They manage it by token generosity up front.”

By then Gloria caught herself doodling on one of the leaders. It was not like her to overlook the guile of a gold digger, however seemly, respected. She looked up beckoningly to her assistant editor who genially smiled. The pile of leaders and pitches on Gloria’s desk they both eyed with lingering anticipation.

“Alfred, I’ll do what I can. Over and out.”

“Oodles of luck,” said the assistant editor after Gloria had hung up.

“Wish *her* luck,” said Gloria.

“Who’s that again?” the editor asked.

“Anna L.”

“The Lovelock belle?”

“The same.”

“You knew the play’s author put all twelve of his names on the printed edition?”

“Yes, Antoine. He apparently likes christenings.”

“He’s also supposed to have rattled them off when some hospital clerk had him register the night he had his chin attended to — the night the picket socked him — yes — hardly a scratch. He is said to have urged an intern to give him at least a couple of stitches. Had to bribe the chap in the end, apparently. One of the stories you like to share.”

By then most women in the office were smiling.

Gloria went directly to Arnold.

McClelland, a tall timeless black and a favoured longstanding pal of Arnold’s, greeted her at the door to Arnold’s condo and, his smile flickering, took her directly to ‘the nonesuch’. “He gone way down memory lane past few days, Ms. Leibowitz. You welcome steward here.”

Gloria well knew what McClelland meant, and was obliged by this ready acknowledgement.

She’d only met McClelland once, yet believed the friendship between he and Arnold mutual and longstanding. An American of Haitian ancestry, McClelland — she never got a first name — was one of Arnold’s earliest school mates. Their friendship resumed on Arnold’s return from South East Asia. A late story for her journal.

When she entered Arnold’s kitchen the ‘nonsuch’ sat at a trestle table, his back to the door, in a tile work kitchen with cutely illustrated glass doors — the painterly work of some children in the condo complex who visited him from time to time. From Arnold’s posture in the chair, thumb and forefinger framing a chin, she recognized a reflective mood he could be stubborn about abandoning. But the object of focus seemed more readily apparent this time: an ornate set of bagpipes beside a seemingly mint tartan outfit on a settee opposite. She detected some humour about the juxtaposition of reflective man and distinct costume and instrument.

“You’ve taken to skirts, have ye laddie?”

“They ken ‘em as kilts, lass.”

“And squeezing the homebodies?”

“An’ weal see then about that.”

With that he rose, dropped his trousers, backed them on his chair, strode to the kilter opposite and proceeded to don the apparel of a Scottish Highlander, the entire maneuver deft and nonchalant — a Storrier hallmark. When he began he wore a t-shirt with the legend of a sports firm he endorsed on the front, and a pair of shopworn boxer shorts. He stood finally in stocking feet in a mid blue, green and black tartan coat with starched jabot, full kilt, sporran and broad leather belt, lacking only a pair of period shoon it seemed. With some improvised fanfare he gathered up the pipes, ponderously saying as he did so, “An’ thou, whatever suit thee, Hornie, Satan, Nick or Clootie, we’ve a right bonny tune for Auld Lang Syne.” Taking in Gloria he added, “Takes a wee bit of braw thinking to mind. I’ve left my shorts on out of humility.”

After a few groping wing-like motions of elbow the long sneeze began. A register was then established and Gloria listened with some amazement to a determined if sometimes hesitant playing of Scotland the Brave, a rendering the musician seemed entirely satisfied with when it was over, a presumption Gloria accepted despite her wonder. Suavely he returned to his seat and resumed the lined demeanour she encountered when she first entered.

As much to himself he said, “According to Antoine, I am improving — learning to start and stop the instrument, while keeping the air flowing and the grace notes full of grace. Almost *anyone* can play

accurately, he claims, but very *few* serenely, passionately. My boroughs and shires are fully alive, he's assured me. Hey ho." He appeared both amused and speculative, then seemed to slip into one of his insular reflective moods, the sudden unanticipated abstraction that Gloria found troubling — as if a nominal cyborg suddenly switched off his sentient social program. He then drew from a satchel on the chair nearest him a piece of paper, a copy of the sacristy records from a kirk in Aberdeen for the year 1956. One name was underlined. "A Mackie bairn," he said with some gravity. "A remote possibility. My mother once mentioned an ancestor — a late recollection. Maybe worth following up." The faux Gaelic had all but vanished, replaced by the faint, Austrian American.

"Of course. I have an editor colleague in Edinburgh. I'll call her tomorrow."

"A mutual friend suggested the inquiry. Her own background also needed some seeing to, apparently. Best to keep her name by 'n' by." He then slipped back into a new preoccupied reverie.

If he might acknowledge the privacy and solicitude of others, he was himself capable of suddenly disappearing without notice — an action that might appear ill-mannered, even manic, to a newcomer. Once aboard the *Tau* he quietly went for a late afternoon swim while the ship, then concluding a sail reset, was anchored by Eagle Cove in the San Juan Islands in the Pacific North West. The sun was glorious and the shallow water near the shore much warmer than the 41 Fahrenheit degrees further out. When he was out of sight, McClelland hastily set out in the pinnace with instructions not to hold up supper. The pinnace returned a short hour later in a golden sunset some distance behind *Arnold*, whose glistening arms delved through gentle swells. With negligent ease, he climbed the side riser and nodded affably to the whistling crew as he picked up a towel, jock-strap naked as he began the swim. A reddish jellyfish lesion on one arm he inspected then scraped off with a knife — an area he and McClelland promptly treated with vinegar and an antiseptic. The swank had, Gloria later learned, sought to test the varied water temperature on muscular resilience. "And what would he have done I wonder had you'd not been around to fetch the pinnace?" Gloria asked McClelland. "Likely the same," the tall mannered Black said impassively. Gloria smiled. McClelland nodded, wistfully adding, "He's trying to shed an alien identity I think, swimming in seas of his choosing. Between you and me and the bounding main. An urgency that's increased of late."

A second eye-catching incident came during a celebrity aquatic competition, sponsored by the sport equipment manufacturer *Arnold* signed an endorsement contract with. The event ended with a hot-dog diving contest which served as an advertising loadstar of the event. *Arnold* had been signing autographs for a clutch of admirers and was late for the diving contest. The judges and audience waited with some impatience for the swank to come and take his turn. When he arrived he went straight to the high board and performed his first dive, a frantic display of one falling helplessly head first from a great height, while wearing gaudy shorts — which remained behind on the pool surface in a tented puddle after his entry! A burly arm stole from the surface and dragged the suit back under. But in his ease or zeal, or whatever it is that decrees the proficient swimmer remove himself from a pool as though propelled by Poseidon himself, the suit slipped again, and three television cameras and a half million viewers world wide were 'snowed' before the insouciant *Arnold* pulled up the limp suit, barely interrupting his amble to a dressing room while the live audience whistled and a droll McClelland waited with seaworthy trunks. When the poser prepared for his next 'dive', the seat of his trunks was emblazoned with a Chinese dragon and, in strident lettering, the name and logo of a Cantonese restaurant he patronized. The amused crowd applauded as *Arnold* came second in the

competition (a 300 pound wrestler had a matchless belly flop), and first in the Heft a Wet T-Shirt Trial (balancing four beauties seated across a horizontal flag pole) — despite a complaint that two of the pole sitters wore lighter polyester T-shirts instead of the regulation hygroscopic cotton.

Such exhibitionism seemed to affirm McClelland's comment about Arnold wanting to shed past ties, become someone else — someone peculiar, eccentric even, unconnected with the fastidious imperious Muerner. It was that thought which surfaced for Gloria at the end of the singular bagpipe offering of Scotland the Brave.

"Danny Boy's not a favourite, I'm afraid," she said with a perfect poker face.

He informed her that, "Peebrrrock (Piobaireachd), the technique for mastering the bagpipe is maybe ancestral, according to one internet maven."

Gloria handsomely nodded.

"Peerless clan heredity, I imagine. Many Scots do have a nostalgic mindset."

She had wanted to laugh, but the face then before her was again newly reflective.

Gloria had never asked a leading question of Arnold Storrier, but her instincts told her now was the moment to see how strong and circumspect his romantic nature might be. She knew he was not a gossip, and eschewed familial strife, especially that of associates. His keen hankering for some roots of his own seemed credible. So far he had little beyond the reformatory records, the morose memory two foster home stays (one being more or less agreeable), his jungle trials, and Muerner's impatience with 'unweening circumstance'. But she was not in doubt about his interest in Anna — quite possibly the 'mutual friend' — and if that infatuation-at-a-distance proved still born, then the serene, recondite, cribbed Madame Licchavi must represent a piquant interest indeed. The vestiges of Gloria's own romanticism framed them as a fated match, guesswork to be sure, but understandably persuasive: two gifted players discovering, reconnoitring a shared plight — their own inimical pasts and current circumstance? Thus it came as a surprise when the information she sought was so freely guilelessly dispensed. Again she wondered how he so easily came to trust his curious ever skeptical biographer.

"Arnold, a close friend of mine needs some impertinent information," she began, as much to break his concentration as initiate her quest. The 'close friend' being her lawyer.

A short silence ensued, then, just as she was about to elaborate, intaking first a renewing breath of air, he responded.

"You have some interest in the Licchavi household."

Immediately she responded. "Yes. There is a rumour of a rift. A usually reliable source said Roald is, well, in a willful tidying mood these days, and may act rashly. Recently an acquaintance asked me to recommend a lawyer...which I did." She had yet to decide if the 'acquaintance's call was disingenuous.

Arnold rose and approached the kitchen counter. Paintings of intricate Delftware scenes filled one wall, shoreline Sandhill Cranes and their chicks the others. The imagery always touched her. Indeed, the entire breakfast room with its light yielding French doors, creamy white cabinetry, fabric chairs, and vivid impromptu children's paintings on the glass doors, was as close to the idea of feminine as she was likely to brook, which lent an unexpectedly pacific bearing to the towering man before her, now washing some fruit.

Said Arnold just above the sound of flushing water, "Roald Sr. has the reputation of a fussy connoisseur."

Gloria decided to let that pronouncement stand, unedited.

Staidly Arnold added, "Something too of the voluptuary. The result of some ethnic richness."

"He is not one I readily find excuses for." She was not happy with this assertion but also not then overly expansive.

Arnold broached the table with two halved Soursops with melon spoons, some Cotton Candy grapes, and a chilled Ehrenfelser. He offered Gloria a lush nearly transparent grape, sedately moving to pop it into her mouth. Instead she promptly took it from his hand, informing him that her stomach worked independently. Jointly they laughed at this, and Gloria was a time swallowing the fruit.

He then sat down, filled two goblets with the wine, and began scooping out a soursop, talking as he ate — in words and intonation Gloria had not heard before!

"Much like Roald, Felix Muerner grew up with an absent father, I understand, and a pretty but strict mother. Muerner's family owned garment factories and a stable of prize Friesians. A head start I think. Before the National Socialism redoubt." A terse smile flitted across his face. "Both Roald and Felix, in their way, seek to upstage history, I think — their own laden pasts. Both fantasists — some settings more 'graphic, seeable' than others." Not being an easy talker, Arnold's words were sometimes a bit frilled. "Antoine has helped here," he added with a limp smile.

Gloria was amused. "So! Licence a go go. More or less."

Arnold seemed not to have heard. "Roald's spouse is a rare woman. Her world, in its way, unusual, improbable as mine. We have just begun to talk." After a brief pause he added, "I think we might expect a squall, at least."

"What I've rather concluded." Arnold's use of 'we' further cautioned.

"I have little influence. Roald's a suspicious Indian idolator. The one consolation perhaps."

"You sound some days like a dedicated diarist yourself."

Arnold smiled at this, as he refilled her goblet. The irony of the remark — he compiling a rival journal — teased the moment. Plaintively he said he had become his own apprentice dervish...out of sheer whirling hope. "A 'by and by' I keep to myself."

"An awful lot of tropes."

Whereupon they proceeded, after Arnold fetched another bottle, to get rather drunk.

The notes Gloria made of that morning still stir. Never until then had he talked so of his past. There had been a young resourceful Thai nurse he said, when the wine was fluently at work, who likely saved his life. He'd been keenly fond of her but lost contact when his 'exfiltration' as he called it, thwarted the romance, which the diary he kept would expand on. A promise to hand it over was extracted then and there. He still had some editing to do; it was too long. Gloria promptly frowned. He said he was deleting only what anger brought to observation; there would be more than enough dirt to dish out. She urged him to get on with it. He said he had given up hope of ever finding the nurse, Jillian, of Thai and Cambodian parents. Her father, a member of the Cambodian Constitutional Council, died of Dengue fever complications a year before they met. Her mother, a painter, had separated from her husband and lived then in France. A Triad group, looking for drugs, had attacked the clinic Jillian worked in. He feared she was conscripted to attend to Triad casualties; gang warfare then being intense. He never saw her or heard from her after the clinic attack. The engaging early Khmer metropolis at Angkor Wat added its own piquancy: it was just after he and

Jillian's last exploring of the wondrous site that she disappeared. An immutable loss it seemed. Indeed, Arnold left off then, giving in to a private silence, which ended when he suddenly, finally, emphatically said — on the matter at hand — that he doubted anyone in the Licchavi household could slight the reality of Roald's mistrust, given his obsessions. By then both he and Gloria were silent.

Courting disaster, the later chapters of the Licchavi-Storrier saga painfully unfolded. Gloria got some of the details from Anna herself, who belatedly discovered the second principled and plucky female companion she might have trusted earlier on — a trust that soon foiled Gloria's doubts about Anna's sincerity and integrity. Antoine aded his own sardonic footnote, but with a foreign languor. He too had been unprepared for the extremity of the interlaced events.

The layered melodrama began when Arnold sent a note, disguised to come from a gemologist, to a Mr. Roald Sambara Licchavi — a week after the night when he first met the pensive Anna seated on the lower step of the staircase that led to the upper loggia — the night he found a broach and remnants of a dress cap sleeve while seeking a second meeting with the singular woman.

The note described a broach containing a precious inlaid stone a young man had nervously presented for evaluation and sale. The gemologist in question, aware of the stone's exceptional value, wouldn't buy it until he ascertained ownership. Smaller stones he rarely quibbled over, he said, but one of twelve carats...well, the young man, noting his consternation, attempted to retrieve the item but fled when the gemologist summoned police. The unusual faceting of the gem was determined to be the artistry of a famous South African designer who, in turn, identified the stone and produced the gem's bill of sale and buyer's address code. The gem would be held in trust until instructed by the specified owner. (Arnold devised this scenario from an expert gemologist Antoine had consulted.)

Roald showed the note to his wife. Her seemingly impassive acknowledgement of its restoration added to Roald's pique if not suspicion. He reminded her that she had previously misplaced a valuable necklace. The likelihood of a guest taking and slyly hawking such a valuable stone further vexed the incendiary moment. Anna did agree the gemologist should be received and given a suitable reward.

To arrange delivery Arnold hired a private detective who presented himself as an ICGA appraiser whom the young jewel thief approached and presented the broach stone for sale. The man gratefully acknowledged the offered reward but refused it, saying it was not his mandate (Arnold's stipulation), and had just departed when Anna realized Roald's ongoing reproof might be slighted, shelved. Roald, in an amorous mood that night, sought to exercise his generosity. Indeed, as she later related to Rosanna, she nearly overlooked the inner paper the broach had been wrapped in. On similar matrix paper had she sometimes conveyed coded messages to dead letter boxes in the dead of night. It was after Roald departed that she retrieved the scrap, spread it under a good light, and saw there the hint of a script that required but a mild solvent — in her case a diluted nail polish remover — to reveal itself. At first she fitfully imagined it a directive from a cut out, and was only partly relieved to discover instead a request to meet — alone! — in a large sportswear store, the gent she accidentally met the night of Antoine's soirée and helped locate a friend's guitar. She did now recall the man, whose identity prompted a giddy laugh. Being preoccupied as she was that night, she hadn't at first recognized Arnold Storrier. In the note he deeply apologized for the manner of the diamond's return, believing its sequestration at the time of the soirée unpleasant, yet desired to meet, see her again,

discreetly! Hence this extravagant subterfuge. If she did not come, he would honour and not further intrude upon her privacy. Bitterly she recalled that evening's battle royal with Roald, prompted in part by his resentment of her recent aloof behaviour. Being maniacally proprietorial he also abhorred the low necked, gossamer, haut couture dress she wore that night and peremptorily sought to retire it, tearing away a portion of cap sleeve to which the broach was attached. He only left off when he sensed he might get hurt and/or elicit an audience. The damage done one of her favourite frocks infuriated her at the time. Indeed, she had picked up and thrown the severed fragment of dress at him as he strode off hitting him in the back. She was nursing her anger when Arnold Storrier 'intruded'. When he left she too fled to avoid any further, stray or nosy guests. Later she'd retrieved the fragment of dress but couldn't find the broach, which had apparently become detached in the *mêlée*. She did diligently look for, but not find it, a fact she kept to herself; best be thought heedless, careless, than a cagy thief.

In the end she burned the note but kept the rendezvous, hiring, at considerable expense, risk and difficulty, two independent bodyguards. Like the Cheka, Roald execrated the use of 'alien' escorts. Of course Arnold had done some homework on the enigmatic lady and learned from Muerner of a valued Paleomena employee who bore a remarkable resemblance to Anna Licchavi, and who, like him, had also 'decamped', as Muerner put it. From Antoine he learned of the wistful poetry she and Antoine composed for her unborn child in Lovelock — on matrix paper, to elude Roald's vigilant overseers.

The meeting took place, in the large spacious sports store. The man's size and rather somber looks addled any easy assessment of him and Anna said little throughout the meeting. His wish to buy her something — as amends and possible *aide-mémoire* — she had wryly smiled at, and drolly pointed to a pair of sturdy, professional-looking hiking boots, thinking the matter ended. Yet a salesgirl had been summoned.

She answered few of his questions, discounting the occasional smile or nod that acknowledged his tact and persistence. Only a fool would have expected ready candid replies then, she told Rosanna. Such a meeting too nearly resembled the summons she might receive from Roald's solicitors. Then why go? The wish to see into the depths. He asked if she was vexed by his attention. He assumed she was not indifferent or she wouldn't have come. She had patiently if not fondly smiled at this. She was hardly indifferent, she did say. He made no mention of Muerner's allusion to a Paleomena employee, knowing Muerner's uncanny talent for distracting and deriding. He only asked if she was content as she was now? That poignant, topical question she met with a flinty smile, saying only that her life was full and engaging, and that she valued many of the friendships her marriage facilitated.

Despite his size and presence, his queries seemed pacific enough. She detected no threat or menace in his actions or his words — or warning. Indeed, his interest in her and her wellbeing was likely genuine. As she listened, she found herself engaged, even anticipating, imagining, further visits, however furtive, for she contended with many watchers then. She was elated to discover in a later meeting that he too liked epigrammatic literature, the writing of Tom Wolfe being a current favourite, a subject that surfaced in a brief discussion of 'ever illusive' independence. Recollecting how Wolfe's own lifestyle was touted 'slyly radical', Arnold admitted to "an envy of one who meticulously, independently, even flamboyantly, lived his own life...proving it can be done, by an earthling!" — the unexpected comment being part of his 'gnomic finesse' Anna later told Rosanna.

He did tell her the little he knew of his orphan past that first day, leaving off any mention of Muerner's allusive aside. He'd just mentioned his first foster home when a photographer was sighted and they left via different doorways after she accepted a second note, which ended in an error encrypted scrip he proposed to use thereafter, which would be enclosed in letters sent to Antoine's theatre as — fan mail, a comment that elicited another residual smile.

Ensnconced in her homeward limo she wryly examined and tried on one of the boots he'd urged her to take, sensing an assuaging tease at its hardy look and feel. Later she told Rosanna it was the selfless lucidity of his language in the meetings themselves that allayed most of her suspicions — as when he sombrely confirmed his trying association with Felix Muerner, the absence of much of his own past, and his anxiety over unknown others prompting and monitoring events in his hectic life. He sensed he lived on a kind of probationary tenure — a refrain she knew only too well by then! When his doubt about his scientific utility surfaced, the sincerity of his words alerted her to her own disaccord with Paleomena — words hardly intended to impress. Indeed, she was dismayed by this acknowledgement, given her own revised, if suspended, commitment to an exemplary science. She listened with renewed wonder and caution thereafter. She was less surprised to learn of his interest in her, though the ready candour of the admission dismayed. With some resolve he'd said, "I've really only met two women I couldn't slight a real fondness for. The first disappeared in Indochina. The second is candidly eyeing me now." Such frank words at first troubled; she did not welcome another paramour; she was after all making careful daring plans of her own. But the care and circumspection with which the meetings were arranged intrigued her also, and she went, sitting usually in silence when he summoned a memory of an earlier meeting, the sobriety of it sometimes teasing both of them, his low genial voice then slipping into its staid Austrian humour. In such a voice he spoke of his late musical pretensions. His restraint was also a draw. She did not withdraw her hand the time he first sought it, but the distant smile on her face silenced him the remainder of that meeting. "I'm not really a free being...at the moment," she did manage to say. Yet she did smile and sought his face with her other hand, which he kissed and held for a mutually flushed moment.

He then suggested a pretext she might consider: a greater involvement with Antoine's theatre, where Antoine and a select friend could be relied on to furnish serviceable alibis — specifically a librarian who would welcome occasional help preparing research texts on set designs and costumes for forthcoming productions. But this prospect she realized wary vigilant Roald would learn of sooner or later and abruptly shook her head — actually her first conspiratorial response she told her new pew mate: she and Rosanna had come to occasionally sit together at an Episcopal Evensong in side pews. Anna acknowledged the coolness on her part (gypsy autism Arnold mused later), yet at the outset perceived no other option. His attentions, however flattering, could complicate her own prudent strategy, which Gloria's lawyer had in part anticipated.

Her canny incisive plan to escape Roald's family orbit, and his team of spies, devolved around the discovery, just before leaving Paleomena, of a covert Russian account, a 'gold seam', to pay select agents and, she surmised, crucial bribes. In recently taking over the office of an engineer Paleomena had temporarily employed, she discovered some old cheque stubs with a single blank cheque partly burned, lying beneath a gas fireplace grate. Its presence there made no sense. The effort to burn the cheque would surely not have been neglected. Was she *expected* to find and report it, a late test of her fealty? Her mind teamed with edgy speculation, though none of her minders had mentioned the

enigmatic cheque. It's presence she might well have overlooked, whereas it offered a matchless fortuitous opportunity now! Given that her leave-taking from Roald, Paleomana, and the GRU was pending, the cheque could serve as a key to a slyly staged release! Whatever the cheque's purpose, she was determined to benefit from it. And she was now sufficiently removed from Paleomena and the GRU to answer for it.

The cheque's design motif matched the bearer drafts once consigned to her, thus affirming a central account that likely paid her own wage! The final draft she received, and luckily had'd yet cashed, bore identical border design and warrant marks to those left on the ashen cheque. A singed account number was detectable, along with scorched but apprehensible signatures, one a schematic. Thus an engaging strategy loomed!

To begin, Anna decided to reimburse Antoine's theatre with a withdrawal from a family Acorn savings account — a canny first step. The pre-nuptial agreement, which fortunately her euphoria at perceiving herself free of the GRU and Paleomena for a time, hadn't prevented her carefully reading, made allowance for joint usage of this one account in specified emergencies, though she'd never been granted an access code. Roald had provided lavish stocking funds to pay her personal and household expenses, the generosity up-front game, but had never freely vouchsafed access to any of his major funds — and the Acorn account was one of several she estimated to be worth half-a-billion Swiss francs or more. By stealth and adroit spy-craft hacking, she'd learned a user name, password, and number code from Roald's study computer. Establishing a joint claim there would emend her *de facto* dependent status. A start at least in minimizing her vulnerability.

The *second* act in her strategy was to place a sizeable withdrawal *from* the Russian account *into* the Acorn account, using the apprehended signatures and numbers on a well fabricated cheque, an electronic withdrawal/deposit requiring pertinent codes she did not have. On learning the extent of Licchavi android prowess in the course of her marriage, she had little doubt the GRU sought Licchavi Consec expertise through third parties, though she wasn't privy to any transfer. The unusual stray deposit, she believed, would perplex, deadlock Roald and the GRU long enough for her to elude Roald's watchers. Minimally, Roald would be stymied by the deposit and soon immured in a desperate attempt to comprehend, if not abjure it — while she played the role of a trophy wife, busy mindfully shopping. The turmoil would, could screen an adroit leave taking. So she believed.

For a time she and Arnold's meetings had been managed through the excuse of endless fittings for a new wardrobe, until the couturier's assistant, a gentle elderly Madeiran woman, whose beautifully cut and stitched garments were one of the designer's hallmarks, solemnly complained that the reputation of the firm, already notable for 'procrastination', had worsened, and Anna was asked to come more swiftly to a decision on some recent fittings. It had been their best excuse: a snug nook in the couturier's workspace permitted a late 'friend' to visit and quietly 'gossip' between fittings, while Roald's chauffeur eyed the shop from the limo. She had long commiserated on select alterations with the talented indomitable woman, and there were tears on both sides when the final creation was solemnly delivered. On returning to the limo, she noted another man casing the studio from a nearby magazine and coffee stand, a newcomer whose presence suggested a newly engaged watcher. Her main problem, which she hadn't shared with Arnold, was that she risked losing her insular status and identity if she were to strike out on her own. The stringers who avidly chronicled Licchavi fortunes were already speculating about

Roald's best dressed wife's 'custodial privacy' as one cheeky stringer put it. Moreover, if she couldn't entangle Roald with GRU, she risked, in due course, losing her relative upper crust immunity. So she believed. Complexity was rarely providential.

Brief meetings with Arnold followed a trip to the dentist, another a last minute visit to a florist to buy sprays for Antoine's birthday gala which Roald shunned — to Anna's mindful protests. The locksmith had arrived a week earlier, and Yatrib sufficiently intimidated to assure a house steward that Roald sanctioned the visit. Roald was nettled the night he found the doors to Anna's bed-sitting room emphatically locked. Her comment about being sorely tired struck him as feigned, yet he did not protest. His wife's growing apathy toward him was a near given then. Anna did not expect a clamorous scene, yet was rather disappointed none took place; another bruhaha would have served her well then, remind him of her new assertiveness. But she knew her husband's mind. Her act gave him a formal leverage he did not perhaps welcome but found sufficiently consoling to desist after some terse swearing. In her room Yatrib knelt to beg the intervention of Ganesha.

Then suddenly — a heartening resolution. Despite the further exaction it entailed, the ensuing freedom it promised was a heady welcome prospect. Once again she gambled — the ongoing game. Would she ever find a regular comforting sleep? Or wake from it if it came? The game plan she and Arnold worked out together was daring and at least pragmatically satisfying. She drolly believed she might yet make use of the durable, so impulsively purchased hiking boots after all! Arnold told her later it was like his first experience of hang gliding as a young teen — a venture which had briefly carried him out to sea and back. "Well, you did return," she genially noted. Such becoming words he hoarded then.

At first she all but derided the plan though. "Only an ingenuous swashbuckler...too theatrical by half don't you think?" They regarded one another then with easy candour. But the actual plan of escape, the one fetched at a newsstand kiosk on her return from the dentist, was adroitly, minutely detailed, and she placidly consented to give it a go. She had nothing to lose really: if they were caught, Arnold would be charged with trespassing and be out on bail before sunrise; she would be as she was, with perhaps one more incident chalked up to Roald's tally of her perfidies. It was the one plan that promised a decisive head start. An attempt to lose Roald's watchers somewhere *in* the city itself would simply cue sentinels in the wider nets — including almost certainly some Cheka informers. Roald's stylish wife was already a subject of intensifying Cheka scrutiny.

An outside window grille to her rarely used corner sewing room Arnold planned to remove and hoist her to the roof in a climber's sling attached to a grappling hook. From there they would repair to the Eastern side overlooking the gardens and forested area at the back, then free fall using the same hook in set lengths to ground level. Once Roald's security detail was distracted, her removal was relatively easy. The operational ploy came in the form of a staged drive-by shooting off the front gateway. McClelland helped out here. Frieda spent a fortnight monitoring the positions of Roald's estate guards. The distant shots on the appointed day incited a fevered scrambling of all near security folk to the main entrance, one of whom, on leaving, instructed her to lock her room's doors. Keenly she listened to the sounds of the window grille being cut; Arnold had climbed a drain pipe fitted into a brick flue, a bolt cutter in hand. It was credibly ascertained that the grille itself either had a defective security alarm or no alarm at all: she'd gingerly tested its sensitivity herself by scoring the steel bars

with a heavy file, whereas the wide window behind the grille might be safely fully opened from inside. In any case, it was hoped the initial tumult off the front entrance would muffle a second alarm, and their flight be accomplished before anyone noticed. With an unheralded fondness she viewed again the riches she would not likely see again. Roald Jr. was still asleep when she looked in on him, his serenity chilling in its facility. He was her one recrimination. But he would soon be housed in the insular boarding school Roald attended. Roald's family never liked her, and would see to it that she became a dim memory in his life. At best, she would appear before her son thereafter as a tolerated in-law. One of the specialists convinced Roald that his wife's 'starchiness, rectitude was inculcating a latent slyness and deceitfulness'! 'Rectitude' indeed. The Cheka sometimes used language so, then derided the fools they subverted with it — one of her many belated recognitions. That Roald Jr. was the product of what now seemed a concubine liaison had lost its pathos, but the child would eventually relate to her only in a formal sense. She hoped there'd be a time later on to recoup lost years, resurrect earlier contentment — children don't always abide the wishes of their elders. Still, had she not been able to leave his room that day, she might never have left. The wonder was she actually did — an act she later deemed, with some amazement, providential!

She was permitted one small valise, which included a single frill, a shortened, unadorned version of the cap-sleeved dress Arnold first discovered her sitting alone on the lower staircase step, the night of the soirée, mulling over her late distemper. In the original, a shoulder corsage housed the diamond broach. The fabric was beaded at the hips in a raspberry that faded upwards to pink and crystal, the Krems skirt knife-pleated over straight chiffon. She hardly noticed Arnold the night he sought a friend's guitar; not five minutes earlier jealous proprietorial Roald, who never liked the dress's beau monde chic nor its décolleté — which she so recently suavely requested her Madeiran artisan lower further! — demanded she change. Roald had urged her many times to shun the proposed design. He didn't like the world 'looking on', she mused. That harangue before the staircase ended in an intense scuffle when he ripped the neckline and shoulder cap to hasten the garment's demise. It was their final emphatic dogfight. The corsage and a portion of the shoulder-cap were severed. Never again did Roald attempt to accost her, learning anew that his wife possessed combative skills he ought to eschew.

As the outside window grille slipped from its moorings, without setting off a second alarm, to fall quietly into a flower bed below, she sensed a cosmic release. The ascent to the roof in the newly hung sling was just short of magical. Descending the other side into the garden could have been accomplished without sheering off the lovely nails she belatedly decided. Eve indeed!

It seemed they were aboard the private plane in record time, though the curtained 'getaway car' took twenty minutes to reach the copse with the waiting helicopter, the ride in the helicopter a near half-hour before the small airfield lit with mauve lights shimmered below. A downpour hit just as they touched down. In the powerful single engine turboprop Arnold chartered, as it taxied into a sudden lift, they looked at a slicked version of themselves they had not seen before and found entertaining; he couldn't remember her elfin, nearly pellucid, ears; she hadn't realized he was such a round head. "Quite Slavic," she said.

The dramatic release was uniformly dumbfounding, the incredulity lingering as mellow inebriation during the ten hour flight, with a single refuelling stop in Labrador. A friend of Rosanna's consented to the lease of a chalet in the Pyrenees where they would go after a stop in Zurich to affirm Anna's banking ploys and a new passport. A limo would leave them a short distance from the chalet.

McClelland and a security detail awaited their arrival on foot. Further plans would be decided at the chalet.

The shyness was another numinous if unhallowed revelation. They had barely touched till then, the tentativeness scarcely concealing a burgeoning fondness. He rather quaintly kissed her hands and saw a ghost of the smile that so daunted him before. Her silence was partly due to the treasured deflation, partly the realization that her companion was exceedingly wide and towering in the narrow seat beside her. She recalled he had once been a puzzling monstrosity. The press shots of some early body-building hijinks were particularly unappetizing, as were the fragmentary tapes of a youngster who began his competitive career as a kick boxer for some London gangster. ‘Unrelenting ghastliness’ was how Gloria editorialized the feral kick boxing. Moreover, the man seemed or could be no less menacing now. The bracing irony being that had Svengali Muerner not intervened in Arnold’s life, they might never have met!

At their pressed secret rendezvous they either walked or sat, ever in anonymous apparel, in parks and gallery nooks, vigilant to any watchdogs. It had been the mind and voice that engaged her, and she was vaguely aware that latter aspect of herself had initially charmed him. Now the languor, lingering disbelief, breathless almost ludicrous anticipation contributed to a silence that made physical presences loom. She noted his hesitation, his heavy restraint, and squinted at him with a half-closed eye. It became for her a pleasant interval to await his response, which was finally the artless purchase of one approaching a quiet but alerted young deer, tentatively seeking only the salients of her face. It was entirely a novel experience for her — to be so guilelessly, compunctiously cherished. She found his stately solicitude thrilling she thought because it was so nearly preposterous. She wondered aloud what part of her he would devour first, and as they both wrestled with proximate schoolyard giggles, they seemed somehow bonded forever, a couple of reunited smugglers. It was then she conceded she may indeed love the man but the deliberate finality of it awed her. Her life had shifted so seismically, her renewed self-reliance become so consuming, that she suddenly did not want that plateau she had gained — regained! — to move, that its very heady tension was part of her own wind-swept soul, and to slight it now might indeed usher in a new demise. She had never thought that desire should oblige a daring dicey adventure — barring Antoine’s sarcastic rendering of *conventional* bonding! Roald had ever been the insular beady eyed clinician, never a courageous, resourceful co-conspirator.

“Poor bear,” she said. His arms relaxed with her fond, ironic words. “I don’t know what to call you. You know you have a rather ridiculous first name.”

Such unexpected comment suddenly lit their sleeted stage in a comic hue. He had seen that amused glimmer all too rarely — initially the night of the Two For Cheek skit, in her question so unexpectedly and whimsically placed before the play’s author.

She said now with sly earnestness, “What, I do wonder, does gay Antoine call you?”

Belatedly he answered with, “‘Titanic’ — a likely guess — always the anticipated ice berg in Antoine’s regard of buoyant straight chaps.”

Her smile he noted could be friendly between being precipitously derisive. But now it was as if she hadn’t heard him. She was perhaps still duelling with ‘suitable’ first names.

“Can I help with the sorting?” he plaintively asked.

“No.”

Finally she ensconced herself against him, her head resting on his jacket collar, one hand tracing

his chin and brawny neck, her eyes focused elsewhere.

“I think I’ll call you ‘David’. He was a complex achiever, also a principled connoisseur Paleomena couldn’t quite suborn.” She suddenly straightened. “Now that I know who I’m traveling with, I choose to dry out.”

With that declaration, she lifted aside his strapping arms and headed for the rear washroom with her valise. *A connoisseur and a king*, he said to the small storm turmoiled window, the wing beyond cleaving a cloud smudged sunset. Rain tears coursed the pane. *Been laying it on a bit thick have ye laddie?...* Yet he knew her need for unobliging consideration — from a trusted wayfarer, indeed a loyal buccaneer, he ventured. Reflecting on his condensed liberal arts education— Muerner’s belated tutelage — the word Argonaut came to mind, a Jason perhaps, whose devotion to his singular Athena matched his own love of the rare earthbound Anna! Rosanna would write in her diary that the five days at the chalet passed with a felicity only nimble lovers can bring to a revel, and ended with the sudden wrenching notoriety — that broke upon them all like a freezing mistral.

The Zurich chores — presenting new passports to customs, and affirming the exceptional withdrawal and deposit in the accessed Acorn account — were executed without complication. Antoine confirmed the payment to his *nom de guerre* bank account to indemnify the damage done to the Geffen Playhouse and neighbouring theatre, and Frieda verified the deposit of a sturdy sum into the Acorn account from the secret Russian fund! A computer techie who noted the payment and odder deposit duly informed the bank manager. The unusual transactions Roald learned of the following day. He was surprised his wife knew the Acorn access protocol, and shocked to discover a stray, inapt deposit *from* the secret Russian fund, a GRU purse he’d till then so sedulously screened! Frieda’s putative half-sister Zoya was then, magically it seemed, in the cast of a production of *A Chorus Line* at Covent Garden which Anna morosely talked herself out of attending at the last minute. Thus the original itinerary remained locked in place.

A cheery McClelland greeted them at the chalet that evening with a meal he prepared himself, which included pepper pot, metemgee, roti, fried plantain, stewed peppers and shallots, pickled garbanzo beans, sapodilla ice cream, and an Auxerrois wine, the chalet’s maid and outlying security guards Arnold hired all savouring portions from this special feast.

Anna herself phoned Rosanna a day later and begged her to come up. “We’ve discovered all this lovely Flamenco music and no one to teach us the moves.” Anna had been eating and laughing at the same time. Sportive voices filled the background, Arnold and McClelland calling out historic names! “Not in here Adolf, no no...Eva, you too...out!” Several goats had wandered into the pantry. The uproar until they were removed was a fine skimble-shamble McClelland said later.

The friend who owned the chalet played classical guitar — whose music and tapes they discovered — and Rosanna once taught Flamenco dancing at the Teatro Flamenco Madrid. At first she was hesitant; she could hardly intrude on a *de facto* honeymoon. But she went, after much pleading, and discovered a joyous couple often drolly amused with one another, so it seemed, who often slipped away after supper to the beautiful orchard, returning in the early hours to a tactfully billeted chalet. The discovery of the music, in particular Arnold’s — now ‘David’s’, though where that name came from Rosanna never learned — superb playing of it on an old square grand, vivified the anticipation. Anna was a wonderfully talented dancer Rosanna discovered, almost she guessed a sometime professional. Yet all that observation got was a friendly hug. All three ended dancing to some records Rosanna

brought. Such winsome pupils! A little too dotty to take on the road mind.

When Rosanna would insist on a rest, the two swanks pulled out a variety of infernal puzzles, most requiring great plastic and/or mathematical skill — Rosanna had been hopeless she said, and had heard of none of them: Baffling Burrs, the Engel Enigma, a dreadful Pyramid puzzle, and several computerized forms of écarté she sometimes heard being played late at night, both players agile cheats according to McClelland, and both given to calling one another catty names, each a select endearment it seemed. Chess was broached only later in the excursion; Anna was still a learner and not about to easily concede any innate superiority in her prospective life partner.

On those evenings the twosome disappeared into the orchard, the quiet that descended had a prankish air, and Rosanna and the maid usually retired, leaving McClelland savouring a last pipe by the fire. The night Rosanna arrived, the two warring sweetkins did the dishes, and found even that chore mesmeric it seemed, incipient humour ever at large.

The inaugural meal that McClelland prepared for the two was gobbled up with spare conversational interruptions. Talk was still precious then and the daze of ‘being there’ not yet worn off, or rather not evolved into the later ardor. Anna was again struck by the abiding care two male soul mates can so parsimoniously and elegantly display for one another — McClelland’s attendance on Arnold an ongoing ‘worriation’ as he put it. She even sensed overtones of jealousy in watching the two. The swarthy McClelland was taller than Arnold and only slightly narrower. He could be a durable sixty-eight or a providential forty-seven. He was a widower with three grown children, all a blessing it seemed. He had been a teacher, a Marine marksman, an amateur palaeontologist, a sailor and carpenter — whose patented canoe paddle made him an independent fortune. He was a superb cook and invested part of his fortune in a tobacco plantation (before smoke-free probity and punctilio) renowned for a pipe blend whose fragrance, a muted allspice, impregnated the kitchen. His expression held permanently the sinew of a refined melancholy. His dignity allied to his proficiency was mesmerizing. He was also deeply religious and quietly superstitious — a fact Anna learned in stages. She found several examples of small bizarre markings on windowsills and thresholds that amused her at first until she realized that Arnold was not indifferent to them; indeed he claimed one evening that the markings often reassured. They sat at the time on their book bed, relaxed and swathed in bath towels after a shower. At his mention of ‘reassured’ she snorted, snatched and hit him with a small decorative pillow that split, leaving them covered in feathers.

“*Reassured...*” She’d mulled over the prospect while blowing some feathers from her mouth. “So, of the many precious markings here, how many have actually *reassured*?”

Arnold quietly answered while clearing a settle of feather plumage from her hair and chest. “Most, I think. Mac seemed highly optimistic this time round.”

“Was he?” she replied with a wifely primness. But her wry twist of mouth and single half-cocked eyelid gave her away. He had by then, after some inspired fondling, rediscovered the smooth nude contour of her sex. Earlier she’d said, “My ‘scarlet letter’, so to speak...pubic hair’s a pain growing out; you’re not entirely disappointed I trust.” His smile had slowly broadened. “It comes with a manual I trust.”

If he was given a time to relive that ineffable period, it would be the first few hours they were alone together. Not because it was the most radiant or satisfying, but simply now the most unreliably recalled. It had been fraught with sedate gremlins, which sometimes teased them both into impromptu

smiles. She had returned from the aft cabin of the plane, curled against him and, after a languorous yawning apology, promptly fallen asleep. He was not in the least tired and sat staring alternately at the growing darkness, the often rain pearly window, and her inert form pillowed against his shoulder; her combed-out auburn hair the one hopeful offering. She had surely guessed, ruled on his infatuation and finally gone along with the plan — which brought about her physical release but no real long term plans once the escape was made. He really had no firm ground on which to presume anything. Their final covert meetings had been affectionate but ran shy of any concrete resolution. His lone consolation being that, given the vexations of her current life, she saw in his companionship a viable escape and safe beckoning future.

To date he had passionately, selflessly sought only one woman, and her sudden loss in an awesome jungle remained an open wound. She had indeed been abducted by an affiliate of a Triad terrorist group he later learned — just after their last numinous visit to Angkor Wat, beautifully described in a final letter. Her loss left him with a growing sense of alienation, as if he were a caricature unnoticed before, his emerging, eminently broadcast scientific prowess belonging to someone else, inimically Muerner's adroitly indoctrinated 'eidolon' he presumed. The period of conditioning and study Muerner initiated, while at first inviting, left him listless, wary, a plaintiff he didn't at first recognize. In ominous stages the specific science he'd mastered more and more pointed to a hectic denouement, to invincible powers it would have little sanction to control, thus seeding his growing depression — as if he were hostage to his own stark involvement in enhancing such a discipline. He had experimented with uppers like Naltrexone or Vivitrol, though not for long, as they tended to vivify his love of gambling — one escape he didn't want overwhelming him just then. He even began resorting to self-inflicted physical injury, which sardonically left him *poignantly* aware of himself *as* himself, and actually spurred him to more immunity-generative surgical interventions, his wish for a psychic freedom from Muerner paramount then, as craven as it seemed now. Yet that 'cutting' gave him a glimpse of a singular peculiar being! His ineluctable *own* self!

What a zealot he had been then, a restless experimenter, full of his own self-dramatic pathos. A wired Hamlet. Were it not for the chagrin of being taken one night, bleeding and smarting, to a hospital emergency and Muerner's prompt oversight, he might still be at it. Yet he had rediscovered in those interventions how a lingering pessimism might be foiled by savage willfulness — not unlike the wounds in his cage match career that became painful *after* the event. But then, a wondrous ineffable calming miracle intervened, something he still marvelled at — the awesome fortuitous rediscovery of soulful classical music: songs, airs in compositions that summoned the speech of angels and brandy of the damned, to cite two seasoned wayfarers. The curiosity being that he'd 'heard', listened to such lyric accord before — but somehow not really *heard* it, as he had of late! This benediction was soon augmented by the beguiling seemly advent of Anna Licchavi — the muse of a very numinous fugue! His ready affection for her released a rapt anticipation — what he lamely called in one artless, blithe moment 'a dolphin ode'. "Ah," she had mused, "bottle nosed." They'd both been drinking. "I did hear the mermaid sing," he said. "I daresay you waved of course," she added, eyeing him with fresh wonder.

Such repartee seemed ever hovering, as they discovered over time the mutual resonances that give harmony its wondrous solidity!

Thus the heady anticipation of those very first hours was enhanced by the sylvan woodland loveli-

ness that backgrounded the scheduled hike, and the first glimpses of the whitewashed storybook chalet with its fragrant citrus trees, patch of hardy Kikuyu lawn, and sprightly flower beds accented with Sunflowers. That initial hike was in part a gamesome acknowledgement of their very first meeting, when the expensive, impulsively selected boots were purchased! A security team shadowed their progress to the chalet, alert to unbidden followers. But none were seen, and McClelland posted his select signs of good, unstinting Fortune.

The hearty meal before the wide window arches that framed the verdant storybook landscape — in the antique kitchen smelling of McClelland's sweet tobacco, ripe figs and anise — was no sooner ended than the reticence loomed anew. Arnold wryly imagined he had a brilliant autistic urchin on his hands. Frieda seemed fascinated with the rustic beauty of the new settings yet seemed unable to bring it into focus. Her only specific requisition had been a private hiding place for a few days after Roald learned of her flight and sly use of the two accounts. He would act impulsively she thought, possibly against the wishes of his advisers. She would know how to proceed in due course. A smitten Arnold had completed the logistics of the Zurich-Pyrenees junket. A bemused Muerner assumed most of the expenses. "Sounds like a femme fatal this 'Anna'," he'd said. "I still think she may be two-faced, a seminal dyad; but if she can keep you head up — can't be an entire waste." Arnold had lamely smiled, yet he did wonder at one point if he'd misread the spirited amiability of Anna's final gestures and words. Was her display of cheerfulness and conviviality, even affection, a means to a well-screened out? Did she doubt his trustworthiness, which she must suborn till the last minute? None of these questions was ever really answered. Either she had intended no match, foresaw perhaps a future cash recompense for his troubles via a parting settlement, then changed her mind, or she simply carefully appraised the options as she went; he was still half inclined to believe the latter possibility. Rapt uncanny anticipation — the flavour of those first reeling hours! They had strolled in the twilight through the well-tended fruit trees, then curiously lingered about some ancient stray olive trees, knurled hardy survivors at the margin of the grove. Only later did he see the beautiful silk chiffon dress hanging unused in a closet. She wanted finally to steer clear of the waxed memories — so she dryly explained.

Indoors, they had silently watched a vivid carnelian sunset. She coaxed him to play something on the elderly square grand. He ended playing Satie, with a wistfulness that went apparently unnoticed. When he paused he found her asleep. She awoke seconds later and plaintively sought her room. He returned to the piano, to play his transcription of the idyllic 'Air' from the Holberg Suite by Edvard Grieg. When he finished she was seated at the far end of the room, in a limpid chemise.

"It was lovely. I didn't want to disturb you."

"I didn't think you'd hear, upstairs."

"I hear like an owl."

Belatedly, quietly he said, "Night's herald..."

Her smile then evolved into the sly pout she sometimes adopted when observing him. For a time they regarded one another with fey amusement, which led to a swift avid embrace, their kisses yielding to many select adoring caresses.

McClelland, yawning while consulting his watch fob, was the last to see them that night, the creak in the narrow staircase giving the twosome away, Arnold hefting his love over his shoulder like a prized himation, the laughter quiet, but giddy, conspiratorial. "Goin t'help sistah out," he mused in the lingo

he sometimes resorted to with the chalet's maid, followed by a well-versed chuckle as he banked the coals in the heart fire, lit a pipe, and thought of the deceased life partner he too had so fondly fulsomely cherished.

The illusive frames on arriving in the Pyrenees yielded to a pretty keenness early the second morning when the hint of daybreak tinselled the furnishing salients of their room. Arnold was first aware of Frieda lying on her side holding one of his large hands. A quilted duvet partly shrouded her figure. She was matching her smaller span of fingers to his. He smiled, which she belatedly parried by a soft nearly pathetic declaration: "— Not even a handful." The window at her back framed her head and face in a tawny shadow. Was the remark full of incipient mirth or an accountant's assessment? Questions followed her like a rolling mist. He said she arrived with the sun. And on cue, as he carefully watched in measured anticipation, the first rays of a 'rosy fingered dawn' begin to electrify her fin spun auburn hair. She matter-of-factly took up both his hands as if to appraise their worth. "An even match though," she said with an optimistic smile, then neatly pulled the duvet over them both.

He awoke about noon, convinced there was a lenient God who occasionally sanctioned unarticled enchantment. He lay on his side trailing poised fingers over the ineluctable prize he had just uncovered, covered and again uncovered, to a lay smile. She was whiter, heavier and more supple than expected, the two maternal sentinels a Rose Marie pink. Begonia, she said. Peach cameo freckles dusted her cheeks, shoulders and chest. He lingered again about the wondrous mons whose smoothness had initially beguiled. The shock of its nude candour, so unexpected, childlike — had slyly, accusingly confronted. She stirred but did not open her eyes. (He would readily learn that no instruction manual was required.) She moved closer to him displacing his hand, saying rather stoically after a plainsong sigh, "Generically, the seam itself belongs to Atë, did you know, according to deep throat Antoine, a detail the imp thought pertinent when we were fashioning Lovelock. He's a stickler for 'fragrant features', as he calls them." She continued with some amusement: "Atë is that ancient Greek goddess with a reputation for criminal rashness...one of Antoine's select...who was driven out of heaven and bedevilled the sons of men, making them so blind they blundered into things." The pause that followed was anti-climactic. "From Antoine's Olympian treasure trove."

"Ah — big man ting," he responded trying to ape McClelland's lingo."

"I think you mean 'stinga'."

A spell of moues followed these words, leading to a 'polyvalent embrace' — a stilted description from a happily dazed Arnold that Frieda, when she heard it, promptly guffawed at.

She awoke a second time to reproof him with candid eyes that slowly creased to a ready esprit, and stretched languorously, newly alert, teasing with a canny smile.

"So, poshlotsy?.."

It was perhaps the beginning of what he imagined as the 'off the wall' stage — blithe fun on the fly, so to speak, which endured more or less to the end.

"You didn't hear," he said.

"I am like...Anastasia...total princess." A daring declaration which he surprised her by replying, "A treasured imp, I read somewhere."

"With a devoted following." She eyed him cannily.

He agreeably nodded.

Some fervid murmuring soon blended with faint jouncing of the book bed mattress — a noise that prompted McClelland, whose hearing was acute, to once again smile as he lit a pipe and recall his own special inamorata — a historic gal still vividly alive in his own lucid memory!

The many board, card and quiz games the enamoured twosome played, served to further sustain their repartee. (As noted, chess would be ‘sojourned’ in a later chapter.) If Arnold was largely unrivalled at most number games, she did keep him head up. Indeed, her acuity and resource left him further smitten with this dauntless Athena who would risk a *worldly* life with him, a mere mortal!

One fawning exchange occurred on the small balcony that adjoined their bedroom. They lounged then, after another joint rapt shower, in bathrobes on a glider, Arnold’s head in her lap — he giving vent to a sober reflection, talking in a manner that echoed Antoine’s notion of ‘ponderous pussyfooting’ — as he once described Arnold’s philosophizing.

“It is a reformational age. The day’s cultural minders may approve of *Wine Women and Song* — whereas *Those Were the Days*, a time when straights had a place in the sun — is history.”

“My plaintive hetero,” Anna quietly retorted fingering his thick wavy hair.

Later that same day, after a leisurely perimeter hike, they gazed at the roan-russet hues a late sunlight cast through wine bottles on the main terrace’s slate table top. He sat on a bench, framing a chin, she nearby in a deck chair with arms circling drawn up knees.

“So alive — the tints,” she said.

“Life — a cabernet,” he responded. To which with some amusement she added, “The born again ‘Reds.’”

“Ah. So. Love the wine you’re with...?” Seeing her sudden moue he swiftly added, “Sorry, trying to keep up. Difficult, of course.”

She looked at him, as she sometimes did, with a schoolmarm’s candour. “You’re not really a social drinker!”

“Few hermits are.”

Eying him speculatively she added, “There are exceptions, I’m told...right now the odds seem in your favour.”

He plaintively smiled.

It was then that Anna, after studying him for a further wry moment, rose to get closer to him, taking her nearly empty glass with her, but swayed off balance on the way. Promptly Arnold rose and settled her onto a nearby chair. With a pert smile, she placed her glass on his head. What followed *was* a show stopper — which Rosanna witnessed from a hall doorway.

After balancing the glass on his forehead, Arnold performed a credible Cossack heel-and-toe, his physical prowess ever axiomatic, after which he easily gathered up the imbibor and headed off to their room. “My very own stair climber,” she said in bypassing a grinning McClelland, a demure yet smiling Rosanna and a silently tickled maid. Indeed, Rosanna would often reflect with some amusement on the attentive McClelland, who always seemed to be drawing a curtain or blind, closing a door. One morning Arnold, breakfast tray in hand, passed her on the stairs to their bedroom. Seconds later Anna said, from their room, in an affable voice, “Ah, such prompt room service.”

Rosanna shared many of her memories with a grateful Gloria, who would give Rosanna a warm acknowledgement in her Storrier saga, particularly Rosanna’s assessment of Anna herself, as in the following:

“The hijinks and agile banter did entertain us all of course. Yet Anna displayed an unexpected insouciance at times. It was partly sheer relief, I’m sure, as I think did Arnold. But another might easily have construed a dotty exhibitionist, particularly some guards. To sunbathe quite like that, drenched in oil, nude as a newt someday. I was told later that one of the perimeter guards even took pictures with a telephoto lens. Then that ever beguiling unprepared-for laughter. Yet should one wonder she was sometimes so effusive. To be finally free of all the other blether. One evening they joined us all briefly on the terrace. You get what I call a real gloaming over there. Anna was still nappy and wanted to know Arnold’s age. The question had been placed earlier. ‘So how old is old? You *are* old enough to take a drink.’ That comment got us all smiling, while the minx feigned an inquisitive stare and Arnold refilled everyone’s glass.

“There were and are lots of stories, of course, some likely embellished. In that catskill quiet there, you imagine all sorts of things. They could have gone off on their own but Arnold wanted a safe haven he told me. The guards, it seemed, were the most conscientious when there was no moon. The twosome apparently returned through the orchard on that second night, he carrying her I gather, she picking things out of his hair. Well, to make short of an earthy story, a guard had got alarmed by an earlier noise — from the orchard. I actually thought it a stray cat, as did the maid. Ha! You can imagine how head up you’d be, given the evening quiet there and possible danger.

“Well, the alarmed guard apparently called the area leader whose name was Paul and reported either trouble or someone breaking the silence protocol. Paul, who was nearest the lovers, radioed back and supposedly said that everything was ‘A-okay, just a tiny bit impromptu.’ The caller is supposed to have gamely replied, ‘Didn’t think you and Breitkopf were so copacetic.’ Breitkopf incidentally was a cutie. Paul then assured the head-up caller that ‘the infrared is twenty-twenty and totally absorbing.’ It’s an awful story, but likely not fanciful. They were at times a spectacular twosome, I have no doubt. A storybook romance few of us get to witness firsthand.”

The sudden abrupt end of the idyll took everyone by surprise, of course. Being so precipitate, wretchedly disturbing, then haplessly prolonged, it was soon deemed catastrophic by all concerned. Roald’s covert, adamant investigation into his wife’s past had yielded results. A payment to a venturesome Russian military attaché and an assortment of investigations, some detailing Consec contracts, bared the skinny. The toxic headline read: *Billionaire’s Wife a Russian Spy, Stealing GRU Procurement funds for personal use!*

Till then Arnold had managed to keep his loathing of Roald to himself, but was cowed by the spy confirmation. His suspicions, which he’d never confronted ‘Anna’ with, were now confirmed, leaving him more anxious than ever for her welfare. Muerner had kept his own suspicions ‘in house’, and Anna never mentioned her stay at Paleomena, telling Arnold only of being: a solitary orphan who worked at largely inane jobs while studying computer science at night school, then precipitously, fancifully marrying a nabob! Her roll as an illegal was of course left in escrow when she married Roald; manifestly, his robot contracts with select arms procurers were inviolate, and any complicity with the GRU a coup de grâce. But her anticipation of a time out now, a dummy hand for herself due in part to a GRU investigation of Licchavi legerdemain in syphoning funds, was extracted from the deck before the game proceeded. Roald’s anger and thirst for retribution upstaged all prudence, it seemed. The paper with the venomous headline appeared on a newsstand just as Anna and Arnold

arrived in San Sebastian from the chalet, their destination Geneva, where Arnold had leased an apartment — a quiet venue to sort out and detail future plans. Now, in addition to the ominous public revelation, was the pending investigation of Anna's stay at Paleomena as Frieda Van Eerden. Her relationship with Arnold would be part of a lengthy ongoing inquiry which could jeopardize his own welfare. Indeed, the late recondite Anna seemed to slip into a state of suspended animation. She had apparently, totally discounted her husband's internecine fervency, that maniacal temperament she had so fleetingly glimpsed: he would cleave his own future to circumscribe hers. It soon became apparent that Licchavi Consec robot expertise, given a GRU agent's proximity to it — an agent with knowledge of Paleomena's remote sensing acumen that cued such robots! — alerted security and military heads world wide, as well as media sleuths. The Russians especially were red-faced. Consec cyborgs featured: astute humanoid beings with herculean arms, hands and legs then debuting as front line warriors — as well as companion bots that enhance wellness and jauntiness (mannequins with human and animal like dexterity) — also a canny cat toy that proved to be 'cat nip' with cats. Media beagles, newly attuned to the growing utility of battlefield bots, scrounged for details. The one daring deposit would ignite a media 'best seller', the burgeoning innuendo a du jour drama that would unfold like a streaming spy video. "The eruption of Roald's subterranean wrath was a veritable Caldera." So said a ruminative Gloria.

The forthcoming days were steadfastly execrable said Antoine, failing to add a flashing bit of wit that elsewhere might have illuminated some mote of reassuring reasonableness. Thus, Frieda's recognition of her faithful, irreplaceable 'David', was a godsend. "I'm here, and plan on staying, as long as you want, or need," was all he ever said. Recrimination nyet. As it was, a newly revealed Apollyon nearly had his day. Even Muerner resorted to some fancy legal brush work. The legal system itself was contorted by the sensationalism; that was and is a 'post-modern dread' said Gloria's obdurate editorial. The underlying cause, if such there were, the one duly overlooked or slighted, was a generic monomania, indexed by an obsessive carnality, an acute obsession with the visual, worth referencing, chronicling. 'Pornography's paternity' was the way precious Antoine put it.

Roald's grandmother, a rebellious daughter from a Vaishya merchant family, was seduced by a brazen Licchavi Kshatriya, whose parcel of land the Indian government confiscated for strict redistribution. Then, mainly for political hygiene, following the foibles of an interim corrupt and bankrupt administration, a newly re-elected government sold back a few landed estates at exorbitant sums, which few of the earlier owners could afford, leaving a smaller princely élite. The grandmother died of a chronic lung disease after giving birth to Roald's father, Ashok, a sickly child, who was born in a refugee camp in Pakistan. She had been abandoned by both her strict family and her cocky and newly indigent Kshatriya 'warrior', who refused to accept a frail ailing child as his.

Ashok would survive his sickly impoverished childhood however, and grow into an exceptionally handsome, clever and defiant man, a chic malcontent who became — after an agent spotted him in a police lineup and got him screen tested — a popular Indian movie star and, eventually, a director of racy grandiose films. He'd steered through the wreckage of several liaisons and two marriages by the time Roald was born, the net result of an affair with a separated British barrister's wife, who was discarded shortly after the birth of the child.

For a short hectic time the mother and young Roald lived in Rampur with Ashok. A former

teacher, she returned to her profession when Ashok threw her over. He continued to privately provide for Roald but rarely visited the child after. ‘Too English’ he reportedly told a friend. Despite several Licchavi scandals, including rumours that one of Ashok’s wives had been burned to death under lurid circumstances, Roald’s mother never displayed, at least in front of Roald, any rancour toward her former lover, and insisted Roald be respectful during the rare visits, ever mindful of the money sent for the ‘untouchable’s education’ (one of Ashok’s favourite asides), the lion share of which she placed in a trust. She was in her late thirties when her only child was born and lived a chosen ascetic life after.

Thus the ornate, luxurious, gregarious, sometime notorious and much publicized life that defined his father, Roald glimpsed from afar — at first.

It was one of Ashok’s associates, a sculptor who carved gracile realistic nudes, who cued Roald’s early interest in figurines. A teenage Roald came to apprentice to this campy artist over his mother’s dismay; later, her son would diligently study mammalian and anthropoid anatomy along with electronics, and eventually work in a factory that researched and produced sophisticated industrial automatons, including robots that could be used in assorted utilitarian functions — one offshoot of the growing sophistication in the design of electronic limbs. That company’s innovative androids became precursors of battlefield robots and realistic sex bots — select models of which the canny Ashok sometimes used in convulsive and orgiastic film scenes. Once, a badly hyperopic female star fetched a scimitar and lopped off the head of one of these to settle an argument with a derisive director. The grimmer aspect of the story was that the actress nearly mistakenly judged the one bot to be a self-absorbed extra silently awaiting instruction in another quarter of the same sound stage!

But long before Roald began working in the consortium he would eventually head, he had discovered in that early sculptor’s archives explicit nude photographs of a European girl who uncannily resembled his mother! He later learned the girl was but one of Ashok’s conquests. Ashok dallied with her when she was still a young teen, returning a decade later to perplex her marriage to a struggling draftsman. Several of the original photographs Roald copied were beguiling images that became the detailed embodiment of a peerless female he came to cherish beyond all others. In the mysterious realm of paramours, she became his incomparable Tara, a being he thought ineffable, *sui generis* even, until he encountered the incomparable Anna at the Eriopis Casino!

In a racially troubled England, where tensions were rising, his mother became a born again Christian newly galled by sensual indulgence. One photo of this Tara, the one and only she ever saw, she vehemently vindictively disapproved of; indeed, young Roald had never seen her so acutely disappointed in him! In consequence, the intense rebuke became an omen: only by stealth might one apprehend such awesome factual beauty it seemed — a stealth that assuaged a shy budding lone voyeur. Thereafter this sovereign figure became the focus of his exacting, carnal studies. He might eventually create his own facsimile of her — in fluent beguiling digital images at least. The unsung irony being that this goddess was not unlike his very own mother, at least in her younger days, whom he had seen only once unclothed, the day she scolded him for leaving a dirty washroom seat. She stood with towels hastily folded about her hair, her otherwise nubile form an adventitious revelation he would never forget.

By sixteen he came to embellish his ‘other’ existence with the arts of Hinduism, especially the civilization of the Newars in Nepal where the temples of Hindus and Buddhists touch one another — where the gods were frequently sensationally young, he observed. This melding of Brahman, Buddhist

and, later, Muslim art, was a further measure of a consuming sensuality, the enchantment or obsession with luxurious images — thousand word pictures for ingrained overcompensating lookers, the cynic might say. Whatever the cause, the sensual apsara or Tara became for young Roald crucial, inviolable and unchangeable, as framed in the thoughts of the Fourth-Century poet Kalidasa:

*Who was the artificer at her creation?
Was the moon, bestowing its own charm?
Was it the graceful month of spring, itself
Compact with love, a garden full of flowers?
That ancient saint there, sitting in his trance,
Bemused by prayers and dull theology
Cares naught for beauty: how could he conjure
Such loveliness, the old religious fool?*

Later grafted to this vision was the Persian inspired architecture and idealization of the Mosque, its alchemy of light and sensuous muqarnas and arabesques. The very inspiration for *his* fungible Taj Mahal mausoleum-temple — a perdurable European princess! In Roald's eyes, always the dark slanted visage of his father tainted innocence — made one's companion a sly accomplice rather than a lovely commiserate charge, as were those booby Hindu goddesses who looked all alike. In those early nude photographs of the girl, one in a seated repose, the sole of the tucked foot touching the matching thigh, the lovely round-eye's cameo face and slender, chaste, beautifully proportioned frame prevailed. This perfected vision, a silent gracile Tara, could redeem a callous world. The discovery of Anna, who uncannily resembled this numinous girl, released the goddess from her frame. For a time, the season of fervency, a new ecstasy was born: the goddess actually responded to word and touch! But when the human being emerged, Roald was unnerved to discover his *own* delirium rarely a balm for a separate *other* entitled to error and *un-suborned* affection, fostered only by joint esteem and mutual engagement. ('The split seed' Antoine wryly said of such engrossment.) "Will a promissory note do this night?" Anna once wanly said to Roald when his desire for her was remorseless. He was in no mood for puns. She might finally climb back into the early inimitable print!

As the heedful wife revealed the unpacked, independent side of herself, Roald saw only one means of restoring the wonder — the sensuality must be overwhelming, sovereign, omnipotent — as it was for him. Was the success not vouchsafed in the litany: Where the gods are young? He must entrance this one-of-a-kind goddess, a challenge he had arduously schooled himself in all his life, had he not? The poignant vulnerability was the isolation Frieda as Anna experienced following her flight from Paleomena and her spy cell, the dark mooring trailing beneath the waves — and of course the wealth, always Roald's slipstream wealth, Rosanna noted.

The beacons midnight lamp of passage would, in due course, grow rather dim.

The versatile Anna had initially responded handsomely to Roald's adventurous gambits, which she interpreted as auspicious even proprietary and actually facilitated. The sardonic twist was that her later listlessness framed these encounters into something resembling a caricature or jape — she a rare purloined anatomical doll, hidden, fingered in a private bower. Roald, of course, misread all the signs. In the early stages of their married life he was delighted his goddess appeared susceptible to his lascivious ardor, his mesmeric ogling, and this enhanced his own meretricious anticipation. Anna was

several months pregnant when the obsession loomed and chafed, and too chronically exhausted and often high, to engineer subtle resistance. Then came the hiatus brought by the child, the recommitment to the requisite task of tempering her obsessive husband and saving a marriage. The final recognition of a vast subterranean despair came with the discovery of the soft pliant toy realistically, if not minutely, modelled after herself! That graven discovery turned her to stone. Then Roald's quacks spoke out, in droves it seemed, alternately soothing and plangent, underscored by their nosy shill Yatrib, all of whom vilified Frieda's 'unheralded, miserly, spiteful, overbearing pique' — so named. The suspected sedation of her food coincided with Roald's growing distress with his wife's late vexation — which he nominally if not witlessly elected one day to foil, mitigate by staging one of Antoine's divertissements — which would duly remind his wife of how 'wit denuded obsession'! A line from a theatre critic she duly entered into her daybook.

The dust up by the staircase set the timer on the densely packed dismay and unease. When the debris settled, nothing had been resolved, and the dreamscape was twisted beyond recognition. Added to the ever lurking Cheka menace was Roald's many obsequious underworld hoods — an early discovery and ongoing untrammelled worry. The pigments in the green Tara soon ran with her ready tears, tears that Arnold, her special 'David', did his best to dry. Yet he did sometimes wonder if he'd slighted this Athena's biographical turmoil (allusively a timeless Trojan fiasco) by so rejoicing in her smarts, beauty and exceptional regard of him — a trust that never wavered though. He was determined the Paris he played would joyously survive.

TWENTY-SIX

Suddenly the interrogation ceased. Vassily, who'd been summoned to Moscow to help detail and explicate the 'fiasco', was despatched to another barracks and told to spruce up. He still hadn't seen his wife. She perhaps did not know he was back. His blown cover was still *his* close secret...so he assumed in his new and novel isolation; he had accepted Angus Dowd a man of his word. Luckily, Frieda was still in harness at Paleomena when he left her.

Yet his questioners remained puzzled on many points. His connivance with the subsequently notorious Frieda seemed then needlessly lax and makeshift. Why allow the girl to freely go her way? Their doubts teemed with implanted suspicions, none matching his plain homely answers.

"You meet Van Eerden in a café, arrange a further meeting, then completely lose track of her. What must we think, Vassily Sergeevich?"

"That the pupil out-gamed her mentor," he candidly answered.

His stay in America was examined in detail. His one embellishment and lifeline: a chance encounter with a senior Paleomena executive at the Los Angeles Chess Club, who might prove useful in the future because he too was so openly disenchanted with U.S. mores and foreign policy. (He kept to himself Stanton's inimitable jarring overture.) His one holdout: the offering he made to Frieda before leaving the café. He explained the meeting as a means to appraise her state of mind and, once that was assayed, either trusting her with a period of grace or seeing her reeled in forthwith. He sensed a confusion within her, but no verifiable coercive agent — which he might identify and isolate only by observing her on her own. Watchers were placed. He was persuaded, at the time, that she still honoured her calling and remained engaged in the leading edge technical research at Paleomena,

which he would promptly sever if they reeled her in. It also became apparent he was no longer regarded as an efficacious player, in light of the late calamity following her marriage as Anna Able to Roald Licchavi. Hence his leave taking.

As expected, the interrogation lasted a long weekend. He believed he might be formally reprimanded, forfeit his medal and be retired early, on a much reduced pension. His wife would stay by him, and stoically stare into the endless winters.

He was amazed so few questions concerned the flight of Frieda's sister. Her secret was it seemed no more a cause for concern — a void in the questioning that irked him, suggesting a coverup, for 'that daunting secret' had ostensibly been a collateral reason for his precipitous posting. His own queries about the fate of the girl impatiently bored his questioners. Then the lights dimmed and he was told to shape up to meet the General.

One lingering matter for Vassily was the 'duration of placement' of an agent. Either they brought such comparatively young operatives home sooner or risked — as late events had bourn out all too well — the nightmare before them now. The earlier removal, after all, had been a standing recommendation of his for years. This stray comment puzzled his questioners; the matter had never come up apparently.

Thus was he prone to interpose, when the interrogation waned, a prudent lecture on 'the grand American malaise' which rendered any course of action, or assessment of an individual, problematic, given the rancorous divisions throughout the country in that day and age — intimating that a young agent should have been brought home sooner. His questioners were soon glazed with tedium; so American culture teased with sensationalism, spirited deviance, racial tension, what else was new? Yet Vassily persisted, citing a revived musical, inspired by the legend of Mona Mahmudnizhad, who was hung in an Iranian prison in 1983 for her Bahá'í Faith — considered anathema by her captors — where the confusion mauled. The girl was interrogated and martyred to rapt rhythmic music. Sound for him that was libidinal, pleasurable paced cruelty and martyrdom! Indeed, the heavy hypnotic beat homogenized most messages from cat food hawking, turbulent TV specials, to spiritual proselytizing. The bountiful land full of: Ain't Got No Satisfaction. Everyone in America 'soulfully' theatrically strained: frequently her popular crooners, flush with rapture or agony; film and video stars to vivify their voyeuristic sex, torment and Armageddon climaxes; newspaper stringers their detailed, serialized stories of topical politic misandry and cruel police bigotry, and political 'exposés' that showcased gamey intemperance. Anger and cupidity reigned. Were the turmoiled people who went below ground in the silos any different? Russia was hardly an antidote to such obtuseness, but its bellyachers remained critical of the state not, generally, one another. The odds makers had their eyes on Putin, the iron man who touted a durable slavic culture not the numbing mishmash Americans seemed awash in. Vassily's own creed was, he knew, anomalous. One flinty eye on the Party, one sore eye on the Gospels, apropos a Deity who countered dismay. He knew he was talking here to cynics, apostates, if not quislings, yet he sometimes had to say his piece... before meeting the dour general face to face.

His interrogators soon sat smiling with a numbing languor at the tirade, an ennui that slowly, ineluctably hobbled Vassily's spirited declaration. How had such a crank ever risen in the Service...let alone been posted abroad, they wryly wondered? General Myshin of course found in Vassily the luck of the fool, whose philosophy was the self-important hokum ascribed to the idealist — to be exploited at will! Life for the General had been marshalled by a juggernaut of unwieldy fates and he saw no

letup. The rigour of the man was such that the concept of relaxation meant occasional inebriation for a brief interval between midnight and dawn, and the rare fustian rebuke of a colleague momentarily yoked to the same task. He trusted no one and took note only of success — in the Party or its technical and scientific minders. That person or body might be listened to, carefully; then one might proceed. He despised his superiors when their manipulation of him was extraneous to Party policy, diplomatic maneuvering, or military strategy — as he suspected when he was elected investigator of the acts and intentions of Zoya Stolbanov, Russian tart and thief, whose talent as a performer masked both lapses. Lucklessly, her flight to the West implicated her step-sister Anastasia Kniažnin, code name Frieda Van Eerden, Ablesimov's gifted and now disastrous illegal, who had been spirited away from her dysfunctional family while still a teen and enrolled in the school that identified her as a possible candidate for training as an intelligence officer — prompting another of Ablesimov's unorthodox recruitments. The General was as vigilant and testy then as now, as the intense improbable Vassily Sergeevich seated himself in the single chair now facing the large imposing desk.

"I'm told you've contracted a dread disease, Vassily Sergeevich."

Vassily decided the riposte would be his sole commiseration, and only said that he plainly wasn't infectious.

"American cheek sits lamely on you, Comrade. But I'm relieved to see you can still practice it. You leave tomorrow, same flight. You are commissioned to see your problematic protégé does not completely foul a West Coast nest, as detailed in your memorandum. The Paleomena business you leave to others. You will be briefed fully in the referentura on arrival. I tell only the outline."

Vassily was momentarily transfixed. Returning to America. The only viable explanation — to serve as a kind of decoy, a pawn readily, safely forfeited if need-be. The General's words lingered as the stench from a slough.

"You will report to me once a day direct. If agent Van Eerden, the current Mrs. Licchavi, is, in fact, the mysterious thief in the service account, all but confirmed, you will meet with the husband's retainers and strike a bargain. You will set in motion an accusation of covert fraudulent use of the special fund by bent Licchavi retainers, who have benefitted from it. They do not welcome notoriety, and may be pumped. You will pretend to assist them with Roald's own rancorous divorce from his wife, agent Van Eerden. Her demise — it's under review — must in no manner implicate us. An assault in keeping with her degenerate lifestyle is under review. We must be in a position to implicate a mad vengeful Roald Licchavi. Questions?"

It was an immutable sentence of course — this 'demise'. Vassily weathered the affront, the outrage, by placing an unrelated question. Did the General learn what the previous fuss was about — who it involved, why, how? Did Zoya Stolbanov actually have a consequential secret? One the state couldn't part with?

The General was about to level a rebuke but changed his mind. A doomed man may be permitted an impertinence or two. He indulged a smile.

"The fellow in question, a senior deputy minister, a hardliner from the Andropov group, was seduced, compromised by Zoya Stolbanov. He liked to brag. She learned in due course of major dirt he had on several officials, despite the fact he never really learned to read or write. A secretary kept him abreast of party strife and important document details. The man was determined no one should know of his illiteracy, or else — including the cuddle bunny. He was a persuasive talker — memorized

swaths of party history and dogma from early lectures and taped speeches. He died last week of a stroke. A bad case of astigmatism, a late diagnosis, may have contributed to his condition.”

Vassily managed a brief snort. The General remained commissar blank, his real regard of current events locked away. Vassily wryly laughed (to divest the tears) thumped the General’s desk and simulated making a toast. “To blind fate — and hundred proof balls!”

The General grunted and summoned the dumb waiter to his desktop. Two brandies soon materialized.

So. An elder and hardliner with menacing insider dirt...who couldn’t read or write! Vassily was almost amused. “How in god’s name did he manage?” (For Vassily the question was double edged: how indeed might he manage — being so derisively fated?) Thus was Myshin invited to disparage the culprit who had for a time all but shanghaied an entire Directorate. With a show of forbearance the General stood and paced behind his desk, his habitual response to shelling out unprinted answer, a stately nod to candour...on the eve of a summary farewell.

“Young radiation victim of the early Kyshtym disaster. Seriously sick for a time. Removed from school. Lengthy convalescence. Became a grain farmer — yet climbed the ropes. Genius with recorders. A party secretary knew, a former Duma member, a janitor and a theatre director. The inner circle — so far. Composed wordy speeches for Chernyenko on a tape recorder. Shrewd ass. Learned Marx, Lenin from tapes and videos. A good story teller, patriot and whoremonger. A narrow but influential network of backers. Presidium Candidate some time ago. A long active life despite his early illness. Ninety four when he died.”

“So how did the little inveigler find out?” (So little?)

The momentum of dealing with an artful sly boots, who had made the last months keenly unpleasant, kept Myshin going, after levelling a look of stoic sufferance on his puristic, newly ill-omened deputy.

“He liked to sketch. Watercolour. Gave one to her. She wanted his signature. That he could manage. When he finished she wanted an endearment also. Below the name. He asked her to write down his words. Apparently she suspected all along. Got the first of several bribes then and there. He broke down before the formal interrogation began. A nut case for a time. Befuddled mute, speechless. Then a timely stroke. His skills are all being reassessed. The late presumption being he talked a lot, sometimes too candidly, especially to his ‘art patron’. He did have inside knowledge of some Ponzi schemes, including that of the MSO Investment Group subsidiaries. Enough said.”

And that was all a stoic Vassily learned about the mysterious big cheese who had all but traumatized an entire department, who in part caused him to enter the U.S. to see a grave ‘Russian’ secret kept. Twelve hours later he arrived for a second time in as many days at the Los Angeles Sheraton Touchstone Inn.

As his taxi drew up to the grey slate entrance, he noted a tall lithe buxom blond with a valiant half-grin leaving the Inn via an underground parking entrance. Unusual, he thought, leaving so. A sad pretty, somewhat past her peak, strung out on lapsed hope perhaps. So Vassily imagined. She wore a light silk dress imprinted with stylized clam shells, no stockings, shoes too elevated for her naturally sauntering walk, and little else he guessed. The dress barely concealed the seamless form beneath. An orange sash curled about the still lean waist. Low-slung breasts formed a suspension bridge of the fabric in front, held in place by narrow shoulder straps, one of which she fitfully replaced. She left the

building with an uncertainty, a lingering chagrin it seemed, which matched in perfect contrast the durable composure with which he approached the desk. For a few seconds her pale sinewy figure passed an arched window front of the hotel. Just such a woman he needed then.

By the time Vassily crystal-gazed a cognac, the leftovers of a bitter sweet cherry sorbet rouging his dessert plate, a rueful Cody was thumbing rides to Louis's property in Pomona. A talkative carpet cleaner, his mouth full of tobacco, offered to drive her to Dodger Stadium. Upset she wouldn't come to his pad nearby, he promptly ditched her. A black tanker driver left her at a junction near Monterey Park; he was very large and much too silent. She felt sick she said, and needed air. The next driver wanted to take her line dancing that night. She told him she had a boyfriend and wanted only a lift. After driving her into Pomona and the doorstep of Louis's store front home with its studio loft, he asked if she wouldn't change her mind, bartering to get her a good used handgun. After impressing a gun store card on her and a phone number, he departed wearing a hopeful grin. She kept to herself the sudden droll idea that gun barrels weren't sweet-spot friendly.

She was relieved to locate the key hidden under the jardiniere of Calla Lilies...appeased also to find no evidence of a replacement bird since her departure in the Porsche with the handsome Canadian realtor who sold coke and homes in British Columbia, and revealed himself to be a diligent con, in his case, a sly benefactor: "Some sales clerks I know, nick and discount their merchandise, and almost all of my clients go for select giveaways." They had crashed at the Touchstone on the return leg from a stay in Las Vegas. They planned an ardent weekend but he stole off that night derisively swiping her purse and most of her clothes after an earlier, heated, protracted snit over his sly sales' pitch and easy resort to toxic loans. He had called her a flaming moron. Well he would, wouldn't he. She doubted he'd paid the hotel bill, so she departed inconspicuously through the underground parking to lessen her embarrassment. Dourly she reminded herself that pretty wheels and ready cash were moron friendly.

The interior of Louis's house always depressed her. He never got around to removing the last owner's floral chintz wallpaper, a style she could not stand. Every room brandished a separate gaudy motif. Even the headboard of the walnut-veneered bed Louis inherited had been covered. But she was tired and weary of complaint. The Canadian's smugness had finally got to her. She lost her temper before his unctuous cupidity and paean to greed. "Everybody scores — not nearly as well as me!" She now discovered she also bled and quietly swore. Nowhere among her things was the necessary article. Finally she showered, placed a folded towel on the bed, and promptly fallen asleep.

When she awoke a faint odour of paint solvent pervaded the room's air. A large man moved across the room's one window, then framing a neighbour's sunny, late-afternoon back yard. He was suddenly by her on the bed, a sharp object, a knife, against her throat. "No fuss now princess," he said. "Cool's the word. Jus' tell 'em where it's at."

"Where's what at?" she said, feeling the knife edge pressing against her.

"The bread, fent, apple 'j' — anything with turnover."

"You're going to be disappointed."

"Angel cake" — his free hand explored her torso — "I no patient dude, a lotta folks sore about that."

It was the umpteenth time she had been docked by assailants wanting cash or drugs, but the first

without something to offer. That fact struck her then as funny and she impulsively laughed, a reaction that startled her attacker as much as it finally did herself.

“You can have the chintz, all of it,” she added, helplessly, just as he discovered and misinterpreted the viscous seam.

“A honey sandwich here, yessir. Maybe like so ‘fore we look round.”

Briskly he waded between her legs the blade edging a soft breast. She fought control of her fear, and discovered again the welling up of a bitter humour, a great formless fatuity dribbling, leaking — laughter.

Then a dull heavy thud, instantaneously joined by her scream and the bright ceiling light filling the room. The knife clattered to the floor as the intruder was yanked off the bed to further disbelief. Two combatants materialized on the floor by the bed. The strong arm of one rose and fell meaning business. She took a bracing lungful of air. In short order a skewed limp body was dragged toward the back door by a lanky someone just as Louis was discovered by her on the bed wrapping a blanket about her. She drew herself into a huddle. Her name resounded over and over — from an anxious, familiar, neglected voice. Her arms swiftly went about him — him now quivering like an enormous child.

The next morning they lay side by side on the same chintzy bed, becalmed, exhausted yet beyond sleep, their hands locked together.

Returning late the day before, Louis found the Calla Lily jardiniere had been moved, guessed her return, then headed back to a nearby shopping centre to buy some groceries and flowers, settling on a crooked Camellia. He had wanted to surprise her and slipped to the back where he discovered the door ajar, a fact he was prepared to rebuke her for until he cited the large intruder. Quickly he sought a vigilant neighbour, then near a back fence, who brought a gun and wrench and struck the debilitating blindsided blow. Louis too attempted to hit the man with the crock— missed, then dumbly sought to restrain his neighbour who had been robbed the week before. When at last he sat beside Cody, a stalk from the Camellia clung to his shoulder like a maid’s favour.

As he went over these details, the intruder underwent emergency surgery at the Pomona Valley Hospital. The man was out on parole. Two nearby homes were broken into that afternoon, telling finger prints littering each one. Louis’s angry neighbour told police he was just ‘standing his ground’ in his confrontation with the intruder. Louis promptly if sheepishly agreed. By the time Cody lay in the crook of his arm, she asked if he still wanted a squaw. He felt she would likely withdraw the offer in due course and resisted suffering through such a pronouncement once again. He didn’t know what to say. “I’d settle for the rest of the summer,” he finally said, with craven dishonesty. He thought she began to shiver. When he looked, her face looked old and braving tears.

About the time a duty nurse reported to the stricken mother that her burglar son was out of danger, Vassily returned from his first meeting with a new Licchavi retainer, a young lawyer recruited after Frieda as Anna was presumed to have devised the baneful Licchavi use of the gold seam. In the meantime, Cheka cryptographers had made notes in Frieda’s (Anna’s) handwriting, purportedly part of a private daily journal or diary. These personal words revealed a chaotic inner nature that tended to corroborate Roald’s onerous charges before the court, including drug dependence, hypomania, cupidity, infidelity and mental cruelty — the harsh scolding of her child and rebuke of Yatrib, and

frequent sardonic comment about her husband's stolidity in public. The miscreant notes, which also alluded to the use of a faux identity, would be instrumental in a divorce proceeding. Roald's 'discovery' and regard of the diary would cue the lawyer to further action, which would be carefully assessed before deciding on a comprehensive strategy — Vassily's modest lead time.

Initially, the GRU pandered to Roald Licchavi. A new mother cum Russian spy, a remote sensing researcher at Paleomena familiar with her husband's firm's robot technology and having nonesuch access to GRU funds, was not a tale the GRU wanted serialized in International dailies, though that prospect seemed now immanent. Indeed Frieda's ace, so she'd initially believed, was revealing the GRU an ostensible beneficiary of robotic expertise from Licchavi Consec technology via payments from the GRU gold seam — a credible expedient to spook Roald and the GRU, leave them duelling with the imputation that Russians were again acquiring select components of American military expertise!

The Licchavi lawyer met Vassily a second time with a scowl: Roald was not interested in accommodation, or muddying the pool; he wanted an arch manifest subversive — quintessentially a ruthless corrupt avaricious spy and sinister wife before the court of public opinion; he seemed determined to claim ignorance of the now nefarious GRU gold seam his 'sly fanatical wife' exploited. Vassily thus expected the worst. A day later a new team arrived from Moscow, only to learn that Frieda was then in insular FBI custody! The development that reshuffled the deck.

At this time Louis Peak also reckoned with an unexpected imposition, but one he did not relate to his current dilemma. An environmentalist friend asked a favour. Would Louis photograph parts of a San Jose Creek to update a study in deteriorating West Coast waterways? Louis liked the fellow and said yes, accepting the modest retainer.

He was photographing the second site at the time the Licchavi lawyer met with the new Cheka negotiators. Louis's tripod perched on a rise of ground above a swollen backwater that resembled diseased flesh and gave off an intermittent mephitic stench. The site had apparently been used by many clandestine disposal crews. A spillway further down was being prepared to flush some of the chemical offal into a nearby thermoplastic basin where it might at least be isolated from the adjacent stream. Just back of Louis a burnt destitute desert willow and some ratty mesquite bushes partially screened the sad remains of a charred homesite, including a fire smutted concrete staircase once painted pink. Cody sat on the top step sipping a coke. Louis's van did not start that morning; someone had lifted the battery. Cody offered to drive him in her battered Jeep. "When you're hard up, you're hard up," she said, ditching a smile.

By late afternoon Louis exposed a last frame, the colours of the devil's own sump just beginning to fade. Minutes earlier some tones appeared to phosphoresce. He was looking about the willow tree for a mislaid lens cover when a large Mercedes sedan passed slowly on the narrow roadway below him. It returned as gradually in reverse, coming to a full stop at the base of the rise. Two men got out, the first suggestive of a street goon, massive tattooed arms, neck and bald head crowning a weathered vest, the second man meticulously set out, a Nehru collar cresting a dark double-breasted suit. Louis could not make out the conversation. The first pointed to the rank backwater with spare blunt language. The second man seemed to nod in approval, then issued a comment that resulted in a self-conscious snicker both men savoured as they returned to the car, which then swiftly departed. "Happy days," Louis absently said as the car sped away. He watched till it disappeared, after committing vehicle and

plate to the final frames in his camera, trusting there was enough light to register such images. Cody noted his fresh unease when he came back. “You see a ghost or something?”

“I think I maybe saw some of the dumpers. Both the spook and his dumper. I think something’s planned for here. Soon I would imagine, from the dismissive tone of their language.”

“How come?” A stubborn yawn.

“Below, on the narrow roadway just off the spillway. I couldn’t really see. They came in a dark Mercedes — La Habra, Placentia maybe, I’m hoping I got the number. I had a zoom lens on. They pointed to the backwater. I’d say they planned to use it somehow. They didn’t look like environmental watchdogs.”

“Did they see you?” Her voice alerted.

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe they’re engineers or something. Somebody obviously goofed.” They argued through a late supper at a Taco Bell. What had specifically persuaded Louis? Should the police know? Maybe they were just head-up watchers — like us, Cody said. I saw no uptight watchers, Louis said.

They returned together to the rise that night. By then Cody was occasionally talking to herself. “Mind sleeping rough when obligated, kiddo? Not at all.” Louis had put a sleeping bag in the back of the old Jeep and brought a camera with infrared registry. He remained till sunrise in the Mesquite, seated on the jeep’s one removable front seat, thinking he was also perhaps a practicing paranoiac. Twice Cody sat facing him on his lap, the second time in her muslim teddy with the disguised lower buttons. It was the first time they made love since her return. His part distraction with the night watch served to unite their peak. “H-o-l-y Hannah,” Cody candidly exclaimed. He didn’t ask if she’d made use of her tool kit. From the way she kissed him after he doubted she had.

“Such a horny night owl,” she said.

Her hair smelled lightly of sulphur the following morning. He rose late, nostalgically poached eggs in the small kitchen, tried to imagine her pregnant, and stole frames of her performing her wake-up Yoga exercises on his, by then, favourite balcony. The leg cast had been replaced with a stiff stocking. He could just imagine a livid mite of his own, clinging to that magnificent chest, thinking only of food.

TWENTY-SEVEN

A radiant sun etched the bevelled glass siding of the loggia balcony where, beneath a Jupiter grape arbour, a warmed Angus Dowd had just lain aside the paper from his morning tray.

He was nearly convinced the Russian agent was back, or a well versed stand in. He was also convinced metamorphic Frieda, now in CIA custody, had lost all contact with the fifth column that still sought to nick some of Abler’s treasure, though their piracy was amateurish at best. The latest attempt to steal some of Abler’s gems was stymied in the breach. The new techie in charge of security appeared to be top drawer. They still had to sort out his background, but so far he performed as anticipated. To sum up: One, an early Paleomena team more or less ‘laid off’, another ‘recruited’, largely unmindful of Dr. Van Eerden; Two, the Pentagon would come to a signature floater deal in the autumn; Three, Muerner believed Abler remained an exclusive, despite a late spate of rumours; and Four, Dowd would give Muerner the benefit of the doubt — for a time.

As for the latest spy mishmash — Paleomena contracts with three firms in the Licchavi consortium were brought under review. The more he looked at the Licchavi family, the more he spied personal vendetta alone, mostly on the husband's side; from Stanton he learned of malicious personal allegations that could embarrass and legally sequester the wife, now apparently corroborated by a journal she supposedly kept. That possibility interested him, for in the meantime he had studied, in addition to the information the Russian provided, Muerner's heated conversations with the elusive Frieda (such intellectual barnstorming!) following the South Pacific 'incident', from which she was released in a state of quite fetching bewilderment — so said Muerner, who prided himself on filling in a missing chapter in her education. Unlike Susanne, she would land on her feet, he said, and be readily employable within a year. She might even reconsider Paleomena as a host. "Surely you jest," Dowd had said. Muerner's laboured response served as an affirmation for Dowd. "I am convinced she will at least wonder if an ad hoc committee should run Abler. The inability to control the dissemination of potent information poses many hazards — none of which she readily apprehended, or chose to ignore, out of spite perhaps. She's a stung drained liberal, not unlike Susanne, whom I've learned she never really trusted — an interesting revelation, yes?"

The sudden marriage to Roald surprised and nettled Muerner when Frieda's identity finally emerged. "A grotesque suspension." He meant of course the sidelining of a promising Paleomena career — "even better backgrounded than Miguel's." He and Dowd stoically accepted the revelations of espionage, though Muerner seemed the more upset. If Dowd sometimes mulled over the possibility he'd misjudged the magus he shared an upper floor of the tower with, he nixed that possibility when Muerner continued to sarcastically berate the future hostilities *ZITA* indexed, while interdepartmental rumours told of his late tense tinkering with some basic presumptions.

In the meantime the two executives assessed Abler's verdant domain with some unanimity, supervised the contractual obligations of Paleomena with unsurpassed skill, and spoke prosaically about Arthur Pechenpaugh, perhaps the one impeachable racketeer Paleomena fostered. Both men agreed that all Abler's output must be meticulously, judiciously, exclusively assessed. Susanne and, initially, Peter Selby-Smith, wanted some of the findings universally shared. Pechenpaugh had masterminded both suspensions. Ogres sometimes have their uses. Dowd, of course, cared for neither employee. Susanne belonged to that breed of ideologue who distrusted impartial intellectual rigour, her righteous often vindictive mindset ever at odds with red-baiters like him. Frequent exposure to someone of her temperament invariably rendered a genius like H.L. Mencken finical, morose. One was beset by the overtones of the 'check your privilege' cant with sensibilities like that! Whereas Peter Selby-Smith was likely a closet gay who made poor jokes about gays. The lad who gave Peter's letters to Dowd said Peter made advances while chiding the lad's presumption, then in the dead of night would phone to ingratiatingly apologize. Sly ideological anarchy and fawning dalliance — some of Peter's legacies to the pressed Frieda — all iniquitous to perfectionist Dowd, for whom the contemplation of a soul striving valiantly but decently to resolve confusion, anarchy and recklessness, was a glimpse of predestination at work.

In a roundabout way, Daphne Charles, given her daunting past, seemed just such an exemplar of that unfolding — and so recently Dowd's own poignant nemesis because of his failure to prevent a scoundrel's abasement of her!

With deliberate slowness he moved his day of moral reckoning ever nearer. It was his way of keeping both Abler and Muerner in perspective. The pleasant office bickering renewed and continued, after a time — *after* the passing of that fated Monday morning following the assault, when she nursed a private lament, sitting so solemnly at her desk letting her morning coffee get cold, her abstraction chilling. Seeing her so, Angus discovered himself restless and apprehensive — a near novelty. It was a week or more before her fetching half-smile rewarded a pithy comment. On that memorable day a determined college-newspaper reporter had wangled an interview with Dowd, which ended when the reporter solicited a donation to The Peerless School, a new training facility that offered an acclaimed program for the ‘cognitively neglected’. Dowd cherished the euphemisms for the dolts of the world, both stolid and deviant in the era of entitlement. Promptly, silently he fetched a cheque — to curtail a maudlin speech and salvage as much cash as civility allowed. Did Paleomena employ any cognitively neglected persons the reporter wanted to know — not to be crimped. Before he co-signed his name, Dowd casually pointed out a couple of people on the floor. One of these, an ungainly computer expert, was at the moment hefting bundles of printouts to the shredder in his usual balmy, too-long-in-the-saddle gait. The lad looked at Daphne who happened to be in Dowd’s office at that moment (actually to hurry the meeting along). She tolerantly smiled, giving nothing away. “That’s most encouraging,” said the youngster, surprised but pleased, adding that he’d given up a hiking trip to complete the canvass that year. “It’s been a pleasure, sir.”

“The cat’s meow,” Daphne said of Dowd to the youngster as he prepared to depart, leaving him in a querulous state.

“Sorry?”

Declared Dowd, “A dog’s a dog...but a cat’s a cat’.” Then, looking at Daphne, he preened an imaginary whisker.

The lad presented them both with a lame smile and left in a mindful state, as Dowd basked in the unexpected impromptu rally of his ineffable Girl Friday. A peerless Hebe he thought of her then.

From there, the next step in Angus Dowd’s retributive dealing with his dereliction was undertaken, a heedful Daphne duly taking note. He began his ‘expiation’ by inviting her to dine out with him at a gourmet restaurant, her initial daunting question there ‘imbuing’ the *apéritif*. “Angus, I am flattered, but puzzled why you asked me to dine with you *here*, tonight. It *is* a departure.”

The belated query, so seemingly randomly placed at the outset of the supper, provided Dowd with the initial solo opportunity he’d anticipated. He rose in his visioned pulpit, the organ preamble at an end. Such a simple request with a dearth of simple responses to answer it. He sought his serviette.

The nimble creature opposite, so captivating among the restaurant’s grey power clientele, her sylphic blond hair catching scintilla of ambient sconce light, the simple acorn sweater dress corniced by a full high-neck collar, her Norse Freya face a delinquent’s mask, openly daringly watchful. Dowd was reminded of the physical chasteness that had come to his office, despite the renewal of the conversational banter. Since the Lacchivi fête, the off shoulder quicksilver silks were replaced by indifferent skirts and blouses — mundane catalogue fare he thought — and, if he was not mistaken, a more fastidious comportment. He even sensed fresh impatience with some of his established tics, such as an unwillingness to use a ‘dictaphone’ — a chip recorder. Roald’s investigation of the assault identified a prescription of Daphne’s, via Roald’s summoned physician, for a hormone which, when coupled with the type of drug she was likely given, could precipitate a spell of depression — so Dowd

learned from his own physician. Thus her question, at once pithy and transparent, he must equanimously rise to answer.

“I never knew until last week you might appreciate such an invitation.”

Daphne was freshly amused, diverted — as anticipated. He knew he was being assayed for traces of whimsy.

“So what happened last week?”

“You pronounced most judiciously I thought upon the uneven quality of some dishes served at our recent spy meeting in the Touchstone Inn, the fare there usually quite satisfactory, yes?”

Her brief smile seemed genuine. He winked at her then returned to his plate.

“And ‘till then I was a hayseed, or something.”

“Not at all; rather more a reminder of someone like, well, Elizabeth Bennet say, Jane Austen’s lass, beholden to keen perception, fine manners and affable candour. A seemly heroine — when I was last in school.”

Again she regarded him with wry wonder. “Another ‘little woman’.”

“Not so little.”

This stalled her once again as she sifted for unsympathetic overtones. The self-effacement in her response alerted him to another apparent success.

“Angus, I see a young lad somewhere in the wings, a tiny bit jealous. The staid rumour that lingers.”

He waved off a triviality.

“So?”

“Yes, Daphne?”

“So what are you going to hit me with on Monday or whenever?” She precisely positioned her fork on a half-empty dessert plate and sat back to study him with continued cautionary interest, one elbow palmed by a hand holding a brandy snifter. She was never more beautiful when adopting a candid demeanour, he noted. “Someone’s getting the sack and I’m to, well, gleefully take over their job. Or you’ve finally discovered a pretty Venetian and wish to pension me off — the old department quip that lives on.”

“Such wily speculation. In one so young.”

“Not so young.”

Being an object of such scrutiny from one he cherished so was an oddly goading experience for Angus Dowd. Again he sought a napkin.

“I shall provide the first clues next week, if you promise to dine with me again. In the meantime, you’re invited to a singular Paleomena celebration. One we’ve put off, hence overdue.”

This brought forth a laden chuckle. “Now I’m really worried.”

Dowd put aside his napkin. “It is highly flattering to have an intelligent beauty pay attention. Even smile. A benediction for wise old stoats.”

Such words, however, were more turgid than intended: he was newly aware that with Daphne he actually heard himself speak — as a rather precious pedant! Thus her dry silence gave him the opportunity to sparsely outline then invite her to a forthcoming gala, which Muerner would host later that month, in honour of the spectacular success in placing in wide elliptical earth orbit a space telescope Paleomena helped fund, launched in Russia, that had already convened much galvanizing

speculation about the edges of the universe. A growing number of astronomers newly imagined enough matter to hypothesize that the universe may not infinitely expand, indeed may be a brane (a membrane) adhering to a larger four or five dimensional universe. “Another drag race,” said one of the researchers. The celebration party was but the prelude to Dowd’s oncoming proposed joint adventures, which Daphne proved wary about accepting but also too intrigued to turn down. None of which would disappoint.

During the initial gala she visited, with a group of hobbyist cosmologists, Paleomena’s ever growing space research complex, and suited up with a student astronaut for a simulated but acutely surrealistic ‘sinker’ trip through the Jovian atmosphere. This was followed by a suborbital flight in a new earth-vista vehicle Paleomena had helped bankroll.

A further excursion, following a week of sedulous office toil, took place aboard one of Arnold Storrier’s sailing ships, with a stop near the Great Barrier Reef, where both Angus and Daphne took a seaplane to the spectacular Heart Reef near Green Island and explored the teaming coral life in a glass bottomed viewing ship, she a couple of times in a wet suit. The reef was recently and controversially entrusted to a Paleomena sponsored consortium of oceanographers, charged with reviewing efforts made in the early nineties to seek out sea water constituents that might restore parts of the reef to pristine health, one of the corporation’s well touted research ventures, in part to foil if not absolve its desalinization, mineral seining and deep-sea mining projects elsewhere. Next they flew to a vessel touring the Palau Islands as part of a promotional voyage for future Paleomena executive vacations. The invitees were personable folk of all ages, the bustle and entreaty of their children augmenting the anticipation. The diversely talented, nimble-witted — ‘omnivorous’, Dowd said — Paleomena elite were a singular treat for a watchful, attentive Daphne.

Thus did dense weeks of office-tower diligence culminate in airy sprightly escapes to oceanic vistas for sport and exploration, in the company of ageless venerable experts and agile protégés from many lands — a kinetic mixture of style, geniality, relish, and brisk wit; only on peripheral yachts did Daphne witness the more blazé ambience of a clientele she associated with much sun and leisure. Such goings on could turn an impressionable girl’s head she dryly pointed out to a dismissive Angus. If she often wondered what spawned this largess, her anticipation of blithe adventure and abiding fortuity never really let up. She knew Dowd cherished his ‘time outs’, but never realized just how winsome some of them were! “Idealized settings often invite sanguine perspectives,” he staidly declared early on, “which rather enhance the study of the market’s change of pace, its often disruptive innovations, thus abetting the fine tuning of investment and any intervening regulatory demands — the ever ‘insinuating issues’. Hence these requisite time outs. For seers like me.”

Then a group of oceanographers from the Maritime Trust Foundation joined them in one suspended lucid forty-eight-hour idyll, which did not overstay its accord. The diver who befriended her, an oceanographer, returned to his ship and ocean, promising to write...together they had found a rare variety of damselfish. Daphne wondered both at the timing and élan of the interlude, including Dowd’s ready if not planned disappearance. She had joined in weekend excursions with Paleomena’s Third Estate (her crowd) and fought through the usual combination of hype, resignation and trashy fun — but amongst Paleomena’s R&D nobility, the company became a kind of benefit in itself. It was at once part of Dowd’s provocative knottiness and enviable poise. The deference shown him by these erstwhile ‘shipmates’ was at times embarrassing (for her), yet his urbane conversation in the breath-

catching intervals persistently entertained and often instructed. Had she ever enjoyed (anticipated) life so much? Romance, the purest species of it, permeated the air itself.

She was hardly perfectly at ease, however. Her life had been in one guise or another too obligatory and forensic to assume the new exhilarating work-play routine came with the compliments of the management. Yet her perception of a quid quo pro continued to elude her. If she might believe the initial excursions a reward for past exemplary services to the corporation, the periodic interceding 'breaks', which showed no sign of letup, were easily interpreted as willing if not obsequious indebtedness — if she continued to accept the alluring invitations. Yet her boss and sometime mentor made no advances or vagrant impositions, and often amused with droll or schmaltzy assessments of their festive days and surroundings. To her spare queries he merely said he was getting on and, never having had a child, was enjoying the solicitude that comes with age. The younger Paleomena professionals she met on her own were nearly as entertaining and often quite debonair, but seemed to fall into two camps: those she sensed to be intimidated by her closeness and service to the august Angus Dowd, and those who actually wanted to wangle information about 'Deuteron', as one called him, invoking a type of projectile in nuclear bombardments. Dowd's earlier comment about 'wise old stoats' prompted her to remark one evening, "Our time outs have been enjoyable these past few months. You've a select name among some of the brains here. Did you know? Goes back a bit."

"Ah. Deuteron. Camp slang in some quarters for Deuteronomy."

Daphne barely smiled. "You know the chap?"

"Old Deuteronomy. Eliot's antiquated cat. Lived too many lives in succession."

Daphne looked away, hiding a smile.

"Like Deuteronomy I intend to live on in legend. And bask in the enviable notoriety."

This produced her incipient whimsical expression he would remember and treasure always.

On one longer holiday Dowd venturously elected to charter the sleek 86 meter Aquijo ketch — all of the current procurable sailing barks being a bit too cramped for Dowd — for a visit to the Bahamas. By then he had plied Daphne with several gifts, at first partly disguised as functional and obligatory paraphernalia for such trips: a custom-fit radio diving mask, an easily set chronometer, the unanticipated heavy sweater and warm socks, chic topsider boots and compact safety strobe horn belt. Other gifts, not expensive but ever thoughtful, were accepted in a silence where her flattered self vied with qualms about accepting such generosity.

The necklace was a departure though and she demurred accepting it.

"Angus, it's an heirloom — for a dowager."

He shrugged and said, almost as an afterthought, "No one, I fear, will wear it as handsomely."

"I'm already 'historic' am I?" she added awkwardly.

Sedately he noted, "Only the largest three stones are of any value. Many of the smaller diamonds are uncut. A seemingly discovery in a bazaar." As he returned the necklace to its velvet case he became more assertive. "Seems a shame to put it in a vault. I trust your most recent observant friend, the oceanographer, might agree, yes? Given his laudable taste."

"I feel like a dive," she said, with some determination.

"Perhaps one day," he said smiling.

"Not negotiable," she added, as one limited to having a final if needy word. Later, after the dive, and mutual disengagement with a late onboard admirer, she and Dowd basked in a splendid rosy-

cheeked sunset, though the necklace incident haunted the gathering dark — the stray gremlin, she decided, that strained the mutuality of these joint sabbaticals. The importunate ‘familial’ omen as she imagined it.

For an extended weekend the famous fashion photographer Louis Führ with a flamboyant entourage in tow anchored near them off Cape Eleuthera to make a lavish, ongoing sea-lust commercial — to hype that year’s Off the Hook swim wear. Führ had chartered a commodious ship, a former navy cruiser converted to a swank sea-going grotto, as a home base for the job. Dowd’s and Daphne’s stay at the Cape coincided with the fashion shoot, the creative director of which was the fulsome, high-maintenance Mme. Jacaranda Albricias, who needed few assistants and little amplification for her voice. Her reputation for ‘primitive chic’ and ‘uncompromising honesty’ made her a darling of the fashion set. Among her models was a limber beauty by the name of Margaret Burke, the step-sister of journalist Catherine Whyte. She centrally figured in most of the scenic shots, and was fawned over by Mme. Albricias during the individual takes. It was obvious to Daphne they were mates, Ms. Whyte the probationary partner. When Daphne walked by Dowd’s cabin that first day on her way to the bridge she heard a recording of Berlioz’s Roman Carnival Overture — an odd recourse here she thought. As the door was ajar she peeked in. He sat in his glider rocker gently oscillating to the debonair music as he overlooked a comparable statistics chart. “That your best carnival tune?” she couldn’t resist saying. Dowd smiled. “For nostalgic mossbacks, yes.” He noted her bikini. “That’s new. Mme. Albricias will be enchanted.” “Not likely,” she quickly responded. “I’ll be in the lower deck’s Beach Club for a while. Fun time.”

Führ’s ocean photo team spent some time recording Albricias’ models both above and below water, some swimming in a ‘non-aligned state’ (free the editorially mandated swimwear) said one of the tabloid’s gamey captions. A rolly polly photographer from Vanity Fair lost his camera and himself overboard when a boom used to swing him across the water buckled. The poor man did not know how to swim. When rescued he lay as a beached whale, his mountainous belly a pork zeppelin to the swimmers who pulled him in. A trauma team arrived in time from a U.S. warship, where he was taken for further treatment.

It was something of a relief to return the following week to her desk in the Paleomena Tower. Even Dowd had waned somewhat before the circus-like fashion shoot, its unrelieved hype and posturing. With notes of a recent dictation newly beside her, Daphne suddenly realized she needed a clarification of an intended witticism — an allusion to a mermaid’s bent (refracting?) mirror. But her boss was away from his office. Someone thought he might be in the screening theatre, to which she repaired, to find the executive seated by himself in one of the editing cubicles viewing a video. She remained just inside the theatre’s entrance door. The room itself lay in darkness, relieved marginally by the light reflected from the computer screen. The image then filling it was one of herself as she swam through some sun-laced jade and aquamarine waters, near the motor launch that served as embarkation headquarters for scuba and snorkel divers. Several of the divers carried photographic gear. The screen changed to another larger image of herself and several young divers as they hovered above a giant Pompeian-red starfish. The pictures were competently taken, presumably by one or more of the divers. Other frames followed, all chiefly of her, innocuous enough by themselves, though the dedication of one photographer, whom she hadn’t noticed, was unusual, given the background

mêlée in several frames when Margaret Burke's finespun form slipped by with a finning retinue in toe. Throughout this sea excursion, where she had kept to the periphery, an elusive unknown photographer persisted in observing and capturing her — the spare, spruce-cheeked Daphne. She was struck anew by the boyishness of her form — an ambiguity, not forgotten, that returned now with a piquant flush. She was pensively aware of Angus Dowd's sexual predilection. The attenuated look before her, only partly foiled by the bikini, less decorous when wet she noted, resurrected the haunt that had jinxed her for a decade before a persuasive analyst proposed a solution. Her life had immeasurably changed for the better. No one any longer doubted the veracity of her sex; indeed she had been accosted on a beach boardwalk by a major advertiser prepared to hire her on the spot for a commercial to upstage cellulite — an offer she politely declined. Since her metamorphosis she'd had several enthusiastic if finally uninteresting companions, including the advertiser, who otherwise served as a kind of universal seal-of-approval. But now a subsurface image of herself was reinstated, fixed before her, a nearly forgotten being, revealed in that ocean, tessellated by criss-crossing ribbons of sunlight. The leanness seemed to her then as rattle-boned as any skeleton one might wish buried. And the most influential player in her life then was obviously fascinated by the nimble trophy.

She did not intrude on what she believed an 'in camera' preview, and returned to her desk. She put aside the dictation that had prompted the break in her routine — a 'break' that intimated how felicitous adventures didn't always last. What was she then to serve as — a handy, nugatory, vicarious entertainment? And was that intrinsically reprehensible? Was the definition of her form, augmented by a wet bikini, a join purchase, a coincidence merely, except in her mindful disarray? At the earliest opportunity she confronted the gnome.

"Angus, I don't often play games, and I do need some straight answers."

She had entered his office at the end of her day and stood directly in front of his desk.

He displayed a too congenial smile, then told her to scram.

This response she hadn't prepared for, his near-bristling preoccupation with a stout folder before him seemingly invincible.

"First thing tomorrow, doughty sparrow. Now get out."

He did not at first see her the following morning.

He entered his office, placed a copy of the N.Y. Times on his desk and prepared to do battle — his early morning workout. The paper was one of the apostasies permanently on Angus Dowd's hit list. She had counted six letters directed to its editors in the last quarter, none of them published, though his standing order did forbid editing. Every third year the collection came out in hard cover at the behest of an exceptional editor at Lexington Books.

He looked up to find her pensively waiting by the Florentine *prie-dieu* and promptly rifled his top drawer to find the monocle he employed on presumptive occasions, which he smartly affixed to an eye before sitting back and crossing immaculate Armadillo shoes on his desktop.

But at once he perceived the aloofness in her wooden amusement.

"The Emirate billionaire didn't propose?"

It was an old anecdote. An oil magnate from Abu Dhabi once sent a note to Dowd requesting his principal secretary's full name, E-mail and brand of perfume.

"I would like to know what you really want, expect. Of me."

His answer was forthright and hopelessly arcane.

“Ah, well — a glimpse of Eden — and, the week after next, possibly Majorca as well, my nimble bee eater.” The quip was buried in an immaculate airtight smile, which she easily matched with one of her own.

“What do the videos of me represent?”

Again his answer was boardroom impervious.

“Ah yes. Those. Perhaps a decade of renewal — for me of course — and a slight infringement of your privacy. I told you I’ve discovered a faun in the works. To be acquitted when I see you one day soundly solvently hitched, or whatever it is young folk do today when a treasured partner suffices.”

As often happened, by the time Daphne confronted the ‘mutant gnome’ — as Muerner once called Dowd in Daphne’s presence — a quick sleight-of-hand brushwork had altered the canvas, and she struggled to recall images so recently distinct and goading.

“And if I remain single?”

“Well then, with your forbearance, we shall, on select days, continue to explore the globe in bite-sized jaunts, in sumptuous and elegant transports, as civilizing connoisseurs. Highly speculative, an abstemious spinsterhood of course, given your beauty and brains. And the chaps you’ve been molesting of late.”

He then, with perplexing ease, neatly sidestepped his own pomp and circumstance by dropping his shoes and speaking to her in a voice she’d not heard before, as bracing as it was forthright. Angus Dowd may even have startled himself. For perhaps the first or second time in his life he felt an obligation to go public, and immediately sensed the recombinant wonder.

“Daphne, the Venetian graduate is a myth. You have always interested me. Your professional proficiency was and is top drawer. As I’ve told you, age brings a kind of suave impertinence: you wish to salvage some of the good you’ve depreciated if not squandered. You are as much a project for me now as an object of affection. I hope for, want, an affectionate daughter, whose company I may enjoy well short of incest. Gemeinschaft — with a lone codicil that urges, stipulates an advantageous life companion for the daughter. A credible seemingly life partner.”

The electric pause that followed was about what Angus Dowd had anticipated, though Daphne’s lone short answer became the spare soliloquy he assiduously strove to avoid.

“Not much of a daughter.”

Dowd did his best to look bemused. “I find that comment terribly coy. I never met your parents, but their pride in you and your academic achievements must be exemplary. Would they not be flattered by your unrivalled reputation here, to say nothing of the excitement if not frenzy you’ve engendered among our brilliant young lotharios. My god, even a middle-aged Middle East billionaire deigned to leave a calling card. And must remain dumbly askance that he was overlooked,” he suavely added, returning to his aloof smugness, still optimistic about the purgative bargain with himself, exhibiting the unobliging, unreserved affability he trusted would foster her esteem — his paramount objective after all. He still had not confronted the possibility that his self-abnegation might be an injury, a furtive slur in and of itself.

As we’ve noted, one of Angus Dowd’s pleasures was putting agile brains to work. The ironic, fated expression that came to her he would remember, treasure always, knowing full well his memory was the only place he could savour such awesome bemusement without apology. The trust he courted was after all a quicksilver commodity and might vanish precipitously. He faced an open-handed

human who knew of his precious idealism, yet would not return a sarcasm, who wanted only her due, which did not include sly patronage or bully worship. In an age of technological miracle, non-mechanical wonders keep to the shade — Dowd's trust of himself. And he now risked parting the protective branch! Daphne left wearing an expression of droll amusement, which rather upstaged Angus Dowd. It was as if he was a cartoon figure here, and Daphne had left saying 'horsefeathers'. Indeed, for perhaps the first time in his life Angus Dowd sensed a job he might not be up to, or a slight he may well have deserved.

Still, their intermittent travelogues grew in splendour and diversity, familiarity and candour, both to absolve and to accept and proceed. At one stage Daphne opened a travel agency, which she sold at a loss after nine months of contending with capricious weather, one too many venal innkeepers, a briefly hijacked airline limo (the hijacker, alone and high, was finally over powered), and a shrewdly organized and cantankerous cruise ship 'victim' whose home had been 'opportunistically burgled' while she was away.

If Daphne refused the heirloom, she accepted select scarves and pieces of jewelry — she wore little and that sparingly, a fact that animated his diligence in finding pieces she liked. He bided his time when she disappeared for a while, greeting her with treasured selfless humour when she returned, knowing the timeless prince with intelligence, bel-esprit, adequate wherewithal or the promise of, had not yet arrived. He teased her with a tutor's or renegade's wit during their excursion days and, on rare vacant evenings, gave free rein to his fondness for the likes of Coleridge, Keats and Gerard Manley Hopkins, her amusement a benediction. They worked at their usual frenetic pace in the Tower then fled to balmy climes at unexpected intervals. People gossiped of course, and Dowd renewed his effort as pledged matchmaker while infecting the lively prattlers — leaving their suspicions in tact. One gossipmonger burble went as follows: 'That perpetual smirk looks like a love punch look.' 'How did you arrive at that conclusion dear?' 'Well, it's obvious isn't it.' 'Not for an old Abelard, surely.' 'You jest of course.' And: 'He gambles when she takes off. To mock what he might have spent on her I presume.' 'Well he was altogether damned lucky last night.' Dowd left that casino in question saying to a known blabbermouth that he was 'newly resigned to enchantment'.

For many months this convivial 'investiture', this amiable non-bloody sacrament, held — Dowd's characterization. In his smuggler moments he thought of it as the grafting of baroque invention onto natural spirit to produce a rare beautiful shade tree. Said spoiler Muerner: "A knotty old cherry on a slender birch. Mutatis mutandis." Dowd took the vulgarity in his stride, while wondering how Daphne's keen sensibility might take the frisky metaphor.

One night after one holiday's disorganized day aboard a super yacht, then being offered for sale — some luggage had gone astray and a late rendezvous with a new friend postponed — 'Just another spring-butt skier,' Daphne said — they watched a Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers film, Dowd intermittently glancing through the draft of an annual report. Daphne had come from an early evening shower and joined him on a divan in the Saloon, where they were alone, the other guests topside watching a spectacular sun set. Her hair at such times smelled of keen evening mists. Toward the end of the movie Daphne wanted to dance and was surprised to find in Dowd a nimble partner, if a trifle 'airish'. But he waned sooner than expected — too many '*disapproving* mirrors' in the room, he lamely said. With a wry smile Daphne carried on, the loose robe revealing peerless legs and fated glimpses of a nude torso, before dropping beside him on the divan, as a cocky neglected flirt, her

expression both dryly amused and resolved, as if she had decided the charade, this toffy pantomime was over. Never before had he seen her so single minded, so undaunted. Or more desirable. She simply said, "Tired of being an understudy." He responded with a short incredulous laugh. Ignoring him she added, "I've decided I want a starring role; you're up to it, I think." Her candid regard of him then could intimidate a viking he thought. Indeed, words failed him! Drolly, sedately, after she again wanted to dance, she proceeded to maneuver him with amused murmurs to her bedroom off the night fragrant Saloon. If that interval seemed surreal, disembodied for him — the word eldritch came to mind — the fixed candid expression on her face told him his pretence of benign patronage was up. His disbelief vied with a keen unbidden lust when she drew him onto her bed.

The robe vanished as if by magic, leaving him seated beside her, as he toured the loveliness of her elbow raised back, her head turned his way, hoping to draw her into a postponed sleep, while her low amused voice asked if the tracers might not extend their range, to which he responded, with some desperation, as if her novel nakedness was but one more speculative property for a proper English estate agent: "Ah yes, the celebrated South face masters an interrupted view...of a broad hummock...off...off a historic iliac plain...." Her background purring as a pampered cat elicited curt laughs from them both. "You risk buying if you turn me over," she said with wry solemnity. The words he accepted but by then had little compunction to resist, though for a few stellar moments seeing her so was entirely enough, for she was every bit as peerless and exquisite as imagined, her amused regard of him a telling affirmation. She turned then on her side, saying the manner house came fully equipped. He did his best to ignore her words and proceeded, in his mind at least, to identify excellent birdsong as he touched her lips, a grazing area above some lovely timeless chapels, which prompted a ready smile and invitational sigh — such being her fond response to his apprehension of the wonder work before him, the ensuing invitational 'hand-fasted' present of her sex beguiling as they come, and they were soon making love like a pair of restive teens.

He was demurely told it had been fun, his mirthful charge on her side leaning on an elbow, candidly studying him. "You want me on my knees?" The sleep encrusted voice might have been offering him a hymnal in a crowded congregation. He touched her pretty, too real face with one hand, and remained slatternly speechless, except for the incantation her name entirely subsumed. He could find no other words at all. She plumped the pillow beside him, stealing a parting kiss, then saying, "The buyers may want a second opinion of course...." Her head soon nestled heavy against his chest, her drowsiness replete in its steadfastness, its unconditional trust. Soulfully he managed to hum Brahm's lullaby as she fell asleep.

Afterward, alone in his room, he showered and drank a large glass of Old Sporan. He was appalled, spent, dumbly grateful. He believed he had given her some pleasure, her late tranquility as close to the modest contentment he might offer her. So was he any less a strutting grotesquery for not having sodomized her, on knees or no? A discursive wedding night is never really enough he told himself. By continuing the liaison did he not risk forfeiting a fine secretary as well as an endearing impish 'kinswoman'? The imagined daughter had quite banished him with her incisive nates — 'cute as a bug's ear I'm told' she somnolently said after the robe or palla, as he thought of it, left off to disclose a timeless kore. 'My so righteous Angus, my doughty not so really old Deuteronomy,' she had said. He had the paralyzing suspicion such nimble parody she picked up from him! Indeed, was anything more seductive than her soft, savvy, beguiling laughter! Such quintessence a near rebuke of

his ever fastidious perception! He had never seen, let alone imagined, a more exquisite human being!

Thus, almost without warning, a chapter had closed on Angus Dowd, his wish to seek an idyllic solicitude lost in his own imperious and lordly management of deference. It was the first time in his life his imposing Tower took on an unsuspected lean, his Dulcinea so decently tolerant of, if not amused by, this stilted pedantic oddity! His passage to a lost rarefied communion with his ‘other’ self was sustained the following night, and the happy, forthright, often wondrous conventional febrile coupling, continued regularly till the end of that summer season.

One night they attended a solo piano recital at the Bear Valley Music Festival by the prodigious Arnold Storrier, now a much regaled polymath savant, who was then being respectfully if plaintively described as a ‘maturing duo-pianist’. It was mainly an all-Verdi-transcribed program and Daphne lingered in a private Elysium, it seemed, till the following evening when they boarded the plane to Los Angeles. So Dowd imagined. He knew Daphne loved opera, Verdi being an endearing favourite, and the Storrier chap a living Orpheus with his interpretations. Was he not flattered that she would share his company with the concordance of lyrical splendour performed by a masculine nonesuch? Yet as soon as they were seated in the plane, he sensed her returned mania for mute self-appraisal.

“So.” She woke to gaze, from her window seat, at the poppy-red arc of sun traversing the horizon. “An ‘embracèd summer’, as someone I know might say.” She took and held his hand but continued to stare at the surfacing sun, her expression the genial masque she wore as a garland. He felt powerless to mitigate such exotic yearning. She perhaps did not doubt the exclusivity of his affection, but it was in the lucid indelible dawn, the extravagant love of love, and thus of self, he might offer. And as entertaining as that may have been — in its often engaging élan — he believed she instinctively ached for a far rarer and more impacted contentment: an unassuming, unmediated, fully matched domestic happiness! He wondered too in his newly circling regret that he ever imagined himself a decent gifted marriage broker.

He saw too, so acutely in the growing arc of daylight, the young nymph of Greek antiquity called Daphne, one of the mountain nymphs who tore the imposter Leucippus apart when he expediently tried to disguise himself as a Fury, brandishing the while her veridical laurel...whose pristine leaves the enamoured Apollo finally crowned his head with, and ordered the tree evermore sacred to his special divinity!

TWENTY-EIGHT

Frieda looked with a residual calm at the plain nearly empty coat closet. Her entire wardrobe at that moment hung from half-a-dozen wire coat hangers — what she had sombrely taken with her to the FBI safe house in Boyle Heights, the agency being her sole sovereign minder then. For several seconds she indulged a recollection of a six meter expanse, bearing perhaps twelve to fifteen million worth of designer creations. One lone item from that collection remained and that in simpler modified form, hanging apart from the rest in the narrow space, as much a paean to the Madeiran seamstress’s craft as a designer’s showpiece. She’d shunned it during her few meetings with her David in the safe house. There it would have exacerbated the bleak atmosphere, invoked a presence she did not finally own. Even now, with the spectre of recent memories still sorely vivid, the act of once more making herself stylishly presentable chafed — and yet at that juncture of her life she sought to regale the ‘David’ she

fervently, ardently sought to share a life with. Her bargain with the CIA was that, when her interrogation ceased, she would be flown on a military jet to the farm house in East Hampton Arnold recently leased; full cooperation during the questioning had suspended any indictment and sanctioned her application for landed immigrant status as Frieda Anastasia Kniaźnin. It was the one thing she would never forgive — the disruption and hence distrust of her authentic self which the obsidian of her marriage had so contorted. She now lifted the elegant costume from its hanger, amazed again at its weight and majesty. A smaller corsage had been added, less the expensive diamond. She decided to wear it on the flight and greet David with it on when she arrived — to prompt a fondly shared memory of their first meeting by the steps of the winding staircase! He would remember she believed. She could do little with her hair; the CIA interrogators had been friendly but the existence in the safe house remained spartan.

They were at first incredulous her information proved so dated. Well, they did come rather late to the game, arresting her a day after the cryptic story broke — Muerner's doing she mused, as much to remove her from media scrutiny. She misled the interrogators on a few personal matters, and nearly got away with it. Not until the final week did she confront a competent examiner, also the more patient — not unlike her old tutor. She even detected in his mood and method the same tempered resignation. Her own baited arrogance, the result of the first two team's presumptions, sometimes got her in trouble. Even now she could barely believe the many gaps in her story; the early questioners were nearly speechless before the probability that whole months, years could be spent: shopping, comparing, estimating, bidding, buying, being counselled, measured, fitted, exercised, coiffed, toned, pumiced, massaged, bathed, drugged...fulsomely 'poeticized'! The itinerary in one week's daybook had provided her questioners a litany of activities that all but dumfounded at the time. Yatrib likely added some noisome asides of her own during her questioning.

The money Frieda as Anna managed to deposit *into* the Acorn account *was* a clever ruse, the net result being a fine distraction for Roald and the GRU. Sadly, it allowed a too brief hiatus for herself! Her interrogators smiled at this presumption. And now, all that should remain in this fraught and dismaying existence, to affect a measure of self-esteem, was the lovely chiffon dress with its brocaded torso. A limbo indeed. The lovely emerald earrings were left off; they parodied two red eyes.

Her legal position vis-a-vis the divorce was still bearish though. The court had initially taken seriously Roald's absurd charges of child abuse, drug misuse and mental cruelty, as exemplified in the diary she supposedly kept — which had yet to be proven spurious. The thought of losing Roald Jr. to the judgement of virulent castigators appalled. Modern word games still phased her. She was somewhat relieved to learn of Roald's own pending indictments from assorted corporate and defence trustees, though the prosecutors there were bogged down with the wording. The preliminary hearing to contest Roald's petition for divorce, including her extortion ploy and the appropriation of the Acorn account, was scheduled in two weeks, leaving her a fortnight with her special David. Then another marathon of impertinent questions. She wondered how many concerts or endorsements the ordeal would finally cost, to absolve a love and release a past... 'May a divorce be with you' he belatedly, wistfully said to her over the phone, probably quoting Antoine or some other mercurial eccentric. It was his affectionate composure that helped stay her apprehension and, as she slipped into the lone pair of estimable sandals, decided the near perfect lady was ready for the drive to the airport from Boyle Heights. In the pass-check room the larger of her two young escorts paced back and forth. On seeing

their ready boyish smiles and hearing such glib well-wishing, she sensed the old enforced calm once more well up within.

Vassily Ablesimov had not properly slept for a week and was beginning to sense his physical disintegration. He believed the SVR, then in joint-command of the Rezidency with the GRU, had found Roald's background too serviceably quirky to pass up. A media saturnalia of his 'decadent lifestyle', inferred from bartered testimony of his own perturbed staff, and parcelled in leaked instalments to an avid media, would be ideal fodder for coercion. Vassily's remaining confusion lay with the sudden appearance of the elegant jars — specifically the GRU interest in them — which he learned about from a debriefing of a Licchavi footman, who identified the jars as receptacles in which Roald likely intended to inter select mementos of his wife (before her 'lapse') — 'films, tapes, perfumes, jewelry, a hair lock or two, rare family photos, select letters, et cetera' — and house them in specially designed muqarnas, rounded honeycombed niches set in a wall-corner of his commodious private study. The footman's GRU debriefer had been most curious for details, particularly the 'et cetera' items: might the jars have an ancillary 'gamy' purpose, perhaps? The jar's designer, a brilliant Czech glass blower, was well known in Russia. At first Vassily was confused. His latest mandate was simply to help muddy connections to the gold seam; at the last minute he was withdrawn from the detail assigned to pump the Licchavi retainers and confirm Frieda's whereabouts. He suspected an assassination team was in place before his return to America. Then the elegant glass jars intruded, intimating a further vagary the GRU might exploit, leaving Vassily in a sour incredulous state.

The original plan which he back-plotted from the lowest operation level, was to enact a separation of the wife from her FBI warders on her trip to the airport. An embedded GRU agent assisting in the CIA investigation — a stark belated discovery for Vassily — would cue waiting GRU gunmen to the departure. The gunmen would shoot the legitimate agents. Frieda would be dragged from the car, handed off to a second or third freelance disposal team. The first stage — Frieda's anticipated trip in a heavily tinted SUV to the airport — seemed on track. A dramatically lurid and lethal abduction could implicate Roald's lust for vengeance.

But then to Vassily's chagrin he learned, through an older sardonic GRU veteran that there might not be enough left of the body to stage a simple homicide with! Vassily had directly asked if an outright assassination was still being considered. Perhaps, said the veteran, a smiling Bulgarian with many gold teeth, though parts of the cadaver could be missing, thus intimating a very gory killing. This stalwart seemed delighted with Vassily's acute dismay, making Vassily suspect the man might be there to pace him! Leaving the question of the jars being purely commemorative in limbo. The Bulgarian shrewdly smiled and suggested the husband was full of adventurous ideas. "'Shylock' we call him. A scoop for the National Enquirer. I predict a film within a year; Americans have a special talent for packaging and preservatives. A fine collector this Roald." The Bulgarian's gold teeth flashed in parting.

Such liaison officers could be a mine of misinformation of course, and were masters at honing dire innuendo and confusion. Vassily could hardly believe what was suggested. But what could he do at that stage? The fussy ghoulishness of the scheme defied apprehension and garbled inquiry. Was someone scripting the intentions, fashioning the aberrant mindset of a useful pervert and his stooges? Such a contract killing, if ascribed to the husband, could upstage the gold seam mess, even salvage some money; the Licchavi retainers would then be under great pressure for the tidiest cleanest

settlement possible. Vassily could not believe the husband that arrantly perverse, but knew all too well what grisly coercion an acutely embarrassed resident might invoke. Perhaps there was a further humiliation or perversion yet undivulged...the Cheka remained a brisk clearing house for Satanic smarts, real or imagined. A truism he'd done his best in his career to rationalize, reconcile to extraordinary need. One of the bugbears.

It was during those hours he might have slept that Vassily decided he'd had enough: his feelings then for the sorry girl were mixed, but he loathed being part of a travesty. What could she now disclose after all? The stages of cocaine intoxication? How it feels to be painted green? Nor had he forgotten his own unhappy descent, and the patent likelihood he might well be consigned to the final body count, a realization that concentrated the remaining options if he were to alter anything at all. In addition to loss of sleep, he had sustained a month in the street atmosphere of Los Angeles: his eyes and mucous membranes were smarting and he had a slight temperature. All he had hoped to see accomplished, in the end, was the safe placement of Frieda with American immigration authorities alive and duly amnestied. A dubious likelihood he now soberly knew, the net worth of ugly reprisal from a maniacal husband so expedient then. Should he manage to get her out of harm's way, it would be his last act as a demoted errand boy. He could end being shot, a not unlikely fate regardless. His status within the residency was now such that he might be assigned almost any bleak task.

Then his stewing anger prompted him to exclaim aloud — "So why not silence the ghoul, the vengeful voluptuary himself?" Well why not? More direct, less messy, maybe easier. For everyone! Halt any thought of a craven, crazed, ghoulish murder, by killing the proposed conscripted murderer! Such a killing might ever disrupt a planned assassination. He was amazed to discover no forthright inner dissent. He stood then beside a curb bagel-and-fresh-orange-juice stand, believing he might finally keep some of the pleasantly smelling offerings down. The more he considered such a killing, the more he was disposed to attempt it. It seemed his exhaustion heightened his resolve. Was it not the protean, prodigal self-servers who had spoiled the dream, for America and himself? As he asked the question he began to refine his plan and credit his chances...which even allowed time to try to save the daughter! If FBI sitters would escort Frieda on the flight to Storrier's home in the Hamptons the following morn, the late department advisement, he must be in a position to follow her on her way to the March Air Reserve Base in Riverside — along the roadway her transport vehicle would likely be stopped, her escorts shot, her seizure immediate, a sizeable truck or trucks blocking an escort vehicle or vehicles — the scenario he'd pieced together, knowing GRU arrest maneuvers. His chances of retrieving her from this situation were small he knew, yet he would try. Which left few hours to plant an explosive in the carefully secreted Licchavi railroad carriage, the fugitive hideaway Roald resided in then, the villa itself being monitored day and night, media ferrets camping out nearby. It seemed odd the recondite carriage remained just that. The SVR knew. Was such knowledge a further bargaining chip? The carriage had been moved several times about the rail yard it occupied, apparently. It was surely just a matter of time before some stringers descended. Thus did Vassily set out to plant an explosive device, a single timed limonka, a fragmentation grenade filched from the station armoury, under a top step to the rail carriage, the erstwhile traveling hotel where Roald would most likely sleep that night. The grenade's vibration timer would allow a short interval for a bodyguard's entry before Roald's — an estimation based on Vassily's own protocol with bodyguards. Vassily would dress as a railroad worker, a wheel-truck checker. Worth a try. Yes, worth a try. Nothing lost by it, nothing at all.

In a like fit of remorseless energy (troubled idealists sometimes think and act alike) did a determined Arnold Storrier study the photos of the large railway carriage, the secreted abode where the anxious, privacy obsessed fanatic then hung out with his newly recruited bodyguards. Arnold's dislike of Roald prompted his own intensive investigation of the man — the details of which he kept from Frieda — the stately railway carriage being a late discovery of the private detective Arnold commissioned to study the Licchavi family, including their domiciles.

As he pieced together the gaudy media details of Roald's career, marriage and lavish wanton life style, including the elegant enigmatic jars he first learned of from vigilant Muerner, Arnold sensed an odium he had not experienced before. He doubted there was finally a plenary decorum for two people passionately fond of one another — they made up a litany as they went — but the lurid sexual innuendo here, now part of a tabloid trove gleaned from Licchavi staff and retainers, made him feel callow, unseasoned, his fervent esteem somehow gratuitous, supernumerary. However physically effete Roald might be, a duel with him loomed. The late daunting imputations about the woman he, Arnold Storrier cherished, was a hex he must somehow shed — however embarrassing that a fervid voyeur like Roald might have seeded them. Indeed, Arnold's 'Real Combat' persona had taken hold, for better or worse! In his mind he could hear Aaron Copland's Fanfare for the Common Man. Such declarative music handsomely bespoke resolve, however belated.

In his mind ranged execrable scenes of putting out eyes with Antoine's walking stick and the like. While the deed, whatever it was, must somehow be accomplished by himself. He could have found numerous hit men to do his bidding; for one Sikh clique resentful of Licchavi habit and fortune, a safe passage into the estate itself may have at one time sufficed. Indeed, the very nature of Roald's apparent obsessions trivialized vendetta — the incommensurateness of such a deed, a belligerent assault to counter idiosyncratic lascivious indulgence. In Arnold's more lucid moments, the lurid imputation of the jars he suspected to be gamy Cheka piffle disclosed to some rapacious stringer. Thus his anger was allegedly the more unflattering, Roald a frail pantaloons when a gorgon need be confronted, not a sly patron of virtuosic glass blowing!

Arnold possessed a fine hatred in his pugilist days, when he ached to obliterate, spectacularly 'kill' his combatant, though a death would have chagrined afterward; his opponents were rarely formidable and many managers on the take. But here he seemed on his own — and a gorged smelly insect filled the opposing corner. Instead of Antoine's steely walking stick should he not take a roach swatter and kitchen catcher? Or do nothing at all? Was there a homelier trait than sexual jealousy of such a one? Thus a sense of unreality clung to him as he stole from car to car in the rail yard where the private carriage was berthed, an underlying warrant of *jus divinum* and *lex talionis* goading him on. The sty he wanted removed. A distracting fire or fires to divert the bodyguards — then a swift adept blow to the back of the neck — if his anger hadn't slackened. He dressed in dark wheel checker or 'car toad' coveralls he'd bought that day, and planned to hide near the carriage until Roald's return that night. As noted, Roald had vacated his villa estate — then swarming with reporters — to the current anonymity of his sequestered rail carriage. Arnold carried Antoine's walking stick and lubricated the mechanism retaining the blade, wondering if he could really do more than give the ghoul a bloody nose. Yet with cane, gas canisters and igniter he came, prepared to play hardball. Such a peaceful evening. A doldrum day and clouded sunset. A yardman sauntered from wheel to wheel of a nearby freight train checking wheel surfaces, bearings and couplings.

The Licchavi carriage sat secluded in a separate siding partly covered in broad tarpaulins not quite secreting the storybook caravan, one lantern glimpsed on the balcony end of the carriage reminiscent of such a one on an old imperial flagship. The fire must not be extensive the circumspect Arnold noted as he checked the extinguishers in a near fire station, discovering then — to his amazement and shock — a second dark form hovering or loitering nearby!

Thus, in a darkening afternoon the two nemeses simultaneously sighted one another, their clothing dark, nondescript, their faces umbered, and quickly took cover. The successive nimble darting of the ‘other’ intimidated the worst to both men. A presumed a Licchavi armed guard tracked an intruder and that guard was one canny bastard. The freight yard they sweltered in was a small island removed from the larger rail grid, thus an attempted escape would be conspicuous and, if the guard carried an infra-red tracer, possibly fatal. It was presumed the guard had already summoned assistance, but was judicious about causing a conspicuous disturbance, given the likely Licchavi request for care and quiet.

Arnold swore at his earlier nonchalance, Vassily his watch as the precious seconds elapsed. They stalked one another for a short minute attempting to notice a characteristic response from the other — quick methodical double-back, duration of pauses, erratic gestures that betoken indecision even fear. The weapon the ‘other’ carried also perturbed. Neither had seen anything quite like it. Two converging yardmen noted the furtive activity, one of whom promptly worked his cell phone while the other entered a small shed back of the Licchavi carriage to emerge with a shotgun. Each of the dark-suited stalkers suspected he would shortly have three or more bodies to contend with.

At one point Arnold was uncertain if he heard additional footsteps or indistinct echoes of his own. As he slowed to listen a thick plank lambasted the side of one knee and sent him sprawling into the oily gravel. His attacker was upon him with a snap cap which he easily deflected. Promptly that attacker, who had decided a swift quiet assault would best abet his getaway, realized his folly: in no way could he deal with strength like that! The immense hands that came about his neck and arm had the grip of mechanized manglers; he could feel his Adam’s apple collapsing into his windpipe. He managed to knee the man’s crotch and break free, catching in time the struts of a fortuitous rolling tanker car, amazed at his own agility in boarding it. Glancing back he saw the brute struggling to stand, then falling to one knee. It was his last sight of the injured Hercules. He could find no suitable oath. Even his near miraculous escape held no quarter.

Arnold, in turn, glimpsing the arrival of more men, slid beneath the wheel truck of a stationary hopper car, hoping his sooty disguise and the gathering dark would mask his presence. While he massaged his one badly injured leg, several voices attested to a search for the intruder or intruders, but eventually became muted as night fell, the remaining voices merging with what appeared to be Roald and his own party of escorts. In the gathering dark Arnold managed to struggle out from the wheel truck and limp away to a grid exit and his car, embittered he’d been so lucklessly hobbled. His sense of relief in avoiding the yard’s security detail partially alleviated his disappointment, though the apparent precipitous flight of his attacker continued to awesomely intrigue. Was someone else determined Roald should be confronted, offed even? That tenable likelihood would keenly haunt him in the following days. Surely only a like-minded requiter or vengeance seeker would have fled so!

In the heavily tinted SUV the two CIA babysitters maintained an intermittent, glib chatter. A

second car followed on this trip to the designated airport. Frieda had seen one of the babysitters before when she was first driven to the safe house. He was very young she thought. The vicuna shawl Rosanna made to go with the stylish shoes she drew tighter about her and silently watched the periodic bustle of humanity beyond her tinted window. Throngs shifted in the late afternoon light as so many moths flitting against signboard lights. She hated moths without compunction. Even Muerner was a friend in crowds like these, where arachnid and reptilian wills prevailed. So it seemed. A young man tried to peer through one darkened window at a spotlight and fancifully whistled — an act that livened disgust. It was one aspect of America she never really understood. In the many gangland neighbourhoods of America's metropolises, the art of self-defence seemed almost gratuitous. The prospect of destruction or enslavement rarely wavered; the meagre satisfaction was to survive for a time near the edge. Though that edge seemed ever narrower and sharper.

The car suddenly shot ahead. “— Not one of ours,” the driver exclaimed, as he tooled down a side street where an old school bus suddenly emerged from a ghostly alley entirely blocking the second car.

The SUV then abruptly careened over a brick walkway and small grassy knoll, to emerge on a neighbouring side street. “No sweat, fully functional and on schedule” the passenger seat escort said after an incisive exchange on his cell. Some kids hanging about a dumpster yelled obscenities as the SUV streamed by hitting some piled garbage.

Was the ‘not one of ours’ one of Arnold's, Frieda wondered, trying to stay her spasmodic shivering. The seat itself seemed at times unmoored.

“Damn!” The car suddenly turned and bounded down an alley, the suspension grating and squawking, the wheels bumping and dangling, causing her to wonder at the vehicle — a hybrid SUV model — surely not transportation to trust in a pinch. More and more the incongruities taunted as she sensed a forgotten operational dread. They were then on the edge of Chinatown she surmised, negotiating decomposing alleys. The car then bolted to a sudden stop before a large looming truck. Simultaneously her two escorts were shot, her door lock smashed and the door wrenched open. Several hands seized her wrists and arms, dragging her out, her wrists briskly tied behind while someone injected something into her arm. Her struggle was brief if momentarily tense before her limbs wilted. She glimpsed an envelope, someone urgently looking inside then promptly complaining that there should be more. The dress and shoes were valuable another suggested, a Slav with a husky voice she thought.

She noticed all this almost as a spectator in an uncomfortable bleacher, the drug rendering her languid, inert. She felt newly cold, Rosanna's shawl had fallen to the ground. So: the first of two, three handoffs? Already the drowsiness, dizziness set in...she assumed it would be gruesome but quick. Dourly she imagined Roald and the GRU in cahoots.

She was bundled into an older sedan with heavily tinted windows and driven at high speed, no attempt made to cloak her head: the abductee would not be coming back. The massive gent beside her noted with some assurance that she was still ‘out of gas’.

She was traded once more, the value of the extras again belaboured. It was the most cramped of the vehicles with intermingling smells of oil, vomit, and a fetid male body who squeezed in beside her. The wheels spun before the doors closed.

Barely awake and almost didn't care. Roald's preposterous Tara a badly moulded memory. The

scene had begun to reverse itself, she a stolid witness to framed mayhem — Peter's sense of chaos or Vassily's pit, or Arnold's — what mayhem of Arnold's — or should she have said Muerner's? Salt water tears. And where was her prince, her special David? He had surely lost her in the labyrinth, airless, lungless....

Her new smelly minder could manage little in the pinioned space, the costume the Madeiran seamstress fashioned for a goddess not an accomplice: the heavy, well seamed fabric would delay a pent-up frenzy, an on-the-fly rape. Flagrant oaths versus noble threads! Though the strong ropy hands did manage to rip the dress's relatively delicate cap sleeve — as a ham-fisted madman had done before. Rape was a rushed affair before an expeditious murder. But the sight of the torn dress in the rear mirror caused the driver to brake and finger the rent in the fabric. A momentous slap, not hers. Electric recriminations, not hers. A thousand or more dollars pissed away! The assault thus interrupted, but not postponed as the car gunned forward. The rebuke did little to temper the ogre in this precipitous joyride, interrupted only when the car abruptly turned, descended in a wrenching arc, headlights sweeping an embankment outlining a looming van, then freezing on a mud flat.

A strong flashlight spotlighted the brisk removal of the pale nonesuch, the ugly tear in the dress prompting more vehement swearing. The stench about was that of a lost midden, the breath of postponed decay, sluggish islands slowly turning in a nearby grungy slough. A retributive death then. New fraternal voices greeted one another with topical complaint: the dumb bastards you sometimes get stuck with! Much practiced resigned sighs. An asshole by the name of Igor was told off and slapped. The flashlight cursively shone across a dingy flat and further mephitic slough, touching also a dark van or coach, then blanching her tear-wet face. A firm voice close by issued instructions. "Take the shoes. Leave the rest." A sharp tug, then another. She almost fell. More oaths and edgy insults which she mutely endured as she was hustled toward the novel, sinister van, the sounds of flowing water in the distance. Again and again she was propelled forward, intermittent ooze for a time hindering secure footing. A newly opened doorway in the van spewed forth a brilliant furnace of light sheering the darkening maze...

Then a piqued distraction, a shrill alien commotion! A scream issued from a stray intrusive body newly rushing about. Suddenly a wholesale panic, swearing — newfound, furious, frantic. A motor abruptly started, the van door banging shut, its tires suddenly wildly spinning, leaving. She might have sighed. Shrill voices hectored and instructed as some shots rang out while she was dragged backwards by hair and arms and thrust into hideously putrid smelling water rising, sloshing about her, acutely acrid, stinging, her form newly sprawled, floundering in a grungy slough or sump, the murky odious effluent gummy, cold, eye-scorching — as the somewhere-else screams from a very angry god continued — then more shots, one hitting her outer cheek another grazing her neck, just before she submerged....

It was an act of courage that Louis, precipitously laden with guilt, nearly despaired of: Cody suddenly, furiously running down the rise, shrieking at the top of her lungs, perhaps as much at him as the thugs below, flinging a spare camera at a figure who spryly ducked, as a flashlight intermittently picked out her hurtling form, while he, Louis Peak, cowered in the shelter of the rise's ratty burnt bushes where they had lingered this one additional night. "Over here — for chrissake!" Cody belatedly yelled back at him.

Then that terrible moment after the flashlight tracked the intruder and the shooting began, when it seemed Cody had accomplished nothing — a horrible interval of surging disbelief, a pantomime prelude to the coming frantic dodging as she slipped between the car lights and flashlight while picking up anything and everything she could find to hurl at them, one stone at least prompting fevered swearing. Mindlessly, Louis called her name from the bushes. Someone fired two shots in his direction before jamming into the remaining wheel-whining car which slowly drew itself from a patch of watery mud as another rock scored a window. Several more shots punctuated the silence. Yet he could make out very little. Then the car turned on Cody. Louis was further astonished to see another body lunge from the shadows, whitewashed by the headlights, and rake Cody aside as the car lunged by. Several gunshots followed — a final set oddly, evenly paced. The wheel-churning vehicle was glimpsed newly ominously sliding, careening, fin tailing, then falling nose down into the smelly slough in a sudden dramatic splash. A terrible ominous quiet followed. No one emerged, nothing stirred before Louis's wild gaze. Nothing! Only a faint rush of water touched his ears. Then a loud shrill call of "Over here!" — a man's frantic voice.

Once more Louis rose up attempting to see through his cascading tears.

Seconds later Cody shouted to bring the jeep down below. Louis lurched into a hurried clumsy response. As he nosed down the rise, the jeep's headlights picked out two stark forms, one holding a limp soaked body, Cody nearby helping support the straggled form, sheathed in a dripping garment hanging like a failed water wing....

The weak ceiling light above the lowered back seat of the jeep separated Louis further from the grim scene. The Jeep's medical kit, a late advisement from a friend, proved a godsend as the stranger worked to stanch neck and face wounds while Cody sought to free the wrists, interrupting her effort only to call 911 on the man's urgently proffered cell phone, her own lost in the mêlée — the one phone they took to the rise that night, Louis's needing repair. Several times Cody firmly assured the diligent man that she'd only been 'nicked' by the shots and was fine, though a prompt assessment resulted in the man helping her tape two gauge bandages on her forearm and shoulder. Louis was by then addled, numbed, stricken by the sight of still oozing scarlet about the victim's pale face and neck, her torn soiled otherwise lovely dress...and the excoriating beauty of a tear-shaped breast. After concisely briefing a 911 operator on the assault, Cody emphatically announced a helicopter ambulance would meet them at a highway junction just off the exit roadway, and would be there in approximately ten minutes. Louis then carefully maneuvered the jeep onto the lower roadway.

"Louis for crissake." It was Cody's only reproof. He realized he drove too timidly along the old macadam side road. As reprieve, he recalled glimpsing and hearing the one car sliding down and splashing into the wide stinking tailing pond. A tailor-made hellhole he thought. The word 'bespoke' came to mind. Again he apprised the acumen of the stranger who then had the woman's main wounds staunches, and began CPR when he could no longer feel a pulse. Cody sought and found a second blanket to better position and cushion the girl's head. The awful intensity beggared anxiety. Occasionally the man paused, hunting for vital signs. The skirt had caught on a stray whirl of barbed wire he said during a slow maneuver of the jeep over a ribbed section of roadway. Several times he mumbled or cursed in a language neither Cody nor Louis could understand. After a fraught drive along the old roadway, they stopped at the junction, where the stranger looked directly at Cody and said aloud in fluent English, "If she lives you are chiefly to thank."

The brilliant beam of light from the helicopter fixed an asteroid landscape about them, the stinging vortex of the surrounding dust and debris gradually diminishing as the blades flattened. Two attendants approached from the copter with a kind of chrysalis and deftly fitted it about the bloodied, smutted, soaked body. The man described the injuries he knew of and also the woman's blood type, a fact Louis was surprised to hear. Three police cruisers were on their way. Cody seemed oblivious to everything but the slicked, blood-spattered head she held in her hands up to the time of the removal.

As the chopper lifted into the sky and banked toward a southerly destination, the fortuitous stranger shook both their hands, repeated the address of the emergency centre the copter headed to, and hoped to see them there. He said he'd witnessed the original abduction, followed the abductors to the awful site and parked his car near the spill way. He would await the coming policemen, go with them to the site, and described what happened. He keenly thanked Cody again for her intervention.

But the resourceful stranger was not at the emergency centre when Cody and Louis arrived, an absence that puzzled. The one policeman they consulted anticipated a late arrival. A plainclothesman took their statements, separately. Louis was partly relieved not to tell his unheroic tale before Cody. Meeting again in the hallway of the hospital they were confirmed strangers. A nurse told Cody it would be some time before they knew, and urged her to go home and get some sleep. Thus far the badly injured woman lived.

The hour long drive to Pomona was interminable. Louis could think of nothing to say. Cody sat in silence, backhanding moist cheeks, while fingering the emergency centre's new bandages on her arm and shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," he plaintively said when they pulled into the driveway.

"Me too," she faintly said, just before heading off for the bathroom.

Later she sat mute and still on a balcony chair, palms up.

"You okay?" he tentatively asked.

"Fine," she staidly said. "All in a night's work."

Tearfully he decided this 'summer's lease' had come to an end.

Vassily asked his two minders — who'd tracked newly 'illusive' Vassily to the polluted waterway and apprehended him shortly after Louis, Cody and the helicopter left — if they might pass by the hospital. They would have time he said.

One returned to the idling car after a short interval and said 'she' was still being operated on. He seemed puzzled, as if she shouldn't be. As they left, Vassily saw a large man hobble out from a limo newly arrived at the hospital's entrance. He waved aside the assistance of a tall stately black and grasped a chrome plated walking stick that was too short for him. The man, vivid in the hospital's entrance lights, Vassily recognized as Arnold Storrier from his own file and late media pictures of the polymath. He watched through the rear window as the man slipped through the entrance doorway. Was it possible? He wryly recalled the special walking stick...and the fact his own neck remained acutely sore from the grip the titan placed upon him. He thought of the growing darkness of the shunting yard, their own umbered faces and attire...and wondered again at the ongoing neglect....

The plane was nearly full. Gloria was on her way to an advertising roundtable seminar in Boston, and had booked a seat on a convenient Russian Aeroflot flight to accommodate it. A handsome couple

with a babe sat in the bulkhead seats in front of her. Two officious looking gents sat across, and two rows in front the trio that continued to interest. One man in the threesome had briefly smiled as she passed by to take her seat. He sat between what appeared to be two large sullen escorts, both either unenthusiastic with their companion or their job. All three seemed uncomfortable, out of place. As she was at heart a romantic, she sensed in that middle face, in its hard ancient lines, a lingering stalemate very close to her own. The man she once looked for had it seemed disappeared with the coming of the identity mavens and their entitlement injunctions, which more or less delegitimized romance among attractive, able, undeservedly privileged folk. Frozen packaged dinners she thought of the whiners. Yet she had not entirely lost the spirit of the quest. Her more doctrinaire colleagues said she sought a Neanderthal. Perhaps she did, in a way, for that chap had survived for a very long time. Her own father would have worn such a label proudly, and he and her mother would be married sixty-seven years in another three months. The mother worked as a chemist, the father as a chemist — alchemists both. They raised two children, the younger son a wanderer and sometime teacher of mathematics, now at Beirut University. There had been few untoward models for her parents, as parents. The current topical psychology, largely a politically correct manifesto, was for her father the loser's dress circle, though in his way he was a sedulous psychologist himself.

She noted the middle man did not request lunch, only a coffee — the man surrounded by two fixed points. The image of a troika crossed her mind, intimating that he shared something of her fate. Of this she was all but convinced. Should he not instead be seated beside her, listening and being listened to, ably teasing and being teased, keeping open the joyful pathways — and finally lustily visiting her with the seed that must bring her silent scream to life and learning? The *dated* romance — which seemed in this retributive age inane, credulous, even superstitious. The flinty equality obsession today envisaged most men as rapists and plunderers, despite the penitential few trying to behave as exemplary babies. It seemed 'beauty' itself was now a racist presumption, and the only honourable out for stolid white men was to kill themselves. She imagined the cribbed gaunt genius before her one of the leftover dissidents.

Bless him.

When at last she snapped out of this testy funk, she solemnly decided she still hadn't reckoned with the public accounting of the Licchavi abduction, which invoked one of her late crochets: assault as — deft method acting! So much behaviour today seemed a strung out reflex, a 'natural' performance, a reflexive castigation or mooning. She wryly recalled the advice of a veteran British actor to a Hollywood dynamo: My dear fellow, do try acting, it's much less wearing and you often remember what you did afterward. Hadn't the finer dramatists not treated the play *as* a play? Oh well, was she not just another ill-tempered middle-aged droopy?...

Then, as if on cue, the lean greying middle man stood by her, his faint smile more engaging than ever.

"Are you not Ms. Gloria Leibowitz?"

A chance to return the faint but willing smile and stanch her wonder.

"I believe we have a mutual friend. I would be grateful if you would deliver this letter for me." He produced a half-bent sealed envelope with Frieda's name on it and thrust it into her hand. "I had planned to mail it but a personal delivery would be welcome. A long story, I'm afraid. Please accept my best wishes for a good and pleasant day."

And that, as they say, was that. She had wanted to ask him to join her for a portion of the ride but his return to his seat seemed ordained. The fated troika reformed and continued its inscrutable lament. For a minute she debated returning the call, wanting to know what the hell was going on — should she ask the steward to requisition a SWAT team, with honour guard on standby? Fifteen, ten, five years ago she might have done something like that, prepared to try to knock out a window if the steward elected to sit on his backside and count the sunbeams.

Instead she looked across the vast blue sky and few cumulous clouds and guessed they would now be over America's heartland. Poor Jud is indeed dead. She looked again at the letter and the rigid cast to the letters — written thus: To Mrs. Frieda Storrier. Was the man a diviner as well? But, instead of yanking the chap from his sober reverie, demanding an explanation then, if acceptable, dragging him into a restroom and showing him how it was done in a Boeing 737 at 35,000 feet, she fell asleep, her last thoughts of John Cook and his gadfly sting about propriety having its own special fatuity. Dear, dear John.

The plane was nearly empty when she awoke, except for herself, the couple with the baby in front, then being fitted into a fat jump suit, and a patient stewardess.

PART THREE

*Does the imagination dwell most
Upon a woman won or a woman lost?
W. B. YEATS*

TWENTY-NINE

The terrace adjacent her bedroom overlooked Muerner's lush Swiss Ticino estate gardens, a serviceable retreat and hideaway from media ferrets, endowed with slender ibex, chamois, mountain hares, deer, moles, marmots and a tiny dead creature she spotted on an earlier stroll. "A Crowned Shrew," one gardener said, "Sometimes confused with the Harvest Mouse."

She smiled. "You keep the grounds in splendid shape."

"Dr. Muerner would have it no other way, Ms. Frieda."

Just below the terrace soared Chinese Fan Palms that endured Swiss winters. The birds were another wonder. This day an Eurasian Jay briefly sat on the spine of a palm frond, to be replaced by a pair of what she believed to be Red-throated Pipits. She'd fetched a bird book from Muerner's library and, when she could stroll on her own, also took note of the many neatly labelled plants and trees. The variety of birds here and in the cathedral-shaped aviary amazed, astonished really, as did the many creatures in the adjacent estate's woodland. More Muerner freaks she imagined. A day earlier several varieties of still-blooming rare orchids were removed from their winter stay in the 'palace greenhouse'

as it was called. Also in stages of removal — lush Daturas, day lilies, mallow and an Angel Trumpet Tree. Bay, Camphor, and Cherry Laurels both perfumed and framed the azure infinity pool just beyond the terrace, with its idling sun sheen on this brilliant spring morn, while some vivid paintbox birds she still hadn't named, intermittently perched on the 'filigree' chairs and tables by the pool. Muerner used the word *Alfresco*, a word she did not know, and was loath to ask leading questions of the mephitic maven, though she felt up to anything he might dish out this day — the third in as many days when she felt more or less compos. It *had* taken a while. She survived she knew in large part due to the ministrations of his Bern clinic specialists, who took over from the Cedars-Sinai's emergency team when she could fly. Thus by avidly taking in the near miraculous setting before her, she suspected she conceded a point. Still, to go to all that trouble...water hyacinths and lilies graced several ponds with Pitcher Plants and Tropical Cannas vivifying the margins, providing pithy spring habitats for the toads, lizards, salamanders and what not. She rather disliked reptiles. Geckos always looked inherently mischievous. One presently lingered atop her dresser mirror. Looking again beyond the railing, a White Rock Pharmigan suddenly perched on a tall garden wall that bore a detailed mural of sylvan wonder.

"What happened to the swans?"

Muerner had come to stand by her on the terrace.

"The Hawaiian geese have mated again, there are four healthy eggs." Impassively he added, "The swans got a little bossy, here. We moved them into a larger nearby lake. We've kept a pair of California Condors, who seem content with filet tartare. For now. Seems to be working."

"So the geckos are safe."

"I'm afraid Angus is still fond of the geckos."

Frieda yawned. "Birds of a feather."

Muerner brightened. "I think today you look quite presentable. Your devoted admirer may compose another lyric opera."

"Did Pechenpaugh complain of the swans?"

Muerner drew a long face. "He was a very sick man in the end, Frieda; I doubt he noticed the gardens at all."

"Did he get competent attention — like you've lavished on me?"

"In the end, yes. He did not always seek it, you know."

"Like Susanne." The comment emerged almost by stealth.

Muerner faintly smiled and gestured for her to enter the sitting room. Not moving, and drolly eyeing him, she said, "So: before Arthur — feral darkness; after Arthur — sweetness and light. Lucky Ninotchka."

"Frieda, I think it's high time you looked over the agreement. You gain nothing by putting it aside. His family may yet rally to contest the settlement if you leave it in escrow. They may even object to the select school you've enrolled Roald Jr. in. Which would be a pity. He has a chance there. You won't recognize him in a month or two."

Frieda held back a laugh.

"Bright children are always salvageable."

"I'm not to see him for several weeks. The current 'retail wisdom' you approve of."

"For the best. He needs a new start. Please consider his former surround, both custodial and cognitive. It can lead to a delusional state. Arnold will take him canoeing and fishing next weekend."

Each word Muerner emphasized. “The example your son needs — an engaging masculine presence. For a time.”

Frieda knew something had to change; she had long since run out of options...before a budding incestuous son. The one ‘toy’ Roald had given him remained a stinging obscenity. She fed a pine nut to a Scrub Jay newly perched on the terrace railing and then froze, waiting out a spate of dizziness, prompting Muerner to grip her hand. When the spasm eased, she removed his hand, tightened the sash of her pale green morning gown, and allowed him to squire her inside to a soft slipper chair by a long bevelled glass table. Several papers shingled its sprightly Lalique top. Each required a signature. Muerner spoke jauntily as he consulted his own note pad, newly fetched from an inside top coat pocket.

“A brief review: the set of Mr. Peak’s photographs revealed the key goons. Two frames clearly identify the Mercedes that initially appeared on the dump site, its plate and number — also one of Roald’s bodyguards, a GRU thug he earlier engaged as a ground’s guard, then as a tracker to follow his newly active wife. The ‘amiable’ fellow’s now confessed to giving instructions to the model chap who drove the second go-cart.” Muerner checked a paragraph in the document. “ — a Hundai Veloster. I have little idea what that is but I am assured it is a motorized kennel designed by a cur. It now lies luxuriating in the ooze of that singular tailing pond. The bloated driver and two others, all unidentified, were eventually pulled from the interior. We do honour their passing.”

He smartly turned the page not looking up.

“To paraphrase: Having questioned Roald’s bodyguard, then moonlighting for the GRU, as noted, and learning of the GRU’s fabricated diary and ghoulish abduction plan, which an earlier note from an incensed Roald apparently sanctions — all readily affirmed in camera by the bodyguard and a contrite villa steward, both banking on some kind of reprieve. In sorely acknowledging the above, the beleaguered Licchavi family lawyers have solemnly agreed to the following. I shall paraphrase.”

Here Muerner fetched a bottle of Brut from a wall cabinet and filled two champagne flutes sitting on the glass table, handing one to Frieda. After setting the bottle aside, he took a sip from his own flute and continued thus:

“One: that all pronouncements, without limit or qualification, of a derogatory nature lodged with such and such a divorce court, impugning the person and character of so and so Książnin, alias Freddy what’s-her-name, are retracted, repudiated, recanted in toto, with proffered apology and, in deference to the acknowledged maligned party, the sum of such-and-such — most of which you have donated to the SARA organization — yes, lest we forget — while said Roald has placed himself in the care and custody of the Catalina Research Institute in Montclair, the son in the care of the exemplary mother, future visiting privileges to be arranged exclusively at the mother’s behest and discretion.”

“Felix, I’ve read all that. Just tell me where you think Roald’s headed. As plainly as possible. Also if you still think Roald Jr. truly needs the care of the special school you and Arnold chose. I am listening.”

Muerner smiled while briefly, reflectively fingering his chin.

“In answer to the second of your questions, the school is a necessity, and it’s far from the penal colony you seem to envisage. You can visit him, in due course, often as you wish. As for your first query — well he’s crushed, mortified, perhaps permanently over the edge. The scandal mongers are fit to be tied. His espoused entanglement with the GRU will keep the tabloid advertisers ecstatic. The

gamy tales about his personal life, which largely exclude you due to some GRU rodomontade about Roald being a career bigamist and married to someone else, are being ‘serialized’, so it seems — and they’re suggestively fact-based enough to defy easy unravelling — including a serious murder charge you knew nothing about — a business colleague who disagreed a while back. A media Saturnalia is underway, and until he’s sentenced for the murder, I wouldn’t rule out a suicide. The Cheka as you know are adept at ‘honour’ killings. As for the GRU — well, with Roald as foil, they’ve toasted your files, and despite the fact you nearly bamboozled them out of over a hundred thousand Swiss francs, claim you never existed except in Roald’s fevered, embattled, defensive brain. Indeed, their claim that Roald enjoyed many ‘spice girls’ has taken root, italicizing the crazed sybarite they’re tarring him as. I would give my big toe to be so favoured. As for your presumed sister, she will play Peaseblossom in a new film of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* — with a spooled voice-over — also the stylishly aloof ballerina in a dance version of *On The Town* next season on American Playhouse on PBS. I would count my blessings. She may, of course, still be chary of her past Islamic ‘hecklers’, notorious for their obstinacy as they are, though they’ve been drowned out by the applause I suspect. You shy away from slaying adored celebrities. Her new face has been but a marginal help, I suspect. She is of course keenly protective of her privacy and consanguinity, but should safely meet with you in due course. We’ve not slighted that prospect.”

“Thank you. It’s overdue, and weighs heavily...as does the little you’ve said about Vassily.” Here Frieda paused, intimating a coming headache. Muerner rose, quickly crossed the distance separating them and, after hesitating, gingerly cradled her head in his hands while advising, “We can eventually do something about these capsule migraines, maybe even convert them to their visual equivalents, also the hum. But not for at least another week or so. We’re only recently affirmed the damage done the cochlea and auditory nerves. I suspect you may have to use a hearing aid in the one ear, at least for a time. Your preference to be deaf around the likes of me may change overtime, of course.”

Frieda simply allowed her head to be placed back against the cushion of the oversize chair while yielding to a wry smile. Muerner sat down opposite and began speaking with surprising élan.

“Oh yes — how could I forget. A curiosity helpful in explaining your wounds. The machine pistol cartridges used by the heavies, identified by the shell casings, are, I’m told, a new exceptional form of a competitive target shooting projectile, designed for maximum inflight stability. Not intended to blow away the opposition so to speak, like an older soft nosed bullet. The faintly smaller but normal looking shell, apparently elongates slightly on ejection, becoming in effect something akin to a thin but sturdy needle that requires a substantial resistance barrier to mushroom or fragment. Through the neck, missing the carotid artery, and thin bone — the outer lower cheek just shy of the lambdoid suture where you were most seriously hit, luckily wide of your spine — the little jasper passed cleanly through without so much as tipping his hat. Apparently some warehouse packager mixed up the labels. An underworld tycoon stole a truckload unknowingly and farmed the lot out to several dealers, the net result being that not a few hooligans, who should now be dead, occupy precious space in several of Los Angeles’ emergency wards. So I am assured. Not a great consolation, I grant, but a reedy tale nonetheless.”

“Overjoyed.” A latent smile rather weakened Frieda’s sarcasm.

“Splendid. That absolutely filthy waterway was another matter of course. The resolution of some subsequent infections, of which your inner ear is one lingering legacy, is now being written up as a dis-

sertation on the mating of select spectrum antibiotics, to be published jointly on three continents. Our own lab was instrumental in devising two of them.”

“You’ve said almost nothing about Vassily. Is that deliberate? He *was* the one who got me out of the pond. Where I blacked out.”

Muerner pulled a face. “I wish I could be more informative here. Please be assured Angus has not been sitting on his hands. He is talking to a group in the consulate here. I wish there were more, but there isn’t. Angus is persistent though, as you know.”

Frieda sighed. “A further word or two about Roald Jr. will be appreciated. And Arnold of course, my stellar, patient ‘David’...who’s refurbishing a farm home for us in the Hamptons. I trust he’ll be here month’s end...now that you’ve got this spook on her feet. As you know, I do hope to meet soon with the exceptional Cody who’s on a vacation we funded...with your help.”

Muerner smiled. “A very courageous lady.” He then fondly retrieved a young gecko that had sidled into the room, dropped it over the terrace, then returned to the table, refilled his flute of champagne, topped up Frieda’s, lit a thin cheroot, uncapped and set out a gold pen for Frieda to use, then walked about the room almost as a gymnast readying for a demanding floor exercise.

“To revisit some issues. As intimated, Young Roald Jr. needs some select devoted supervision for a time. My clinical experience here is apropos. Wilde, my clinic’s head shrink, who is ever one-hundred and eighty degrees misaligned, thinks Roald Jr. needs a relaxed empathic environment with some caring but principled female models. My interpretation is Roald Jr. needs a robust adventure or two with a couple of resourceful masculine companions — who share a devout respect for madame of course. I *have* asked for a second opinion. Part of your charm, and vulnerability, despite your lovely feigned look of imposition now, is the manifest fact of your exceptional talent, candour and basic loyalty, both distracted for a time but again whole I think. You even seek amends with the Russians, for Vassily’s sake no doubt, which they stolidly misinterpret. The last heroine one might say. Indeed, an ineffable *Anastasia*. My main concern is that you get on with your life, which includes the resurrection of your career! I do realize I’ve been rather cavalier in assuming responsibility for your recovery, but it was after all what Arnold sorely wished. Very wisely I may add. He is indeed fashioning a rustic homey home. The MIT soreheads are standing by, of course. I merely advised him to do something useful rather than moon about while it was touch and go at the Bern clinic.”

For a brief moment Frieda considered Muerner a kind of archetypal Puck, but quickly restored the barricades.

“What ‘career’? Brood mare, dollars to doughnuts wife, loyal Paleomena hack?”

“I think of them actually as symbiotic, as would any illusionist baiter. But I give science the pre-eminence and Paleomena boffins the laurel. Some of us must know what’s going on, and those who do must not be distracted.”

“Like Susanne.”

Muerner wanly mulled the point over before answering. “Again — as I’ve said — that matter devolved before my time. Yet I stand accused of a certain detachment, yes. I have always found the spectacle of the beautiful talented egalitarian, patronizing a utopia she’d remain a singular exemplar in, embarrassing. She was one of Paleomena’s sad contrariedades.”

“Before your peerless idols.”

Muerner remained silent, though a rare smile touched his face.

“You and idol-crazed Roald may have hit it off — oh christ!”

Once more Muerner gingerly held her head, then sought a syringe in the bag on the table, which Frieda firmly pushed away.

“Before you anesthetize me, I want to hear more about this grand wonderful aesthetic of yours. There is a nice story about that Roald had some dandy jars made up, and you plan to bid on them should they go to auction.”

For the first time Muerner seemed liable to impatience.

“The dosage has been considerably reduced.”

“Felix, I don’t want to sleep.”

The syringe was sedately returned to the bag, which was slowly closed. “This may not be the hour to address human aesthetics, poetics — or, concomitantly, classical glass blowing.”

“I beg to disagree. I sometimes feel like Tolstoy’s Maria Bolkonsky, dealing with adamant circumstance. A relevant allusion lost on you, I know, but there it is. She witnessed a lot, with a stoicism I rather envy right now.”

The result of this outburst was one more step-fatherly smile that angered her more.

“And I further resent always having to make myself into some kind of harpy simply to get at the unvarnished truth.” The rumours surrounding a recent meeting Muerner had with Zoya, featured Zoya lunging at him with a nail file. Frieda wanted to pull down that immaculate collar and see if the rumoured scar was there. But she would use that insider’s skinny at a later time. Of course equally taunting was the fact he didn’t press charges and had sponsored one of her recent show lounge extravagances — the showy dreamscape that Muerner believed slyly endorsed his aegis of improvement, idling poisonous protracted complaint. The ‘get on with it’ mantra.

“I think you really do not savour such ‘unvarnished truth’,” he calmly said, on returning from a second visitation to the terrace, this time bringing with him a wondrous turquoise green toucan on his shoulder. “You want an *out* — an out from advertising’s ongoing successful exploitation of beauty, smart striving, and singular acumen like your own. Singularities the woke crybabies disesteem.” He held out his champagne flute and a surprised Frieda watched the bird dip its beak into the golden liquid and knock back the take. “You seek an *acquittal* from the plaintive envious hoi polloi, to put it succinctly.”

“Christ!” Once again Frieda held her head. Muerner relaxed only when she waved him off and began plumping up her chair’s back pillow.

“He’s of little help sadly. Religion has no truck with individual salubrity or beauty, nor their survival.”

“Big deal.” Raucously Frieda blew her nose.

“Please remember the Western World’s legacy is its relative freedom, openness — its cultural aesthetic nakedness, like no regimes before it. Many people are finally keenly finding out just how awfully mediocre, feeble and unprepossessing they are in such a glaring invidious arena — such an unrelenting dishy, dolled up fish bowl — naturally many are mad as hornets, and rebuke all fortunate looks and circumstance — the glaring indeces of their servility.

“Rot.”

“But you see the drive to perfection cannot be stopped; too many talented people are in place and the prospect of a millennium mesmerizing. The only question is what life for the swelling man-too-

many.”

“The natural terrorists.”

“Of minor import. In the end they savage mainly their own kind. Especially those luckier, less retributive, than most. A common rebuke after all, is it not?”

He offered the toucan more champagne and Frieda, now head-up, was astonished to see the bird dip its beak again, knock back the draught, and immediately repeat the operation.

Muerner was pleased. “A fine cartoon in the New Yorker eons ago: two young toucans perched on a tree survey their magnificent mother — who is all beak of course. Says one: ‘That’s mother.’ Says the other, ‘Wow!’”

“I have nothing remotely comparable.”

“You do actually: the sum of the parts.”

Reaching forward Frieda began signing the documents, her silence an ongoing reproof. After a short interval she remarked, “I thought I’d better sign these before you get off on the jars and I puke.”

Muerner readily took up the thread.

“I know you think I retain too little ambiguity in my outlook. The colours you say are too bold and finally unimaginative. Well, in some cases they may be.” Again he topped up both flutes. “This toucan for instance — the extraordinary colour of the neck and breast feathers are a genetic twist, as are the eyes, which can now register greater acutance, permitting it to peal fruit with even more nimble dexterity. Its new eye will soon be of inestimable help in understanding some features of our own vitreous humour and visual acuity. I have only the sketchiest outline of your time with Roald, but I understand from his psychiatric evaluation that it must have been a kind of suspension, one that foils potential. Obsession, engrossment, limits, constricts, oversimplifies perception. Whereas perspicuity, when added to decorum and seemly ritual, actually rarifies elegance, gives it a nuance, a subtle detail, a finer set of constituents. Especially over time. The jars Roald commissioned for niches in his study are the work of a remarkably skilled and of course innocent, blameless craftsman. They transcend any excursive craven purpose. Surely an in-between shade on the black-white palette.”

“Roach brown,” Frieda quietly said.

After a pause and release of the toucan, Muerner began more staidly.

“I regret you think the matter untenable. Gruesome vivisection, the lingering presumption here, only a rabid monster could abide. Which in no way will perplex the jars’ worth, eventual use and disposition. It is the import of their elegant design and manufacture that will triumph, their private deployment an unknown. I understand the artist was himself pleased with his product, a rare concession from him, apparently. The lyrical beauty of the arabesques on two crystal vases are masterpieces...so unlike the utilitarian medical examiner’s table in the recently identified van, say...leaving one free to guess the jars intended contents, from an apostate donor...according to the late, mainly Cheka insinuation of Roald’s ghastly retributive fancies....”

It was then Frieda rushed from the room and retched into the bidet. Muerner stood over her but did not this time attempt to hold her head.

When the retching ceased she said with considerable anger, “So fond of artistic speculation are you — being such a ‘niche’ connoisseur?”

“Of exemplary aesthetic expression, yes. In all its revelatory wonder.”

“I think you’d better leave,” she said when the worst was over. Then, in the most pointed of her

reproofs, after Muerner said that kinky psychopaths were legion in that molested age, she quietly stated, “All the waiting beady bird eyes; I would call you a peerless SOB if I didn’t feel so for your mother...and for Eve. I can only imagine...” This fitful comment ended with a stoic lower.

“You should meet her. My sainted Eve. Perhaps sooner than later.”

“I’m maybe too much of a straggler right now.” She thought of adding but edited out — in a mythic landscape.

A little later, back in her sitting room, the nurse prepared a special poultice for Frieda’s newly faintly suppurating ear, with Muerner’s help, the patient lying upon a pearl blue grey daybed beneath a matching coverlet. When the dressing was in place Muerner was about to leave then abruptly changed his mind, his voice then somewhat louder. Frieda closed her eyes.

“There are some other considerations.”

Frieda sighed; Muerner smiled, persisted.

“I strongly suspect you’ve never had more than three or four good friends, and you have it in your power — by giving way to despair, or treasured funk, or whatever the chic concept is now — to psychologically maim at least two; I’m made of sterner stuff. The most vulnerable one is a potential recluse without you. Otherwise, a natural exemplar as you were once and can be again. I’m not an apathetic bystander here of course.”

Frieda wryly looked up at the nurse. “You know when the card’s bluffing? Me neither.”

The next words were directed to Muerner and came out immediately. “You want to engage this sorry scientist — just get out of the way. Arnold — David — is not a bargaining chip. And I resent being cast as...as some kind of spook.”

Very quietly Frieda then relaxed, tried to, her face again intimating nausea. With a dour smile she waved off the analgesic offered by the nurse.

As much to himself Muerner said, “I daresay, ‘bargaining chip’ might be one of Arnold’s pre-occupations these days. Tribunals being iffy as they sometimes are.”

Solemnly Frieda added, “You needn’t rub it in. Too bad you can’t accept his outlook. He is a nonesuch, a prince.”

Muerner took a time answering. “Difficult.”

Frieda and the nurse exchanged stoic smiles.

“A few truths should be reiterated.”

“Splendid — just before I go deaf.”

“One: a sad but too often slighted truism: STEM is still the only workable tool box we have; even the modern mystic, between visions, finds it useful. Without it everyone slips back into the ooze.

“Two: wise and brilliant scientists and engineers do not reproduce like locusts. The circumstance of their coming and maturing is a difficult labor. And despite the myths, they are rarely self-sufficient islands. It has taken me a while to appreciate this.” He ignored Frieda’s wayward chuckle. “And one key to their viability is the affection and trust two exemplary individuals share. Two sturdy life partners.”

Instead of a further rebuke, which he anticipated, Frieda surprised him. After winking at the nurse she said, “Felix the Great.”

Muerner smiled, and after a last brief consultation with the nurse, departed in his customary haste, leaving his pale charge with a headache only slightly less severe, and a faint nausea — which in

the coming weeks disappeared as predicted, leaving the ear at about thirty percent of former capacity. Further improvement was anticipated.

She didn't see her indefatigable patron-antagonist again that summer, the duration of her essential recovery in the Ticino villa — but for the ear, which Antoine suggested would be Arnold's side of the bed... 'an ongoing audition', as he fondly put it.

Rosanna briefly visited, small-talked and gossiped palliatively, if eccentrically, a revised fairy tale being an unexpected but welcome respite, however brief, for an anxiously reflective Frieda.

"A late acquaintance told me of an older friend who loved fairy tales, Cinderella being a favourite. After a recent meticulous reading of it, the 'old friend' said she doubted Cinderella really sought a prince, however fortuitous, rather a mundane night or two out, and a new dress — concrete things she might actually relate to! I must admit laughing aloud when I heard it."

"Well, *storybook* princes are much the same, aren't they," Frieda mused.

Antoine came with several friends, including a tacit Arnold whose limp, though much reduced, still invited speculation. Before their wonder he affably shrugged, saying, "I stepped on a bear's tail." To which Antoine promptly remarked, "We shan't ask what the bear was d,doing." Only Frieda appeared unamused by the explanation, knowing too well the GRU's often bearish disposition. Another reason for Arnold's late constraint Antoine took up with some caution.

"He's f,fending off the disappointed viziers. So out of practice, m,moping about like a disfavoured aunt. A bar sinister in the MIT escutcheon."

The allusion was to Arnold's falling out with MIT's molecular science department, and the dicey legal deliberation that now loomed. A matter that invited silence.

Then Gloria came with Vassily's laconic letter which lacked a return address. Frieda took it up, reading it with stoic wonder.

Dear 'Zia, I kept the pretty shawl — my Gretel's crumb. I may have injured your friend. A dire mixup. I arrived late due to this mishap. I am permitted to tell this much. A courageous lady, a pained but spirited witness, acted courageously on your behalf. Her name is Martine Norstrom. Her boyfriend calls her 'Cody'. When you happily see daylight again you might wish to thank her. The LA County Coroner will have her current address. You have my very best wishes. V

On the conveyor, valedictions were sparse; his brevity a requiem.

Gloria left after a long night of talk, urging Frieda to put the sorry dramatic tale to rest in a book. "Only you can tell it." She did not communicate Antoine's gamey comment about how only a credible superman might engage the day's smart wary woman — a comment that would implicate Frieda as a lucky consort indebted to Muerner for mentoring the singular Arnold! Frieda would learn of the jibe soon enough, if she hadn't already heard or sensed it. Gloria did not want to be the bearer of a prickly sneer, despite its woke currency in that day and age! She also knew that many stolid authors underestimated female editors' empathy for the gibe — editors she was then seeking out for nonsuch Arnold's life story!

The visit from Eve Kielce, Muerner's life partner, was an unexpected but welcome reprieve for Frieda. An elegant timeless beauty, given to quiet affirmation, she brought a detailed update on Frieda's ear injury — the most extensive so far — and was optimistic about further improvement.

“The infection, mainly from some potent infectious bacteria in the tailing pond, has finally been particularized. You will note an improvement soon. The tympanic membrane has healed nicely, and the one inner bone displaced, but not fractured by the one hit, has been re-disposed. Muerner, being the pessimist he usually is, sometimes overlooks Providential circumstance.” A light affable smile followed this pronouncement.

Said a relieved Frieda, “I will tell Antoine; he’s currently advising Arnold on sleeping arrangements. He bought him an ear trumpet.”

Both women smiled. Eve continued with, “We’re all grateful of course that the ammunition used by the goons was so comparatively inapt.”

“The details of which Felix delighted in imparting.” Then, less suave, Frieda added, “A detail I haven’t slighted.”

After sharing smiles, Frieda continued thus: “I trust you know that Felix and I have some differences about democratic fortune. Curiously, my early tutor might have got along with your partner. I have not yet worked out a synthesis, but see the riffs in Western society ending badly, which Arnold’s — David’s — serene melodic music tends to soften. A needed reprieve I think.”

“We wish you well, as happy life partners —one of Muerner’s underpinnings for achievement you know. We are all optimistic. And patient.”

Frieda smiled in spite of herself.

The conversation then amiably dwelt on several vital mundane matters: living arrangements, court appeals, pending concert schedules, Frieda’s lapsed but still salvageable career — indeed Fortune in general. It was an interlude that would touch, amuse, and engage Frieda ever after. Eve had one of those temperate diplomatic sensibilities that yet deal with the reigning presumptions. Her very equanimity hid her determination to elevate the debate, keep the options buoyant. Indeed, it revived Frieda’s trust in herself. They parted with genial smiles above clasped hands.

At first they simply touched the bases: played cards (chess was still too lucid, involving), read an assortment of online mags and web-sights, made formal inquiries after the girl named Martine, fed the rarified macaws and toucans, climbed a vista near the Cabana des DiAblerrets. His initial explanation of what happened to him was lean on details, the spare facts haunting enough — in particular, his limping escape off a rail yard, for one. What rail yard? Additional details soon emerged: “The yard that housed Roald’s private railway carriage, his hiding place then from the world. Where I ran into your mentor, ignominiously. We likely had the same idea. Remove the sty, each in our own circumspect way. But we stolidly imagined one another adversaries, one actually guarding the carriage. We both wore dark coveralls and had smudged our faces. Well, that presumed ‘guard’ managed, in due course, to whack my leg with a board. Leaving me an incensed cripple, barely able to stand.”

Frieda inwardly sighed; my reeling exemplars, she said to herself. She then showed Vassily’s letter to her cherished David, his reading of which brought tears to his eyes. Promptly they embraced and soulfully gazed at one another, though his regard had a plaintiff’s aspect she sought to disown. Said she, “I’m not a spent soul seeking the silence and tranquility of a nunnery, you know, not like Pushkin’s Tatyana Larina disdaining happiness. A tale I’ll read to you one day. Fated Russian gals have few American facsimiles.” Such tragedians — not in the farceur sense — were much on her mind then. “I *am* whole; only my hearing’s impaired, and I’m assured that’s on the mend.”

“No real need for an ear trumpet, then.”

“No.”

The meeting with Martine ‘Cody’ Norstrom further helped diffuse the apprehension or perhaps re-focus it — widen Frieda’s view of the current scene. She sought but dreaded the meeting, yet wanted to greet and thank the girl personally. Memories of that evening remained acute, and an apt show of gratitude mandatory. She felt Arnold, her cherished David, would welcome a few days by himself to work through his personal liabilities, especially the one before the court. She feared the girl’s presence could deflect these preoccupations. Frieda hadn’t really ascertained how uncertain his future might be. Until now. He left behind a sincere grateful note for Cody.

Frieda had carefully read the statements of both Cody and Louis Peak and realized she was indebted to them both — Louis for initially getting them out there and taking pictures that identified the one jobber, Roald’s one bodyguard who contracted with the GRU, and Cody for heroically distracting the lead assailant who, ignorant of some stray coils of barbed wire, would have seen Frieda drowned in the caustic hellhole just above the spillway — the ‘final ostensible deposition’ as it was called in the dire LAPD report, a detail Cody affirmed in her own interview. Roald, then in a much deteriorated state, and diagnosed as acutely delusional, simply smiled when the murder was broached in a later psychiatric evaluation, according to a report a colleague showed Muerner. Happily, the gruesome ‘heist’ remained a ghost during Cody’s visit. Cody would remember that singularly awful night of course, but acknowledged it only in a fond, sustained, inaugural embrace. Frieda was grateful, yet worried her association with the heroic lady might provide another target for Cheka or Licchavi goons. Somedays the strain, recalled from difficult field assignments, seemed the ongoing toll of sheer consciousness. She believed herself still capable of dealing with a random assault, but the killers that wrathful, ruthless diehards might deploy were another matter. Did she want Cody known for aiding a notable Russian defector — the ‘drama queen’ reporters kept in their cross hairs? Only by disappearing might that defector find a measure of serenity and peace. Arnold had suggested she stay sub rosa in Ticino during his court hearing in LA — stay out of the cross-hairs — then join him for their escape, their ‘deliverance’ to the Hampton farmhouse he’d newly leased. The sturdy McClelland would reside with them while they settled in. With luck they would enjoy some exclusivity if not anonymity — at least for a time.

Roald Jr. remained a worry and concern of course. To feel a seismic unease before one’s child, as she had the first time she saw him after the attack, dismayed and exhausted. How would she deal with, counteract, the adverse conditioning the child was so relentlessly exposed to toward the end? Again, the most natural instincts seemed twisted beyond recognition. And the affection she felt for the singular man who sought to convince her son that his new model train ran best on its tracks, was also now adventitious. She might escape some of the anxiety by heavily relying upon him and his surround, but that trust demanded a fearlessness before a potential outside threat that she could no longer easily invoke. He *too* could be an ancillary casualty in the days to come. One disaster, two really, had cleared the deck of lounge chairs. Muerner’s standing offer she was still loath to entertain. She and Arnold might be safer in his domain, but the thought of being beholden to the wizard was a thorny prospect for both of them.

But the presence of Martine offered a glimpse of a still warming sunlight, of a courage or

optimism, scarcely unobservant, that disclosed the energy and equanimity Frieda yearned for then. She resisted believing Cody's manifest élan was simply the interim excess of that day's 'exhibeesh schooling' — a Muerner phrase for the warp of public education.

Martine — Cody — was as American as her nickname or 'professional handle' as she called it. She was tall, blond-gold, deeply tanned, lean, strong, friendly, self-deprecating ('Once a roadrunner...'), prettily if uncomfortably made up in a cream blouse and grey-green suit when she arrived, the coat folded on her arm, stylish frost stockings descending to Gladiator boots she appeared to try to hide when they sat down. Her face intimated a near regal poise with its blueness of eye, hint of rich nether Hapsburg lip and high wide cheeks. Only a slightly receding chin suggested to flinty connoisseurs a vulnerability, in addition to the double-duty laugh lines that seemed at times both smile and under-study lament.

Cody was the last visitor Frieda accommodated in her rooms in the rustic villa set in the lovely Ticino estate gardens. It was late August. Arnold had already funded (with help from Muerner) a holiday for Cody and Louis, which they had undertaken separately, Cody interrupting hers for this special visit. Some barn swallows flitted through the gateway fig and jasmine trees the day Cody arrived. McClelland had come the day before to help with details of the Hampton trip, and his rare laughter issued from the villa entrance the hour Cody arrived. He was still bel-esprit when Cody was ushered into the garden seats by the fish pond.

"Sorry 'bout that," Cody said. "I missed a turn coming here — asked him if he'd consider a 'swappo — my map for his. Seems I struck gold. A word a school friend used. Who was born in Jamaica."

"McClelland was born in Haiti. 'Swappo' may be what he'd prefer to do with me about now."

"Well he needs his head examined then. Between you me and the chameleon." Cody gleefully eyed some juncos daring in and out of the lush vegetation surrounding the pond. "The holiday's been fantastic. It's a fairyland over here. I can never thank you enough. Madeira was a dream. Spain too — the coast at least. And here in clean air land — Hello Tweety Pie!" She waved at a young Robin then perched on the back of a chair by the pond. "And you want to split — to LA?"

"For a night or two, to attend to some impending business. It's where David and I will leave for the farm house in East Hampton. The current plan."

"You look great. No, really." Cody shyly interrupted herself. "Guess we were all lucky." But quickly her eyes refocused to the enchanting surroundings, eclipsing searing memories.

The exuberance Frieda hadn't prepared for. Cody readily noted the smile, openly apologized, saying she sometimes had that effect on people. At times it was as if Frieda fell skating, a beginner, her anxiety keeping her on all fours. Even the meal she and McClelland had prepared now seemed stilted and imposing. She headed for the less congested centre of the rink, acknowledging, without again identifying him, the 'FBI special agent' who was convinced Cody saved her life in distracting one of the goons, and that Louis's photographs were instrumental in identifying one lead abductor. She also repeated how she and her friend Arnold Storrier wished to set up an annuity Louis and Cody could jointly or severally draw from (Muerner's ongoing cagey largess), convertible also to a trust or single cash payment...an appointment had been arranged for Cody to see one of Muerner's administrative officials at the end of the holiday. As she steered Cody to the dining table near the scenic fish pond where cold roast goose with prune and apple stuffing, celery root remoulade, and a Grand Marnier

soufflé garnished with fresh strawberries awaited, Frieda couldn't stifle an urge to patronize their singular chef. "He's a greatly appreciated showoff. He'll be around in a bit."

The pond's extraordinary fish promptly caught Cody's eye. Kneeling, her hand in the water with some fish treat Frieda had given her, the moochers bore down at once, a rainbow of fanning tails, tickling this seasoned peri. She laughed. "Like some randy bozos on the Costa del Sol — mostly puffers and walleyes."

Later, as they ate, the conversation touched on personal matters. Frieda learned that she and Louis separated shortly after the fateful evening. "Louis is a home bod," she said with a trace of sadness. Whereas she had jumped at the offer of the holiday, even though it conflicted with a commercial for Wide World of carpets. "I used to do a waterbed line, but the birds do get younger and younger. I've put the show lounge stuff on hold, for a while."

"We hope you'll keep in touch, and let us know if we can be of help in any way."

"Well, as I'm nearly three months pregnant, I may rent a small house somewhere in Portugal, and move in with a couple of cats. That's where I'd like to have the kid. If I have it. Cheaper living abroad these days."

Frieda was only momentarily silent. "Does Louis know?"

"About the kid? No. Not yet." Cody stared at the soufflé then listlessly put down her fork. "I think the holiday's great. But I don't know about the other — the trust thing. I'm a real pushover, most of the time. You said the pictures were important."

"Yes. Very. Indispensable, really."

"Photographers are a tacky bunch," Cody said with some finality, and spoke no more of her caution with munificent gifts. By then Frieda was doing her best to remain even handed.

Cody stayed a long weekend, swam in the azure infinity swimming pool in the mornings, and showed Frieda some exercises to flex a stiff thorax. They went shopping, saw on television Zoya's performance as Peaseblossom in the transcribed ballet. While watching the performers, Frieda silently keened over the many lingering apprehensions: Muerner's select generosity, Paleomena's mesmeric successes, in part based on Abler's acumen, Zoya's growing popularity on two continents, both as dancer and late graphic novel star, and last but far from least, the portentous asymmetry of genetic endowment and astute medical care — Muerner's freakish realm that both teased and confounded her philosophical outlook, her cherished 'David' being a legatee of such providential intervention. Yet she believed his inspiring music had materially absolved him of any onerous complicity with such a Svengali. As for Abler, she'd lost touch with the faction that had tried to independently pace its output. The faction itself, the last she heard, was, in any case, all but co-opted by Paleomena.

"She's a neat lady," said Cody of Zoya after the ballet performance. "An agent's dream I guess." Said a complaisant Frieda, "I think you would get along with her very well. I've met her."

Antoine and 'a t,too pretty *figurant*' (one of the performers Antoine employed), arrived from a shopping junket that afternoon. The young dancer was charmed with the lush setting, the serenity of the grounds, and shade-orchid Frieda reviewing her world in elegant silk habits with the genial observant McClelland. In the bronzed kinetic Cody he found an earth cousin and drew forth a miniature camera. In turn, Cody wryly turned away, arms crossed in front, her lithesome figure apparent to all beneath a thin halter-neck summer dress. Antoine, as savant and sometime critic, mentioned a diviner friend (Oscar Wilde) who thought photography a modern nuisance that changed

wine into water. “Your friend knows his bozos,” said a reparative Cody, and promised to remember the line. Frieda silently committed it to memory as well. “Antoine has a droll sense of humour,” the *figurant* said, while continuing to find the setting and Cody an inspiration, Cody finally wryly cooperating. “The shots will maybe end a storyline I guess. ‘More verse less chapter,’ my pa used to say.”

Antoine described the weekend as ‘boobgate’, with a trace of envy Frieda thought. He told McClelland, “The air t,teems with tumescences.” Live Cody rather upstaged him — McClelland’s later take to a quietly heedful Frieda who matched his ready smile.

Frieda spoke to Arnold about Cody’s stay the day she arrived in the austere LA safe house — her requested domicile while Arnold prepared for his day in court. Frieda had arrived in LA early — the Ticino Estate being finally a bit too halcyon for her — the real world still being out there and her need to engage it unrelenting. Arnold was allowed to share a portion of the upper floor of the safe house with her — after hours. He was assigned a sitter to insure he was not followed to the safe house. Indeed, Frieda would remain an information source the FBI periodically consulted long after her arrival in the Hampton home.

One early morning, as she and her special ‘David’ eyed the solemn bare walls of their spartan bedroom and a grey skyline beyond a casement window, the realization surfaced.

“She has a couple of cats and can make a life. Not a fraud.” He sought her hand with the continuing tentativeness she felt a growing need to scold. They sat then on the lone double bed like housebound siblings and began to play an improvised round of cat’s cradle with a piece of packing twine. She had just passed on a simple formation when he sought to scratch his chest. Following his hand inside the open shirt she sought to touch the scarred neck and chest, also some lower front ribs where machete wounds left seamed patches of skin — pithy reminders of that gruesome sojourn in South East Asia, which concluded when Muerner learned of a nearly shanghaied polymath genius.

“Muerner’s surgeons minimized the lesions I would have had,” she said. “You’d never know without a magnifier. Invisible mending. Not like my unambiguous wayfarer.”

Listlessly putting down the twine, she added, “A salvaged Beauty, more or less, and her providential Beast. You ever think of leaving a few marks of your own? For identification. Just asking.”

He listened in a limp silence, which she decided to match with a glazed reverie of her own:

“He could fix the moment, you know...belatedly he planned some kind of heist. Pretty trophies. Muerner kindly left off how they might have begun.” She withdrew her hand. More emphatically she added, “Such a one...a one-time husband.”

Arnold nodded but without comment. That was when she reached over as if to sock him only to fondly caress his chin instead.

He caught, held and kissed her hand, then simply asked, “What did you usually do afterward?”

She barely smiled.

“Wait for I don’t know — ‘Godot’ isn’t it, according to savvy Antoine. Coke and a double Drambuie often sufficed. Why?”

“A busy life,” he softly said, not happy with the terseness of the remark but unable to improve on it. Her whimsical leads always teased. Allusions to Roald’s craft ever chafed. A singular prowess he lacked, apparently.

She was about to resume unpacking when he said, “I did plan to confront him...I wasn’t there train spotting.”

But the statement emptied into a void as she silently unzipped a nearby duffle bag.

“Just how...I would leave to the moment. I had Antoine’s walking stick — and some thoughts about arson. The special railway carriage seemed a fitting pyre, seemed...as you now know.”

He looked up to find her absently pulling a stray thread from a sleeve.

“Then I ran into a combatant, a security guard I imagined. I was exasperatingly wrong of course, but soon too crippled to matter. No niceties were exchanged. When I finally saw the so detached Roald in court, I doubt I could have harmed him, except perhaps in pressing self-defence. I understand he mainly tilts with his legal beagles.”

“Which he did rather well, at one time...at least until you elected to impersonate a virtuosic gem appraiser.”

“I lucked out,” he said as their eyes locked in risible tears.

Early the following morning, after a fond, mutually engaging night, flush with quiet moments of lyric eulogies, they savoured the morning coffee they’d taken to their bedroom — one of the rites, free of their mindful but considerate watchers, they savoured. Minutes later Frieda watched him shaving with his precious straight razor in their bedroom’s small bathroom. Still buoyed by the evening past, she mused, “I am pleased Antoine’s select allusion to you as a ‘sometime cavalier prig’ is inapt.”

“Cavalier in a pinch, prig I’ve always contested.”

She sat on their small double bed then with an appraiser’s smile. He had an early appointment he said, which she presumed to be with a lawyer, though his carrying case that day looked larger than usual. A swelling paper trail she imagined. He paused as he dressed, calmly eyeing her, saying, as he removed a topcoat from a closet, “You might, should, discreetly, watch your laptop at four PM sharp today; it’s on an assigned channel, no tuning necessary. I need, well, a sympathetic witness.” The remark seemed to have the desired effect. Just such surprising comment revealed the ever hovering wonder in their romance. If Arnold Storrier remembered one thing about the woman he idolized, it was her musical voice with its beguiling, ironic timbre when diverted. Hence that day’s appointed ‘curtain raiser’, which served to regale his lone audience member, who elected to name him thereafter her ‘hammer-kavalier’. Arnold’s budding reputation as a sometime contrapuntal composer elicited the pun! Fond words were a commonplace then.

By a timely despatch Arnold informed the LAPD and his lawyer of his specific intention that day. Meticulously disguised, he gained entry to the main Licchavi residence posing as an officer of the Los Angeles Environmental Protection Agency, obliged to test the air quality of an older gas fireplace (a ready access scam that took him the better part of a week to concoct). From Muerner, Arnold had learned about the ‘ineffable’ jars. In a copy of the Sikh Times Gloria made use of in assessing Roald Licchavi, he saw a picture of the ornate study the jars were photographed in, a study on the second floor that overlooked the terraced garden area.

Once inside the room, Arnold barricaded the doors, set down his carryall, assigned a wide spectrum video transmitter with magic eye to a side table, then proceeded with a broad-faced hammer only Bhairava himself might have wielded to effect his own singular *Kristallnacht* — all of which Frieda watched while seated in a catatonic Buddha-like state. The shock for both of them was the discovery

not only of the wall niches, in essence a style of mihrab, with their elegantly fitted jars, but a near life-size ceramic sculpture of a seated green Tara who resembled a detailed Frieda. Arnold looked on askance for several seconds, for the sculpture had not been part of the jars' art world documentation or media exposé. He could hardly believe his eyes. Because Muerner had so praised the elegant jars, Arnold, swearing aloud as only a badgered fugitive can, pulverized only the sculpture — an ardent if impetuous demolition Frieda watched in stupefied awe.

The villa's security staff were at first addled by the noise, then began preparing for a siege of the chamber. LAPD's finest were 'informed' by Arnold's cutout at the appointed hour and arrived moments after the final fragment of the sculpture vanished into a smithers pile. The wanton delinquent was promptly arrested, fingerprinted, photographed, charged and released on a bail bond. He returned at the specified evening hour to the safe house, with the compliance of his sitter — to greet his wryly amused wench with, "You didn't, I trust, record the event." She looked at him with novel disbelief. "No; you'll spend the next decade in prison I presume."

He eyed her speculatively. "The presumption is a fine, suspended sentence, craven apology; exemplary public service in perpetuity was left in escrow." Staidly he added, "Muerner's been working to stay any tabloid innuendo surrounding the jars — how such innuendo hatches defies credibility. I daresay the Russians may have been active here. Yes?"

Frieda dolefully smiled.

They are quite beautiful — the jars — I must admit being a little chagrined when I saw them, and if they're auctioned at Sotheby's say, any slur will wane Muerner believes. He does have several like-minded critics in the art world, wonder of wonders. Curiously, it seems only Roald, the sculptor, and now you and I, know of this late effigy. A late commission it seems. Who why and how are unknowns. Anyway, my first 'public service deed' was the pulverizing of it. Only Zeus Himself could have stopped me. The police saw only the finely decimated remains. I told them it was a large vase, and that an art critic friend found it particularly distasteful. I suspect they fancied getting me committed as a lunatic. I managed to assure them a bail bond would suffice."

A dry smile touched Frieda's face. "Public service. Despoiling art."

"Art for avid prurient ogles, yes. Who tend not to hear...the Music of the Night."

The phrase invoked a shared felicity. The Mozart serenade, *A Little Night Music*, softly playing on Frieda's CD player, had been the background to a night of quiet (to adhere to safe house standards) but prolonged blissful love making, such that they lingered afterward in one another's embrace as Titanic survivors may have consoled one another. With dispatch she now began undressing her 'public servant', who was soon cleaving to her with a muted but avid passion that exhausted him and at least left her feeling it would be charitable to await a repeat engagement. Thus, it was just after a second interval of quiescent but blithe coupling that, with a canny regard, she noted the oddity.

"I'm not altogether flattered, you know. You obliterate the rare dishy memorial then screw the inspiration for it? A bit of a travesty one might think."

Promptly he said, "The uncertainty principle and me never got on."

She smiled at this and turned on her side to confront him.

"To follow such a long, straight, pointy nose." Which she skimmed in a slow evaluative caress. "A reliable neck though. Horsey."

He briefly smiled.

“Firm chest...neato expansive sex.”

He drew her away from the intimate caress.

“You need more sun,” she added, raking his chest.

He caught and kissed her hand. “A bit obtuse...the chap obsessed with an immaculate tan.”

Frieda’s amusement was slow in coming, resulting in some stomach dimples he hungrily sought while she continued to study him with one-eyed candour, saying, “So. Lie back and think of the Founding Fathers. That it?”

“There’s no injunction that says you must enjoy it.”

That was when she grimaced, mutely yet robustly grappled with him, and he was a time getting her pinned beneath him. Said she, “That took a while.”

He was a moment responding. “Sirens would’t have it any other way, would they.”

For a time they lay drolly studying one another. She broke the spell by declaring: “If this is another lead into that awful Penelope-the-weaver joke you may never see my navel again. What’s funny?”

“Some days I feel like Adam. Eden’s Adam.”

“The wimp.”

“Him, yes.”

“This is a sob story...?”

“It has a political dimension.”

“So — sob on.”

“What was the People’s First Democratic Election?”

“Someone cares?” she readily asked.

“When God made Eve, and said to Adam, ‘Now choose a wife’. ”

“That was sly,” said she, eyeing him with an inquisitor’s intensity. “So, you’re pissed Eve sought some outside advice — thinking your skinny a little, well, ‘skinny’.”

He smiled. “You would have eaten the serpent, I think.”

Their fond antic regard of one another soon led to another protracted molten embrace which ended in a mellow reverie during which he suavely mused: “I imagine they call this a ‘safe’ house because pregnancy is a rarity here.” He smiled.

“My own savant.”

He was then fingering the barely visible handiwork of Muerner’s surgeons. The evidence of her gun shot wounds lingered as scarcely discernible rills of pink, partly blended into the freckles that played about her face. “Angel kisses — your freckles,” he fondly remarked. Drolly eyeing him Frieda asked, “What about tits?” Promptly he said, “Well, they do prove a gent can focus on two things at once.” She turned on her side and sought his hand. “Happy?”

“Ineffably.”

“An odd couple.”

Later their numinous exhaustion basked again in a soft-hued, oyster fat cosiness. She lay on top of him looking with her characteristic whimsy — one eye partly closed in appraisal — into his expansive face. “It’s nice having someone along...not just presiding.” He was then too happy to think of ghouls, and affably said, “I still wonder which eye is the spy.”

“My intrepid explorer,” she said, pulling his ears.

Several mornings later, as she combed out her hair, then just shy of shoulder length, she placidly invited him to study her in their small dresser mirror. Their eyes locked in the reflection, hers newly candid, tending words oddly daring. “He was essentially...as you know, an insular voyeur... and wanted only a pretty ornamental being.” With lenten grace she reached back up to caress his face, his eyes then alighting on her newly pregnant flesh, the wonder world forming before him, this creature of a thousand and one nights. The pregnancy had been confirmed the day before on an escorted trip to her gynaecologist, whom she’d seen a couple of times during her stay at the safe house.

“A unique adventure...in the making, here,” he softly said, their hands newly linked over the still normal looking abdomen. “Our own Pyrenees.”

Said she later, in repose, as he fondly stroked the growing coppery fleece of her mons, “May I be forever, well...a co-respondent, not another abstraction, an ‘image’. I trust you do understand.” A day before he’d recorded the mystical Debussy *Images* and, as before, found her sometimes plaintive metaphors a fine goad. He managed finally to face her with the Olympian cool acquired in kick-boxing arenas as he began to caress the new fuller hairs of her sex. “That means shoulder length does it?”

They both ended eyeing one another with a primal accord.

By Christmas that year they snugly resided in the Stamford farm home as committed life partners, an FBI watcher present but inconspicuous. An Atlantic storm took a wrong turn and brought a twelve day extinction of the New York theatre season, including the most ambitious Plombiers’ extravaganza, entitled, *Musing the Maenad* —a ‘pastiche’ (Antoine’s word) that required two wardrobe mistresses and sixty meters of back drops.

The storm passed over Long Island, slammed into Stamford on Boxing Day, and continued to the feast of the Epiphany which, Antoine pointed out to an attentive Frieda and guests, was from the Fifth Century celebrated as the Coming of the Magi — the first manifestation of Christ to the gentiles. “My favourite gentile,” Frieda quietly said to Arnold, leaving the watchful friends curiously alert. Much surface transportation was stymied and many parts of the state floundered without power. McClelland and Arnold worked on an old generator with limited success. Lights often remained seance dim, shower water tepid. The entire East Coast as far south as Wilmington and East to Louisville was lashed by winds that often gusted to cyclone fury and brought snowfall pyramids that buried two stranded snow plows in Trenton and one side of a pioneer church near Hartford up to its chimney. Several airports were shut down. In one field off a Hampton roadway two frozen bodies were found in early January. By then Roald Jr. had written two letters to Frieda, both promising, but would not see her again until later in the New Year. She had talked to him several times by phone. In one conversation he said he liked ‘David’, adding that ‘He’s a really great step-dude.’ Such a camp affirmation Frieda had not before heard from her son, and felt a renewed affection for him.

Antoine made it to Stamford to see the ‘happy t,touched couple’ but became restless the second day, saying there was little more disconcerting than observing a “distracted Hun thinking the Aria to the G,Goldberg Variation’s a *Liebeslied*” — his metaphor for the obvious infatuation of the husband. “At least p,play something Schuberty for your pregnant trull you m,malingerer.” Frieda was alarmed to see him go, the most recent weather report ominous, but Antoine said a late offer of shelter from ‘a well-tuned muso’ who lived in New Haven would keep him ‘perfectly pitched and m,melodic’. He left fluffing his collar, urging Arnold call a professional to repair the in-house generator.

Then the weather briefly calmed, though the power remained unreliable. Oddly, it was perhaps their happiest time. Alan Dershowitz was working out a jesuitical settlement with MIT, the details of which were less onerous than anticipated. To Muerner's surprise, Arnold's musical talents were on call, enough to pay a new mortgage, living expenses, even allow some extras! His folk opera *Tyche* — which featured Marianne Fitch and two of her students — was to be made into a movie, and possible later TV series. Roald Jr. came in late December. He was learning to play the piano. Everyone said he had talent and a fine performing sense. He gave Frieda a poem he'd devised. Someone in his school had been fondly teaching Ogden Nash and/or Noel Coward. The poem ended with the showoff couplet, 'I have this hippocampus upstairs, Full of amorous Decameron airs.'

Frieda ceased being sick by the second month — a month earlier this time round — and took prompt delight in some gypsy lore Rosanna told so well in the dim evenings, in a sepulchral Spanish-English. Roald Jr. savoured plans for the summer holidays with a new sibling in tow. Gloria joined them for a weekend, also Marianne Fitch and her tall white-haired husband who, with Frieda, Gloria, Roald Jr. and some neighbourhood children, made a giant snowman, 'buried up to his waist' said one observant missy. Four youngsters from Antoine's theatre staff arrived on cross-country skis. One prepossessing lad, an architect with a talent for theatre design, was engaged to a Miss Daphne Charles. "The Paleomena's chairman's personal secretary," remarked Gloria. Several pithy stories surfaced about Angus Dowd. Gloria smoothly added, in a catch-breath quiet, that Daphne would continue in Paleomena's lucrative employ. Frieda and Arnold remained attentive to one and all, 'making everyone copacetic' (Rosanna's verdict), except perhaps restless Antoine, who ever apprized happy 'heteros' with a wry smile. Arnold told Frieda nothing until it was over — actually the evening of January the Third, when a sheriff phoned to confirm the identity of a third frozen body. Rosanna was nonplussed herself recalling the tales of romance and intrigue she narrated those nights — while out there a real nightmare was so inadvertently taking shape. To think the storm actually accelerated the momentum! Frieda was not pleased Arnold withheld the information, but shared his sense of nemesis. Indeed, it was the first time she sensed a release from her latent despondency. Even the sentries might now stand down.

The countdown began when Roald Licchavi, whom the GRU kept in its sights, was given a day pass to a rescheduled discovery hearing over the holiday. A special Parole Escort Officer was recommended by Arnold's attorney, with FBI sanction, to see Roald avoided all contact with the wife. The following morning Roald and the officer flew to New York to see a nonesuch divorce lawyer to assess the late charges from Frieda of: grievous slander, spousal abuse, planned aggravated assault, and past mistreatment of a child, all of the above congruent with a late psychiatric assessment of Roald that had discomposed Roald's family's West-Coast lawyers, who were tidying up the many suits against the estate, including the Russian charge of embezzlement — siphoning funds from an alien account!

The storm fell during the return drive to the JFK Airport. Three GRU agents in a waiting car, key players in a late devised operation, yawned at the snowflakes. All men worked at the Russian Cultural Centre in Washington. They were dressed as highway patrolmen. They flagged the PEO's assigned car for alleged erratic driving — to strenuous objection. When asked to stand clear of the car, one GRU agent head butted the testy PEO and gave him a needle, the other hammer fisted Roald and hustled him into the back seat. With the two cars serving as blind, the PEO officer was stashed behind some

Adirondack shrubs. It would appear that Roald somehow drugged the PEO and drove to the Hamptons with the PEO's handgun.

Two of the GRU agents then drove Roald in the PEO car to a copse adjacent the Storrier farm house in Stamford, the second car driven by the third agent, following. The agents welcomed the concealing storm, seeing a chance to reach the residence more directly and circumspectly. After parking the cars, the two agents headed out across the copse toward the house with a dazed Roald in toe, the third agent left behind to mind the cars. It had been affirmed that Frieda, Arnold, Roald Jr., and McClelland were in residence. The essential job then was the removal of reckless, vengeance seeking Roald, ever determined to portray his wife a harridan and canny ruthless spy. A rash murder/suicide would hasten that work. An ancillary wrinkle was to add to Roald's personal files, via the one footman, cryptic notes in a well forged hand, recapitulating an insidious use of some of the elegant jars...no 'pound of flesh' left in abeyance. The late revised tactical plan was that one of the operatives would reconnoitre the house, locate if possible and shoot Frieda, then shoot Roald with the PEO gun to suggest a brazen murder/suicide. If Frieda was killed so much the better...but her injury or death soon lost its paramountcy in the face of the sudden, newly blinding storm, which soon obliterated any expedient approach to the farm house!

As the storm suddenly unexpectedly worsened, the two operatives lost sight of the house and soon, the way back to the cars. The wind was then well over 100 miles per hour, the snow alternating with blinding hailstorms, during which Roald collapsed from an apparent heart attack. The operatives left him where he fell with the PEO's hand gun, his demise a given, then sought shelter from the terrifying storm. Earlier, the agent in the second car realized he'd soon be snowbound and fled after a frantic failed search for the threesome. A farmer looking for missing animals days later, discovered two snow covered men dressed as patrolmen huddled by an erosion barrier of mature cedars. It was later presumed hypothermia may have prompted a fatal rest. Their identity would remain a mystery. A third body, later found in the copse some eighty yards from the Hampton residence, was identified as Edward Roald Sambara Licchavi. A handgun, the fingerprints degraded by rain and frost, lay nearby. The PEO's car was found across the copse with a nearly empty pack of Sobranie cigarettes inside.

It was a haunting chapter Arnold and Frieda eventually, jointly consigned to 'the days that are no more' — a line Arnold remembered from his reading of Tennyson — despite the ambiguity posed by the coroner's report which remained open-ended about Roald's presence in the neighbouring copse near a handgun. By then postmortems of the late discovered PEO, also entombed in the storm, revealed the presence of GBH, a sleep inducing agent and, in Roald's case, a severe head bruise and elevated myocardial infarction.

"The GRU have rid themselves of their unreliable maniac," Muerner later told Dowd. "Voluptuaries like Roald would never venture out in such a storm. My guess the two unknowns were GRU heavies who nulled the PEO and abducted Licchavi. Given the ferocity of the unprecedented storm, any agent in a backup vehicle likely elected to save his own skin." Dowd greeted the summation with one of his own: "I presume you fancy getting her back." Replied Muerner, "I doubt the GRU will bother her again. They can make of Roald what they want now. Moreover, murdering housewives you *claim* ignorance of is a bit dicey. She did serve our remote sensing team as well as anyone; I trust she's kept abreast of current research." Muerner indulged a dry smile. "Her Russian appeasement effort is ongoing you know...our nominal surviving Romanov. She's counting her blessings."

Frieda went to Roald's funeral with Roald Jr., a decision Arnold silently accepted and would wait for them in the limo, the armed chauffeur escorting Roald Jr. and Frieda into the church. Arnold explained to Roald Jr. that funerals were a family affair. The day was aptly bleak and gusty. Roald Jr. said he understood, but with a solemnity that prompted Arnold to change his mind, such that the three sat together with the chauffeur in a side pew. None of Roald's family acknowledged them.

The following day Arnold took Roald Jr. to McClelland's equestrian club to at last ride the great 'Cleelan Pony', Roald Jr.'s name for a grand stud stallion there. But the horse was not in its stall. A groom said someone likely took the stallion for an exercise run. Roald Jr. was disappointed and kicked at some hayed manure. Arnold told the story of the pessimist who dismissed a room full of fine toys as 'just so much crap', while the optimist, in a room full of manure, reminded everyone that 'Where there's manure there must be a pony!' The joke earned a patronizing chuckle from a groom. "A real trotter," Roald Jr. wryly stated looking about the smelly stall. Arnold smiled. "Promising kid," the groom added. Seconds later the grand Cleelan Pony was discovered with the majestic McClelland upon it, the stallion's nostrils flaring. The boy stood wonder struck before the large brown-black Arabian, then obsequiously grateful as the familiar knurled hands scooped him up from Arnold's arms and onto the foresaddle, to grasp through McClelland's jersey his hawser arms.

A week later Frieda recalled that adventure as she prepared for bed.

"I think we're going to have to buy Roald Jr. a horse. McClelland thinks so too, now that he's got him happily riding a fillet solo. I presume it could be stabled at McClelland's club."

"You're probably right. MacClelland piloted him in a roundabout on the stallion the other day. He looked ecstatic. Mac says he's a natural."

"You're surprised."

"He has many, many talents, your son."

With a slight inflexion Frieda noted, "My father used horses. They helped move heavy equipment in the mountain terrain of Afghanistan. One of the few comments my mother made about his operation there. I don't think he rode them though."

"You've not told me a lot — about your mother's life with him."

"Sadly, not a lot to tell. It was hard for her. She did tell me his loss left her suicidal."

And so a mindful 'David' regarded his newly pregnant wife as she consigned her Chinese kimono to a fauteuil, Gloria's comment about the transit of Venus resurfacing in his mind as she settled beside him on their bed. "He kicks like McClelland's stallion, on a bad day, this child of yours," she mused, as they eyed one another with ongoing durable wonder. "Corinthian marvel," said he after drawing the night gown over her head. "Ionic ravisher," said she. He thought of their lovemaking then as his own private libretto, Antoine extravagant — chasing amidst lustrous flues, fine coppery fleece, ever awed that he might give pleasure to a historic Cybele...in a life eventually graced with four busky, affectionate, multi-talented children (two of them twins), the offer of a research grant from Paleomena left in escrow, and a musical output that resurrected the lyric splendour of late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century classical music.

The court appeals involving MIT summarily ended; Arnold paid a substantial fine with Muerner's help and was given a suspended sentence, along with the stipulation that MIT would be part custodian of any future research findings he might author. The court did not contest Arnold's exclusive entitlement to his 'energy packets' formulae, though he was urged to reconsider. Another plus at the

time was the offer from Disney to serialize Arnold's much-praised foster-home saga in his opera *Tyche*, the movie to serve as an opening introduction.

Frieda welcomed being called 'Zia, short for Anastasia, a near hyponym of her 'David', and became rather fond of his Rosenkavaliers and Ariadnes, believing most had a timeless irenic aspect, being close to the music of Richard Strauss, Rachmaninoff and Khachaturian, music she'd always loved. Vassily's influence, in part. She even lifted a quote from Sergei Rachmaninoff.

The day's new kind of music seems to come not from the heart but from the head. Its composers think rather than feel. They have not the capacity to make their works exalt — they meditate, protest, analyze, calculate, brood and tease, but rarely exalt.

However, Arnold's intimation of composing a cantata to historic Anastasia — once the soul of the Russian dream of restoration and reconciliation — seemed too patronizing and earned him a kindly pat on the head, followed by a waggish, "Yes, yes Eulenspiegel." By then Frieda had heard most of his favoured German canon. About then she also discovered some stolid verses in an older diary: 'Wide the wide rampart she might find that distant lake, and ride its buoyant waves to a sovereign shore.' With a snort she promptly suggested he "stick to his musical clefs" — only to steadfastly leave the room to his prompt open amusement over her apparently inadvertent, unmindful mention of 'clefs', and return with the allotted, single dual page of rolled-up newspaper they sometimes duelled with. No one got hurt but she had a talent wielding one of these 'clubs' he only rarely outmaneuvered!

On other days she would recall the triumphant Abler program, now sanctioned token public revelations (the central nervous capital pool being largely committed), and the ever extended reach of Paleomena. She still met with 'Yevgenia' privately. Zoya's ongoing worry was that Muslim antipathy, once incensed, was one of life's infinities, and she resisted endangering anyone dear to her. Identities have a way of reconnecting, resurfacing. "One day we banquet together," Zoya would say, though Frieda suspected they might both be in hospice care when such a day came. It reminded her of her ongoing tryst with Paleomena. That year she received a handsome Christmas card from the emphatic Muerner, leaving open her full reinstatement in a Paleomena research program.

All cards ended with: 'Save the last dance for us.'

THIRTY

The formal debate at Dartmouth College auditorium between Angus Dowd and Ashly Scargill posed the question: The Multinational — Macrocosm or Metastasis. Early in the debate Ashy Scargill reproved Dowd for 'toadying to corporate hubris', an applauded put-down that was followed by a sweet young thing in a front row releasing a large toad onto the stage edge from a briefcase. The creature hopped closer to Dowd, who finally scooped it up and placed it on the lectern. The creature stared up at him with a convincing intimation of approbation. A kind of pyromaniac anticipation settled in after the initial laughter died down. The canny Dowd paused as long as he dare.

"The alert observer will note the sagacity, poise, and inestimable reserve."

This comment was followed by the sudden improbable appearance of a squealing piglet into the auditorium! An odd extraneous happening that prompted brisk laughter; indeed, the antic event took everyone by surprise. The piglet ran to the front but seemed undecided when it reached the raised stage, only to briskly return to the back of the auditorium.

“I am consoled,” said Dowd into the momentary quiet following the piglet’s departure. “Pray note the frantic pitch of the porker. Mr. Scargill’s professional vocalise.”

Frieda, who watched the event on a wide computer screen with Gloria and some of her staff, stifled an insider’s laughter: Ashly Scargill had a high-pitched peevish nasal voice.

The piglet suddenly pranced again down the centre aisle, once more sniffed out the area before the dais, then again bounded to the back and into the hands of its embarrassed owner, the pig being a pet of his, which had escaped in a car collision near the back of the auditorium — facts the owner had disclosed to the debate’s marshal who by then hovered by the back door.

After the pig’s final leave taking, Dowd said, into a further lull, “You might also note the omnibus cowardice of the porker — fleeing so.”

By then Scargill was fit to be tied. The sporadic applause was capped with a few raspberries and some porcine squealing. In the meantime, Dowd took off his glasses and began wiping them on his tie front.

Of course it was thereafter hardly convivial japing and fond reproof. Goaded youngsters are ever supple, and Dowd soon faced a number of unflattering allusions; moreover, prolonged involuted joking gets tedious. But he performed well in a hostile environment, and Daphne had a lovely marzipan toad sitting on his desk the following morning.

But if Dowd once could savour such humour, that time had quietly slipped by. The announcement of her engagement came, in the end, as a switch hit and unheralded letdown. It wasn’t as though he imagined her a match for himself; it was simply the likelihood of losing the fraternization of a trusted servant and nimble playmate. Their extended intimacy had been a providential preserve that all but blurred his historical perspective. Sardonicly, the hovering thought of losing her was what kept his fondness for her decorously conventional. And he was far too enamoured to imagine her ‘wedded’ to him. My god, she even discretely talked of adoption. A doughty homebody — a happy subversive under his very nose!

Then the kind, thoughtful, exceedingly cute, budding architect turned up and Dowd’s plight resolved itself into a very lovely dew. She would have a tangible prince — for how long no matter — it would be the commitment from a handsome, young, intelligent, cultured exemplar that counted, so he believed — and he, Angus Dowd, could continue to enjoy at arm’s length the company of an agile sensibility he treasured as ginseng to a Korean. He even got her promoted, leaving her free of him for much of her day. She would ever be a horizon of loveliness, a flare of conspiratorial mirth — and he would be there to console her when the marriage failed, as he predicted it would (the day’s young were ever leery of age and routine, two bent pedlars of unbecoming reality). The one regret was perhaps to never know if she had taken him on because of attrition, wry empathy, or the wile of adventure and occasional glimpses of *la dolce vita*.

That quandary was akin to his reassessing the un-vamped, worthy Frieda Storrier — or ‘Fred’, as she was then called in the society columns — commenting in Gloria’s rag on the phenomenon of the scientist mother and the schooling she sought for her children.

Frieda had joined a coterie of parents who were keen to establish an alternate school that would emulate aspects of the Finnish model — which the school Roald Jr. had been enrolled in closely followed, a belated and telling discovery for Frieda, given Arnold’s joint resolution with Muerner on the choice. Several factors were germane to this system which, the more Frieda studied it, the more

salutary it seemed. If the older, uniform Scandinavian social fabric that initially prompted it was less homogenous than before, the system itself retained aspects worth trying to emulate.

One of the main characteristics was that in Finland teachers were exceedingly well paid! Most had their master's degree or better and many had completed the equivalent of a residency program in US medical schools. Student teachers often taught at affiliate elementary schools that adjoined a university. In short, teachers might be counted on to know the better pedagogical programs. Frieda knew that in the US, research on what worked in the classroom and what didn't, often got stuck in 'educational' politics, many 'experts' arguing that certain subjects or a method's presumptions were biased if not pernicious. In Finland, research was said to transcend idiomatic prejudice. The government made its education policy decisions based almost solely on effectiveness — diligent observation and testing! If a program offered improvements, the federal Ministry of Education and Culture endorsed it. By and large, public education in the United States slighted rigour, frank candid testing itself was being deemed biased, discriminatory, even racist. Also, compared to the US, where open free playtime had been dwindling for the last two decades, Finnish law required that teachers give preschool students 15 minutes of play for every 45 minutes of instruction. That policy stemmed from an almost storybook belief that kids should be allowed to live out a childhood with limited supervision. Study after study found that later grade-school students given at least two daily recesses of 20 minutes or more, behaved better in school and did better on assignments. The philosophy stemmed from a mutual level of trust shared by the schools, teachers, and parents. Parents assumed teachers had covered pivotal subjects in the confines of the school day, a day that lasted five hours on average. Time spent at home was often reserved for family enterprises. A long standing uniformity and homogeneity in the Finnish population, had rendered deviance conspicuous, too often vexing, and hence less diverting or engrossing.

Also, all schooling and pre-schooling in Finland was still state funded. The cost of early care in America set up disparities that could last throughout a child's later years. In Finland, parents were guaranteed almost everything. Preschool and daycare were both universal until age 7, and more than 97% of three to six-year-olds were enrolled in at least one. More than that, though, the preschools were good. They aligned their curricula with one another and prepared kids along similar tracks.

As exceptional was the fact that Finns paid, or had paid, little or nothing to go to college, whereas American students often racked up many thousands in college-loan debt. In Finland bachelor, master, and doctoral programs had been subsidized by a combination of taxpayer levies and the federal government. The system stemmed from the belief that education, including higher sound education, is a societal necessity. What lay in escrow was the socialist mentality of most Nordic countries, and their social-cultural uniformity, which hadn't yet disintegrated, despite the growing rebuke of such Caucasian cultures.

Most everyone in Frieda's group was optimistic about this alternate school. Work primers would be forthcoming. For the current directors one essential acquisition for four- and five-year-olds was the habit of learning special skills in those early hours of the day when one applied oneself unwittingly, forthrightly — the pal of habit consorting, in time, with memory, even nostalgia. "The feel good recollection," said one esteemed teacher, "We only become strictly 'practical' when our options begin to disappear. Some neurologists believe that occurs when an inner clock puts a limit on the 'brain stake' or cell entitlement, if you like. When that happens we seem to be stuck with the inner mind

geography we've already traversed. We continue to learn of course, but the exertion required is more taxing. Hence the utility of early hours and sustained study to optimize that 'brain stake'."

Gloria added a footnote to the article, saying she'd rarely come across parents so absorbed in the dynamic of sturdy pervasive learning. "The magic is alive and coping," she said of the new directives, and was in touch with an interested publisher.

Dowd, ever alert to trendy illusion, smiled and chucked the magazine into a waste basket. Another bumper crop of modish meretricious panjandrums he forecast. He was ever touched by the credulity of otherwise able forthright people. Didn't Frieda and her pals realize the Finnish system had worked relatively well over time due in large measure to its homogeneous race, culture, ethics and value assigned to effort and stoicism, which minimized conspicuous disparity, envy, rancour, techy displays, and thus delinquency — thus lessening the danger of cultural hazing and fragmentation. Still, he wished the trustees well. Such a school might spark an over due debate in the U.S. Though he doubted Americans would ever enjoy such a consensus.

The occasion of Daphne's nuptial was a for Angus Dowd a 'consummation devoutly to be wished', despite his unease with convention. Given Antoine's astute management of joyous expression, Dowd commissioned him to fashion a winsome celebration, which augured a marriage of love and art — and elegant ebullient dance! The curiosity was that Dowd experienced for perhaps the first time in his life a sense of pending loss.

Antoine engaged many fine dancers and musicians. Arnold hired the caterers and hall — the new Los Angeles Music Box Theatre. Marianne Fitch sang from *Of Thee I Sing* and *Cinderella* (La Cenerentola) with members of the San Francisco Opera chorus, and Winton Marsalis played Paganini, Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton — to standing ovations. The concluding cancan dance performance was as engaging, from all accounts, if occasionally lascivious. This final act alone must have cost a hundred thousand or more, one observer remarked. Zoya was the principle dancer.

Just before the marriage ceremony, Frieda had been in Zita's (Zoys's) dressing room hugging and jawing with her peripatetic sister who had registered something of a comeback that season. A recent rumour claimed the noted performer had crashed, taken to drugs, was even seen among the vagrants in LA eating a raw sparerib while perched on the base of a toffy sculpture before the newest commercial tower. A further rumour attested to the dancer's attempt to stab a ranking corporate Svengali — again paraphrasing from Gloria's rag — ironically reminiscent of an earlier encounter with an incensed Muslim. Only the name of the Svengali in the late story was omitted.

"Motherhood that awful, hon?" Zita asked finally in desperation, herself just keeping the floodgates in check as the sisters appeared to look upon one another for a first time. Frieda was then several months pregnant. Zita had yet to mention Catherine Whyte, *her* likely twin — a story for another time — or the unfinished bust she had acquired of a person who resembled a much younger Frieda. '*Un objet trouvé*', one art dealer called it. Zita discovered the statue in an art salon auction and put a final bid on it. Perhaps one day all would be sorted. Else-wise, the cloud about her encounter with the Islamist had been lifted by her success, though the fatwa had never been formally rescinded. So far she had escaped her past, but the anxiety never really left despite her new identity and look. If the media were to unearth her connection to Frieda — and journalist Catherine Whyte for that matter — her past might be 'on call' again. One of the lingering worries. Zita's hands slipped from Frieda's

arms to her own hips as she stood back to candidly observe her savvy stepsister, maturely pregnant for a third time.

“Twins,” Frieda said, lightly smiling.

“What did Arn think you naming second kid Vassily?”

“It was his suggestion. I agreed of course.”

Again they closed and hugged one another with tender ferocity. Separated, Frieda fondly surveyed, again, the beautiful svelte woman beneath the light dressing gown and especially the latest alteration to the beautiful mindful face above. “Well so,” Zita retorted. “Wizard slow poke making goddess. Big righteous bro.”

Frieda proffered a quizzically half-closed left eye.

“Hell, barely got blade — nail file — under skin. Am amateur compared to you. He leave me ‘lower Slobbovia’ cow for month. ‘The smarty had a party and nobody came’ you say. Holy Rodina, the time!”

With great nostalgic vigilance, Frieda watched her sister, now a Terpsichore avidly followed by a core of select devotees on two continents, assume the costume of a cancan dancer, the face, despite the revisions, still a pentimento hint of their shared inheritance, though the excessive makeup soon turned the remembered human into the marionette required for the performance. With practiced ease the voluminous petticoats descended over a wide pleated shift. The low cut bodice seemed to lace itself in place. It was only when the final single luminous red garter was positioned that Frieda realized the celebrated culottes were seamed in bright luminous scarlet and pink braid, forming a vulva cartoon on the gusset. Frieda barely contained her amusement.

Without looking up Zita said, “‘A reminder’ — so says poofter Antoine. ‘The woman of ‘sovereign’ parts.’ Besides, with acre of chiffon, only satellites know for sure.”

Frieda fondly kissed her sister and departed for her box to await the lavish ceremony, which the dancers would conclude.

The marriage service itself was embellished by a series of contrapuntal bass and descant exchanges. A bass-baritone singer repeated the I Dos of the elegant Daphne, Marianne Fitch the pledges from the lad, both straining in the wrong range. The Episcopalian Bishop who presided was assisted by two French horns and an exotic oboe. Underrehearsed, as it turned out, but the audience loved it, and the bride and groom survived as a stellar romantic duo, about as elegant, beguiling as they come. A swany Russian interlude followed, including, for the first nuptial dance, Shostakovich’s wonderful Waltz from his Suite for Jazz Orchestra No 2. The stage floor was soon packed, the many couples ‘italicized’ by shafts of light from two large multi-mirrored ceiling balls. Shortly thereafter, the nuptial continued with the ritual of departure, first the bouquet, then the carnal fuss with the garter, not unlike the one Zita put on. The cancan performers swept on stage after, all Moulin Rouge éclat, and all astonishingly alike except for the central dancer. Frieda mechanically handed her opera glasses to Arnold who surprised her by handing them on to Rosanna who placed them somewhat emphatically on the balcony balustrade. Frieda noted Arnold sitting with his eyes closed and wondered how deliberate it all was. She fetched back the glasses and decided Zita was perhaps correct: only the satellites might know for sure. She did note with some amusement two staid friends of Gloria’s, a publisher and his wife, in the second row.

“A little campy, the dancing,” she said.

“The fiddlers seem remarkably inspired,” Arnold said, seeking her hand with the unwavering fondness she cherished.”

(It was the winter Vassily Sergeevich’s arthritic widow Sonja got a zek from a nearby camp to pack the windows about her tiny cottage in Igarka to stay the savage winters. A month before she bought more yarn with the proceeds from a pawned watch Vassily had given her on the last wedding anniversary they shared. Vassily had suffered a lethal heart attack. So she was told, though not where or when. His ashes would be returned. She would knit a sweater for her nearest neighbour’s grandchild. Sadly, this neighbour was not well. But for the knitting, Sonja feared she might wander off into the coming storm.)

Zita (Zoya Yevgenia) eventually married her manager and came to reside between films and stage appearances on a large property in Nantucket. It seemed she was finally free of past ogres. Indeed, some of her last performances were given in Russia itself. When dancing was no longer an enduring blessing, she turned to cheeky talk shows, her own blitzy chatter nearly as famous as her celebrated dance roles had been. Platinum hair alive above a cameo face bussed by a single rose, she was for a time talk show magic. It was on a late night show which included a waning but still impenitent pagan host named Rickles that she displayed a fluent political wit. The hour was beamed to the Russian Federation as part of a good will exchange prior to yet another round of GATT talks.

Rickles, taking note of Zita’s incisive cleavage, mused to another guest, “ — The great divide, our own Brunhild.” Brunhild was Rickles favoured word for Zita.”

Brunhild happily responded thus: “Bite tongue you die of food poisoning, yes?”

Rickles scowled at the audience’s amused response, exclaiming, “You’re a mess, Bruny. Therapy might work, with a good stuntman.” He then noted a good looking long-haired lad in the front row who responded by crossing his eyes and making a face — Roald Jr. to be exact. (Frieda viewed the program on their Hampton study tele, her twins in creamy flannel long johns hanging about her shoulders. Arnold watched the show in the hotel room he and Roald Jr. shared while in LA, where he would perform with the Los Angeles Symphony. Vassily Storrier and McClelland watched from the Hampton workshop where they were putting the finishing touches to a scale model of the Santisina Trinidad, the largest ship at the Battle of Trafalgar.)

To antic Roald Jr. Rickles said, “Hang in there kid. We won’t meet again.”

“You’re a scream,” Roald Jr. suddenly said, surprising even Rickles.

Rickles drolly chuckled.

Roald Jr. answered with a surprisingly good imitative chuckle, again crossing his eyes.

“You’re a deadbeat, kid,” Rickles promptly said, then, “It’s hard I know, when you’ve lost your pacifier.” Taking note of Roald’s colourful clothes, he asked, “So who made your spiffy attire — Freddy Kruger?”

After a shrug Roald Jr. said, “Possibly.”

Rickles continued with, “So who are the jaybirds next door?” Two of Roald Jr.’s friends were doing their best to remain royally unengaged, despite their affable smiles.

“One’s a girl. The other’s her latin stooge.”

“Ha, ha, that’s nice. Hang in there kid. Go home and watch your hair grow!”

Young Roald Jr.'s show of boredom could be mesmeric. The girl waved her hand in front of his face and shook her head, not hiding her grin. The other lad flashed a toothy smile which Roald Jr. promptly matched.

To the co-anchorman, a giant teddy bear with a robust laugh, Zita asked, "He fools now with twiggly boys? In sunset years?"

Rickles snickered, smiled pathetically. "You're way over the hill, Bruny."

Her cleavage lower than ever Zita took another savoury lick from her cone, then wryly said, "Valleys prettier than hills."

Quietly yet audibly Road Jr. said, "Touché."

Rickles luridly smiled. "We'll see you home safe, kid."

Happily taking in Vassily's group Yevgenia added, "Such sweet boy... and mainly girl."

"Keep it kosher, Brunhild."

"You are last media warrior, I think."

More pervasive laughter.

Said young Vassily to McClelland, "Who's Brunhild?"

Said McClelland, "A valkyrie. Your mum's stepsister."

"What's a valkyrie?"

"Good question. A kind of resource management type."

THIRTY-ONE

She lay starkly awake thinking of her deceptive, plaintive, convoluted past and the ostensible superman she shared a newly promising life with. The irony of such a one being the partner a modern pensive woman might find tolerable, companionable, even loveable, was not lost on her. Sarcasm aside, her special David was the one she might finally selflessly trust, sharing in his soulful quest, his inner 'music-magic', so tractable in its way to the mathematical genius used in his measurement of time and frequency, rhythm and meter, pitches of notes and tempo, to create the vast tonal harmony that had rendered him whole, plenary she believed, thus sealing his wholesale peace with her...her Orpheus who never looked back. Curiously, the onset of the Corona virus would 'endorse' their close fast union.

Yet the lingering memory of her former life, on as many dawns, stung her. The reality of which only his seamless affection on as many nights and days might baffle, and so reveal the home, the sanctum two observant survivors might share.

When her David was away she sometimes dreamed of a conveyor and a furnace rich with oily smoke. How earlier turncoats had been dealt with, according to legend.

She had tried several times to contact Vassily. She expected and sought no solace there — he was either dead, under permanent house arrest or worse — yet she ever wondered at his late sense of vocation and final regard of her. Did he remain miffed his early protégé had so sidestepped her parenthetic calling, as she had with Paleomena and the ongoing marvel of Abler, its leading research patents now fixed, impervious — for finally Muerner et al seemed indestructible and without peers: the era's largely unbalanced terror! Eve's e-mails and cards often contained deft excuses for the maven.

Whereas Vassily shouldered a catharsis only he might bear.

A late research grant proved to be another orphan, a commission scripted by Paleomena, where she would have worked on the latest enhanced radio waves from quasars to assess the deformations of space.

But the geodetic network could also be used to pinpoint the location, on sea and land, of acutely detailed objects mere centimetres in diameter, as in a face or notebook, a possibility Paleomena and its surrogates were likely as interested in as anticipating cosmic defaults. Her pessimism about Paleomena hadn't wained. When Frieda again demurred, Muerner told her once more that benevolence remained a romantic gamble and he was neither romantic nor gambler. Again he chided her for harbouring such distrust, adding, "Only a community of like-minded exemplars can deal with intransigent reality. The vital dynamic. And only a respected, cogent and dominant culture might accomplish that." Then he offered her — again — a generous commission from Paleomena. His awaiting 'last dance'.

She rose from the bed to look in upon her children, endowed too with the love and purchase of a man wary of a largely remorseless science, yet steeped in an exquisite reverence, a soulful euphony that would offer some respite in a turmoiled world, and ease her sojourn with aging and death — even the ominous fate of her special Vassily, who she feared had long since departed his vale of tears. All her queries to Russian sources remained unanswered.

Later, as her David slept, she thought again of asking a silent enigmatic God for a resonant workable trust...as she once tried with a creed that had proved too exacting. The dream itself hadn't yet wained...a being so like herself alive in a pristine sylvan clime where, somehow, all humans participated, fit in. Where life was a measured pace, one step at a time...full, occupying, consensual, even joyful. Where convulsive reparative drama and purgative catharsis no longer reign! And in the dream she would remember the singular mentor who championed her as if she were a guardian spirit, a totem, a peerless daughter who, in the arduous trek of time, would not break stride.

(About that time the zek had finished filling in the gaps around the widow's front door and windows. Sonja's only mail that month was another overdue invoice from some flower seeds she hadn't received that spring. Yet the sun was out, Vassily's urn ashes at last delivered to her, and her arthritis somewhat less flaring. Perhaps some cloud berries remained on the bushes by the river.)