

APSARA

by

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ONE

Coventry University graduate Aram Mir, a late Muslim convert, gazed out the window of the river barge at the tree thick embankment along the Volga river, just north of Moscow near Uglich. Beautifully autumn-tinted Aspen, Birch, Elm and Maple fronted some taller evergreens, mainly Spruce and Pine. He was struck by the presence of yet another solitary boy walking on the pathway near the river's edge, this one accompanied by a small dog. It struck him as odd, given the gregarious nature of most teens. At least those he was conversant with. Did this boy share his special dilemma, his familial secret? Or was he a symptom of how life in Russia was too often harrowing, the Russian male leaving this tearful vale earlier than his European cousins? The presence of the boy struck him as perhaps prophetic. A being bereft of healing belief he imagined, in a country laden with beautiful cathedrals.

Some recent words from his mindful sheikh he also deemed augural. "Your status in the cell is I'm afraid problematic. In part because your Arabic remains so poor. But you have been a sturdy help with some things in the past and the council does not forbid what you now propose. This is not the same as a full endorsement. But you have decided. We await the results with attentive concern." The prudent sheikh, he knew, was likely sympathetic but cautious enough to sit on the side. A regnant Salafi who learned what was proposed was incensed, and his English, when he chose to use it, gruff and emphatic. Especially before the lenient sheikh. "Are you sending in the clowns now? To wallow in the mawkishness that Western stooges have so shrewdly exploited?" The sheikh had advised Aram to take a short break — see his stern ever restive mother who had returned to Yaroslavl, her birthplace, and assess the security at the lone Mosque there, then decide if his plan, his new tactic was apt as he first thought. His elderly widowed mother he found to be her usual cagey, forbidding self — his conversion to Islam a nebulous page in her memory — and the mosque ably functional and nearly whole once more, though the worshipers had dwindled somewhat since the attack during Ramadan in 2008. As it had in the past, the classic structure with its steeply arched windows and slender ivory minaret revived in him a sense of awe — in faith as well as splendour. Indeed, as he recollected the sheikh's circumspect words he faintly smiled. A year ago a school fellow studying English called him a 'rebus' — a word or image puzzle, often the thing or person liable to misinterpretation he claimed. Even blame. As for the often sardonic mindset of his mother — innate self-flattery he suspected — it may have sharpened his own sense of purpose, the understanding that pointed the way! Such that a

dutiful Muslim engaged by Rabelaisian posturing — notable for gross robust humour, extravagance of caricature — would be a singular rarity if not an oxymoron. That he had found in its blithe derision a means to abet his struggle, enhance his Da'wah, dumfounded the others. At first. It was going to be an interesting week. Perhaps that's why he liked to travel by calm river water when feasible. The solace it imparted, water itself being one of God's first gifts. "You would snigger like our enemies?" another dogmatic follower asked. A moment of reckoning. To this critic he suavely replied, "One way to face a snide opponent is to know his habits, his seamy obsessions and distractions, then go toe to toe with ready germane satire — it being a fine sharp sword. An idea the Shurā may have slighted, yes?" His questioner limned a smirk.

Aram's late Armenian father was disgusted when he learned his only son had become a Muslim. "The biggest mistake of your life, so far." Father didn't think democracy lame, or Islam anything but a mug's game. But for his son, the West was awash in debilitating blame games and extricating, debilitating drugs. There was a malaise shortchanging it's earlier promise. Islam, he believed, had some features that might prevent an unmitigated fall. But he was not optimistic. Humans were a susceptible species. Still, he would proceed. Allāh was not a neutral investment advisor or forbearing misandrist — two options for the new cool moderns.

TWO

On first entering the production facilities at Glow Worm Films, a blossoming adult film enterprise in a hard luck suburb of Tarzana, California, Joseph Sall, a heedful teen son of a Scottish Canadian mum and a Syrian American, misinterpreted the direction given him to the reception area and found himself in a dimly lit corridor that was suddenly brightened by an adjacent well lit room, the nearer end of which contained a low dais where the casting for a new film was apparently underway. A man in a medical smock and a fashionably dressed, heavily made-up woman, appraised two female candidates who were partly screened from Joseph's view by a ringed curtain. Both appeared to be nude. A young man, also nude, stood in a doorway off the dais and absently waved at Joseph. Momentarily distracted, Joseph almost bumped into a girl standing in the hallway who apparently waited her turn. Beside her, an older deferential woman, also smartly dressed, noted with concern some bruising on the girl's hip as she undressed. The girl glanced at Joseph, saying, "Can be a turn on." Joseph hung his head and moved off pretending indifference. Had he ever seen a prettier girl? Said the attentive woman, "Well, no skin's broken." The girl dismissively shrugged. "You'll be a shoo-in," the older woman fondly resumed when the heavily made-up woman beckoned from the well-lit dais, a sight Joseph furtively took in glancing back. The pretty girl returned his look, her smile sickly he thought.

When he at last he found and entered the office area, a sullen-faced girl who sat at a cluttered desk looked at the want ad he held out and his frail form, with a smidgeon of disbelief. "You're seeking

work here at Glow Worm Films?”

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

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

As he sat, Joseph experienced none of the diffidence — or languor — he had the evening before. A hairy, thick set man who stood just inside the film studio wearing what looked like a butcher’s apron, suggested to Joseph an odd carnival celebrant. Spiky multicoloured hair — someone had consorted with a peacock? — lurid tattoos, many piercings, and a straggly goatee contorted with elastic bands. That the qualifying entry into such a world might be reliable erections erased the lingering sniggers. *shirk* barely approximated what he sensed in this alien recreant space. Slowly he recalled Aram’s special eulogy, knowing how the singular Aram, their cell’s latest tactician, had his own treasured reading of the Hadith, and a Salafi’s scorn of sensual indulgence and cosmopolitan suavity. “Calming words for distracted worshipers,” as mindful Hejaz dryly put it.

Do not be swayed by Western stooges’ and wiseacres’ cynical description of the Celestial Angels or Mala’ika. Their sublime nature can never be corrupted, nor their attention diminished. Their pervasive presence is paradise itself, their purity the essence of the restorative power denied the profane deceitful Iblis. The essential transformation is the goal of Jihad, the ritual purifying of the self, and thus the excision of prurience, dereliction and ready cynicism — the glib profanations we must reckon with.

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

What particularly vexed Joseph now was the fine slender woman seated by the carnival man in the studio. A more perfectly sculpted face, Persian perhaps, he could barely imagine or, he winced, a more kindly expression. She appeared to be naked — beneath a flimsy wrap — and seemed to await the shoot that was being readied. With a genial nod she told the ‘peacock’ he looked nice. He grinned and said he liked this studio. “They take their time.” The woman then smiled at Joseph. “Maybe next time,” she said with a cordial wink. Well within the the studio itself, two persons worked to ready light boxes and baffles. Nearby assorted iron manacles and a shiny gaff hook hung from a stanchion. A

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

"She'll get over it," the woman wanly replied.

Just then a buxom platinum blond on elevated heels in a tight red plastic dress entered the reception area, approached and tacitly eyed the studio chamber. The peacock smiled and gave her a thumbs up salute.

"You got balls, Kore," the peacock loudly exclaimed after making eye contact.

The attentive secretary was fondly confused.

The peacock continued in an emphatic voice: "Kore played She-Harem-Sadie — for the Thousand and One Night Blow Out. Ejaculated all over the Mini Stallion. A squirter like you've never bloody seen. Mix with her you wear a rain cape."

"Kore?" the secretary said, more incredulous than ever.

"In a dark wig," the esteemed Kore absently answered as she impassively took in the assorted props in the studio.

"Blew everybody's mind. A real monsoonie," the peacock continued.

The secretary managed a belated smile.

It was then placid Joseph whispered to himself, 'Some truths we deem self-evident..this being a first,' then left the room after releasing the lock-on timer to the canister valve in his backpack. The reception-restroom area and studio were soon filled with a phenyl isonitrile mist, the result of a masterfully constructed stench bomb — the handiwork of one Aram Mir, a chemistry buff and wild

card jihadi with a commanding sense of smell. The stench he described as the breath of a Komodo dragon on steroids. Six people were rushed to emergency. All survived. With, for a time, hyper sensitive nasal tissue.

The stench bombing of the office and interim video taping studio of Glow Worm Films was only belatedly attributed to stink bomb components, there being gas and plumbing complications before. The sex trade community and its diverse patrons were particularly surprised — at the presumed ‘bombing’, not stolid plumbers or gas workers. At first, the culprit or culprits were thought to be right wing nutters; enough there to go around. But when an obscure group called Shaheed claimed responsibility, the tuned-in media was bemused. The audience for the video streaming of graphic sex, menace and assault was massive — world wide — and more and more pornographic — hadn’t you noticed? What distinguished porno flics with skin scenes in late films and TV series were ‘modesty patches’ and intimacy coordinators. Indeed, who *wasn’t* watching, or would want such shows censored, replaced by the Leave It To Beaver era programs? Avant garde libertarians felt obliged to remind one and all that being narrowly judgmental was an old trap — an aberration of die hard Neanderthals. Well, a few doughty Neanderthals were less vexed, some even harbouring approval of the unique stink bomb blast. One rye head was quoted in a neighbourly bar crowd in South Bend, Indiana: “You’d think the assaholas mighta done this before and saved us some downers; most of those Glow Worm cunts could chill out ‘incels’.” Later that night the Kick Boxing boyfriend of a lap dancer who served as one of the ‘cunts’, punched the critic’s porch light out but good.

The facility itself was quarantined, some neighbouring buildings painstakingly fumigated and sanitized. A nearby tavern was closed for a time. The sex trade community mounted a theatric protest much attended by hundreds if not thousands. There remained among some local area residents the suspicion that the group responsible for the ‘bombing’ may have intended to hit the property next door, then owned by the brazen son of an expatriate Kuwaiti businessman. The mushrooming speculation soon animated a plethora of self-dramatic twitterers, one of these idling over the use of ‘a rusty dusty hydrogen bomb’. ‘Holy Shit’ and ‘Chili Killi’ got airings as well. Some claimed the instruments used to detect the left over residues from the canister were substandard; others that the amount of chlorine based decontaminate used was carelessly excessive; still others that the investigation team was indifferent and slapdash. Bungling, dead-end officialdom was soon, again, gospel. The next day, members of the New York Behr Brue Bankers Club swiftly departed the revolving entrance doors holding handkerchiefs to their noses. The reason for the sudden departure was promptly determined if not readily explained. A disgusting odour had suddenly filled the 2nd floor lounge, then spread via the air conditioning system to the rest of the building. Gasps from many members were sudden and frantic; one promptly vomited in the street. The puzzled expressions were ‘chimeric’, one earnest witness later said. Another stolidly wondered if some escaped zoo animal had somehow got inside and

died. Talk about stray pythons and other neglected animals was topical. Others believed it but another dumb juvenile prank. A becalmed bystander noted that several bank sharpies who attended the club had sold many sub-prime mortgages and investments they knew to be incredibly risky, many of these executive sharpies given large bonuses. Three of these he named. “Bound to cause a stink,” he said. The laughter was rather anemic among some onlookers though, for many were implicated in one way or another by the Wall Street tsunami.

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

In due course Shaheed ‘readily proclaimed responsibility’ for these attacks as well.

THREE

“Excuse me, sir. You appear to be in my seat.”

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

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

With some annoyance the stout Mr. Dorfman rose to his feet and shuffled past the patrons in the row, stomping on a couple of toes yet offering no apology. Indeed, his mind was a welter. He would be closer than ever now — five rows from the stage in fact. He made an effort not to look inconvenienced — which in fact he was, now that his presence was manifest to the patrons in the lower orchestra section of the theatre. He felt a flush come to his face — such that he almost turned and departed the gilded, plush and crystal chamber, only to decide more people might see his face if he did so. Once more he trod on some toes to find his assigned seat, where he sat like a catatonic child, except that few such children weigh over 200 kilos. His conscience was a riot of voices then, all shouting him down, calling him scabrous scurrilous names. Yet he was strangely possessed. The temptation that led, nay snared him to attend this performance at the new London Apsara Club, was now mesmeric, what a pressed classicist might assign to a Zeus-sized libido.

The posh club was rumoured to be the work, or ‘afflatus’ as one critic put it, of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov, known to media gate mouths as ‘Kissy’, reclusive brother to the Bratva Pakhan’s Boris Ivanovich Borozov, known to virtually everyone else as ‘Bossy’. A mob boss who was

now in prison due to a recent rash of exploded bodies — the messy murder of a prosecutor who happened to be the protégé of a mob with closer ties to the reigning oligarchs. Kissy, in turn, no longer enjoyed the relative anonymity he once savoured, for he too was now the focus of several ongoing investigations, though about all the current diggers could unearth was his backing of a new chain of clubs, the London Apsara being then the latest, which featured a show lounge that reviewers in general extolled, in part due to the talent and beauty of some of its performers. One of these, ‘Devi’ — from a late marquee — was a young svelte wonder the bulky Mr. Dorfman had become obsessed with. A displaced houri of Paradise he thought, this odd Circassian or East Slavic Apsara. His obsession was sufficiently humbling that he had to assume an alias when he ventured to steal away to attend another performance. His steadfast guilt added a finely seductive voluptuousness. Thus did stolid, fervid Ammon Farouk, an Egyptian who had attended London Metropolitan University where he was clandestinely known as Ding Dong Farouk, elect the name Dorfman. He could manage what he believed a German-English accent, because being German he felt would confer a certain stature and anonymity in London’s exotic clubs, though he hadn’t reckoned with the possibility that he might be seen as a simpleton — after the lead character in the satiric British Channel 4 series, Gravy Train. He had always envied those Saudi princes whose wondrous leisure and legendary stamina supposedly mesmerized the demimonde in London’s West End. Were he only ten years younger and not such a dogmatist, so belatedly aware of his calling, his Da’wah...still, he ventured on, slipping into the new Apsara to glimpse this miraculous Devi who had metamorphosed into several sprites over the days he tracked her, this night appearing in a temple costume of elegant minimalist bling above a shimmering translucent skirt that kept the voyeurs, including himself, diligently alert. The slender but well-toned limbs and lissom dance moves stirred in him a desire he’d not felt since his adolescence, only now it was even more thrilling in its nostalgic incarnation. He yielded up an audible sigh or two as the bling flitted about the sinuous torso to reveal a stunning timeless beauty — until, that is, she began performing with what could be an Arabian sword on a rug, a so-called ‘magic carpet’, the very design of which resembled that on his current prayer mat! If it had been his desire to one day stalk and ravish the creature, these stray impertinent props incited a rage in him he was barely able to contain until the end of the performance, when he briskly strode backstage determined to throttle her. Ammon was a menacing alpha hippo when provoked. After barging into several rooms offstage, performers and stage hands warily questioning his presence, he found her in a wardrobe room examining a ritzy ball gown. At first she seemed merely annoyed that a roisterous fan could gain access to her. She called out just as Ammon lunged at her, tearing the cotton wrap she wore, revealing a form stunning in its flawless doeskin, the pert breasts each a peerless dove-like Upcher Ammandoux. It was this revelation that momentarily distracted him, such that she managed to seize a hair or hat pin and wildly stab him — in one eye as it turned out. The slender fountain of blood that issued forth was incredulously witnessed by his one intact eye, at least for a moment or two; soon he could see very little.

The ensuing pain itself, including some manhandling by the club's bouncers, was not cathartic. His stolid excuse of 'devotion' — he went to give the siren a tract of some Hadith-based precepts for guilt-laden infidels, which prompted the angry crusader reaction! — just managed to stymie the congregating bobbies and goad a detective inspector to consider charging the dancer with aggravated assault, though by then the girl had vanished. Ammon's admittance to an emergency ward was a further trial as his Egyptian identity was sorted out and a temporary NHS Alliance card issued. But he was soon taken in hand by some Sunni clerics who happened to be attending an educational conference in East London. The hospital was relieved to engage their auspices for the care of a foreigner. Much later, at the hearing before his Mosque's Shurā Council, Ammon's plea of a devotional pilgrimage gone awry proved somewhat underwhelming. The scowls on the faces of the council members seemed unanimous. A Muslim Brother now identified as the patron of an Iblis den under a false name in an attempt to redeem a pert cabaret dancer, did not enhance his credentials as a dedicated worshipper. 'Cyclops' indeed! The word one critic invoked.

That same week a charter rights group filed a complaint about police laxity with the British Institute of Human Rights. A human rights group also worked to see if the club fomented ethnic antipathy. A women's center smartly vilified such clubs as egregious affronts to all women.

FOUR

Hejaz Naseem faintly smiled, exhibiting an amused expression rare and inimitable for a vigilante like him. Despite his American college education, or perhaps because of it, Hejaz seemed at times the very nemesis of levity or even solicitude. A toothsome irony, which in part prompted the notable smile, was that Aram Mir, one of their cell's late tacticians, was that very minute marching alongside the robed Shriners in the Pacific National Exhibition opening parade in Vancouver, Canada, wearing one of his many clown guises. Hejaz had just received Aram's e-mail. 'Marching with the Keepers of the Mystic Shrine.' Aram said he enjoyed consorting with posh potentates. Indeed, Aram wore so many hats, as they say in the West, that he seemed at times the Genie of a reconstituted Aladdin. The mindful jihadi had been the prompter and animus of their new tack: "Target what many Americans also loathe: such Americans are our latent exploitable constituency! Our waiting 'reserves'! Life for many in the U.S. will only become more impecunious and exacting in the coming months and years. The selfless, purifying tenets of Jihad will take on a new 'relevance' — a word they like. Also, less noise for us up front, less outlay when you attack the exploitive enterprise of an Iblis. Particularly when you create a right-awful stink. Most humans retain an acute sense of smell!"

And, Hejaz calmly reflected...they had just begun. He knew Aram had problems with the cell's tacticians over a Russian oligarch he'd cannily befriended, but was sufficiently adroit to play wild cards now and then. He wished Aram well. The savvy jihadi had said, more than once, that "unlike animals, humans are hard to tame." And, apropos, the Russian — "He knows apes and peacocks we *can* tame."

Aram's words themselves often diverted, shrewdly counselled. The sheikh's begrudged approval itself was an entreaty to the spirit of Sunnah — the wider meaning of Muhammad's words, habits, practices and tacit approvals! If Aram was riding a rather windy camel, he was riding it well nonetheless.

Thus, on this relatively calm day as Hejaz sat playing an ancient board game with stolid Abdul in a draughty office in Agami, outside Alexandria, handily vented by a tanker truck with failing brakes, his lingering amusement, as we've noted, was a welcome novelty. Aram's clown caper, plus the stink bombing of Glow Worm Films, the Behr Brue Club, the abortion clinic and Nixit — all contributed to the lurking hilarity. But now, a further but unrelated diversion — baby food. Baby food! The subject resurfaced as Hejaz waited out woolgathering Abdul. Catherine Whyte, an American Broadcast Network journalist honoured in OO Magazine, had just outed a baby food scam in Europe, its formula substandard nutritionally. Baby food. The Western readers of OO Magazine might be alarmed by substandard baby food. From the turmoiled Russian Federation as it turned out! No mention of babies starving world wide, parentless children, forsaken kids generally — or, for that matter, affluent children stuffing themselves with bad food, eating their way to an early grave. No, deficient baby food was front and centre that month. The other world atrocities vigilant Hejaz was attuned to, were on a back burner at OO that day, though his list was long and growing, his enumeration of a dirge that might invoke some venerable tenets in the Hadith, becoming as it were so self-evident to the mindful. Aligned with wily Aram, Hejaz had some talent as a scold. That very week he recorded the fiery rant of an American internet fulminator, whose caustic words served as an ongoing indictment of the West's newly woke politicians — a diatribe Aram used in the recruitment drive for their cell's soldiers, Joseph Sall being an inaugural special operative. The fulminator's words identified the schism they must play to.

"I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, this country is in trouble. Our government and too many of its media mavens are now vehement blame gamers. 'Freedom of expression', so called, is sanctioned only to vilifiers of traditional Western culture. A war against history is in high gear. Most good fortune, even achievement, in the woke perspective, is a fluke of happenstance, and hence, undeserved."

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

"Such gamers tend to slight our growing debt, welfare dependency, ghetto wars, moldering infrastructure, scandal steeped media, many mediocre teachers and credulous Marxist professors, obtuse parents and their infant beauty pageants; our exponentially growing drug culture, recreational and medicinal, mischievous and insular computer hackers and proliferating scammers, texting hopheads, and the growing hoards of expectant codgers. Also, and I regret the list is so bloody long — relentless fomenting advertising, exponential pollution, serial videos that feature all manner of mayhem. Those TV serials showcasing vivid ghastliness and unabashed nudity, are now routine, thus inviting the next round of producers to fashion even more stunning grotesqueries with more plausible sex to retain an increasingly jaded audience." Hejaz might add — in the Russian bailiwick of the

aforementioned Whyte — the deft ransacking of industrial cities to squirrel away an obscene fortune, assuring the criminalization of the new élite, thus strengthening many wayward cartels, prompting the agile lobbying of many governments, businesses, NGOs, even the sometime gelding of the UN. And yet — substandard baby food might upstage them all this month. A reminder for Hejaz that many Western women regarded child-bearing as a millstone, as they dissed pro-life advocates and screamed profanities at men — when women in several third world countries could be brutally beaten if not executed on the spot for far less. Many women in the Middle East and some African countries have had their children torn from them, their bodies expunged of sexual pleasure, while vengeful Western women wearing vagina costumes with nice, clean clothes underneath, drinking clean, bottled water, with a stomach full of food, exclaim how singularly adverse their lives are.

As we've noted, Hejaz was attuned to Western castigators, who tended to upstage scrutiny of endemic corruption and dissolution in non-Western countries.

He now came again close to smiling. The cover of OO Magazine, his latest successful 'mootard' to visualize and encapsulate Western fetishes, put its heroes on its covers and there, this week, the pretty face of a youngster barely out of a training bra who had — one must not be diffident here — ably and courageously fingered crime boss Boris Ivanovich Borozov, known as 'Bossy', half brother to the more elusive and enigmatic 'Kissy', for selling adulterated, nutrition scant baby formula — 'inadvertently' Bossy's minders claimed. Poor inadvertent Bossy. Shorting even your children. As noted, Hejaz was often blind to depravity elsewhere — parenthetically the historic perfidy and vendetta that spawned it. In his preoccupied regard of the West he sensed dupery in the Zeitgeist, the longstanding infatuation with progress and its heady believability. The panacea of plenary entitlement. The early Greeks once championed a diamond hard sense of elegance — Nothing in Excess. Now the credo seemed to read: Without Excess Nothing, or Nothing exceeds like Excess. Hejaz's hatred of mind sets archly progressive was a kind of vocation for him, a theist's dismay with voguish trends — such as the patronizing of ethnic diversity while touting social fusion, finding the energy to work only at things you are finally galvanized by, slighting discipline itself as a possible noxious concept, a right-wing hang up, exhorted exertion a corrosive force, psychosis one possible dividend. All febrile trials and scolds must go. The implicit Western feminist creed that had, in abjuring most men, made reproduction for women a newly heroic effort! Thus: the importance of baby food. Safe, affordable, ever nourishing, not a wily fish bone in the lot. The belief in a secular Utopia was spawned in the West, which, in all its glib presumption and peremptory smugness, could daunt the entire planet; of this alone Hejaz felt certain, as a hot cindery wind dusted the air about the game board Abdul was setting out, and gave to gritting one's teeth a baleful effort. The picture of the journalist, the youngster who had braved spying on the Russian kleptocrats, her accomplishment there, however modest in the scheme of things, considerable and unfeigned, reminded him that past European mores and folkways were now effete, godless, even under retributive review. Often, like today, as he regarded the lovely, faintly amused face

on the cover of OO Magazine, he sensed an urgency that took his breath away. He looked up. Abdul was showing signs of impatience. “You playing?” Abdul spoke in English for he knew that Hejaz, like Aram, poorly understood Arabic. Another of our burdens the sheikh said, in a moment of pique.

“Yes. I’m playing.” Hejaz picked up a large grain of sand off the game board with his thumb and forefinger. “With a grain of sand.” He and Abdul often talked in riddles.

Abdul smiled. “I see an orchard with many fresh water pools — an early paradise.”

“A paradise the Egyptian Amarna court once dreamt of.” They had worked for a time with an archaeological team at the special site.

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

Again Hejaz dryly smiled. Numbers seemed part of the problem.

The news of the stink bombings reached Catherine Whyte, the newly celebrated journalist at the American Broadcast Network, while on a brief visit to North-West Washington to see her mother and take in the PNE parade across the border. The story was still vivid in her mind as she took in the PNE parade floats, the carnival atmosphere a fitting distraction she thought. At first. It was the Shriner marchers who incited a rare, novel wonder. Western butter and egg men dressed up to resemble Ikhwan or Saudi potentates struck her as finely droll. The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine — at home in the land of the Great Satan — now marching by a Big & Tall Shop, escorted by various clowns. But she had more than fustian pantaloons to contend with these days. Her expulsion from the Commonwealth of Independent States, now the Russian Federation, despite her current celebrity (her face on the cover of OO Magazine) had turned into a dull charade. She lived then in a professional limbo, her work in Russia suspended for a time for her own safety, the assignment from her new boss, a former stolid bureaucrat from the U.N. — Darin the Deplorable, she named him — still in escrow. That she might end up toiling in the West for a Western ‘apparatchik’ was a fine irony. Later that day she would read about the ‘Apsara Hat Pin Attacker’, whose media-filed picture intimated a canny resemblance to herself! More ‘fake news’ she wondered?

Ammon Farouk sat on a sectional sofa just off the trellised, colourful, flower-filled terrace of his large apartment in the Zamalek district of Cairo near the Qasr al-Nil Bridge. The sprightly flora was the soulful work of his wife Atiyaah who loved and got many of her decorating ideas from slick Western magazines. One of these, OO Magazine, he had casually fetched from a coffee table that day — a slick showy magazine that should have been left in the women’s quarter! Seeing the cover had turned his usual expressionless, corpulent face to granite, the patch hiding his injury shifting its alignment. For a brief moment the notion of a clone scored his reasoning.

He smacked his head and looked again. Yes, the same bloody infidel hell whore! The face would not escape recognition — so uncannily like the very accursed one who had cost him his eye. But how

could that be? This child-woman was not a cabaret dancer, precious gem smuggler holed up in London's East end, so his minders concluded — but an ABN journalist out of Los Angeles working the year last in the St. Petersburg and Moscow environs. Catherine Algaea Whyte, an apparently sturdy reporter at ABN, now with the reputation of both an Ar-Rakīb (The Watchful) and an Al-Hasīb (The Reckoner). As the heady moment tarried, he decided the world was full of doubles. Satanic doubles. Yes. The only explanation. His disgust with himself and Western glamorizing of carnality — The Great Shayt'ān at His Most Ingeniously Heinous (one Nour Party publicist had chosen the words well) — would only be expiated by cutting off the head of the foul Apsara club tormentor, this hopped up houri. Would that he never had been lured into the swank clubs she performed in...he had never purged the vagrant, capricious lasciviousness that shackled desire with enduring shame. His anger with himself and the furor she incited performing with a prized sword, on what looked like a larger version of his very own Senneh Kilim rug! caused him to storm backstage to throttle her. Except that God had questioned his timing. More or less. And now a tony face so like this infidel mutilator smiled back at him in rich glossy colour on the OO cover! Well, the other jinn, The Devi Who Embodies Earthly Gifts — from a raffish marquee at the London Apsara club — would not likely dance there again. Pity. He looked again at the magazine cover and once more fielded the suspicion that they must be related, his hatred almost a balm then.

For John Mayo (no connection to the clinic he always said up front) the cover of OO Magazine also stirred a timely review — as had the stink bombing of Glow Worm, Behr Brue, the abortion clinic and Nixit earlier that week. Sadly, many people, East and West, were committed to rescinding the frequent tedium and drudgery of earthly life by binging on venomous hatred and sensational assault — savouring the inimitable élan of the witch trial, the heady smell of naked burning flesh. Burn, burn anyone doubting the wisdom of the devoutly pissed off!

Well, it did seem so some days, stink bombs being a welcome if unexpected deviation.

The Washington Post, which John read on his daily ferry ride to Manhattan, headlined both stories of the ABN reporter and the 'bombings'. (Spare details of the Apsara attack would spike a late edition.) He had long been a sorry witness to the West's slow decline, lamenting its sullied promise and late maniacal vilifiers. An emerging aberrant clique of Neo-fascists seemed a telling symptom. But the dissolution was too far advanced, he feared. Too few beloved, well tended babies, for one. Even the West's IQ some believed to be slipping. The Soviet Russian failure was perhaps no longer a blessing. Thus, this young journalist's venture into the kleptocrat cauldron — as audacious and gamey in its way as the recent stink bombings — was both remarkable and puzzling. How indeed had she done it and got out? There seemed more to the story than the article disclosed. He smiled. The spirit of vengeance was italicized by the Sunni Da'ish, the 'True Believers', who began blowing up the Middle East, also locales in the intrusive Western world, in part due to *imposed* rulers like Nouri al-

Maliki in Iraq. No stooges would run things for them. The Glow Worm attack he first thought an oddity, a jape even, some college kids having a go, indulging another smart-ass joke. But Behr Brue et cetera suggested a more puristic resolution. Indeed, John Mayo sometimes wondered if he and some Islamic purists, given aspects of their keen repudiation of the impetuous, self-indulgent West, were fraternal twins, outriggers on the same boat. It seemed the world was coming apart, again, anarchy re-emerging, which usually spawned or consolidated more sets of livid factions and incendiary radicals. A friend of his once remarked while viewing his home library, "John, I trust that Robert Michels' book *Political Parties* remains a Mayo staple." "Most days," John replied. "An early seer, Michels," the friend additionally noted, "oligarchy being one of democracy's deformations, today's corporatocracy with its government shills, an example." When together the two men often discussed the West's malaise, specifically the arena where spectacle and the media join hands. Most recently a fond discussion took place in the amply liquored, wood-panelled Morton Steak House on Fifth Avenue. They had just returned from a golf holiday at the Montouk Downs State Park Golf Course in Suffolk County and were willing to do a bit of compensatory exclaiming. His friend had begun with a practiced snuffle, in a voice intended to be overheard beyond the margin, perhaps in an attempt to see if Republicans were still welcome in this venue.

"Many writers and scenarists in today's entertainment industry are having a field day, so help me, creating cultural and psychological mayhem, all in high definition. Is it not ordained, this irresistible shambles — the prurient allure of vividly staged menace, aberration, assault, the lascivious vying with the brutal?" He then directed his remarks to an older couple seated nearby. "It's hard to look away isn't it? Even news casters relish sensational behaviour, the bathetic sometimes hosting the obscene. They know their restive audience. Pandering to vendetta garners vindictive viewers — a reliable if not growing audience." He turned to another somewhat younger couple. "Many of the day's apocalyptic video games are available to youngsters. The games' authors stumble over themselves to visually vivify the ferment, sometimes with a sentimental quest or two to perfume the carnage...a heavy rock beat often egging on the turmoil." The couple complaisantly smiled. Fluently John added, conscious of a few turned faces, "Well, the programs you speak of are spoors of several new, unprecedentedly cruel and salacious TV series, the 'naughty bits' nearly whole 'entireties' in some cases. Let's face it, provocative graphic calamity may be a sop for the abandoned — in both senses — male youngster, and ready excuse for the disillusioned, accusatory female. Moreover, sensual binging itself is now a pro forma entitlement. An internet staple." He looked about at some newly tuned-in faces in the room and smiled. "Just for instance — one of the lapsed mores — boys can now enjoy the prettiest teens on the planet — visually, or even with life-size, hyper-realistic, talking dolls — without the slightest exertion; an onanism that mocks the historic quest. There's even talk of marrying such surrogates. What's expected when no one's expecting — to freely quote the unromantic Jonathan Last." By then some nearby diners were intermittently listening, one older, well-dressed, solo chap joining in with

some litanies of his own.

But that exchange subsided this day as John rode into a sun etched Manhattan on the ferry, the missing towers a reminder and entreaty, his focus then the topical matter that month for the OO editors: substandard baby food. The heyday of the business buccaneer. The avid foiling and subversion of stolid prosaic culture. So he believed this day more than ever. The Statue of Liberty passed by him on the island ferry. Such a statue with an ironic message — welcoming those who seek comfort if not license and the new dogmatism that, in effect, marginalized stolid whites — the new ‘deplorables’. He liked the idea, and penned a sketch on the margin of his crossword. Then he had another idea which he liked even better, and penned that beside the first.

FIVE

Zoya Belova Stolbanov, the show lounge dancer who ably defended herself from a crazed gent after a performance in the London Apsara, sat in a sunny room in a suburb of Bern that overlooked a market where an onion festival was underway, the annual Zibelemärit. She still could barely believe her providential arrival here. Lively children played about some stalls throwing small vegetables at one another, the occasional adult grabbing one by the elbow and shunting him off to a citizen volunteer. The charming medieval look of the square gave a storybook atmosphere to this her latest pied-à-terre, so different from her noisy messy Crodon hotel room in London...where a dream had foundered. In her page boy wig and little makeup she imagined she looked like the Little Snow Girl or perhaps a dewy admirer of the Stone Flower, two Slavic folk tales she especially liked. It had been a busy week — astonishing in that the medics at the Bern Clinic should be her current rescuers, indeed, in their way, her co-conspirators! One in particular who arranged for her to flee London — even provide her with a Norwegian Schengen Area visa ID which dubbed her: Lisa Galina Christiansen. Lisa, rather Liisa, had been her mother’s Finish Christian name! Providence. The troubled mother who insisted Zoya learn English, believing her daughter might one day work as an a-political tour guide. Ha! Her child’s exceptional talent as a dancer Liisa never really fathomed.

As she watched the lively children, Zoya recalled her own early years, when the doctor who later attended her mother from time to time, also gave her a thorough once over. His name: Dr. Felix Muerner. If she ever wondered about professionally disguised abuse, the utilitarian nature of the tests and the doctor’s kind thoughtful manner in conducting the examinations, addled suspicion. She could not remember much of the early details, but knew that Muerner retained some kind of vested interest in her general health if not her wellbeing. Something to do with the drugs her dissident mother had been given before she got pregnant. Despite her deteriorating condition, Liisa kept the sorry details to herself. The lurking imputation, which Zoya learned about in due course, was that some of the drugs might also affect the offspring. Had she not been singled out, taken in hand by Muerner’s team, she might have ended as a ward of the overseers who had caged her distraught dissident mother. So she

believed, though the whys and wherefores remained illusive. It was the amicable Dr. Petrus who greeted her on her most recent arrival at Muerner's Bern Clinic. He invited her to join him in the cafeteria the morning following her arrival. That meeting would be remembered with wondrous vividness, such that she often mused over the gist of the conversation, his language then an attestation.

After they selected their breakfast fare, he forthrightly steered her to a table for two in a corner. If she wouldn't remember the specific words, the recollection of his measured voice reclaimed the mood as well as some particulars. He could not speak Russian, but in English they might communicate, though she had him repeat several phrases. He always carried a Russian phrase book with him when they met, almost, she mused, as a policeman might handle a note book.

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

"Now some details we should revisit. Most I'm sure you will be familiar with, others you may have slighted or forgotten. One being that Muerner eventually fled Russia and opened this clinic in Bern."

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

"The history of your courageous dissident mother is now fairly well known, and has been documented by some émigrés who have published memoirs. Her harsh treatment is a measure of the anxiety the party cadres had for her at the time. It was the aftermath of the Lysenko period remember, when all behaviour was still deemed malleable; with the right drugs and conditioning all would be well." Again the discursive smile.

"You know your half-sister Anastasia — 'Zia' — was selected for special education when you were still a child. Her whereabouts today remain unknown. We know she was eventually drafted by the Cheka, thus removing her from familial contact, for many Cheka agents work alone under assumed names. Your parents got a brief letter from 'Zia explaining her necessary 'estrangement', promising a happy homecoming in the future. Though such a reunion is uncommon. As you know, 'Zia's father, Liisa's first husband, was killed in Afghanistan. *Your* father Liisa married shortly after 'Zia's father's death. Well, just before getting pregnant with you, your mother Liisa — yes the same, a coincidence

by the way — was given some drugs that may have altered her enzymatic makeup including that of her unborn child — an early apprehension — twins as it turned out, one of whom died as a babe. Muerner certainly regretted the use of such drugs at the time, but was not in a position to curtail their use. As you must now know, he was one of several German medical researchers the Soviets dragooned after the war and worked for a for a time in the aftermath of the Lysenko heyday when select drugs were believed to be the ultimate permanent curatives, yes?”

This dated fact Zoya accepted as but another prompt in that morning’s edgy details. Use of the word ‘curatives’, which she had him explicate, also jolted. She faintly smiled. “Continue, yes.”

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

Zoya too adopted a durable smile as Petrus ventured on.

“It is still not known exactly what drugs the Soviet millenarians used on dissidents like your mother, but they were potent, and given to her about the time she learned she was pregnant. I can only say that your excellent health relieves most of our apprehensions. But we should continue to check you out for some while to come. We would be negligent if we didn’t. We will always be interested in your well being, and the clinic always available for assistance, questions and consultations. You will see one of our excellent surgeons later today I understand — to suggest changes that will give you a new altered face. Every bit as pretty I trust. We have an excellent team that evaluates most of the clinic’s proposed cosmetic interventions. I do understand your desire and need — to lose Ammon’s vengeance seekers. Yes. We’ll help too with a new comprehensive ID.”

Zoya adopted a residual smile. The words had not eased her anxiety about the early career of Felix Muerner nor what his exact role in the treatment of her mother and herself may have been. Still, she was willing to let the explanation stand for now; you don’t shoot the messenger. Very early on she knew all too well that her mother — following ‘Zia’s father’s death — had been a problem for several Soviet authorities who were, most of them, *real* storybook ogres. She did remember Felix Muerner, the German medic the Soviets supposedly recruited after the Great Patriotic War, but believed an associate was the one who actually monitored her mother and herself as a toddler. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Muerner opened the clinic in Bern, from whence the later examiners came, the one doctor, Nils Petrus, becoming a kind of father figure for her, in that he was a mindful raconteur in explaining things. Briefly the world seemed less discordant in his presence. Indeed, she had looked forward to their private semi-annual and then yearly sessions when he examined her, the physical aspect devolving over time to mainly verbal inquiries. By then she was too

familiar with mind sets that propositioned, molested, abused, and had no anxiety about Dr. Petrus. When she fled the London Apsara after the assault, her first phone call was to Muerner's Bern clinic. Dr. Petrus was not available, but the receptionist knew immediately who she was and put her through to Eve Kielice, Muerner's long time parter and associate who, after a brief muted discussion with another party, told her to be on a street corner near the Green Park Hotel later that night. It was all richly surreal at the time. Indeed, she almost didn't go. Yet a dark Mercedes arrived at the appointed hour and she was hustled into the back seat and covered with a raincoat. A Mr. Weyker, a large menacing man, sat beside her and told her to keep her head hidden. They arrived minutes later at a Thames boat club and boarded a sizeable yacht. That evening they crossed the channel, to anchor before a small village. A second Mercedes materialized on a quay and drove to Lille where she was put on a train to Bern with a wig, dark glasses and interim identity papers using a picture from her last school portrait. If she was anxious and disoriented at the time, the composed, coolheaded Mr. Weyker proved to be another Petrus, despite his size and bearing, and she felt, again, that if Providence had given her the hat pin, such fortune remained as caring and mindful now. In Bern she met with the engaging Dr. Petrus who explained that no one there believed the initial story of a two hundred kilogram Muslim being attacked by a slight ballet and show lounge dancer. She also relearned that the state of her health remained a priority for the clinic, given that her mother was a late casualty of the potent drugs the Soviets used over time to help fashion exemplary citizens...though in the end it seemed robots would do. Hence was she welcomed to stay in Bern for a time as a clinic's out-patient under her new name, which bestowed, reinstated her mother's Christian name. Her fairytale escape had thus far not disappointed.

Welcome to the Bernese Oberland!

Belatedly she deduced, from the media poop and a couple of samizdat street folk she kept in touch with, that the manager of the London Apsara had broadcast her disappearance, hoping to discourage any revenge minded jihadis from seeking her out at the London club. He likely forwarded a note to the club's casting director in Moscow warning him that 'Devi' would no longer be welcome in London. Luckily, neither he nor the Moscow director knew where she was after she fled the club; hence they alone dealt with the newly animated stringers who were haranguing the club employees and London police to find the tabloids' 'intrepid assailant'. The club would be under a cloud for some time, as would the chain's managers in Moscow. Once before, when she was deemed an awkward asset — when she tried to suborn a too conscientious Apsara program director — some cheery wag suggested she seek work with Lavrenti Ganyanov.

Ganyanov had a reputation as a racy pornographer. He *had* photographed her years ago before figure photography graduated to shaved labia and clinical minora. Then he posed her as a Fifth Century Greek sculptor might have, upright, nude, abstracted. She was just twelve. A 'kore' he called her. Given her Muslim avengers at large, the thought of looking up such an avid porn merchant *now*

induced a spate of impulsive giggling. Prompting her to recall her last performances in Moscow, finely balletic despite the intervening burlesque, which had garnered standing ovations: Russians still had a fondness for unforsaken talent. As poignantly mindful was her late liaison with Yuri, a pro-curator's investigator, who was instrumental in jailing a colleague of the Moscow manager, which only certified her as a 'lasting liability'. Her liaison with handsome companionable Yuri was thus forsaken, abandoned — one of the dour exigencies. It was a trying disruptive period. Many vexed nationals, particularly Chechnyan patriots, remained an ongoing scourge in Russia, though some vexed critics accused the FSB of planning some outrages itself in order to lionize and advance its new champion, Vladimir Putin. She had some diamonds and two small ikons she never told Yuri about, and believed they would be enough to give her a few months start, if she remained invisible. A friend had performed in the new Los Angeles Bellerophon Club and Zoya dreamt of arriving there in a crate of caviar! More than ever she was determined to find a home in 'Tony America'. Preferably with a new face, as well as a new name. She'd met a surgeon at the clinic who would undertake the work, and she had diamonds enough for a payment were that necessary. In the end her desperate belated decision to call the clinic directly kept her hope alive, and may have saved her life.

Again she picked up the copy of the OO Magazine she'd taken that morning from the apartment's tidy library, and once more looked at the cover with a mixture of wonder and amusement. We all have doubles she told herself. As had the reassuring Dr. Petrus. Though the similarity here was startling. The attack had ushered in a realignment of her life and fortune. But for the Apsara's director's whim to add the sword and magic carpet in one part of her act — props that prompted the attack she later learned — she might still be captivating audiences there "Timeless storybook artifacts," he jovially called them. He had added: "Imagine: our Apsara ravishingly alive on a magic carpet; how you muse the fable spinners." So said the wily director, who cultivated 'Cyrenaic prowess', as he snootily put it. She had him write down those precious words for her. Bidding on the costume itself, an ancient temple girdle and elegant crown, was an Apsara tradition and, on the night before the attack, fetched a four figure sum that was pledged to a senior's shelter..

She was convinced an attentive Providence had placed the long hat pin in her hand that awful day. She had been in the wardrobe room examining a Nineteenth Century masked ball costume — for a program then in rehearsal — when the attacker arrived, whom she first imagined a too exuberant member of the audience! As she looked at the surprising OO cover, she felt the time was ripe for a tectonic change, a realignment of her prospects. Yes, a heedful Providence had given her the weapon — the only explanation — a Providence she now felt would not abandon her in her determination to forge a new life; to once and for all dump the chic swines and earnest cons and their Cheka 'irregulars', who sometimes threatened to rough her up when she elected to act out — do something assertive and original! The procurator's investigator had saved her from a mauling a couple of times, and she liked the man, but he too must be ditched in her new life. Only with a new identity and domicile might she

avoid the goons who must now be sleuthing to find her. Providence again would decide. Petrus agreed that the clinic performed wonders in changing human faces and bodies. And that if she was determined...his doubt was momentary. Promptly she had declared, “Put that in record please: ‘Determined!’” Petrus fondly recalled a bit of Pushkin then, followed by his trademark wink. “*Love, hear my plea/ Hark to my prayer/ Send back to me/ Your visions fair.* Pushkin would be sympathetic,” he said, “even with my mediocre rendering.” Once more she inspected the wig that would be a strategic prop until her transformation was complete. The coming out of a new identity! A new viable human being. She looked again at the growing milling crowd about the square’s market stalls. A tear came to her eye. They use onions to induce tears. For an actor, not a fugitive — a thought that came to her as the too-familiar face on the OO cover once more smiled up at her.

Dr. Petrus spoke with Gervase Maistre, Muerner’s clinic secretary, the same day he conferred with Zoya. Gervase’s office outlooked one end of the clinic’s trail garden. The velvety texture of the mosses on the rocks set along the stream to the goldfish pond, seemed to match Gervase’s early needlepoint chairs and the Damaskand moiré window sheers — one of Petrus’ private, fond observations.

They greeted one another with polite inquiries about their health. Gervase’s standard response — ‘Pretty rotten’ — Petrus accepted as a kind of moniker. The opening question Gervase repeated aloud with emphasis: “‘Should Zoya be told the full story?’” Hmm. One of the conundrums. Muerner believes the time is not yet opportune. He still worries that those who helped him with the covert removal of Zoya’s twin, Masha Kusnetsova — our special Catherine Whyte — could be harmed if the knowledge got out; two of those facilitators, as you know, are alive still. Masha’s grave might be re-examined for one. Zoya miraculously survived the meningitis she contracted as a babe — the cause given for the demise of Masha — who, as you know, became part of a carefully selected American family to facilitate Muerner’s ‘homey’ requirement for his double-blind study of the health of the two, environment being an intervening variable to assess the effect the drugs the mother was given on the offspring. Unlike Zoya, who has always been overtly assessed, the surveillance of Catherine has been done secretly to insure the double-blind integrity of the study. The examination of Catherine has been bicameral: one done by stealth at select intervals with the subject asleep; the other by secretly copying her own doctor’s records — to accommodate Muerner’s comparative health evaluation: Catherine growing up in a more or less decent orderly community, unaware of her real origin, Zoya stuck in an often unsavoury chaotic environment. Either girl learning of a live, identical twin sister, would negate a double-blind study, and likely endanger those who helped with the removal and placement of Masha (Catherine), whose exceptional loving mother has been devoted to Catherine. The testing is almost complete. And now with the specter of Farouk the Terrible, it is imperative we protect both girls. Had Muerner attempted to remove Zoya as well, he could have alerted clinic watchdogs, his hospital role

been re-examined and likely curtailed, and his comparative study never undertaken. Sounds callous I know, but it was a vexatious period. Leaving both twins in the saturnine Soviet world Muerner balked at. Hence his judicious ‘experiment’.”

A brief silence ensued, which a solicitous Petrus rent with a digression. “If she proceeds, Zoya will have a new face when she meets her twin.”

“They will of course meet one day. A day we must anticipate.”

“Yes, one of the givens.”

“In due course Muerner will disclose the details to both girls, likely using someone like Kissy Borozov as a conduit — the versatile Kissy.” Both men shared an in-house smile. “Aram may be involved by then — or Hārun, as he’s known to a select cadre over here.”

“That would add a nuance or two.”

“The sisters may even reconnect with Anastasia by then. Possible.” Again both men smiled, less readily perhaps.

Catherine Whyte’s last social evening at the America Embassy in Moscow had been a curious mixture of nostalgia and sobriety. She was congratulated on her work in Russia and told she would be missed in the months to come. No one mentioned the fact that the Russian Federation had in effect kicked her out — revoked her work visa. Thus, a last minute invitation to attend a party at the Moscow Apsara, one of the Borozovs’ chain of private clubs, sorely beguiled. A handsome buff chap who presented himself as an Intourist Director wished to escort her. “You need, I think, a long night out. Too much *tyazhelaya rabota*.” The phrase meant ‘hard work’ in her lexicon. She guessed him to be an FSB sitter, which his self-absorbed manners and smart attire suggested. Several members of the embassy staff were also going — her diplomatic sentinels — and encouraged her to join the party, the type of entertainment she had shunned during her stay. “The club is the very best in Moscow — and features some very pretty boys and girls.” The tale of the assault in London by a vexed Muslim was then making the rounds. The dancer — whose face resembled hers and was the object of the attack — no longer performed there or in St. Petersburg, her last stage in Russia. The show was sensational Catherine was assured, and invitations scarce. “Russia breeds fine dancers like rabbits and most need work. You won’t see the place again for some time. And you likely won’t have consular cover then.”

In one washroom of the Moscow club the import of her current situation hit home as she studied herself in the mirror: she was actually leaving — had to leave — a country she had endured a love-hate relation with for nearly five years. It was then she noted what could be a blood stain on the worn tile floor. So. Another reckoning in this awesome Land of Long Nights, in Colin Thubron’s fine words. The carmine stain recalled for her the ugly contretemps between the crazed Muslim and the Apsara dancer in London, making her think of her own problematic departure from the troubled country that bred the likes of Stalin and Shostakovich — the dark tunnel with its candled light at the end.

From the few rumours, and a single somewhat grainy newsprint picture, she guessed she bore a remarkable resemblance to the fabled dancer, and would have liked to meet her — the performer who had so suddenly disappeared. Understandable, given the reputation she must now have among jihadi reckoners and her edgy managers.

So Catherine guessed, as she viewed the livid spot. Some stains have a long shelf life. This one she would remember.

SIX

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

“Catherine Whyte has a gamin even elfin quality that belies her focus, diligence and undoubted physical courage. Her expression often reflects a droll acceptance of her success, and her poise encapsulates a long-standing humor that must derive from her many assignments in the late, baneful Soviet Union, and the later, much troubled Russian Federation. Her ribbed beige sweater and plaid jumper reminded me of a prom gal on the last day of school. And ‘school’s out’ is just the mood she communicated, being slated and at last resigned to take an overdue vacation. We began our talk with the nub of her investigation — the careers of Bossy Borozov and his elusive brother Kissy.”

OO: What initially interested you in Bossy Borozov?

WHYTE: The remaking of a pariah.

OO: A former tycoon becoming what, an ideologue?

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

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

WHYTE: Empire yes. Nearly four billion in just under five years.

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

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

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

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

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

WHYTE: And from all accounts having a ball.

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

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

OO: An obsessive human, then.

WHYTE: No, he's a creature, clever and assured. Like his brother, I doubt his humanity gets in the way at all.

OO: Do you see a windfall in the disintegration of the Soviet regime?

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

OO: The story is not over then.

WHYTE: Hardly. History is the unending drama.

OO: Perhaps it's in our genes.

WHYTE: Perhaps.

OO: Thank you so very much.

The return to her beloved America was a seemly change from life lived under the current kleptomaniac tovariches and their retainers at Gazprom and Rosnett. The gangs of thugs serving the many new dons made life for the hoi polloi every bit as exiguous as before, if perhaps more luridly sensational, in that the sudden chaotic settling of scores was more dramatically and often publicly enacted, bystanders as vulnerable as the select target of the hour. With the passing of the Gorbachev interim, Russian genes were still being purged with much hauteur and haste. Or so it seemed — the collateral damage being more inescapably obvious in the wake of glasnost and perestroika, and the connived at selectiveness of the police in investigating state crime. The Fates since The Fall were particularly noisome in Mother Russia, in Holy Rodina. Moreover, Catherine was tired of the sermons her conscience served up for her. By fingering one manic brass cat she had barely cautioned the others, the proliferating others, likely making their craft more enduring as they perfected their scams, grand larcenies, threats and canny assaults. Her new public persona — celebrity being both a crimped and exposed condition — barred her from further pursuit of such tycoons in the fledgling Russian Federation, and might even reduce her to a stateside job at ABN (American Broadcast Network) the remainder of her career. Her editor at ABN was a cozy realist: "Bossy has some pending charges, it's true. I wouldn't go back though." Catherine also knew that the expulsion likely wouldn't hold up in court, but contending it brought its own protracted dangers. Holy Rodina must await her return.

But that was that...and over there. With considerable sadness, she thought of the district environs (beyond the main Russian cities) she'd left behind, districts too often chilly, forlorn, ugly and alien. Her

well habituated caution was a curiosity in luck fraught America, this providential historic experiment, this permissive nation with comparatively little festering history. No sustained pogroms or wholesale murder of an upper class. Not yet anyway. So. A land she loved now harbouring a vixen. Not easy being a stray tiger, especially a pretty tiger; a rare endangered species.

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

She told no one that she planned to visit first the West Coast, except her sainted mother, who she would see in due course — wanting time to settle in on her own, free of media scroungers and nosy acquaintances. Even Michael, her on-off boyfriend in San Diego, she kept in the dark. She sensed he had a new friend — hardly surprising given her repeated absences — and didn't want to be embarrassed. She would touch base with him in due course. She had been friendly with an ABN copy writer in Europe who turned out to be an avid believer in the paranormal — an 'influence' she didn't need in her ongoing assignment. His late invitation to a camping holiday in Kefalonia she turned down. She saw no future in an 'occult' relationship. She also resented having had to be so brusque to get him to lay off. In Russia itself she lived a celibate existence. The romantic snares there were too few and too hazardous. Hence her renewed wonder at romantic life here, the distractions so many, varied and, in their way illusory, the casualness itself a fine tease. Careful reconnoitring first seemed a waste of time in this rush for life. Particularly after a protracted absence.

Thus, in lieu of the usual or anticipated reunions, revisitations, chirpy parties, she took an excursion to Anacortes and the San Juans, passing through Eastsound to find a B & B near Friday Harbor — a sojourn as much to re-confirm the area's near Mediterranean climate. She knew the locale from her college days, but never felt a need for a secular baptism in a treasured spot — a sudden urge to wash away the care, anxiety and official rectitude of her Russian juggernaut. If the beach area she sought did not accommodate a nudie haunt in her earlier visits there, the change was a reminder that freedom and leisure were not incompatible and might be enjoyed by a country's select minorities...she smiled, her patronage of her especial America was on a roll. A muscular brute stood on the pristine sandy shore like a Colossus, testing what looked like a sextant. A pretty red-headed girl sat on a log nearby reading a book, some partiers lolled about a camp fire further down. Soon

Catherine was waist high in that day's gentle swells to affect the baptism she felt entitled to, an act she would never have entertained in Russia. The thought itself brought a rictus smile. When she first waded in, the Adonis sauntered by and grinned. Compared to the full bodied book girl she must resemble a Belsen inmate she thought. He continued on with the gait of the wantonly self-assured, only once glancing back when she impulsively removed her suit near the water's edge. He was about as physically robust as they come, but again nowhere on her radar, his presence much too close to the ape thugs surrounding the Borozovs. What Catherine belatedly noticed was an ageless man who stood near a distant boulder, scanning the horizon as if searching for a particular ship, the bathers, it seemed, immaterial to his quest. His dress was nondescript, what you might expect of a working stiff on his day off, unlike his classic Persian profile. A profile that reminded her of her seat mate on the plane.

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

Kalid had been a fisherman and taken a young Israr with him on many trips throughout the ancient waters of the Mediterranean. The waterfront Israr may have frequented here — deduced from his few but dutifully detailed letters — turned out to harbour a nude bathing beach, a late discovery in Kalid's perusal of the breaking waves. He snorted. The irony was a bitter discovery. A slender pale woman who likely did not see him approached the water and suddenly removed her suit. He was almost certain it was the person who sat beside him on the plane. Light skinned, thin, small breasted. A jinn of desire and temptation. He now disliked her as much for his despondency as his anger. He was further vexed that she appeared to be a good swimmer and as pretty a youngster as he'd seen. Indeed, he realized she was the first such jinn he'd seen entirely in the flesh. Suddenly she dived into a snowy crested wave and disappeared, to emerge many yards further out, a bit of flotsam idling in a trough, except for her laughter, as carefree and buoyant as one might imagine. Once more, as of late, he had trouble breathing. Such a beautiful coastline, with such forsaken debris littering it.

Next on her solo re-communion with this Land of Nod, Catherine sought out the old haunts in the parkland she traipsed as a youngster just across the border in Vancouver, Canada, where she had a couple of times vacationed with her devoted mother. Wearing a dark wig and shades she booked into the Sylvia Hotel on English Bay — still not altered to accommodate the PC name wardens — using one of the alias identities she'd been assigned for the bolt hole passage her handler at ABN's foreign

desk had concocted. Her first day was perfection itself: a warming condolent summer sun, baby blue sky with meringue clouds, and a faint breeze rilling the lilac grey waters of the bay. She had considered more remote vistas in either Deep Cove or Whytecliff, but to confirm her escape she must touch down at the most nostalgic landscape of her past, in this case the interior of Tweedsmuir Park, now considered banal by some or, as the brahmins declare, gentrified. Such preciousness she easily slighted in her wish to recapture some of the early durable moments in the park, when fun and nature seemed indivisible and infinite. Thus, with small back pack and sporting an old pair of jeans and a sleeveless cotton cross wrap — attire she eschewed in Russia — her swim suit underneath, she headed out to the central lake area, at the last minute subtly adding to her facial makeup and leaving off the wig the better to savour the flirtatious breeze. She met several cordial folk on the main walkways and asked a couple of them to take pictures with her operative's camera. Rekindling a smile from the past she posed by several of her salad day haunts, including the barren crag near the old lighthouse. No one recognized her. A happenstance that helped foster a sense of release. One too earnest lad with a forearm tattooed in Celtic knots failed to pick her up.

Yet as she approached the interior, the starker memories from her Russian saga tailed her in the stark reflections of the Thetis Pond — in particular the images of a trialled largely forlorn people removed from a sorry earth, the too real faces she had seen slip beneath the patchy surface of daily tragedy. The memories especially of the crones in the provincial villages lingered as a burn. This unassailed beauty here, so impervious, so free, so readily abundant and accessible, seemed the very quintessence of tyranny, bequeathed to the campy denizens of the West Coast. The Land of the Immortals. She put her camera down and sat on a rock, near the fractured stump of a giant cedar, likely felled in an earlier windstorm, which now intimated a miniature keep or donjon laid to waste. For a time she had that scenic venue to herself.

And then, as if on a stray cue, one of her past schoolmates stood staring at her from a nearby tree trunk — an eye to eye discovery of a very old friend, practiced truant, faun, and talented painter — a high school chum nicknamed Pachis, who this day recalled for her a very special kind of goat as he nibbled, or pretended to, what appeared to be salvia or lady's slippers, reminding her he often sought to 'bemuse' — in the puzzling teasing sense. "Pachis?" He didn't answer, looking at her now as an attentive bird watcher — spying a bird on a wrong continent. Whereas his presence too was a galvanic shock. Gamey happenstance was as alien to her now as finding herself in such a locale with nothing to do! Coincidences were always suspect in her trade. Meeting such a one here revived her psyche's vigilance. Wiley Pachis could well be an area pry for a Cheka field operative!

As she skirted the fresh spring Thetis pond, he following, as if reviving their old silent take on 'I Spy', she thought the while of Kissy's odd pseudonym, Maenad. A quirky name. For Maenads were frenzied women of ancient Greek mythology as likely to spook and kill children as swack Satyrs or mangle animals, a simulacrum of the modern era, where dynamos come in many guises, and normally

docile sheep are nervous. The sheep here must be nervous with venturesome Pachis around. When the Hermes fountain came into view, she impulsively rolled up her jeans and waded into the pond, he following suit, suggesting he was as engaged as she imagined. They eyed one another with risible disbelief for several seconds when they stood finally a yard apart knee deep in the cool clear water. “My word,” she heard herself say aloud. “In the flesh.” Her rapt incredulity became a third presence. They had accidentally met years before in this very park, where they began a fond, sometimes racy liaison, that lapsed when she entered college.

“So. You’re here — again.”

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

“Is it possible you aren’t really here?”

“Most everything’s possible.”

“Would you tell me how accidental this is — for old times’ sake?”

“If fate is an accident.”

By then, despite her wariness, she held out for a providential coincidence; she was determined to stay the gremlins this day.

“You haven’t changed,” he said with a becoming smile.

“Nor you.”

“Seventeen, what, eighteen years?”

“But yesterday.”

If she had never backed away from a conundrum before, the confusion now bared a tipping point. Yet the recollection of a happier sensuous visits regaled the caution. Nostalgia feasts on happy memories. She was on holiday after all. And willing to do a bit of gambling. Gambolling if the Fates were distracted.

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

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

and pulled out the waistband of her briefs to squint at her mons.

“You’ve hardly changed — physically at least. Our first time you had what you have on. Underneath. Snuff-coloured.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, the snuff box.”

“Memory can be...patronizing.”

“Ho, ho. Said the timeless lady.”

As they wandered about in this pre-coital effulgence, he adorned her hair with a lily garland, and slid the soft fabric of her halter off one resilient breast. “The favoured of the two,” he said, surprising her. They were thigh deep in the main grotto of the lily pond then, noting how the place was redolent still of pine, juniper and lilac, volatile essences of remembrance. For a time the sun brightened the dewy trees as sunlit coral. She stubbed her toe on a stone and paused to soothe it. He set her camera on an adjacent rock and set the self timer.

“The hamadryad is watching,” he said.

“Lucky fellow.”

With a certainty and acuteness that was uncanny, they rediscovered the private kimono of grass they lay on nearly two decades ago. Finely memorable but much smaller, given the tree and shrub growth, the kimono now barely admitting two pliant bodies as he began as then, kissing, alertly exclusively caressing, her initial diffidence thus slowly beguiled. So, it was still possible she mused, as the desire kindled. Only later, after a brief repose, a ‘lucid stillness’ purloined from T.S. Eliot, did she notice some regnant lilies in the nearby pond bright with cardinal colour. Was her aging artist still a regular here, then? Recalling his landscape art only keened the question, for his presence was now a dour reminder of how she might be tailed even in this unfettered land — the sudden release of their former selves now a caution. How easy it would be to photograph one in this thick sheltered wilderness she sadly thought. She felt slightly sick, but managed a tight smile when he took and kissed her edgy hands. The quiet gesture was short lived, his next words a veritable fire siren. “I’ve recently got a grant from the Fischer-Bakey Foundation. Illustrations for a book called *Musing the Maenad*. Minoan Greece. Come to my studio. It’s in my pad in Yaletown.”

The Fischer-Bakey Foundation was one of Kissy’s art fronts which, in addition to several galleries and a coterie of artists, included period furniture and glass blowing factories, and, in the Apsaras, a spirited show lounge theatre. All in their way Trojan horses she believed. The means to ‘assuage’ the oligarchs and nomenklatura, keep possible suspicious meddlers at bay. Yet she decided she dare not reveal her knowledge of this. At least not yet. She faintly smiled. “A possibility,” she said. “*Musing the Maenad*?” “Yes, just so,” he said.

Kalid sat on the plane in a similar aisle seat. The window seat was occupied by a young lad who

played a video game. His mother sat next to him and chatted on as if Kalid were a recording device. How he missed the discreet silence of his former seat mate. It was an ambiguity he could not resolve. The mother here was an Episcopalian who volunteered at a food bank. She did not like the way so many young people acted these days. “They have no respect for themselves or others. They have no sense of shame.” It was obvious this woman would not be sympathetic to the bathers he’d recently seen. A discrepancy that puzzled for his earlier seat mate had harboured a decorous, quiet politeness; he knew she waited for him to speak first yet could, on another occasion, behave like a wanton. As he endured the wordy monologue, he pictured her pretty form negotiating the cresting waves. The gilt-headed bream he caught long ago near Tyre were no more sleek or agile.

SEVEN

It was a wary but determined Catherine who chose to visit Pachis’ Yaletown studio residence, a second floor abode over a wicker furniture store. Dark clouds umbered the sky that day, the sun an ashen smear.

When he first opened the door he seemed confused, demure even, as if he had either forgotten the time they agreed on or doubted she would come at all. “Have I come at an inopportune hour?” she dryly asked. He was a moment responding. “I’m in the middle...no come in. Had to fit in a sitting...her day, the model. It’s fine, she’s sociable.” “You’re painting?...” Catherine asked, barely hiding her amusement. He called out, “Viola, okay if we have a guest?” From the interior came a sweet childlike voice, “All copacetic.” Again he hesitated, then said to Catherine in a muted voice, “You can maybe entertain Amy. My daughter. Her school was cancelled today...some power failure...really, glad you could come. No time like the present.” He adopted an impromptu resolve; too obviously he had been distracted, yet seemed pleased to see her. Inside the front room, which expanded into a skylit studio, he pointed to two large wall-leaning canvases, saying, “The new commission, a series of paintings, illustrations for a novel entitled *Musing the Maenad*, the portrayal of an enigmatic Minoan community of mainly striking women, with the occasional male, usually a soldier or boy, soberly looking on from the sidelines.” Catherine was again surprised by the title, and amazed by the vivid ancient Greek settings depicted in the canvases and the remarkable litheness of the models Pachis used. The studio itself was a small museum of period artifacts. “Stuff from the F-B foundation,” he nonchalantly said. “Props and inspiration.” Pachis’s model, who had slipped into a paisley wrap, was a tall striking redhead. “Hi, I’m Viola. Footloose and...except when I’m posing.”

Said a complaisant Pachis, gesturing toward Catherine, “An old school friend — Catherine. Wanted to see the studio. The new work.” The explanation appeared to pass muster. Said a buoyant Viola, “I’m a perpetual student, Tibetan Buddhist, and part-time model — I need the money.” Pachis remained unusually obliging, as much Catherine suspected to downplay her sudden coming. Pachis’ young daughter, Amy (her mother had taken up with a CFL lineman Catherine later learned) liked to

squeeze paints onto Pachis' easel — at his direction — which she did or resumed now, while scowling at her father's model. "Another nudie," she said, and became particularly antic when Viola backed her wrap on a chair, calling her a "freckled tutti-frutti". Viola's mother-of-pearl skin, especially her cheeks, shoulders and upper chest were dusted with a rich spectrum of freckles. Amy was further nettled by Viola's ingratiating laughter and mod comment at this characterization, "Well, that's a holismo." It was then that Catherine realized how much Viola resembled the girl at Friday Harbor. She was also surprised by a couple of near life-size figure sculptures in a composite green-grey material in the margins of the studio. "Where did you find these?" Pachis looked at her with confusion then reserve composure. Said Amy with a pout, "He got a big pile of someone's play dough." Viola suddenly blithely laughed. Belatedly Catherine noticed one sculpture very similar to Viola's form. "Your father is a talented man," she said to Amy with a ready smile. Amy seemed momentarily satisfied and allowed herself to be propelled by her father into the adjoining kitchen where a jigsaw puzzle was laid out on a gate-leg table. The conversation there between father and daughter was brisk but amicable. "You do the next sunflower and finish the border." "Why?" "You scare my model." "Okay." Viola suppressed a further fit of laughter.

"So when did the sculpture stint begin?" Catherine asked Pachis when he re-entered the studio. He shrugged. "At the beginning. Always. I share a studio now in San Francisco. Fairly old stuff, the near life size. Cast from clay originals."

Catherine did her best to accept this new discovery. Her former restless impetuous friend this resourceful, animated, accomplished? She had indeed been away, out of touch. So it seemed. With heedful care Pachis faced the in-progress work on his easel — a portrait of Viola standing before a grotto of tony bathers, all of whom, including Viola, were nude. "Part of an initiation rite," Pachis dryly remarked. Viola promptly added, "Not my cup of tea. But the painting — gorgeous!" With some help from Pachis, Viola resumed the desired contrapposto stance, one hand resting on a hip.

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

When Pachis broke off for the day and sonsy Viola left, a yawning Amy was led to a distant room for a nap, while he and Catherine talked on the glassed-in balcony. Ornamental fig trees sat in sepia ceramic pots near the railing, screening two cane-seated chairs behind. She was about to seek more info about the grant when he, suddenly, impetuously, wanted to paint her. "A mythical huntress, an Artemis, I'm thinking," he said newly studying her. "Yes, your primogenitor I think."

Quizzically she looked up. “What? The wild animal dyke?”

Briefly Pachis scowled. “Always the reporter.” Then, again preoccupied, “Yes, this misty afternoon light — the Vale of Tempe — where Artemis may well have hung out. With a Maenad or two.”

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

“We share the studio . The plaque goes out front when he’s here.”

“He’s a photographer isn’t he?”

“Yeah. A good one. Another Fischer-Bakey genius.”

“You’re sure Amy would approve — of another ‘on tap’ model?”

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

Shortly he emerged with a quiver and short Greek-styled tunic that bared one breast. Dourly she decided she had more to gain as a player than critic or interrogator, despite her suspicion that the flat could be bugged. With his usual despatch, he helped her change, fondling eyeing her the while. “As Artemis, the Huntress, you’re a Maenad consort,” he said, once satisfied with the prospect presented by the spare costume in the pale light — short and flounced with a single shoulder broach. With some earnestness he added, “An eye-stalk pose here I think, arms akimbo. Like so.” After approving the stance, and her candid amusement, he resumed with, “Yes, I did see the OO piece. Some story. Has legs I expect.” If his impulse to paint her seemed as much prank as wish, she wanted him to talk — which he did when engaged. When a swift rough sketch was done and the palette primed, they spoke in measured tones, her curiosity feeding complaint: she might ask some pointed questions looking like a tart.

“For a virgin, this maid ‘Arty’ did whack a lot of stags I understand.”

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

“A tiny hit.”

He leaned back for a moment as if momentarily distracted. “There’s a gala in the works, a gallery opening. I’ve been asked for a submission.”

“What ‘gala’ is that?”

“A fête to celebrate some recovered art works once thought ‘misaid’ or lost. Mainly. Some modern stuff as well — with a figurative bent.”

“Any connection to the Fischer-Bakey Foundation?”

“The gallery itself is a Kissy Borozov venture.”

“Goodness. The big K. Do tell me more.”

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

“We’ll see.” Not quite hiding a wry smile she said, “Do tell me more about this Kissy chap.”

After resuming painting and carefully reworking a brush stroke, he said, matter-of-factly, “Kissy Borozov — the guy who subsidizes F-B — has made application for a temporary resident visa — in Canada. One director said as much. Thought you’d like to know, have it affirmed, at least.”

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

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

“A showcase for some F-B artists. And some recovered works — that somehow survived the war. Some of the ‘missing’ stuff.”

“The works a few clairvoyant thieves salted away. And decided to ‘reinstate’.”

“They do have some fine painters, the Russians. There are many supposed and missing master-works. Yes, should be interesting.”

“You happy sharing gallery space with art world sharpies?”

“More or less.”

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

“Pachis, love, how fly — Artemis as an apparent show lounge teaser! And a quiver — but no bow. A bit of a flake, I’d say.”

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

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

With make-shift ease he quipped, “It worked out nicely in the past.”

“Did it?” Then she got restless. “You don’t find it odd that a buccaneer like a Borozov would take up an ancient little known theme — using a toffy collection of paintings? What’s it called again — Musing the Maenad?” The prospect of such a series drolly amused.

Pachis smarted. “If he, or whoever, is involved he must like mythic tales.”

“But why this ‘tale’, do you think?”

“You must ask him.”

“Ask his close-lipped flunkies you mean.” She all but despaired that day of finding out much from this self-sufficient faun, who likely saw his late patron as an overdue dessert. “Have you ever met a Borozov — Kissy or Bossy?”

“No.”

“Pity.”

Later, as he cleaned his brushes and regarded the well blocked image, he remarked that he could use her in the the series. She lay then on the studio couch, where they’d left off, the costume then draped over the headboard, some late afternoon shadows dappling her seamless pale gamin form.

“You don’t think I’m a bit spare, exiguous for this Maenad sorority?”

“Not at all. The beauty that animates witness.”

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“In the tale, the character you’d represent, becomes a love object of the regnant Maenad.”

“A lez ‘acquiescence’?”

“Your presence is, can be, beguiling.”

She slipped off the couch to pretend, again, to warily look about the flat and studio, but could find no telltale sign of a bug implant — as thoughts of the *frankly* observant Amy continued to tease. When asked, Pachis insisted his daughter was still asleep and the studio door wedged shut. As Catherine watched him administer to his brushes — he too was naked then — she thought again how absence makes the heart grow gullible. A quite beautiful Adonis he would make in a painting by another.

“Are you catering now on the internet?” she asked.

“The series may be placed there, eventually.” He looked up expectantly. “The being you’d represent is in the story is actually a Cup Bearer to the gods. A Hebe. Often offering a libation.”

She smiled. Even as a teen she had the reputation of a fearless drinker. “I somehow think you’ll manage on your own. But I’ll pass. My toenail polish has a bit too much stammel.”

“You mean red.”

She smiled. “The impenitent colour.”

“Said the happy bolshi.”

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

For a moment he seemed undecided, an auctioneer expecting perhaps another bid, then changed his mind and sought the ticket. She kissed him lightly on leaving, advising him to use a different deodorant. (He had a rather gamy smell that day.) In the taxi she decided her stay in the Canadian Land of Nod was over: the ticket served as a day pass to a gallery in San Francisco. On her way out she passed a painting in progress, a fairly realistic rendering of the Statue of Liberty. A blocked space at the bottom was also a puzzle. Pachis did not embellish his pics with words. Yet it seemed some here were in the works. But she was too eager to leave to broach the subject. She’d played along that day long enough. Her own space beckoned.

Mindful Hejaz was reluctantly amused by the poster-like painting on his computer screen. Was Aram adding to his satiric squibs? Luis Führ, one in Kissy Borozov’s Fischer-Bakey stable of artists, had jointly created with his friend Pachis a visual jape — with the help of someone named John Mayo.

That they had portrayed The Statue of Liberty so was a hoot. Aram's wry humour was heavy in the air then. Hejaz thought then of Andreas Serrano and his Piss Christ, knowing that Serrano was another coddled derring-doer, a gilded Christian cross immersed in his own urine deemed a work of art by the age's cognoscenti. Serrano, the purulent prophet. Not unlike the Führ-Pachis-Mayo threesome, who had rendered the Statue of Liberty, in beautiful robes holding aloft a torch, a lurid smirk on her face, the bottom caption reading: *Give me your disgruntled PC wokies, unlucky grifters and jacklegs, peach thieves, harpies, praxis Inquisitors, aspiring goonlets, B&E sluggards, sneakin' deacons, troubled trannies and nullos, and I will lead them to The Come Kingdom!* Hejaz was conversant with American rappers and cut ups. "The perpetual adolescent full of himself," someone said.

Hejaz looked up suddenly with surprise. Ample, sandy robed Aram had come in noiselessly through a back entrance. He was on his way to Saint-Jean Cap-Ferrat to see the circumspect Kissy Borozov. One of Aram's discreet associates. Codadad he called Kissy, the lad dealing with the nasty princes. He also called Kissy Lieutenant Kijé — a name Hejaz had to look up, thinking the while that if Aram's understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith facilitated his novel pranks, then he was indeed a rare bird, a curiosity in its own nest! Aram then glanced at the picture of the mock Statue of Liberty poster on Hejaz' computer screen and shrugged. "A fine impertinence this. The audacity that diverts. Not all the new PC wardens may be amused though."

Bossy's memo from prison had been blunt. Sergei, Bossy's long-standing secretary and spin minder, sought Kissy out at his Ascot Moscow residence, where they sat in the period salon, the mixture of real and faux artifacts from the ancient Egyptian Amarna period an elegant if insular backdrop. The encounter would leave Kissy awash, struggling to avoid being sick. Sergei was, as usual, archly, vicariously vindictive. Kissy had seen a media picture of the Apsara dancer who resembled the American journalist and been struck by the similarity. Bossy, in turn, was not amused. "Our fucking cherry picker *would* notice. And talk." 'Cherry picker' was Bossy's late word for quiet, observant Kissy, whose Apsara Clubs were extravagant baubles for hard-nosed Bossy. The cultural opprobrium brought on the one club by the injury to the Muslim was the last straw. Noting that the nimble dancer resembled ABN reporter Catherine Whyte — the very one who had exposed Bossy's baby food scam — doubled the ignominy!

Sergei was up front with the injunction. "No mistake. B. wants the ABN bird waxed."

Kissy shrugged. "Well, for all intents and purposes..."

"'Intents'! It's a bad show. She'll be on to the late stuff Bossy's marketing — and talking to Willardson, the Paleomena art guru, about our 'rare' touring art show, sooner or later. So. Curtains. ASAP."

Again Kissy sought a lay by. "Well now, a demise will set the press alight, an accident may leave her a heroine with more time to write to a larger audience. The options are limited given B.'s

‘liquorice laundry’ of late.” He smiled. He always prided himself on his English, a few select phrases he might now use to vex turgid Sergei.

Sergei continued as an obdurate male nurse. “It *has* been suggested, for a while now, that you better utilize this artist she’s screwing. He’s got a Fischer-Bakey grant and she’s eager to learn what’s happening stateside. We know this...we’ve a secretary at ABN. Reputation, remember, is her ace. We deal with that. Bug the guy’s place, get some nudie photos and mask her into American lobbyist Chuckie Warren’s hot tub with his needy opportunists, say — and the venal trippers and actors he sometimes patronizes, one recently charged with mail fraud. Whyte will be seen as a ho in the tabloids — a desperate bottom feeder. Then we work on her so-called investigation here. Presenting her as a clever but shameless hack. She’s leaned on Warren before to get his dealings here with Rosneft. B. likes the idea. Especially the internet possibilities — putting her go-go ass there and elsewhere. The placement must be immaculate. B.’s word. Someone like Ganyanov I think.”

“A tall order. She’s no dunce.”

“You have a reputation for finesse.”

Kissy smiled. It was not a compliment.

When Sergei left, he made himself a very stiff drink. The fact was the Whyte Bird was a near paragon for him, her resourcefulness alone a seductive trait, let alone her perception and daring. If the net result was rather small potatoes in the wider scheme of things, her success was nonetheless notable given the climate she worked in.

But there was another cinder in his posh crib: he happened to find the woman fetching in both a cerebral and carnal way, her sylph like loveliness especially a fine tease, exemplified in the early Greek notion of nothing in excess. She aptly fleshed out his own fondness for subtlety, finesse, perspicacity, succinctness, all crucial in his appraisal of both art and women. And he was, he was not loathe to admit, taken with her. Some bugged footage of her in a Kiev hotel he still looked at from time to time. The way she brushed her hair, as if the act rekindled memory itself, reminding him of his mother, one of many nimble ways she commenced daily chores. He found, in due course, he adored everything about her. The droll way she sometimes looked into a mirror — likely suspecting she was being observed, though they never saw her looking for bugs. Her fluent nimble ablutions. Her auburn hair — almost blond in bright light — the Belleek patina of her vernal form, relieved by an incisive toddler’s bum, to say little about her dedication, her canny judge of character, the humour he believed to be wry and innate — calling one surly Serb border guard ‘Heinzi’. The package seemed all-inclusive. He believed she knew she was being observed and recorded, but presented herself as a rather careless, exhibitionistic journalist who liked her liquor. Later they realized the scotch was in fact tawny tea. Her watchers were obviously distracted from some of the goings on. How well she disguised her real intent, her use of Russian officials themselves, her requests for seemingly innocuous information that contained nuggets to add to her info cache. Then there was the time she likely put a

trailing beeper into the seam of the attaché case of a secretary who made known she was going at last on a cruise, when in fact she continued to deliver drafts to a Swiss bank from Bossy himself, to avoid electronic snoops. The payees were somehow backlogged to the pharmaceutical firms in China Bossy did business with. The secretary had been careless tending her attaché case. A late supposition. The very lack of fingerprints suggested an accomplished actor. Thus, he would be playing a long hand, as the Brits say — exercising his ‘finesse’ in getting her ‘salaciously’ photographed in Pachis’s flat. Though he guessed that withholding the Fischer-Bakey grant was B.’s ace in the hole to get Pachis on side. Get the overt pics B. wanted.

He couldn’t sleep that night and sat in his expansive study like a sullen, pensive watchman. B.’s ‘behest’ was a face off. The quandary loomed as an unexpected and inconvenient canyon. Then, despite all, his face morphed into a wry smile as a novel thought matured. Yes, by polishing her karma might he not circumvent, skirt the unwelcome abyss? Possible, yes. Worth a try at least.

It was the mug shots of the evocative Ms. Whyte taken at an Interior Ministry post that cued the possibility. Her profile, in the one shot, had an antecedent he was familiar with — yes, a matching profile of one Greek Akrotiri maiden or kore, the very one! The match of the two he believed sufficiently close to accommodate the novel plan he envisaged now. The Minoan age had a special place in his fondness for cultural refinement and able women in particular, given the self-confident outgoing way they were depicted in Minoan art. The idea of a gracile female bull vaulter cued both wonder and awe. And now the hint of an atavistic double — in his observant mind. He decided that night he must add to his collection of Bronze Age kores by creating, ‘re-creating’, a startling, eminently recognizable profile mural! The effort may amuse the bird herself and keep some barking dogs at bay. Being showcased as a historic icon would give her a beaux arts face, a winsome charisma, and partly foil tawdry smears, thus perplexing a tycoon bent on defacing, nullifying her. So Kissy elected to believe. Such an identity would add to her public aura and immunity from slummy aspersion, assault or a murder that would implicate flagrant *Russian* ignominy — again! The more he considered the idea, the more he cottoned to it. As fanciful as the ruse might seem, his mind was made up. Discovery and recognition were, he believed, perquisites for romance and esteem, even exculpation, and immediately got to work planning, commissioning an oil-painting mural that ‘interpolated’ Catherine Whyte’s profile into the Akrotiri original — leaving both ‘girls’ recognizable! Possible, yes. “One of the portraitists in the St.Petersburg Academy I think...a very rush order,” he told his secretary early the next morning with blood shot eyes. “Put everything else aside for now. Tempus fugit. A prototype canvas I’ll frame myself.”

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

her cameo face. Yes, love can edify.

That same day, John Mayo, a late critic of avid self-esteem, was ruminating over his commissioned painting of the Statue of Liberty. He sat sharing a dram in the Bungalow Lounge in the Fairmount Miramar Hotel with the venturesome Führ. The initial toast acknowledged the campy rendering of the poster. Pachis had given the original Führ photo a ribald face and a venerable painterly aspect. Mayo had added the text — in a moment of indulged pique — the same John Mayo who now sat having second thoughts about the poster's worth. Could one really daunt the proud self-dramatic execrators of Western culture? *The wretched refuse of your teeming shore...the homeless, tempest tossed* — now, parenthetically, mainly undeserving whites, Western history being sorely berated as egregiously tainted and inexcusably lucky. So. Was an independent life, and the satire he once prized, so invalid now? The day's woke progressives certainly thought so. Did he really want to antagonize that fulsomely dogmatic camora? Being a pariah was low on his priority list. He perhaps must act more prudently here on in.

Zoya Stolbanov's stoic prudent aunt Tatjana — not a dissident or refusenik — was at first alarmed by her discovery of the OO Magazine in the lobby of the hotel she then shared with her niece. She was still poignantly aware of the twin who died of meningitis at birth, unlike her precious, resilient Zoya. "We all have doubles," Zoya said dismissively, convinced then the likeness on the OO cover a fluke. Zoya had taken adroitly devoted, and beloved, Tatjana to Zweisimen for a holiday. A 'safe' holiday. They had just returned to their hotel near the rail station after a tour of some Simmental farm houses. When informed of Zoya's progressive surgery in Bern — her jaw line already altered — Tatjana softly said, "I fear I may never see the finished product." "Only skin deep a change of face," was about all Zoya could think to say as the mutual tears abated.

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

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

As Zoya/Lisa wiped some drooling yogurt from her aunt's lips, she kissed her hair and tried once more to engage her attention. Family matters were ever a conversational prompt, though she knew Masha's death was still a lingering sorrow for Tatjana. Taking her aunt's hand Zoya earnestly said, "Tell again about 'Zia.'" Half sister 'Zia, short for Anastasiya, left home at an early age to attend an accelerated school sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior. Zoya saw her only once after her departure. And hadn't heard from her since.

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

"More than snoop then, yes?"

Again her aunt shrugged. "She left. Never returned. Just so. They rarely return. What other organ does that?" She waved as if shooing a troublesome insect.

The story of her putative father Zoya knew all too well. A late drunkard with a dishonourable discharge from the army, who died in a solitary ditch, the soil of which happened to be still contaminated by the initial plume of radionuclides from the Kyshtym disaster. Whereas Anastasiya's Communist father was an officer Hero of the USSR killed in the pre-war skirmishes in Afghanistan — long gone by the time the twins were born, and Liisa's surveillance became onerous. The reason for it remained sketchy, her mother's demur about the matter before an inquisitive child an unnavigable ocean. All Zoya ever got was a sorry smile and another wave of the bruised arm and a mute unfocused stare. "One day," she would say, as if such a day was ever likely. Zoya believed her aunt knew the louche details of Liisa's 'belated' detention, but honoured her sister's wish to keep them spare as possible. The first few years of her life Zoya spent visiting the lockup near Perm where her stubborn dissident mother served out her second sentence, becoming more and more ill-defined, unrecognizable, her late facial twitching a terror to behold. All the while Zoya cared for her feeble, scapegrace father, whose sly humour and wry acuity — when he was sober — kept her attuned to the curiosities of the unforgiving state. Had he been more robust and fearlessly candid, he might have joined his wife. His stay in a lock up for a disorderly conduct citation was oddly short lived. Her own young life as a truant and budding delinquent established a reputation that her sylph-like beauty and talent as a dancer only seemed to perpetuate. Her brief stay in a dance academy was curtailed when a party hack took a fancy to her. The hack was a scout for a new chain of clubs then being created. Apsara meant little to her then. But she decided she'd give performing there a try when some pending charges against her were abruptly suspended. If dancing had been the only requirement...her shortcut to maturity would have been less arduous. So said her late emerging conscience. The Muse that too often looked away.

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

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

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

EIGHT

Ammon Farouk looked at his adopted daughter Dilsat with an expression of stunned disbelief. His wife Atiyaah looked on from the kitchen silently shaking her head. He could not believe it: this slip of a girl actually talking back to him! In English! "You will speak to me in Arabic!" Calmly Dilsat answered: "You talked to the bobbies in English, explaining your cuddle with your sharmuta." Into the brief, scorched earth silence she added, "You've said here more than once I'm becoming one." That was

when Ammon struck her. Immediately Atiyaah rushed to her daughter's side, retrieving a handkerchief from her gown to touch a lip that began to bleed. All allusions to his 'London adventure' scored Ammon to the quick; the embarrassment lingered as a rank smell. That such a daughter might invoke his pariah status roused the maniac in him. He was speechless. All along he believed himself a negotiator, a careful adjudicator, a practitioner of wasat. His anger these days astonished him. He hadn't reckoned that the burden of guilt might be debilitating as well as excruciating. All he could manage now was to confront her in the very language she chose to duel with. Thus, in English, while enduring a stabbing headache, he shouted, "You will so marry Ahmed! Period! You will not return to England to study more nursing!"

The ensuing silence disoriented both parties.

Dilsat's birth registry named her the daughter of an ordinance officer killed by the Russians in Afghanistan. Ammon's barren wife Atiyaah had arranged the adoption. Her inability to conceive was a failing Ammon attributed to her alone, though he had no other children he might point to, despite his many sexual trysts. He would have dissolved the marriage had Atiyaah not come from a distinguished family. He had luckily, importunately married above his station, which his current reputation did nothing to enhance. The too pretty Dilsat worked for a time in a field hospital in Cairo and, on a recommendation from the director, applied for and got a bursary to Leeds University to study nursing. She returned for a summer break and emphatically reminded Ammon that she did not like timorous, small, ungainly Ahmed and would not marry him. Ahmed was also sympathetic to Sufism, an irritant for Ammon, yet the wealth which Ahmed inherited from a distant Great Mufti would enhance Ammon's status in the Mosque, at least as a benefactor for the poor. But Dilsat was not to be persuaded, let alone commanded. "Maybe I'm no longer a virgin," she said with awesome resolve in her Arabic accented English as she dabbed at her lip wound with a sterilized cotton ball Atiyaah had fetched. "Want to take a look?" Ammon was by then speechless, his face suggestive of a waylaid camel about to spit. Finally, he looked at his wife and loudly demanded, "What is she saying...what is she saying!" Atiyaah looked at him with undisguised disgust, but said nothing. Promptly he was on the phone to the Egyptian styled Mutaween, the religious guardians for the Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Sin, and demanded a team from the hospital come to the house. Even as he finished the call he could barely believe he'd acted so. His mind was a welter. But his authority was in question here, and a man unable to control his women was a lame stallion, one suffering from cerebellar abiotrophy, as he thought of it. Dilsat looked askance at her mother, who took her by the hand and led her to another part of the house. "You can be a monkey," Atiyaah softly said when they were alone, her quiet resignation a further goad. "You can't be serious?..." Dilsat exclaimed. Atiyaah simply looked away. "We'll talk later." Dilsat in turn ran about the female quarter of the apartment but found the available doors all locked and began screaming. Which no one in the suite paid attention to, though Atiyaah sat covering her ears. Ammon sat with his eyes closed and his

fists clenched. He must...he must. Ten minutes later the team arrived, two scarfed male members of which bundled Dilsat into a bedroom, covered her mouth with tape — her language then a lexicon of street insult — and with the help of a third removed her lower clothes and held her legs apart as the doctor inspected her. A flummoxed Ammon decided he was not to be fobbed off and looked on, only to be dumfounded by the discovery that she had not properly shaved and the tattoo of a small bunny's head defiled her hip. He left the room in a state, thinking he must thrash the whore the moment the team left. What other option was there? Petition to have her stoned?... The doctor however was not the ally Ammon imagined, nor expected to encounter in such a disciplinary team. As he removed his gloves in the hall outside the bedroom — Dilsat huddled within, silently shivering, her gag removed — he remarked that he had not heard such colourful language for some time, but that the question of coital activity was not conclusive. “It's hard to tell sometimes these days, as active as some forward young girls are. The activities, menstruation devices and the like. It is possible she has been partly breached, yet she could still be a virgin. Just conceivable.” But the glower on the marshal's eyes, who stood nearby, said that this was no virgin. Ammon glimpsed Atiyaah standing further back in the hall, a tall skinny bird of prey waiting to pounce. She towered over him by almost a foot, and was thin and hard as a rake. Not a real woman at all. How would she know anything about this? She could not attract a beggar. But for her position he would have taken more wives. As for his daughter...he could no more tolerate her impudence than his own besmirched reputation. He must act, and would indeed petition to have her publicly beaten or even stoned...but for this shifty gutless physician. Whose diffidence ironically absolved a turmoiled Ammon for not proceeding as he otherwise might have. “I trust you and your wife will have a serious talk with her, sooner than later, maybe have the clitoris also nicked; we usually don't remove it these days” — the last word from the quack as he packed his bag. It was all Ammon could do to refrain from kicking him out the door. Instead, he went off to his expansive study to pray and consider his options. “See she is locked in her room!” — his late inflamed directive to the house steward. Yet he could not concentrate. He had objected to Dilsat going to England. Obviously not strongly enough. He would take some coffee with his friends and assess the matter. He had shuffled prayer timings before. He was invited to stay the night with a neighbour and collect his thoughts — revive the heedful judicious arbiter he once was esteemed for and hoped to resurrect. He solemnly returned the following morning to find Dilsat gone. Vanished. “What have you done?...” he incredulously demanded of his wife. “What have you done!”

“She asked a servant for some cranberry tea. Khalil.”

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

“He's curious, kind, and sometimes has tea with her, as you know.”

Ammon's anger was soon again careening, breaking free.

Atiyaah gravely continued: “She likely slyly put a sleeping draft in the tea pot; I found this in her bedroom.” Ammon dumbly looked at the medicine vial Atiyaah held out for him; it had a Leeds' Belle

Isle Pharmacy label. “A sleeping drug, as you can see: Donormyl. Time enough for her to get away. He wouldn’t have locked the door as they sat together.” Atiyaah doubted the drug was placed, or would indeed promptly work, but felt Ammon would not know this. Kind Khalil had taken pity on Dilsat.

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

Ammon sensed he was drowning.

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

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

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

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

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

“So why is she half naked?”

“She is *not* half-naked. They rehearse in attire matching the performance costumes. The sark is a traditional part of one costume.”

“So who are the stooges?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the rest — the more salacious ones?”

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

“Who took pictures of her half dressed!”

“How do you see that? She is respectfully dressed in all.”

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

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

“Yet you hid away the entire bundle.”

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

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

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

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

NINE

Cocktails at the opening of the new Borozov art gallery in San Francisco came with an assortment of visitors: truckling groupies (one of these protesting an artist who painted heroic scenes of traditional native hunters hunting whales), fondly exclaiming patrons and their guests, fulsome brokers, diffident arts cognoscenti, patient docents and impervious crashers — all rather reduced to insignificance by the size of the hall, a facsimile of an oversize bunker Catherine thought, though the finished aspect of it suggested the work of a cutting-edge designer, with emphasis on ‘cutting’. But there the sorry intimations lapsed. Surrounded by what she considered estimable works of period art, she took up a flute of champagne and joined a comely party of three: the ebullient Elana, a talkative friend of an importer she knew to be connected to one of Kissy’s shipping companies; Cody, a blond comer, one of

the showcase docents; and an unexpected Viola, very Brahmin in her sari and as genially ingratiating as ever. Catherine's new hair style and makeup initially foiled identity as journalist Catherine Whyte but not Viola's recollection of Pachis' impromptu friend. What waylaid Catherine's concern on seeing Viola, who could not remember her name (Catherine gave her her middle name, Algaea), was Elana's seamless paean to the Egyptian chair Cody fondly fingered, a splendid copy of an ancient Amarna throne seat. It transpired that both Elana and Cody were Egyptofiles, having spent a former life on the Nile, and both were caught up in the nostomania of the singular Amarna period. The two were soon comparing notes on the creatures they contended with in the court of Akhenaten — his flinty mother Tiye and a ministerial ogre named Ay. It became apparent they also imagined themselves reincarnations of Nefertiti, but seemed loath to apprise the other of the fact. Said Elana, "Well, as one of the choice best wives, and not at all an earth mother Hathor type...well it was a difficult time." In their current incarnations the voluptuous Elana and the equally ample Cody had obviously 'contended' with meagre upstarts before. By then genial Viola and Catherine had wandered off to discover two of Pachis' Minoan paintings, one featuring Viola, who seemed touched by its inclusion here. With considerable relief, Catherine noted her own absence in either painting. "He can paint, Pachis," Viola belatedly, softly said. Mutely Catherine savoured the girl's ready elation.

Noteworthy canvases proved to haunt other venues as well. In the main gallery Catherine's sudden flatfooted discovery of her 'metamorph profile', as she would come to think of it, left her speechless. One wall in the main gallery featured a large realistic painting of a Minoan mosaic, the profile of an aristocratic girl, the likeness to herself deeply unsettling...until she realized that Pachis had apparently nothing to do with this offering, which was based in fact on an original mosaic in a museum near Phaistos on Crete — a compounded vexation that prompted her to look at all the artifacts with renewed vigilance. Was she dreaming, hallucinating? The painting, a reconstruction based on an Akrotiri original, was credited, to her further astonishment, to Konstantin Borozov — the enigmatic Kissy! Hence, her discovery of the portly Paleomena art expert David Willardson standing in a dim corner alone and mute, was irresistible. But she wanted the identification to come from him not her.

"You look cross," she said.

"Exhausted."

"Borozov can have that effect."

Willardson was silent for a time, then said, as much to himself, "Too many ghosts. The 'absent' canvases...resurrected."

"They're that credible?" she asked, glancing about the salon.

He seemed both amused and perplexed. "Wintry 'orphans'. Some." Turning to look at the Minoan rendering he added, "It *is* a wonder. From a period that continues to amaze if not stupefy. Not unlike Kissy himself I think."

"It's all 'Greek' to me. What kind of 'wonder' — in your estimation?"

He warmly smiled. “Not a fluke. You may have inspired a Minoan devotee, I think.”

“That mawkish is it?”

Willardson then motioned to an alcove harbouring a set of period drinking vessels. After a greeting more honoured in the breach, they settled together on a banquette to study a wide shallow kylix, one of several in an open display case, an ancient Greek drinking cup, a smile etching Catherine’s features as the phrase ‘not a fluke’ needled. With some wistfulness, she said about the cup, “Even with handles, tipplers must have spilt some.”

“One problem of liquidity in fine art.”

“Just so.”

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

“Hardly.” She smiled, too cutely she imagined. “You can imagine my wonder.”

“Do remember, Kissy’s not a thug, like his brother. And he plays his cards close to the vest. This is a departure, for me as it may be for you. But knowing Kissy, as I do, I cannot believe it represents anything but a sly compliment...intimating the descendent of a Minoan Muse, Kleio say.

“Now I’m really worried.”

“Don’t be. It does serve as a telling if not fond homage. Which can have a protective aspect.”

“Good lord. A shenanigan a homage.”

“The audience here certainly likes it. All approving witnesses. The ones I’ve noted.”

Eager to change the subject, Catherine returned to Willardson’s earlier concern. “‘Ghosts’ you said, in reference to some of the other paintings. Love to hear more.”

“Well they’re haunting enough — some of the orphans in this collection. That Kokoschka in particular.” He referred to a self-portrait that was defying expert diffidence.

It was a further affidavit for Catherine. A connoisseur like Willardson, being uncertain about some of the pedigrees, meant Kissy et al had likely struck gold. The earnestness of the docents tended to bear this out. The Minoan portrait being a canny distraction perhaps.

At the outset of her tour she had examined an elegant Attic pithos, prompting a near docent to say, “The piece, please note, is Fifth Century, assembled entirely from fragments. Discovered over a wide area. I still find it amazing. We nearly put it behind glass but decided it had to breathe. Share a space.” The man’s demeanour was a ready affirmation. The encounter underscored for her Willardson’s insinuation — that some of the accepted masterpieces would be set cheek by jowl with the curios or ‘orphans’, in hope of ‘fitting in’. Her suspicious mind was alive with speculation. The art world was often as much a puzzle for her as a solace. She now, seated by the canny mindful Willardson, added a candid observation of her own.

“Apropos your ‘ghost’ paintings, I recall an interview where you once said, of the venerable Hermitage collection, that it was a Phoenix,” she ventured. “That survived the Nazi funeral pyre.”

“Yes. One of the legatees.”

“That sounds a bit mystical.”

“Well, you are a sturdy young journalist.”

Again her ready warming smile she was beginning to lament. “Aren’t you curious about what’s actually going on — here? Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

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

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

“Then we must be exceedingly patient.”

The quick exchange mandated a brief pause.

“Including the mural?...”

“It is a splendid endeavor, to be savoured, enjoyed, appreciated. Not a fraud. They don’t call Kissy a necromancer for naught. Living so close to anarchy and outlawry as he must. In most of his salon assemblages there is often a canny dare or two. And occasionally a laden puzzle. He is a kind of escapee, a rhapsodist. A mindful recluse.”

She mused for a moment. “A greedy cormorant pretending to be what — a mythic Bezuhov?”

Willardson barely smiled. “Well, given the embarrassment you’ve caused his brother...he may just strive to mollify, intrigue rather than confound, vex.” He paused. “Have you never considered that he may in fact be the opposite of his brother? Not really a Borozov at all?” Another interrogatory smile followed this. “We really shouldn’t overlook fortune’s gifts, benefices.”

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

“You’ll be very near the top of my list.”

Before leaving, she had one last look at the mural and its slick poster in the gift shop. Again she was confronted with a likeness that intruded. Giving her a public persona she distrusted. She sensed a fine campy absurdity and imagined she was blushing.

The gallery sales clerk was beaming though. “So help me it’s you. We all have historic antecedents!”

“A face card profile. More card than face, I think.” To herself she said: once flattered, twice credulous. But the clerk was on a promotional roll. “Perhaps we can, should, rethink reincarnation after all.”

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

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

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

If she chose to be wryly amused by the mural, she nevertheless invited the ABN art expert to pronounce upon a good facsimile of the original, which she discovered via the Paleomena Guide to Ancient Art in the Getty Villa Museum, trusting the expert must find it arbitrarily and slickly transcribed, and thus scotch the arcane insinuation — that such a look-alike might exist. The expert studied the mural for a long minute before commenting. She too was teased by the work, which was closer to the Borozov rendering than she had anticipated. The expert was amiably expressive.

“The transcriber may have added some lines — original fragments are often hopelessly scant — but overall the delineation is surprisingly authentic I’d say. For the period. You’re not an immortal are you? The original Akrotiri profile is one that is pretty well intact, given the standard, even the figure and clothing are minimally eroded.”

“So you’d conclude it’s not a spoof.”

“Well, hardly that. The past is ever arresting, when we choose to look.”

Though his commentary was as nuanced before other examples in the gallery, her mind remained a distracted welter.

That night she stood beside her mirrored closet door, her hair up to reflect herself sideways in the mirror as a Bronze Age kore. One might be flattered, she thought, imitation being..yet the gamey question lingered: what might a hoodoo like a Borozov gain by discovering, if he did, and hawking such a ware? Moreover, it must have cost a bundle to fashion the bloody thing. Being circumspect as Kissy normally was...well she couldn’t just let the matter slide. If he had concocted such a distraction, either he was going bananas, or he had something imposing and likely egregious up his sleeve — either way, she had to find out. Coincidence she had long since ruled against. Her nose and profile might, in a great stretch, remind one of an Akrotiri maiden, but here the resemblance was uncanny — meaning, she surmised, an extravagant joke with possibly ulterior purposes, beyond the sly adulteration of a historic artifact. The execrable reality in the Soviet disintegration she never confused with a daft day dream. But here in the West, the mixing of reality and fantasy seemed a veritable goulash. She didn’t immediately anticipate the protective aura the mural might provide her. That came later.

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

“The new Borozov salon might be a good place to start. No less than David Willardson wondered at the authenticity of the ‘newly discovered’ period works. He seem reconciled to a new era of virtuosic clones.”

“Did he.”

“He used the word ghosts, which usually means liquid — possible bankable representations of missing masterworks, ones alluded to by period writers and art historians. Immaculate rebirths, you might say. It is a calculated ruse — float iffies with sturdies — to keep select well-oiled experts on the fence. Willardson intimated as much. Forgers hate backtracking.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

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

But like many adepts, she sometimes underestimated the opacity of her boss. A further late afternoon confab with Darin the Deplorable merely headlined his specialty: When in doubt try servility. They sat then in the mirrored boardroom lounge, their reflections ghostly in the soft light, she in her most stylish pant suit, he an overly starched shirt that smelled of perspiration. Said he: “The board decided that digging up too much dirt on the Borozovs will hurt some moderates in the Duma. Make it look like the whole shebang is moribund.”

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

“Well, we all have our pet trolls.”

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

Then he all but floored her. “Why not consider the new expressive feminism? Its vivid canvases, portrayals — citing maligned ethnicities, social prejudices, and their issues. We need to get up to speed on that.”

She dryly smiled. “Um...situational ethics, shrill reproof, consensus as racist and patriarchal... organic tits and ass....”

“Within reason,” he said without commitment.

“Reason as handmaid,” she replied, still unengaged.

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

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

“You should be a natural, I expect. Getting at the nitty gritty.”

“You’re scuttling the whole art investigation thing then?”

“A ‘time and place’ thing prevails here I think. We must give democracy a chance.” He was leaning forward then, his elbows on his knees. The Thinker with Piles, she thought. My Arkansas lizard. She was thinking then of feminism’s untenured reach.

“So: cook, rook and look books. Men as mutants.”

“In so many thoughtful, non-incendiary words” he said finally, her sharp words mere background noise. “You pension benefits come under review this spring. We want you ‘onboard’.”

He lamely smiled before he left, leaving her to deal with the close flush that had come over her. She had to act, do something. She would be hurling objects in a minute, sweeping the mantle of keepsakes, as they did in the dramatic flics. She badly wanted to whack somebody, become a plenary terrorist. Coward! Bastard! She decided she'd better get to her gym. Fast. There is a doggerel to compensation she had long ago discovered — when the big boss sucks. With her it often emerged in the gym — 'bam bardolatry' she thought of it, for the crocks, gasbags and earbangers. Her on-off California boyfriend Michael, then an ad salesman at ABN, was treated to an arduous sampling of it the following afternoon at a local gym, the vigour of her kick-boxing blows on a body bag as unexpected as her rather seedy gym attire.

"This boss of yours sounds like a real piece of work."

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

"Whoa Boudicca, that blow was a haymaker."

"Do pay attention, Merlin."

"We're close here to indecent assault."

She was aware her gym duds had seen better days. Now they might serve as consolation — liven up the mute herd. So she surmised. The kick that followed was particularly savage. Said a head up Michael, "Holy Hannah."

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

She narrowed her eyes and affected a smile. "What about half a dozen." Michael laughed. "You couldn't...you could." Then watched with unfeigned astonishment as a succession of blows reined down on the listing dummy. Little did he know what was in the offing that day, the next round of which was spelled out during one of the few pauses on the gym floor stations when he spied the swim suit in her worn carryall.

"Not the Falls — now, today? In this weather?"

"I want to take a dive."

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

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

When they arrived at Cedar Creek Falls, their select water hole, a rock lined pool with a slender sloping waterfall, she climbed immediately to the top of the nearest arching cliff, her 'bardolatry' shrill as ever as they surveyed the marbled water below. "A pool to poach the sublime...and free the quick from pantomime. Poetry for a porker."

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

Again she looked at him with droll sobriety. “Yes, fido. So. A further dare to rinse the pall...a narrow channel...headfirst fall. All for a career bastard.”

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

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

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

“So be a manatee.”

Near the deserted sandy brushwood area by the waterfall’s head, he found her standing, eyeing the setting sun, and was again entertained by the combination of freckles and goose bumps, her bosom being but a larger variety beneath her seamless suit.

“You’re cold.”

“It’s peaceful.”

“Well, the ‘burghers’ have split, haven’t they? I made some chilli this morning.”

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

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

After a protracted and lamely contested tussle, it was her light spandex swimsuit he struggled to shift as they settled on a patch of still warm sandy earth, accepting her cries of “swine” and “pecker head” as simple companionable rhetoric. But he was surprised by a belated yet sustained plainsong rapture he’d not heard before as he kissed her a second time. By then he had removed her suit, her lightly flossed sex a benediction. The following day few words, many moues, and a curious wistfulness summoned by a scrapbook, her elfin self ensconced on a divan in the bright sitting room of her strata suite, which overlooked a park. He could not recall seeing her so thoughtful or so maddeningly desirable.

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

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

“I want to rediscover Hebe.”

“Who’s that?”

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

He snorted. “Where exactly?”

“The islands. The Dodecanese mainly.”

“It’s rather late isn’t it?”

“Not for the raki.”

He was by then aware that her earnest proposals were usually the most casually placed. And though he tried, he drew a blank on the Dodecanese. Somewhere off the peninsula he presumed. He was too miffed to ask what raki was. She wrote her mother after their arrival on Rhodes, enclosing some pictures.

Dearest Mum,

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

M.’s smarty friend owns the Lotus racing car in the one pic. Escape for sex starved journalists he says! A nice seat for me and my neglected guitar on the beautiful fenders. I actually drew an audience this day!

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

Love and a miner’s hug, Cathy

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

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

Of a kind she’d endured before.

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

“What in hell’s name are you doing here?”

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

Sitting and crossing a leg she studied him with begrudged affection, deciding he was not quite compos after a couple of smelly retches. He then put a cautionary flea in her ear, words that rather belied a crapulous state.

“I’ve come to Rhodes oh kind one, to sculpt a timeless being, a goddess. Borozov trade edition. Come see. In the Garden museum. In the Castle of the Grand Masters.”

“That’s a public gallery you nitwit.”

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

Seconds later he lay sprawled and snoring. If she was generally livid, disgruntled, she now narrowed her focus. All a facetious story, she decided, were Borozov not mentioned. The sudden compression of her world — again! — left her restive if not resentful, a reaction apposite it seemed in the ‘carefree’ West. With unremitting dismay, the import of his arrival and the event he alluded to put her back in the thick of it, all shore leave curtailed. As she studied him she brooded over the fact that he knew where to find her, for she had deliberately sought that day a venue of her own to indulge her erstwhile rock collecting hobby. Even as he slept, or pretended to, she could imagine another set of eyes upon her. Yet before leaving she took a towel from her carryall, neatly folded it and placed it beneath his head — only to conclude that his stupor might well be a fine method performance. Which likely paid well.

While retracing her steps along the shingle her suspicions grated, as her sandals slipped and slid on the stoney slope. When in sight of the colourful bay condo she and Michael had rented, she imagined a prowler assessing their unit as he moved before it. Barely was she inside the suite, opening the window louvers, when the man slipped by a second time, his manner oddly hesitant she thought. He glanced in the partly louvered window but without focus or apparent intent, his concentration then fixed on the matching unit next door. He seemed perplexed. Standing very still in the room’s side shadows, she felt certain he hadn’t seen her and that he bore an uncanny resemblance to the docent who had touted the pithos in the salon! She could distinctly hear his last words to her then — ‘assembled entirely from fragments’.

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

“You said he looked confused.”

“He kept looking about, as if confirming the suite.”

“You don’t think he was inside?”

“No.”

“You’re certain?”

“No.”

“But fairly.”

“Yes.”

“Would they be that concerned? Go to that much trouble?”

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

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

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

“And he wants your witness of this thing — in this annex. Pretends to.”

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

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

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

The next day, beneath a Cirrus fleeced sky, in a small plot just off the Garden of the Grand Masters Museum, touched by the damp of an early mist, they discovered the ubiquitous Pachis silently, imperviously at work on an arresting clay sculpture amidst a handful of patient admirers. The rustic setting was bordered by a lush walkway of ancient Mastic trees. The model for this kneeling *soi disant* goddess could have been one of Bossy Borozov’s lithe super sirens, the nearly completed work — the arms and hands likely done independently it seemed — in a light brown-grey clay. The museum guard seemed to expect them. No one spoke. As far as she could tell no one was unmoved, about half the audience as beguiled, she decided, by the real goddess, so factual in her dimpled flesh. The Seinfeld joke played then in her head: ‘For your information they are real, and they are sensational!’ The modern curiosity being that while boobs might be ample, figures were supposed to be spare — to the point of invisibility. But here a seemingly satisfactory balance was apparent, with little or no surgical intervention. Hanging gardens indeed, in the most lyric sense. Hemispheric yes, but proportionate to the overall figure and meetly gravitational. Such words Willardson might use in invoking physical elegance.

Then a further annoyance surfaced. This statue, the pose at least, Catherine had seen before. It took her a few minutes to narrow the field. Such that she left Michael for a prompt trip to her car, her iPhone and a internet signal, to summon an African collection and download the famous sculpture that

confirmed her recollection: The Kneeling Woman of the Baluba Area, a stark sharply saliented African masterpiece she'd seen in the Brooklyn Museum.

As she studied the image on her iPhone, the telling recognition resurfaced, the sway Western Culture held over the arts. Vide the matter of beauty so often heralded as svelte smooth Attic symmetry, the concinnous assembly of parts to a whole — no edgy contorted salients — so inimical to the imperially slim, realistic, halcyon, Fifth Century Greek examples, where form itself upstaged colour — lithe and gracile bods in marble and bronze, which the ad and film world exploited with unwavering dedication. That a Borozov might be a patron of such an aesthetic example only added to her wonder.

Hence, the revelation of the 'bowl ladies' — each holding a sizeable bowl on their knees, one a parody of the another, one sharply edged, saliented, stark, the other commensurately placid — provided an eerie climax to the otherwise agreeable holiday, the remaining day with Michael being a brief return to the quaint spa at Kallithea with its eccentric canopies and intimate grottos. Though Michael had been shown an image of the Baluba artifact, his doubt about its relevance lingered, which the quiet of the spa seemed to amplify — where they stood for a time in silence looking up at the array of Moroccan purple glass stars in the ceiling vault of the main grotto. He was the first to speak.

"You've ruled out coincidence?"

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

"Is it worth getting vexed about?"

"The skin trade that hunky dory for you?" The fact they were both in trig swim attire then, faintly amused, hers a seamless one piece that limned her gamin figure; his, stolid boxer shorts, a nod to a buff masculinity.

"Maybe this Borozov likes Attic litheness and symmetry, as you said?"

"The 'Attic grace' Ezra Pound was so keenly dismissive of."

With a sigh Catherine began anew: "I know this sounds ad hoc, but canny Kissy may be on a cultural 'crusade', reviving a Western sense of beauty — think about it: a lot of Westerners are weary of multiculturalism, especially its pert edgy advocates; they're weary of being maligned even vilified for being who they are, and liking what they like. The lean, elegant Periclean-inspired bod prompts an 'uneccentric' ideal which confirms a recognition, a familiar icon that sells products, and attracts droves to Hollywood and the internet. Such idols are not eccentric, eerie — in the Western purview. The dynamic of it all is sobering, is it not? The structural, skeletal patents of a widespread vogue. I don't know what Kissy's putting in his vodka these days, but halcyon art is an unexpected venture. Sorry."

Michael was then oddly distant. "I wonder what went on here?"

"It's the setting for one of Pachis' paintings."

"The pagan stuff."

"An initiation rite. For some partisan gals. It was the setting for one of the paintings I saw in his studio in Yaletown, and at the San Francisco gallery."

“Partisan, eh.”

“Ladies who fashion their own game rules.”

One final trip to Symi rounded out their stay, venturing up the steep hillside terraces she loved, as did the lively island children, including a group of phone card hawkers, one in oversize shoes, stopping every second step to back up and retrieve one or the other shoe. The sun was a warming spangle that day, the bay beyond a medium’s mirror. He massaged her back and neck on a terrace patio bench, a pergola full of ripening fruit overhead, the smell of aniseed and dill rife in the air.

“You really think Kissy that soft on — ‘Periclean’-inspired bods? You’ve used the word before.”

Dryly she answered. “It’s a troubling subject. For instance, *Triumph of the Will* — Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film — intimated the existence of utopian genes. Which invoked the Greek ideal. One of the Borozovs late ventures was the requisition of human ovums and sperm for god knows who — a discovery when I was investigating the baby food scam. At the time I thought it unusual but relatively unimportant. At the time. The research into genetics has, of course, augmented the need for such material. For the new ‘genome genies’. The folks anticipating perfection.”

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

“They seem to refine it though — each time around. You see it in most toffy magazine ads — the mainly sleek winsome seductive if not lovable beings. The ‘select’ beings advertising exploits.”

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

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

On their nearly mum return the divide between them seemed invincible: she an inscrutable Harpy to him, he a heedless Boeotian to her. An advert that Willardson sent her, heralding Pachis’ upcoming gallery showing of the ‘Bowl Babes’, merely hardened her disposition. The ad featured a photo of the historic edgy bowl babe seated opposite Pachis’ rendering of visual ‘concinnity’, elegance by another name, here a generic ‘Wellstern’ beauty queen. So she thought.

A week later she looked at the creamy life-size sculpture, fleshed in the patina of parian marble, which faced a perched, pinched rendering of the dark Baluba carving as if delivering a rebuke. To connive with such a bias seemed insane yet inevitable. Her aggravation with her discoveries in Greece had torn away a shield, an aegis. About all she could conclude was that her old school chum Pachis, Old Horny, was in thrall to a clever shylock who apparently sought a select pound of flesh — for reasons that strafed with confusion. Her faun had originally wanted a nymph, a Hebe! The ‘she’ who brought the gods their ambrosia, their ‘river’ to elysium. But what Kissy Borozov was really up to here, if he indeed was the instigator of the bowl babe and the enigmatic mural, simply baffled. She had to talk to Willardson again.

That evening the Mirror, Mirror on the Wall displayed a troubled femme — herself. The earlier encounter with Pachis haunted her return to the West, for he was her chief lead to learn what Kissy Borozov might be up to on this continent. Her wish to flee from Pachis’ surround, his figure mania,

was stalle by his likely ties to the tycoon. Which meant getting cozy with the *artiste* sooner than later, abetting his painterly adventures for one — cravenly posing and getting laid, the last a tolerable reprieve. However, the thought of a Borozov looking on, via a planted bug, gave her the creeps. Bossy especially. Such ‘bugs’ he amassed. She knew his conglomerate, separate from Kissy, backed sites that exploited the internet fantasies of craven men — celebrities, however intermittent, being a select item. Fitting a picture of a righteous faultfinder like her onto a scabrous site would be a nice pound of flesh. It had happened to pretty hopefuls before. Pachis was in an awful hurry to realize his nymph. She wasn’t sure if she was being paranoid — five years in and out of Russia can do that — but the thought of being spied upon by Bossy’s goons, a bug or two in Pachis’ flat — feasible if Pachis was in hock — brought a slow burn. Just the sort of thing a vengeful thug might find entertaining — a first blow, so to speak. One could indeed end up a salacious item on the internet, and possibly out of a job. But looking for a pinhole lens in Pachis’ flat and atelier — or passive listening device for that matter — would be especially hard, given the talents of Borozov’s field bravos and the endless clutter and rough hewn stone in Pachis’ abode. To neutralize such bugs — if found — would tip her own hand and likely endanger Pachis. Hence the dilemma for a new cute celebrity. The other reedy question was Pachis’ own regard of her. Did he see any singularity useful for his work, independent of a Borozov, or was he merely in hock, as she supposed? Her Pan certainly liked her once, if a while ago, and seemed no less enamoured now...but then one can act the part when enticed or coerced. All in all — a fragmented mirror indeed. And yet the dare had always been an entreaty for her, pertinent peril a spur to action and understanding. Leaving Pachis now would further distance herself from what was really going on.

And so, in the week that followed, despite her best intent, Pachis belatedly got a call on his cell. That too could be bugged but, unlike an e-mail, she would at least be talking directly to the bugger himself. She had to find out what was going on with the Fischer-Bakey Foundation, and the possible consummate fakery Willardson hinted at. If Kissy was a director, a vigilant Bossy would be lurking in the shadows. Pachis seemed pleased to hear her voice.

“So glad you called. Been trying and find you. We talked about it earlier — the book I mentioned. A mythology-based novel.”

“Remind me.”

“I’ve finally got a commission.”

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

“A fanciful account of two Greek lasses who duel with one another, toward the end of the Bronze Age. One a maniacal Maenad, the other an irenic Hebe. A ‘metamorphic’ mythology — a posh word in the preamble I was given — alluding perhaps to the calamitous end of the aesthetically resplendent Bronze Age.”

“Metamorphic. Sounds about right for a Borozov. But why me? Lots of paper dolls about.”

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

“A mere coincidence.”

“Lady Luck put you there. Most happily.”

“So. Figure stuff, right? Viola’s cuz. You’ll keep my face indeterminate. Keep our pact intact, yes?”

“If you insist. Pity though.”

“So nice seeing you on Rhodes.”

“Kismet.”

“Well, a ‘K’ somewhere.”

The ancillary problem of course was that Michael seemed newly distant, undecided. Had he been more companionable she may have declined Pachis’ offer. In the end she decided, or rationalized, that Risk was the Name of the Game here — the fast track to learn what the F-B minders were actually pursuing. Posing for Pachis would allow time to query the sly fox. So: eyes open, arms crossed, teeth clinched. Thus, ever anxious to see where the fated string led, she returned to Vancouver, got faintly drunk and patiently posed for a week in his messy yet amenable studio in Yaletown, festooned with fragments of early Greek frescos, columns, artifacts and murals, and a commodious day bed. Minoan came easily to mind. And the word labyrinth. The studio’s nooks and crannies for bugs she intermittently studied, without revealing her purpose she hoped. Her heed set off a quick exchange.

“Pachis, parts of your studio are covered in a Stone Age dust.”

“Which the cleaner is loathe to remove I guess.”

“She’s that conscientious is she?”

He thought for a moment. “A study in ageless sloth.”

Catherine also wanted confirmation of the daughter’s whereabouts. “Amy’s now in grade school, you said, and staying with your aunt on weekdays.”

Pachis easily nodded. “An overall benefit, my aunt’s nearby home.”

He had sketched her many times as a teenager. Looking at these early drawings they were entertained by how little she had changed in two decades since. Which he proceeded to affirm. As expected, his ardor was the match of his passion to capture her on a tabula rasa canvass. Promptly he sent her off to a change room to ‘get comfortable’, calling after her: “You’ll appear mainly nude in some scenes, partly nude in others. Where I’ve nothing suitable, it’ll be easier to add than take away. The costuming is all vintage stuff.” This terse explanation, which only teased her suspicions, she decided to accommodate for the time being, a patience that was soon put to the test. With his usual intense presumption they spent some time salving her to get the subtle sheen he sought. It seemed she was in the cave of a beady Cyclops. He also asked her to shave, saying the contour of the mons, her ‘peerless labia’, was obscured otherwise. “Why? Who’ll notice? You’ve discovered the charms of

pedophilia in your mature years, your age of assent?” “Never much liked looking at a lousy toupee. And in some scenes the torso should be timeless.” He gravely added, “It’s also nicer to, well, osculate.” Ignoring her dry amusement, for there was little enough to remove, he devoted an absorbed interval to rendering her a nacreous child, availing himself of the excuse to excessively expound on his choice need — the realization of the breathtaking nymph who must represent the legend’s Minoan heroine, whose skin was touted a lustrous Krems cameo, which she realized was the generic tone of the Rhodes’ sculpture. The curiosity was the ease, presumption and briskness with which he proceeded, for the earlier teen artist had been agreeably and seductively tentative in his suggestion to draw her nude. Because she was perhaps curious to know how flagrant the North American tomcat scene had become while she was away, she looked on with droll amazement as her limbs and sex were so freely apprehended, as he handily spread her before him adroitly wielding a No No Razor, often fondling her the while as the razor honed her skin, her arousal, which she finally undertook as comic relief, a mere given, the glassine kiss that followed a historic curiosity. Even her belated orgasm was his to affirm, as if his mastery of such rules of order was routine. “The afterglow gives you a special patina.”

“Yes, Titian.”

Thus, standing before him contrapposto on his easel, her only costume a trig Artemis-style wig, her head turned to one side, as if surveying a distant landscape, did he fluently began, pausing only once to assess the image emerging before him. The surprise for her was the elaborateness of the Bronze Age setting of the painting that had awaited only her presence, its palatial form a revelation — the opening page of the proposed graphic novel. The thought that Borozov had a sly gambit up his sleeve still vexed, though she doubted this work would interest any internet satyr nor her identity be manifest to a colleague. In due course she was reasonably convinced there were no hidden devices to record their studio engagements. And nebbly Amy was whisked off to the aunt’s on the days she posed. Indeed, it seemed Catherine’s wish to eschew an audience was not unwelcome. Haltingly he explained: “Amy can be a pest somedays. The aunt knows I’m busy right now. She’s a bit of a prude. But likes Amy. She shuns the studio. Fortunately Amy likes her.”

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

The day she posed in a fanciful Greek cape — a chlamys he called it — he worked in a fast silence that seemed immune to interruption. Questions must wait their turn. Thus his sudden abrupt comment, during an impromptu pause, surprised.

“You embody it. A universal kore. And posterity will thank their lucky stars for us preserving it.”

She easily laughed. “In the words of one celebrated toff: What’s posterity ever done for me?”

“The Pneuma works in mysterious ways.”

“Pneuma? The great mundane fart?”

“The fiery cosmic spirit no less. Pneuma!”

“Sounds like someone at Fischer-Bakey’s been breathing down your neck .”

“I think we need less gin in your drink.”

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

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

“Where did you read that?”

“The front of my mind.”

“Sounds like you’d prefer a boy.”

“The elegance, the law of parsimony, applies to both, actually. And no, I don’t know anyone at the F-B Foundation — the question that seems to ‘lie in wait’ here. I simply applied for a grant. This Borozov chap you keep mentioning draws a blank — other than the fact that he heads up the board of F-B trustees, a fact you would, must know.”

She didn’t, until recently, but decided Pachis’s wariness on the subject a hindrance now. She smiled. “He does get around.”

One extraneous line sketch — which he hung by the daybed following her first day posing in the studio — was a fine diversion. The sketch, done from memory or during one of her time outs, was a swiftly-completed head and shoulder portrait that showed her pensively if not diffidently gazing into a mirror. She couldn’t remember him doing it. Working swiftly as he sometimes did astonished, for none of this compulsion and verve she recalled from their early days. Then she saw only a very cute male animal and decided the time was overdue to learn what the fuss was all about. He seemed leery this day of expanding on his Borozov or F-B connection though. She must be satisfied glimpsing the main work, and the late kore in the chlamys, the sylvan elongated beauty. He continued to work mainly in silence, nodding occasionally and engaging only in fleeting abstractions about a shadow patron: “Kissy is a bit of a shaman I think.” “Who isn’t in that family,” she readily replied. Then again the protracted silence, his canvas coming alive with a rich other world, his expression newly pacific, even serene. The perdurable question was timed she hoped to coincide with this cresting satisfaction.

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

“You are an original.” He barely smiled.

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

He looked up with momentary confusion. “That wall-sized mural in the salon? A friend took a picture of it.”

“Well, that too.”

“Serendipity.”

“Is it serendipitous?”

“An agreeable rendition. A reincarnation of sorts. Perhaps you once consorted with an Immortal.”

“Like your consorting with a special patron now.”

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

“You’ve met him then.”

He indulged a grimace. “One of his ‘accomplices’, yes. An office ‘ringmaster’.”

“He has a name?”

“His first name is Sergei. Didn’t learn the last.”

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

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

“No suggestions?”

“No.”

“A tacit trust.”

He looked carefully at her then but gave nothing away.

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

“I’m creating an immortal — a center ring female. The ringmaster, whoever he is, is only a page turner.”

“He knows the score then.”

“He values exceptional talent.”

“Any chance of meeting this ringmaster?”

“Who knows?” He curtly laughed. “I’m told he’s a hermit. More or less.”

“A hermit.” Then a line from poet she’d particularly liked came to mind. “‘Aloof with hermit-eye I scan, the present work of present man — a wild and dreamlike trade of blood and guile, too foolish for a tear, too wicked for a smile.’ A word to the wise.” Was it Coleridge or someone else? She couldn’t remember.

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

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

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

quickly despaired of each one. She imagined the day at an end when he approached and fondly kissed her. Half an hour later he began sketching her as she lay, partly spread-eagled, their humour then wavering between droll and jocular for he had never sketched her so before. “The abs danced when you snickered,” he said appreciatively. “Abs yes, so very important,” she mused, “always a posthumous treat.”

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

While dressing she took stock. The realistic sketches, torn from his pad as he proceeded, lay as scattered shards on the floor which she fetched and stacked on his easel. On one he had spent a while realistically detailing her loin and labia. Well, they were only sketches. His natty ‘inspiration’ that day, if that was the word — an aging Nabokov *Lolita*, say — lingered as a stale joke now that she had calmed down. If she once assumed Amy to be the lone studio snoop, that assessment seemed again this day optimistic. Amy was a fine sobering reminder. She could sense her anger foiling her otherwise languid, amused state. She had anticipated an interlude of serene lovemaking before Amy arrived and now felt cheated and rebuked.

Before leaving she looked again at the flat and studio. The rough brickwork was the problem, so many chinks and nooks and sculptural pieces to set a device in. The likely niches once more disclosed no implant though. So was her trust of the dynamo and his arresting art misplaced? The rare pleasure he gave her a liability? She did learn a salient fact that day: Pachis had an editor at F-B who cued the illustrations — the ‘page turner’. Another tidbit also alerted: the story line was likely incomplete — the board game scene being apparently an unexpected, unplanned for addition — meaning others she had yet to see if she stayed on. The pesky haunt was still the advent of the world wide net, a cute daring celebrity more or less in flagrante a fine louche tease on it, her hard won journalistic credentials sullied by an impetuous lapse. And all this to try to learn what a perplexing . mobster was up to on this continent. She was about to leave when the urge to sleep became well-nigh imperious. She was exhausted by the day’s events and import, and far from certain how she should proceed. Planning itself then seemed mazed, warped. Her secretary at ABN wanted to know the duration of her visit to Canada’s West Coast, an unknown then. She was tired and also hungry. The day bed never looked more inviting. Soon she was ensconced in its soft enveloping cushions in a housecoat, a fey smile flickering as she finished a corn beef sandwich and a Perrier, her yawning soon prodigious.

When she awoke the outer balcony windows revealed a heavy driving rain. She had slept through the night and was covered with a duvet Pachis must have placed. The street outside shivered in its asphalt armour beneath the pelting downpour. The day ahead threatened to be invincibly grim. An addict's down time, she mused. She recalled his comments about Asian sumptuousness versus Greek economy. His prized 'nothing in excess'. "A little surfeit please...in the hard light of day," she said to the empty room. Pachis was then in the tiny kitchen brewing coffee, setting out a breakfast, and readying his daughter's lunch, saying, "No, an apple is much better than a tart." He invited, at a distance, his model to agree, which she briefly suavely did. "Much better than a tart!" Almost at once he realized the gaff: his models garnered little esteem from his green-eyed daughter, particularly one discovered nearly *in flagrante*. Moreover, he was peeved this model had been so smoothly patronizing. "If she was really awake she really would agree."

Later, when Pachis and Amy left to register for a reading tutorial, Catherine strolled about the studio, impressed again by the partially completed canvases she would appear in, only to find a side passage, almost a crawl space, she hadn't noticed before. Indeed, it was all but hidden by a standing row of loose, blank canvasses, and a half-finished portrait bust of what looked like Yeltsin. The passage led to a narrow vaulted room with some packaged art supplies and a large canvass that initially amazed, then startled and shocked, and finally nettled. The name plate titled it The Sale. Smaller letters underneath read: Commissioned by Lavrenti Ganyanov, whom she knew to be a racy Russian photographer and illustrator. The scene featured a nude young woman seen from the back, being exhibited at a lavish, late Bronze Age Egyptian court, a young Akhenaten and his courtiers eyeing the pretty and vulnerable form. One of the courtiers was about to take her hand, as if the experience was new, embarrassing for her. A sensational comedown. Something a peeress newly sold into slavery might experience. What especially alerted was the detail, not Pachis' style, and her belated recognition of two faces — both lobbyists in the Russian Duma. The woman's slightly turned head — she looked away from her audience — was certainly hers, the figure credibly hers. Pachis, or another artist, had not altered this face. Yet the pose was not one she could remember adopting. If the picture itself was engaging and finely executed, the court sumptuous, the colour a vibrant paint box, the imputation that unknown images of herself might be entertaining a potential adversary irked — pictures less nuanced than this one. Some 'sale'! Was this pic a precursor to more flagrant internet scenes? Moreover, Pachis' claim of ignorance of Borozov and his flunkies had suddenly, dramatically dissolved. She knew the late versions of Photoshop could do wonders with interpolating digital photographs, yet presumed the painting before her to be free hand. The brush strokes looked authentic, though their uniformity made her reconsider that possibility. The prospect it hinted at — images of herself floating about in a feed lot limbo — made her slightly sick. She looked again about the studio but could find no space or object that might serve to house an audio or visual plant. Though not being a top drawer expert she was again far from certain.

Her anger touched off a confrontation with Pachis when he returned. At first she didn't want to reveal her new knowledge of the painting, a finesse gamble she'd played well before. Clever barbarians were ever vigilant, she reminded herself. But his presence set off an IED. He was, as she expected, dryly nonchalant.

"It's an outside order. A Photoshop conversion. A guy from the foundation. The name plate means nothing to me. As such. Another player. The original suffered a mark, a scrape. I was asked to touch it up. Someone's coming to collect it."

"The gents in the painting — friends of the pal?"

"What d'you mean?"

"If you have to ask you may be luckier than you think."

"Guess I'm blessed."

"Pachis, this is not a happy discovery. I'm leaving. Now."

"Oh for crissake!..."

TEN

Ammon Farouk strained to listen. The team he sent to find the Apsara dancer had found no leads. The jinn had vanished. The other team — the one looking for the elusive Dilsat — had unearthed some information about his elusive daughter, news he keenly awaited. The cell phone signal was initially poor, but the voice at the other end recognizable, that of a former Mutaween marshal in the Guardian Council of Nayef Saud. Ammon was slow to answer when told the latest. "Amman? Jordan? How could that be? She would never get that far."

The voice at the other end was not in doubt. "The pictures we've taken thus far are a match. We believe she's changed her name."

Ammon was dumfounded. She must have had help. "You're certain she's alone — acting alone?"

"She's pretending to be a tourist we think. A good cover under the circumstance. She may have some money."

Ammon could barely believe. The pampered child acting as a 'tourist'. With money? His silence seemed to cue the coming question.

"You want her taken or not?"

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

"If she strongly resists?"

"She must be returned!"

Ammon was dumfounded. Jordan. How could that be? His mind was suddenly laden with daunting speculation.

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Kissy Borozov looked out at the distant vista from a telescope in the Dubai Ritz-Carlton executive suite and thought how desperate, cold-blooded it all seemed, the prodigal steel glass chrysalides, many empty of any settled life. And in the distance, from this height — the Strait of Hormuz — which always reminded him of an endless rilled slough, above which a large helicopter now flew toting an SUV in a sling below it. The world of The Manifestly Chosen. No wonder the unchosen want to explode things now and then. So unlike the desert, and its immutable lasting silence. How ironic that this expansive land's lone benefice, its black gold, should lay out of sight below ground. Or that mainly foreigners, alien drudges and connivers might retrieve it for the wiley princes. Such contempt these descendants of desert warriors, marauders, had for stolid toilers, craftsmen, facilitators, who built for these potentates ever more lavish palaces, not unlike this one — even as the ingrained distrust, hatred and contempt mushroomed. More or less. Where could such princes possibly 'fit in' in Thomas Friedman's flat earth? Their very essence thrived in a steep acerbic hierarchy where the unworthy, those who slighted the Lion of God, must be execrated — their ineluctable jihad! The opportunities for a buccaneer seemed endless in such a wide beckoning sea. Ensconced in their palatial edifices, the princely rulers mustered and deployed their wily purveyors of: explosives, arms, digital spying, money laundering, drugs, prostitution (the virgins of paradise freelanced here), smuggling, stalking useful political wire-pullers, even conjuring heavenly vistas for the dedicated jihadis. The odours of greed and covetousness and menace masked in this Tower of Silence by scents of balsam, jasmine and attar of roses.

Well...such vagrant thoughts do conspire.

The letter from his brother demanding a face to face meeting he had hastily put aside. All in due time. Having the pit bull under house detention, carefully watched, after his impetuous murder of a rival cartel's minister, made Kissy's proxy work easier, more serviceably adroit. The elder convicted vor, the unconscionable volatile brother, was then routinely monitored, all communication vetted; the hippo minus his tail, someone said. (Hippos used their tales to spread their feces and so mark their territory.) Kissy being younger, overlooked, rarely given his due, yet ever patient, alert, judiciously ingratiating, slyly accommodating — devoutly nuanced as he deemed it — forged ahead below most of the scuttlebutt radar. Indeed, he was about to meet late cagey subsurface friend — the inimitable Aram Mir, a sly terrorist, dedicated, tireless, smart and hard-core. Impeccable manners disguising a flinty resolve — in an Armenian who converted to Islam in his late teens. A child of a dour Russian mother, the late father a member of the British-Armenian All Party Parliamentary Group, who worked for Technochem CJSC, perhaps cuing his son's interest in chemistry. The son a committed but evolved radical who would meet only with one Russian vor at a time, while his field men ranged about entrances and parkways. Aram Mir wielded a sly impertinence Kissy envied. Though as the meeting commenced, Aram's newer plans proved inapposite to the agile wit he usually exhibited.

Still, he began by revisiting the late droll strategy. "As you must know, we have a special agenda

which patronizes the ready-made constituency — those Westerners who find growing Western impiety and flagrancy a lingering bad smell.”

“Yes, your late targets are a revelation.” Kissy, who kept track of Aram’s exploits, had initially been heartened. The over all destruction might be less — no 9/11s — and an assessment of the net effect would allow for a time out.

After a proprietary smile, Aram proceeded this day with a comparative target list, expressing it in a kind of reverie: “Emphatically the makers of Face Off, a porno mill devoted to groundbreaking barbarity, a radical family court that appropriates children on a regular basis. one of two well-known celebrities who’ve sensationally feigned victimhood. and the head offices of one or two haughty cosmetic giants. A nosy salvo here and there.”

The pause that followed was a thoughtful one for Kissy. He was perhaps most taken by Aram’s reference to cosmetic hauteur. The dreamscape that turns some nervous gals inside out, in essence the hawking of humiliation, as he thought of it. Silicon, botox and collagen seemed heavy industries, in a market full of skin and hair products. If labiaplasty, the latest chic surgical intervention to re-sculpt a keen porn star, was a bit outré — an undertaking by one of Ganyanov’s plucked poules — the age’s toffy media and TV shows tended to quicken and vivify the salacious regard of pretty seamless bods, the virtual aspect becoming less and less noticeable. Continued the mindful Aram: “We must be more discerning, focused. The ripe targets have a particular reek about them.”

Despite the recognized acumen, Aram looked this day rather brittle Kissy thought. He had been strung out in Basra at the time, sorting out some recent chaotic rivalry there, and was here, Kissy knew, not to list favoured targets, but table new exacting ones. Thus, after his earlier amiable preamble, Aram began, with his usual thoroughness, detailing a new fatwa from a reigning sheikh, which urged the elimination of an artist who had taken some racy pictures of a pretty but unnamed Persian girl shedding a niqab and stylish burka. The pictures, fraught with anatomical detail, went viral on an internet site. The girl bore a close resemblance to the willful society daughter of a former Usra deputy. Kissy had not seen the pictures but in preparing to meet Aram learned from Sergei that the girl in the offending spread was in fact a canny look-a-like, a one-time Olympic pentathlon hopeful. Muslim female dress as sensational pornographic props, a newly budding meme on some sites, seemed to have attracted a gaga audience.

The artist, wryly named Louis Führ, an early recipient of a Fisher-Bakey grant, customarily trafficked in arresting salacity — in his case ‘artistic’ fashion photography — a Western bent, the racy chic of an indulgent, enticement imbued society. But here Führ had apparently touched a nerve. Cheeky exhibitionism, ‘entertainment for career ogles’ — Sergei’s phrase — was not an approved Muslim *divertissement*. With eyes looking off unfocused, Aram quietly stated,. “The fatawa will be carried out, the Sunni protocol of reprisal inviolate here. A passion play that may, for a time, upstage our current strategy — of other things to do.”

He then paused, smiled, and returned to his own agenda—which he quietly resumed enumerating as recompense perhaps — indelibly inking a few patrons of child pornography, smoke bombing a Victoria's Secret factory, skunking an injection site, actually raising a crack house. Aram assertively concluded with: "A natural constituency in the West is as vexed with the wiles of the Great Satan — in a nutshell. We bring them onside. In due course. With exemplary patience and example." Kissy sometimes wondered just how robust this new tack might be. Blind a porno fanatic? Castrate a Ponzi magnate? Probably not. Too craven — and in their way impugning aspects of Sharia cruelty itself — for the witty yet mindful Aram. Though few people would strenuously object to raising a crack house or 'skunking' a government injection site. The Ummah must innately approve. After all, the beloved houris were there for strivers — not those jaded idlers seeking asylum from the trial of growing up and old, often now via meth and fentanyl. It was all Kissy could do to keep from sniggering. One could make a mint in this judgmental, censorious climate, most safely in the West — parenthetically in multicultural havens like Canada, where he had applied for a work visa. A judicial haven that sanctioned a wide range of immigrants, regularly elected socialists in government, abided NGOs, and wide-ranging entitlement ideologues. So it seemed. Indeed, the English population there had more or less canonized apology itself, 'sorry' being an iconic response to slighting or inconveniencing another. A large country with a tiny population blessed with abundant natural resources which paid for its enviable benefit programs. A sizeable French community had little interest in the country at large — thus assuring some societal fragmentation and government debility. A ready made nest for wily observant entrepreneurs. Who could rely on a tidy banking system that had yet to be compromised. Your money was as safe there as anywhere. Being adept getting your select collateral into it was the membership fee. Once there, the foreign wolves were largely kept at bay. Canada be praised. He would have a visa and work entitlements resolved within the month. Not unlike Aram, he seemed a wayfarer striving for a better place, somewhere.

So whose face am I really looking at today he wondered as Aram looked off at Dubai City's Jumeirah Mosque and Burj al Arab in the distant haze beyond the balcony's arabesque stamped plexiglass. Almost plaintively the stoic maverick continued, as anticipated.

"The artiste. Always the artiste — the reliable fatwa inciter."

"So."

"I think he'll be more useful as a missing person than a corpse. Hustlers make poor martyrs. Our smarmy opportunist, who fancies honourable mentions among the glitterati, and now teases with Muslim female attire."

"A disappearance?"

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

"An indefinite disappearance?"

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

“An enigmatic note, left behind, perhaps?”

“We do know his script.”

“Of course.”

“There is another matter. Always another matter.”

Kissy smiled. “I’m sure.” Slowly he took in Aram’s stoic resolve to table the *real* purpose of his visit this day.

“This Bern Clinic I’ve heard you mention, in passing. The new ‘eugenics’ center. Passing itself off as a remedial clinic. I’ve been given an earful.”

“The progressive research facility?”

“Part of the dissolution. The canny fraud. The current sty.”

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

“Creating the ever-so-pretty pain free, pleased dolts. Denizens of the Come Kingdom. The inheritors of eugenics. The showcasing of unprecedented winsome possibility. The obsessive head trip...which our memorable Farouk has reminded us of.”

“Harvesting perfectible eggs, well-documented sperm?”

“Eugenics.”

“Well possibly. Over time. Beauty and health that perverse for you? Surely not.”

Aram was a moment responding, his usual droll expression abandoned, suggesting he was far from an engaged player here.

“The current lowdown suggests it is an eyesore. No human has the wisdom. ‘Dialectically’ it is an apt target. Perfectionism is a human minefield. We are not God.”

Aram’s lidded eyes rather confirmed his lack of enthusiasm here. The apathy of a mere cutout Kissy thought, as he began to read between the lines, debating the metaphor ‘eyesore’. He smiled, even as he tallied their own late handsome remuneration for quietly if belatedly providing the same clinic with superb eggs and sperm, from which the wizards there were undoubtedly fashioning all kinds of robust tissue cultures, as well as mapping the genetic blueprints for the idealized comers down the road! Moreover, the demands grew almost every month. The fact that Aram might be engaged to impair the enterprise came as a shock and cautionary warning. Aram had never appeared so stolid, phlegmatic, nor this reductive. The dedicated Islamic brothers must indeed have got under his skin, questioned, rebuked his specialty bent, called for, demanded, an act of contrition — smell alone not being an abiding ruin. Kissy was dismayed. This was not the blithely satiric pal he remembered.

“What do you propose?”

“Blowing it to kingdom come — convoking a status quo ante. Genetic marking is a sly, silly, direly consequential Western fetish, presaging the incubus of eugenics.” Again Aram’s look and manner belied his words.

Kissy smiled even as he winced. “Well, it may sometimes harbour an overly precious mandate. But bombing? With explosives? Pretty healthy babies that much of a disappointment are they?”

By then Aram seemed to be speaking as an automaton. A being Kissy did not recognize.

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

Kissy was not amused. Aram had never resorted to such arrant earnestness or, in his estimation, flagrant obtuseness — at least in his presence. One of the influential sheikhs must have got in the way, a potent elder not appreciating Aram’s canny tactical sense, one convening a motion of censure even expulsion, and a test to affirm loyalty. Could there be a tangential reason even? Someone who worked at the clinic, an influential Muslim perhaps, who helped restore an American combatant say, and about to go public, believing the clinic’s wondrous reconstructions one of God’s benefits? An apostasy not to be connived at? Could the sty not be removed without resorting to savagery, Kissy wondered.

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

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

For the first time Kissy looked at Aram with some dislike. This was not a scenario he anticipated, nor a being he remembered, and wondered if Aram was, in fact, perhaps playing another of his assessment games — a further evaluation of the iffy ‘stand-in’ Kissy.

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

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

Again Kissy smarted. This was new, despite the ‘I am told’. A knife edged development he had not anticipated, and wasn’t sure how to dull. Too obviously he had his work cut out for him.

When Aram left after his wrenching handshake, as if to tighten his request for what seemed a boatload of plastic, among other materiel, some of it stench bomb constituents as before, Kissy sensed an impasse he hadn’t seen, less guessed at. He actually liked Felix Muerner, the clinic’s head, believing him an astute, ambitious yet civilized man, and felt now a dilemma as poignant, if not as disruptive, as that posed by the exceedingly pretty Catherine Whyte. At one time, he too fancied embarrassing her — planting her on several internet cites, casting her as another abundantly confused American. Seeing her reaction. But the more he saw of her and read her copy the more he doubted such a comedown would suffice. The elegance of some silver samovars ever belie tarnishing. Moreover, she seemed to represent the best mentality left in the West and prized many of the same engaging things he did: decorum, hard work, discipline, candour in dealing with mulish opinion, painterly art, classical music — a late discovery as she worked Pachis’ sound system — in short, a sober if persistent wish to seize the high ground, as he once did when a young reporter at Komsomolskaya Pravda, thinking the

‘intellectual conscience’ might be heard. The effort was short lived of course. His conscience and nerve took a lengthy detour. Had his brother not thought him ‘salvageable’ he might still be a senior tour guide at The Hermitage. Bossy’s trade in art works — one facet of his otherwise bloated hucksterism that sullied both art and artists — was breathtaking at first, then merely bewildering as the constant suborning press-ganged one into the family practice. Now, with his noisy brother demanding a comeuppance with ABN’s Catherine Whyte, he was, *mutatis mutandis*, facing an unknown Aram over the Bern clinic and a daring photographer. The irony here was that Führ’s reputation equally resided in the talent of his retoucher, nicknamed Pachis who, in addition to his talent as a sculptor and painter, and superb airbrush artist — Führ’s handyman — had produced some beautiful paintings of the lovely Catherine Whyte — achingly beautiful for Kissy, who barely resisted his own premonition that he had fallen in love. No woman before had affected him this way. He wanted to know her better but instinctively knew such beauty might only be admired from afar. Eidolons have no home. Her own innate impetuosity might harm her in the end, but he did not want to have anything to do with that end, certainly not now. So he would bide his time: introduce her to the art world as the exemplary ‘kore’ he believed her to be, an original to be savoured at a distance, too engaging, appreciable, to vindictively slight or harm — his upbeat presumption. Sooner or later she would consider the craft and taste of the mural’s producer. The ancillary amusement was that she would be dismayed by the attention — an innate dislike of exhibitionism being one of her defining traits. In due course he would look over Bossy’s shoulder to savour the potential pics from Pachis’ studio — to see the cat in her current fair and God-given flesh! Her laughing flesh! The under bosses and some party heavies looked to him to run the show now that Bossy was working at arm’s length under house arrest, mainly because Bossy’s younger brother was the least worrisome — the least dangerous — to the other clan bosses. It was a perilous position, but one he was determined to outlive. In part, a determination spurred by the coming into his life of this perceptive Persephone, the Queen of his Underworld, the one hosting his missing ‘avocational conscience’, the rare wondrous Catherine Whyte. And now an improbable Aram had revived his vulnerability, stymied his regnant wish to act as a peerless bondsman who would forestall the use of deadly force. If he had too easily slighted a murderous credo before, he was determined this time to keep the hounds at bay.

Again Ammon was astonished. Obviously this later team was second rate as well. He almost spilt his coffee. The voice on the phone was unapologetic though. The fugitive had ‘come home’ but remained at large. But another of his lead tracker’s shoddy affirmations.

“Cairo is a messy place. We’ll find her. Sooner or later. She won’t slip away again.”

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

A slight pause ensued before the voice responded. “It’s not a good area she’s been seen in.”

“I want her alive.”

“That is understood.”

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

“One positive sighting.”

Ammon was all but speechless. “She must be found.”

“Of course.”

The disturbance down the street from the entrance to the intimate El-Mashrabiah restaurant, one of Kissy’s favourites in Cairo, was only exceptional in that the young woman two putative religious marshals sought to seize, had eluded both long enough to create a scene, which only incensed the abductors and terrified their target. Yet she managed to escape a second time, only to back herself against an indented shop front where her options were limited. There were no district police about — not unusual — and the few street folk at that hour only too keen to vanish while looking back to see what was happening. It seemed every time Kissy elected to visit this choice restaurant, a nearby face-off ensued.

Ordinarily Kissy would have paused but a second or two before climbing into the second of his two armoured limos, the superb supper over, his guests departing — the conclusion to this late visit with key players in the area. But the behaviour of the woman was frantic, her very life likely in the balance. The one abductor had produced what looked like a taser, an uncommon weapon in that street at that time. Kissy doubted the marshals were legitimate state officials — abductions were frequent then — and would plead a dedication to Allāh if confronted. The second man had at last cornered her and seized her arm. It looked as if the struggle was over, but another incident in that seething metropolis. For whatever reason — Kissy would mull the matter over hours later — he did tell two of his body guards to intervene. The sight of their submachine guns sent the abductors and remaining onlookers running in opposite directions. The girl, younger than Kissy thought at first, was obviously in pain, and now slumped down favouring her wrenched arm. “What do we do now?” Peter, his lead guard asked on his cell, looking at a distant Kissy as if at an apparition. “Put her in my car.” Briefly Peter indulged his talent as a method actor, this time affecting galling bewilderment, but proceeded as requested, saying with unexpected calm in Arabic to the crouching frantic girl, “Lookit, we’re leaving the area. Want a safe lift? Your boyfriends won’t take ‘no’ a second time.” When the girl looked up at him gesturing that she didn’t understand, he repeated the words in English. She seemed to relax with the last translation. Then, to Kissy’s amazement, he heard her answer via Peter’s cell phone two times in the two languages, the last in a surprisingly good imitation of Peter’s Russian-accented English. “You might as well bump me off here. Save some time.”

Peter was no longer the method actor losing his temper. Who in hell had time for games like this — in a place like this? A group of wary gawkers was regrouping. He looked back at Kissy then gritted his teeth. In English he said, “This is a ‘one off’, kid. I give you five seconds to make up your mind.”

Slowly he counted out the seconds looking at his Rolex. On the fourth count, after looking at Kissy and his grand vehicle, she straightened and allowed herself to be led to the slowly moving car as Peter diligently scanned the area.

She was hustled in the back with Kissy and Andrei. Igor sat on the rotary seat, the PPSH-4 sub-machine guns stashed at his side. Peter drove. They all glanced at her with as much disdainful habit as curiosity. Kissy was surprised to find her so young — perhaps still a teen — and looking as though she had been living in the street for some time. Dirty, no makeup, emaciated, matted hair escaping her shawl, what looked like a hematoma above her left eye, hands bruised and scraped, clothes tawdry despite her long skirt's expensive make and cut — the one clue that may have prompted his action. He was both entertained and curious. Her features suggested to him Circassian more than the Arab features he had initially surmised, and he deduced she was exceptionally pretty beneath the grime.

The ride back to his hotel was in silence. So Pygmalion, he said to himself. 'Pyg' being his select operative prefix. He wanted her to be the first to speak. Yet she held back, as if anticipating further mayhem. At last he said, "I can put you up for the night. In a clean comfortable hotel room. You'll be quite safe and unharmed, even your injuries attended to. Provided you answer some questions." She nodded as she wiped at a persistent tear. It had been a busy week for Kissy, an earlier visit to Ras Tannūrah one of the trials he had undertaken to reassess some of Bossy's late hirelings. As was suspected, several new faces proved to be plants from a rival mob. He had not been minding the store. He had to attend an assessment session with the big 'B' the next day. As he looked into a portion of the central rear view mirror, at this grubby edgy Dulcinea, he smiled. The limo then smelled of garlic. In her graven silence she seemed to await further mayhem.

"You can leave anytime, mam'selle," he said finally. "Do stay the night at our hotel. Have your injuries looked at. Have some supper. You're perfectly safe. We can talk in the morning — if you're still here."

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

"We understand your use of the front end stuff. That Egyptian court thing Ganyanov commissioned — The Sale — was clever but not really 'net worth' as we say. We'll soon have a few raw frames that should work. One F-B chap had another heart-to-heart with the artist. You were kept up to speed on that I understand. Chuckie Warren's notorious hot tub may be the asset here — one late companion being the dolly of a Whitehouse security advisor. Put Whyte in with the current doxies and she'll be a six-pack joke for a month at least. The insinuation of an 'ass end' investigation will only

keen the salacious innuendo. Ganyanov, our net guru, has another idea. Where you come in. The video B's watching features a new Enfilade model, Karen Guk. As you know, Kissy bought the Enfilade haut couture firm some time ago. A suggestive liaison with a Russian mink no less, could also sully Whyte at old true blue ABN. We know ambitious Karen will meet Whyte on her new feminist fashion beat. Whyte's new boss at ABN has pretty well imposed it — her change of assignment. He's one of ours, a believer in 'detente'. He told Whyte she can prowl the art scene so long as she reports on fashion and the 'new feminism'. A switch hit stance I imagine — meaning she'll be an art snoopy we've got to stay on top of. Really." To himself Kissy mused: so, still mad, bad and dangerous. But Sergei then had his eye on the louche options. "You must see that the Enfilade head boy, Antoine Plombiers, is introduced to Whyte. Karen will be a model at his shows and initiate a come on — a nice lure for a Borozov obsessed journalist, is it not? Karen is a stunner and a fine actor. Her English is good and we're getting her into a top American college — something she's wanted all along, apparently. The staging of all meetings will be recorded, intimating a professional lapse, a newsy pulled by a likely Rusky moll. An anathema for ABN's current CEO." Sergei faintly smiled, as much to himself. Kissy also smiled. Catherine Whyte would not be that gullible or careless, but knew his opinion wasn't pertinent here as Sergei plodded on. "There are other options in the works. One impinging on the donor egg trade in that Santa Barbara spa you helped set up some time ago for the Bern clinic. We know Whyte will do some egg digging sooner or later. It's a subject that's bound to come up in her new 'life style' job. We might even prompt a Russian consular secretary to sign on with the spa. Another watcher at large. Karen will also register with the clinic, the money for good eggs being substantial, and play a key roll in our lesbo entrapment. Felix will keep you posted. It's coming along. We may yet learn who Whyte's songbirds were here." He did not shake hands with Kissy when he left, offering instead a brisk nod.

What 'songbirds'?...

When again alone, in his own elegant study, full of faux artifacts reminiscent of the Egyptian Amarna court, Kissy, who badly needed a tonic then, relieved his anxiety by revisiting his discovery of the engaging fugitive near the El Mashrabiah restaurant in Cairo — Dilsat al Haiq, the name she proffered after many reassurances that she was free of further assault or abduction. The presence of his traveling secretary, Marfa, also seemed to console the waif when they got to their hotel. An older kindly woman of virtuosic patience and solicitude, Marfa too had weathered an arduous life and remained vigilant to the lined care in others. Marfa often surprised, and would come to be, in dealing with chary Dilsat, a providential help.

The offer of her own room, daily meals, medical attention, and cautiously shopping with Marfa in the hotel boutiques to buy some toiletries and new clothes, kept some of Dilsat's early wariness at bay. His initial demand in the limo was that she answer some questions about her street life in Cairo which

she agreed to do. In due course she would be free to leave with enough cash to take her to an address of her choosing. On hearing this she had politely smiled.

It didn't take him long to realize that her coming into his life, with the current push-pull aggravation, was fortuitous. Indeed, how often does one find a godsend in a stranger? How curious that she might be the very one, yes, the very one to foil Sergei's scurrilous script, even the stray targeting of the Bern clinic! He could barely believe his singular luck. Fortunately she spoke English well, his Arabic being minimal.

They sat down in the sitting room of his Cairo hotel suite late the following morning for a frank, back and forth talk. Some minor injuries had been appraised and dressed by a hotel medic. A Russian doctor would see her within the hour. With incidental satisfaction Kissy noted that the newly purchased jeans and blouse fit her well. The grime had made her look thinner than she was. Now her straightaway language and unaffected manner both surprised and reassured, a candid question leading the way.

"I think you better tell me who I'm, well, dealing with at this stage. I am grateful you came when you did, truly, but I don't know you from Adam."

Kissy smiled, aptly nodded, and with some bemusement spelled out, candidly as he dare, the Borozov business empire.

"Ours is an NGO business that sponsors the Fischer-Bakey Foundation, an arts academy, the Bern Clinic, especially its current research sector, the Apsara chain of show lounges and casinos, and several businesses that provide goods and services mainly for Russian consumers. My over-eager brother recently backed a food venture that proved to be misrepresented, and he's now dealing with the fallout, including...a gratuitous assault." Kissy decided mention of a murder rash here. "Be assured, if you undertake some of the work I'm going to propose, you'll be paid by me, and report only to me."

Her incredulity was immediate. "You want me to work — for you?"

"I'm hoping you will hear me out on that subject, for you have a talent innately suited to it I think. Let me say again, however, that you may leave when you wish. Best depart early, if you have no interest in what I'm about to say. A doctor will be here soon to reassess your general health. I am eager to learn more about you, though, and trust we can quietly talk for a time. Especially about a new beneficial and rewarding undertaking you'd be especially good at."

Dilsat was by then dryly amused. "Well, as *we* know, I don't have a lot of options right now. So try me."

"Before we proceed, I should know more about your own background. Your family and interests. One of the requisites I'm afraid."

After a brief faint smile, she began. "A sorry tale, by and large, not that it's unusual where I come from. I'm adopted. Fortunately I have a very kind stepmom. She's filled me in on some early details... didn't want me discovering them 'cold' on my own...lets see..where to begin....

What followed was a complex history Kissy listened to with a growing wonder and admiration for the obvious perceptive resourceful heroine before him.

Dilsat's real mother turned out to be Jordanian, a secretary in the Government Tenders Directorate, who had been raped by a Saudi prince, the subsequent child — Dilsat — abducted by an agent of the prince when the mother threatened an international exposé. A week later the mother was killed in a car crash. The child was given to Ammon to acquit the prince's 'indebtedness': Ammon had been instrumental, before his gaff, his 'demise', in backing the prince's clamp down on some Palestinian radicals in the West Bank. The child's registered father was a deceased Pakistani customs officer. Ammon's wife, the observant stoic Atiyaah, had quietly communicated these details when Dilsat became a teen. "A messy beginning," Dilsat said, Kissy's question about her past opening a wound. She then explained, in brief: the details of her stay in England, going to a Leeds' nursing school, joining a dance class, something she'd always wanted to do, and her adoptive father's gruesome rebuke of her 'impudence' on her return, and her desperate flight. "Women don't do much complaining or venturing about in Egypt." Yes, a rather common tale he thought. Even with the ghastliness — almost trite. "My stepfather is very strict and exacting. Mum does her best." A persistent welling tear mirrored mention of her standby mother. Wiping it she added, "If she's not in a hospital or prison by now she may be praying to be admitted." Again she paused, as if citing this possibility was a slur, a betrayal. "I doubt she's in any real danger, but I'll be very grateful if you can see if she's well, still at home and tell her I'm okay?" After a further laden smile she added, "The next group looking for me will simply have orders to bump me off...most like."

Kissy was anxious to learn more and pressed on, fully aware she was still warily finding her way here. Yet time was of the essence for him.

"We certainly will contact your mother — soon — a given. But now — can you verify the grades you had at the Leeds school? You said they were good."

"I was there only a year and a half, and I'm afraid to solicit them myself. I don't have a transcript with me. As you will understand."

"We can attend to that," he readily said. "You obviously enjoyed your brief stay there. Is it something you want to pursue — some kind of medical career?"

She was a time responding, as if her answer wasn't self-evident. "If possible — of course."

"The dance classes you mentioned — that so incensed your father — they were obviously more than a diversion." Again her answer was defensively simple. "Yes." "Are you any good?" he promptly asked. She answered rather wistfully he thought. "If and when you look up my marks you can also check with a teacher at the dance academy I attended." Her tear-complexioned face then reminded him of a lucent pond apple. "My time there...was special."

"What eventually might such training lead to, do you think?" The question was promptly placed.

She looked at him directly then, her expression pending. "A month ago I...well it's hardly germane

now is it? A word my English teacher liked.”

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

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

“If you had to choose, which would you give priority — medicine or dance?”

“You ask the hardest questions.”

He smiled but waited, with a growing satisfied patience.

“I felt most alive at the dance academy. Where I come from women move very little. Hard when you’re pregnant most of the time. Or in hiding. Trying to. The niqab isn’t always the external imposition some people think.”

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

“What if you had *third* choice — as I’ve intimated?”

Her prompt amusement was again unfeigned; indeed, she looked at him with a mixture of wonder and the initial wariness he had seen in the limo. “I have a suspicion this third option is maybe unsavoury. Even for me,” she added with a lax smile.

“Well, if you can imagine a more discrete and engaging way of making a living let me know.”

His comment had the desired effect. She wasn’t to be patronized.

“I’ve had people toy with me before. Still. I’m here. Listening. Trying to.” It was the very vigilance in her face that beckoned, assured Kissy, which the arrival of the doctor softened, a congenial older woman who carefully assessed her patient, rebandaged the hand, and gave her a sedative for her sprained ankle. Before leaving she advised Kissy to have the patient looked at again sooner than later.

Kissy smiled at Dilsat when the doctor left, and nodded, acknowledging her ongoing caution. “I do have a proposal I hope you’ll consider. It will benefit several people I admire, and keep a vital institution alive — yes.”

Dilsat stifled a laugh. “Sorry. I am listening.”

The more he considered Dilsat, the more he was convinced she would make a very resourceful field agent. What she had gone through in the last few months, injuries and all, once even getting across the border into Jordan, likely following some dissident or Syrian refugees, struck him as phenomenal. With some decent training she could be exemplary. Her accomplished English and innate Arabic very helpful, though he realized she tended to shun Arabic; it had been a way to annoy her father she later conceded. But how to broach the subject of becoming a field operative — with a fugitive from a harsh fundamentalist Muslim family? She could need some plastic surgery — to a face already nearly perfect — and a totally new legend. But the possibilities her resourcefulness promised, given his current and future difficulties, were amazing. A truly outside, independent, field operative! He smiled a second time. Providence does not often come beckoning. He felt certain Chuckie Warren

would not slight a timely hint to avoid a snare. Or the directors of the Bern clinic — a topical discreet warning from a needy and heedful client, an unsuspected invisible outsider with an urgent letter. An agent known only to himself.

“I do have a demanding job to offer you. It pays well and has a future that you, with your street smarts and reserve energy, may wish to consider — after we see you whole, restored to good health, of course.”

“A real job? That pays well — for me?”

“With many benefits, both for yourself and, if truth be said, mankind in general.”

He would ever after remember her stifled laughter. Disbelief vying with wonder and, as it turned out, a droll if not daring willingness to hear him out.

“Yes, mankind,” he said a second time.

It was later that same day that a restive Kissy sought images of Charlie Warren’s ample hot tub — the tub having a web notoriety — to better assess the extent of Catherine Whyte’s jeopardy in being ‘interpolated’ into it, given the task Sergei saddled him with. The discovery of a semi-nude look-a-like already there, sitting on the tub rim, jawing with a grinning Charlie, prompted ready wonder. On recognizing the fugitive Apsara performer — an identity the assault publicity had affirmed — Kissy smiled. His belated recognition of the girl’s similarity now provoked laughter. He’d noted the likeness before but never found it, well, fortuitous. How ‘regretfully’ he’d advise Sergei that a dead ringer of Whyte was already in the tub! Imagining *how* she got there was as numinous as her being there.

Unlike Kissy that day, Ammon Farouk was promptly explosively aghast.

“What are you telling me?”

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

“They took her — in a limo? Her!”

“As I’ve said.”

“A Russian limo?”

“Perhaps. Hard to say.”

“What do you mean? You got the number?”

“It was too far away.”

The pause was electric.

“How do you mean ‘far away’?”

The momentary silence was miasmic. The vision of his team ‘keeping a safe distance’ scored his consciousness. Even his hirelings had balked. He was livid. He could hardly believe what he was being told.

“You have not heard the end of this!”

ELEVEN

In the hard light of day one sometimes needs a disguise. On returning to her Santa Barbara suite after her snit with Pachis, Catherine found a spare note from Michael saying he would be in Dayton for a week. “I trust Pachis had a ball.” His final, not inappropriate, comment. He had not taken kindly to her decision to visit her old school pal and, especially, ‘pose for the ponce’ as he put it. If that liaison with Pachis struck her now as stalemated — given her discovery of the awful painting — she did not regret the adventure, for she had acquired some telling info there.

The disguise she anticipated making use of now — given her apparent conspicuousness on this continent (where she had once imagined a relative anonymity) — came in the form of some select makeup and a blond wig a spry friend from Paramount had loaned her which she now fetched from a cupboard. The note was still attached: ‘Does wonders for the cash flow, if you must shop at Mondaine, or the Bird Cage — the new boutique bazaar. Saving on hairdressers is a bonus at both joints. The colouring’s perfect I think.’

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

Hejaz set the package aside after seeing that Aram’s messenger left unnoticed. The package contained the first installation of the F-B novel, based on a myth where a Minoan aristo becomes a slave then an Egyptian queen. Hejaz snorted. He looked again at several illustrations through a magnifying glass, thinking of the West’s infatuation with thinness. Pretty nimble sinews that elided fat and ungainliness. But the novel was not the only offering in the package. A set of photos tucked in an envelope had been overlaid by the book. Their presence was a surprise. Aram was expanding his archive it seemed. Some photos were of the Apsara dancer, a Catherine Whyte double, sitting *in* Chuckie Warren’s ‘traveling’ hot tub when Charlie was last in London — the very notorious tub Sergei, Borozov’s bag man, planned to mask the journalist in! But here an acutely lifelike *she* was already *in* — slouching at the edge, likely nude or semi-nude — the curtained enclosure hid part of the figure — a beady eyed Chuckie standing thigh deep in the water avidly looking her over. Another picture showed a naked creature from the back, almost certainly the same urchin, walking at dusk along a deserted pool deck toward the luminous curtains of the hot tub enclosure, a pithos or amphora balanced on her head, the vessel likely filled with pot and coke. Charlie liked his buds gamin and artifacts antiquarian. A more breathtakingly slender modern figure Hejaz had never seen. The

Western gods did some shameless things to their women. Skin of the finest light vellum, gracile sinews fashioned by a fussy German ceramicist. Just the denizen for Charlie's racey hot tub enclosure. Hejaz had learned a thing or two about Chuckie Warren...for Aram, via his Russian contacts, was a vigilant observer of such brazen tycoons, their deeds, minders, retainers and lobbyists. Hejaz could hear Aram fluently expounding on the subject. Charlie's lusts had apparently opened a mine of information, especially for the Cheka. Early immaculately interpolated pictures of Charlie with a senator's young daughter the Cheka used as blackmail to pilot the influence he wielded in the Senate, by pandering to business and political sharpies the Cheka were interested in. Such activity actually widened Charlie's company of pool companions and most everyone was happy. His cocksure reputation had always enhanced his talent as a facilitator. Had he been married with a family the hot tub might never have materialized, but bachelor Charlie was known as a dynamo self-starter and astute mindful adventurer. A doer, fixer, facilitator, his large, sheer curtained, jovial tub an excursion for assorted businessmen, harried pols and their advisors, idled consorts, media hopefuls, even ambitious models and actors. His comment about being a Tequila worm in the spritzers entertained for a season at least. His reputation soared when he helped get the Senate to delay indefinitely deployment of new missiles in some breakaway Eastern republics. He putatively saved the American taxpayer a bundle, eased tensions with the Russians (a postponement at least) and several edgy Europeans, and entertained a score of doughty wannabes. As long as he was on form in the Senate, his close house colleagues were known for their wry shrugs, as much from envy as perhaps admiration. Indeed, getting into the hot tub gave some gals a leg up: a new gig for a rock canary, the entry of an agent of influence into a newbie actress's directory, or a fun job for a teen in a select fanzine. The 'casual' dress code kept the atmosphere enticing.

But now, it seemed, the possibility of Catherine Whyte ever being 'noticed' in the bare-faced tub had lapsed. The girls were astonishingly alike. Hejaz regretted he could not be there to witness Sergei's grim recognition of the fact.

All the while, in the quiet wooded mansion on Kamenny Island in St. Petersburg, Dilsat Farouk came to learn, in full, Kissy's career offer — following a Rysachok flight with Marfa to Russia's 'cultural capital'. Arriving in Kissy's limo at the storybook estate left her awestruck. Life for her had taken an almost fairytale turn it seemed. The waters of the Neva Delta on that overcast morning yielded a still, pearl-gray surface, a lingering mist veiling lush embankment trees. Two young lads stood on a further bank fishing. She recalled Marfa saying that Kamenny Island was an ideal domicile for assessing consequential plans.

From her soft cozy bed where she had actually, comfortably *slept* that night, she keenly regarded the neatly dressed morning servant, who could very well inhabit a period English household: she had watched repeats of the original Upstairs Downstairs when she was in England. This servant's name

was not Sara, though, but Dasha, and her English laden with expressive Russian add-ons. Dilsat had slept so soundly in this loft room's cot that waking was a dismaying experience. Indeed, it took her a few seconds to realize she hadn't carelessly nodded off in some abandoned market stall — in the 'sleepless souk'. The recognition that she was alive and comfortable, despite her injuries, seemed almost daft. The room she was given overlooked a luxurious garden — pretty braided pathways in a cluster of colourful flower medallions and stately statues. The suspicion that something sinister awaited her in this sumptuous villa had not abated, but was attenuated by the servant who arrived to enquire after her health while bearing a tray of savoury breakfast fare which she placed on a small desk by the window. "You sure you've got the right room?" Dilsat politely asked, again, only to elicit a throaty laughter from Dasha as she entered the bathroom to place some extra towels. On emerging, Dasha heedfully said, "Mr. Borozov has habit of courtesy, want to know guests are, um, OK. Doctor come after breakfast today."

Dilsat smiled, "I'm fine. Won't be here long. Thank you." But Dasha, a girl about her age, urged her to calm down. "Marfa and Mr. Borozov worry for you, the bruises, sprain, cut on hand, and want doctor. Be relax. I be here six years. Great place and Mr. Borozov very nice man. Doctor friend. A true Alyosha Mister Kissy. You stay I think. For time. Easy to get cabbie. I least stay, eat and see doc. Best thing."

Dilsat looked at her injured bandaged hand and spread it on the soft Duvet of the snug cot where she had listlessly crashed shortly after arriving at the Kamenny villa.

"I draw bath. Food stay warm." The servant then gestured toward a walk-in closet. "Other clothes you may want. Size me — for you. Call button on head board and desk. Hope you here for while. Poka."

When Dasha left the loft bedroom that first morning, Dilsat almost followed the girl out to forthrightly request the cabbie that was promised. But the surroundings were so agreeable, her late dread so hauntingly vivid, that she hesitated, then lay back on the cot's bushy pillow and gazed into the relief scallops on the wavy oyster-white ceiling. All white nun's hats she thought. She looked in turn at the clothes Dasha mentioned, their very modesty appealing, reassuring. She fetched a piece of French toast from the tray and headed toward the bathroom. Pulling the one surgical glove tighter, she gingerly turned on the faucets to the creamy elongated tub.

The doctor, an attractive middle-aged woman, arrived with Kissy later that morning. Kissy remained outside the bedroom while the doctor found Dilsat's blood pressure, temperature, and lungs all satisfactory. But the wounds were another matter. The one hand she dressed anew, and spoke to Kissy afterward.

"She's been through a lot. Which she's kept to herself I think. Several lesions and likely a cracked rib or two. The one ankle has an inversion sprain. The ribs of course will heal on their own — but the ankle does need some attention. I'll come again tomorrow."

The following day Dilsat agreed to a frank talk with Kissy and the doctor. Dilsat's account of her recent adventures included details she thought she would never tell anyone, ever, including the fact that she had become an adept thief. But it was cathartic she soon realized to get some things off her chest. The doctor asked questions about her early life, childhood diseases, inoculations, interests, general health, redressed her hand and ankle. Kissy she thought seemed unsurprised by her story, yet listened in a heedful silence.

After the doctor left, she promptly candidly demanded of him, again, why she was, in point of fact, picked up. "We almost didn't," he replied with a grin. "But you are here, and can stay until you feel well enough to leave — if that's what you want." She remembered his earlier offer of a job, but the actual offer, spelled in detail now, she nearly gagged on. It began innocently enough after he checked to see they were indeed alone, a sly maneuver that concluded with the act of fetching a package of cigarettes. So Dilsat suspected. He offered one to her which she refused, her anxiety once more ganging up on her, though his quiet soft manner continued to disorient. If she still anticipated some sort of unwelcome advance, his words soon transposed the possibility. Indeed, her wonder grew with every word.

"I hope you can and will stay for a while. For reasons that are not altogether companionable." He smiled, as much to himself, she thought, and began again with a new resolve. "In short, I'm in need of a select investigator, a field agent, who is not drawn from my current pool of associates. To wit, someone 'fresh off the bus', so to speak. More on this later. From what I've heard of your recent flight, and some deductions of my own, you seem to be just the person I've been looking for. We might discuss the matter in the forthcoming days, I trust, as your hand and leg mend." He smiled, again as much to himself she thought. She was then speechless. "It's a position that pays well but will require a new legend for you — new name, identity, passport, and training. Please be assured, all persons you subsequently elect to call friends will be of your own choosing." Again he smiled, as if he'd neglected something, yet kept on. "It's an important even crucial job, that will almost certainly save several innocent lives. You should I think find it interesting. If I'm wrong in assuming so, well, you are free to leave anytime, without explanation, as I've said. It must be a private compact, my offer — exclusively between you and me, for now. A third party may intervene later — but only as a conduit of information to and from me." After a brief silence, distracted perhaps by another thought, he promptly added, "Your injuries will of course heal as well here as elsewhere." His last smile, she decided, was unfeigned.

"You want me? To work...for you? Me? As an investigator? A field agent?"

"In a nutshell."

If her impulse was to again resort to laughter, his ever patient regard of her nixed the urge. "You actually have a job you need a, a 'fugitive' for?"

"Yes, a very, very special escape artist."

Her prompt amusement was still born. “So how special is ‘special’?”

Kissy smiled. “A person willing to shuck an old identity for a new — yet remain essentially the same person.” He was further reassured by the equable way she took this in without giving anything away.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Yes, stay here and become a newly minted person with career prospects in intelligence work...or leave with the old familiar person intact.”

With some resignation she said. “The yes-no questionnaire.”

Days later, they sat under a rose pergola by the entrance to the Bastide Manor House, Kissy’s other getaway near Cap Martin on the Cote d’Azur. His trusted secretary, the inimitable Marfa, worked at a table near a back staircase decked with orchids, and spoke quietly on a cell phone before an open laptop. Wisteria, Cypress and old Olive trees formed a bosket that screened an old church and chapel. Dilsat could hardly imagine a more unexpected or pleasing setting for the proposed shaping of her new identity as a prospective field agent, including, in due course, a newly functional leg.

The pending assignment, her first, was not without risk and she marvelled at her own engagement with it. The prospect of both gaining a new identity and actually foiling a terrorist attack struck her then as providential. What better way to assert the civilized mandate she was beginning to prize — that one might live confident in one’s ability free of solemnized rebuke and retribution. What she didn’t know was that Kissy had decided Aram’s request for a large quantity of plastic, some of it PETN, in addition to the carbylamine chemicals, was in fact a warning. Someone else — not in Aram’s cell — had decided the Bern clinic an apt target. Aram intimated as much in a recent dead drop letter. The ‘cloaked’ advisement. A prompt discrete word to Muerner, the clinic’s director, was in order. But not through the usual channels. It must come from an outsider. His ‘insiders’ had many witnesses and prompters then. The chaste unknown messenger studiously sat before him now.

“You want me to go to the clinic and apply for a ‘lower limb radial fibular reconstruction’, your doctor’s late advisement” — the wording still amused — “with a ‘very important note’ to a clinic administrator.”

Kissy staidly nodded. “The one injury you had during your ‘peregrination’ — the one roof top flight you described — needs attending, we now know, by a specialist. It’s worse than initially thought; the doctor has assured me of this, though it can be repaired, restored. The clinic is second to none for such ligament and bone work. Bones and limbs set the stage for all acts.” He then paused for a moment. “The cautionary note, in its way, concerns a matter equally important. And every bit as consequential.”

Dilsat placidly nodded. “And you also think a slight alteration to my nose will help guarantee a freedom from the menace posed by the likes of my father — however attached I am to my nose.”

“It is only a suggestion. Already you look...well, have already altered the being connected with

your past.” He knew Dilsat was impressed and perhaps amused by the new make up and hairstyle, as well as the simple but fashionable wardrobe. He continued, “I cannot slight the proposed alteration of course. A Western Botticelli nose — which can be altered, restored later on — will seal the new identity. Give you an unparalleled freedom of movement. It is an arbitrary but not witless suggestion.”

She was silent for a time. She guessed the recommendation to be sound, yet felt it a betrayal of the ethnicity she still identified with. Scheherazade becoming a Botticelli doll. Some tale that. But she had decided it was a foregone conclusion and changed the subject, bringing up the matter of the endangered clinic.

“You’ve not fully explained why the clinic might be a target. It’s not in a war zone — it doesn’t help or secrete rebel partisans.” Kissy had debated telling only so much, but decided the messenger must be alert to the known facts.

“The enmity derives, I believe, as tenuous as it may sound, from both Shi’a and Sunni disapproval of the idealized rendering of humans by other humans, one objective of modern genetic engineering — a less defective human. The inherent louche intimation being that God the Creator left some things unfinished. Somehow lacking. The work of a knave or plodder. A most baleful innuendo.”

Dilsat couldn’t help smiling. “You don’t think they may have a point — about vanity, say?”

Kissy laughed. More and more he believed the girl an exceptional find. The question defined the answer he thought. “God gave us a brain. We are capable of both empathy and idealization. Remember, Islamic medicine was at one time the finest in the world. Without it, I doubt the Bern Clinic would inhabit this era to evolve as it has. Indeed, thanks to some Muslims, the lights never went out in the darkest periods of Medieval Europe. To live is to sing and dance, my sad mother used to say. She never got to...in any case, the surgeons at Bern can be instrumental in putting you back on your Terpsichorean feet. I know the clinic director. He too wants to see human beings thrive. An article of faith. Sadly we live in an age where disfavor, rebuke often reign. And the clinic has been cased by an Islamic cell, a close resourceful friend has confirmed it — which begs the question of a motive. Hence the odds on injunction, the ruin of a facility supposedly ‘rectifying’ God’s work — work, I believe, noble, humane. But as I said, you *can* leave if you feel the matter conjectural, or indeed, settled.”

Dilsat sensed some exhilaration listening to this candid declaration and, warming to such ‘belief’, calmly nodded, saying “For hope and reconciliation then. To foster ‘the better angels of our nature.’”

Kissy was touched, elated. “You put it very, very well.”

“A phrase I picked up in an English class. An American president said it apparently.

“Abraham Lincoln.”

“Another ‘Abraham’.” She smiled.

“Yes, another. One of the best.”

She stifled a laugh, electing to return to the mundane. “Another question. About the timing of the message you want me to hand-deliver to the clinic’s outpatient director.”

“The security protocol at the clinic was designed by an ex-KGB technician, which means it’s as good as circumstance allows. A pending attack will not take place for some time. The materiel necessary for an anticipated assault will take weeks to deliver, assemble and embed — your treatment there being fully complete well within that period. As for the head-up in the letter, the directors will alter some security measures. We live in fractious times. We do the best we can — all of us who care — to minimize the casualties. But again — your stay there will be uneventful, except for the benefit you’ll receive. It is only a beginning. You’ll be part of an adjunct team in the future — possibly in Canada. As I’ve said — you can leave, exempt yourself from further commitment. Your lower limb will be attended to regardless. But we must know your mind soon. It is a new venture for you. I don’t believe I’m being presumptuous in assuming you won’t be returning to your home anytime soon.”

“So, in the end, the nose alteration may be necessary. Longterm. The discrete identity, as you say.”

“We shouldn’t preclude it. At least at this stage. Our cosmetic Muse here has left you pretty as ever but not perhaps unrecognizable to someone who knows you well. The surgery will be a further guarantee. It is a serviceable intervention.”

“Can we again go over the danger to the clinic and its importance to civil seemly life.. Also, I want to know how my mother has fared. Longterm. It is an ongoing worry.”

Kissy smiled. He decided it would not be prudent at this stage to inform Dilsat that her very father could be a facilitator in the cell that maneuvered to attack the clinic, that his embarrassment with Western-perfected Apsaras was apparently sufficient for him to find some scapegoats and like-minded jihadis, if Aram’s inference was to be believed. Kissy’s main concern was that the clinic should be warned about the newly troublesome threat from a private source. There were too many eyes on himself and his staff, too much speculation about unusual visitations. Bossy would act rashly and likely make matters worse — provoke other cells — if he knew a past client was under threat of attack. Best keep that fact from him for now. Kissy thus responded to Dilsat’s query by first answering the second of her salient concerns: “Your mother appears to be well and engaged in routine activities at her Mosque. We continue to monitor her, of course, and will inform her of your safety when we feel such information can bypass Ammon. Leaving him in a limbo is a good strategy for now. You must trust me on this. The two men stalking you fled the moment Peter, one of my security guards, approached. Their identity remains unknown.”

Promptly Dilsat said, “I do appreciate you keeping an eye on my mum. She is my chief worry in all this.”

Kissy smiled, shouldered on. “Now, about the clinic. Admittance there is carefully regulated of course; it accepts referral patients only from designated specialists. Remember that its Director, Felix Muerner, suffers from the misrepresentations of his past, his Nazi ordeal, and is particularly vigilant in insulating himself and his work from scandal mongers. The Swiss authorities highly prize the work of

the clinic. We do know the chief terrorist players, and we are detailing plans to thwart them should they actually undertake to harm such a modern health facility. You will provide, via the coded letter, an early, crucial heads up on a possible assault by a terrorist entity.”

“Who would have researched gaining access to the clinic, then. As a patient or patients perhaps.”

Kissy smiled. The prompt deduction was, in his eyes, a further measure of the girl’s acumen. He added, “Patients have histories though. The referral process itself acts as a vetting operation.” In the end, Aram had been helpful here. The earlier meeting with him, as it turned out, was but a test of Kissy’s own loyalty. The unusual quantity of plastic Aram solicited that day had already been requisitioned — from another source. Aram’s late dead letter drop was a solemn advisement of the change — and thus a further acknowledgement that Kissy was still a confidant, a member of Aram’s coterie. Part of the message also identified a type of explosive that a suicide bomber — a patient — could have surgically implanted, also lodged in winter clothing. ‘Patient’, indeed. The pretty woman before him would be the clinic’s harbinger of the coming attack.

The timing was crucial. In the week past Kissy discovered that some charges against Bossy might be expanded — a late galvanizing development. At a minimum, Kissy’s stand-in management would be less time sensitive, and the explosives the other cell requisitioned thus easier to track in an expanded aloof timeline. The clinic would survive this bout of insidiousness. After the clinic’s warning and Dilsat’s treatment, Kissy and his new team would be in Canada, expanding the network of tipsters and lobbyists there. The land where business and pleasure might be enjoined, a substantial part of his investment cache newly stashed in comparatively reliable Canadian banks! He was already working on a revival of *Kismet*, which showcased the wonderful lyrical music of Alexander Borodin. A movie of Lermontov’s play *Masquerade* with Khachaturian’s haunting incidental music was also in the works. Music he sometimes felt only a gifted, nostalgic Armenian could write, its waltz one he often imagined dancing to with a belle of his own fanciful idealization — such as Catherine Whyte. An expressive wistful melody with engaging momentum. If Dilsat herself was far from assured she knew what was really going on, she had come to trust her patient, considerate and adroit rescuer. She now raised again her lingering concern about her mother. “You’ve filled me in on some facts about her current life, and I know calls to her now could be monitored. I also know fanatics can mistreat unreliable family members.”

“We know she is still at her residence and appears to be in good health. We will keep an eye on her of course, as you requested. Since the Apsara attack, it is unlikely your father will harm a faithful Muslim wife from a prosperous influential family. We have some leeway here. She is well liked in her community we’ve learned, and, as we’ve said, busy with activities in and around her mosque. Ammon remains a worry or course. He is impulsive and prone to act rashly. He won’t sit idle for long, indeed he cannot. He is likely desperate to rehabilitate himself in some say. We will certainly keep an eye on his activity. As the Arab proverb says, a falling camel brings out the knives. But soon you will be an

entirely new person — new identity, legend, passport, perhaps even looks. Though I know Muerner’s specialists will be challenged to try to improve on the original.”

The flattery barely hedged her further question. “I’ve heard stories about former secret service members — who can never really leave once they joined.”

It was a matter Kissy had to down play, at least for the time being. “All past history. Sad, but past. Your stay with us will be up when you choose. It is the third clause in your contract which includes a generous separation pay packet. We will only demand that some names not be divulged and you give us a few months notice. It’s a shared trust.” All too poignantly Dilsat understood the word ‘shared’, which she took in with a light smile. Kissy looked into his hands with a residual calm before continuing.

“As I’ve said earlier, it’s a life you will be a natural at. As for the present venture, you’ll benefit from the ministrations of a peerless bone and sinew expert, have ample opportunity to contemplate a new nose — even sound out the mavens at the clinic about their utopian vision. Always an aesthetic dare. Which, if you think misguided, you *can* walk away from should you choose.” Kissy lightly shrugged even as he ably smiled, poignantly knowing his words were less that forthright. His move to Canada remained the option that preserved his sense of self.

Dilsat had long since appreciated Kissy’s dismissive irony. “Some walk.”

Briefly they shared a mediative smile.

“Where did you learn to talk so well?” she belatedly asked. Her own study of English remained an ongoing adventure.

“Books. Many many books.” She was surprised by the trace of sadness that came over his face then; she had assumed books were a blessing.

“How many languages?”

He was a time responding. “Russian, French, English. Mainly. The Ineffables. ‘The peerless troika’ the Russian classicist Nabokov said.”

Dilsat had of course little comprehension of the incipient guilt Kissy wrestled with in recruiting this talented innocent. It could all end badly. Best not to spell out the latent ‘ifs’. It was part of the game. You play the hand you’re dealt.

TWELVE

Flushed, rose apple Viola, bless her, was only too keen to introduce a prospective member to the spa in Santa Barbara which an aunt had given her a year’s membership to. It was Catherine’s initial foray into the era’s health and beauty domain, which Deplorable Darin had ‘recommended’.

“Oh for sure...you’ll love the solarium...yes, Tuesday’s great.” Catherine believed her new well-crafted look would foil her media identity, and that Viola would be her usual amiable, airy, self-absorbed self. A risk, but an odds on gamble. She introduced herself over the phone as an acquaintance of Stanley Leatherby, the artist. “I think we briefly met at his studio. You mentioned the

spa at the time. His work you know is now on display in the Frisco Landowney Gallery. ”

“That’s awesome.”

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

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

“I see,” said Catherine with studious intent.

“The ‘in’ joke you see, the spa’s freedom from male scrutiny.”

“Very swish. Keep the bastards away so we can decently die out.””

“More or less, I guess.”

Both girls smiled, Viola with less alacrity.

Because the spa also featured a dome reminiscent of the Crystal Palace, the solarium and cold pool were pellucid in the late morning sun. Such that it was immediately apparent Old Boney would have been alert here, given some semi-nude swimmers, nor a demur against lesbian friendship, given the presence of a few apparently enamoured couples. “Not my bag; I’m a cis-gender Jill I guess,” Viola averred. Catherine was amused that being openly fond of boys in such a venue might need a dispensation. Well, it was an accusative era.

Later, as she sunned on the warm pool deck, she overheard Viola responding to a ready inquiry in the pool.

“Who’s your pal?” “She’s a friend of Stanley Leatherby — the painter.” “Don’t know him but I’m sure I’ve seen her before.” “She’s on a holiday, apparently.” “Another layoff?” “No, just a ‘breather’, she said, a time out, I believe.” “Maybe you can introduce us...in the cafeteria?”

But that ‘breather’ lapsed when Catherine took a tour of the facilities and learned about the pretty bright college kids there who had contracted to sell their eggs to the spa’s fertility clinic. “Oh they come and go, but some *can* make bundle,” said one pool lifeguard. A watchful student named Karen, who overheard the question, was more dryly informative — volunteering an answer in a faintly slavish accent that alerted Catherine. Unlike some of the bathers, Karen was attired in a discreet dark one piece, which enhanced her lithe leggy form.

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

(What Catherine did not know was that Karen had, on Cheka advisement, already registered with the spa, not immune to the sizeable payments made to stellar women willing to donate their eggs.)

On seeing two swimmers wearing only thongs leave the pool, Catherine remarked, “A What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get — more or less — gene pool?”

Karen affably nodded. “It’s becoming a rite here. On Tuesdays, I’m told, some approved female brokers want to see you nude and visit a room off the solarium. C’est la vie.”

“You’ve never been tempted?”

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

Karen, a student at a nearby college, and by far one of the sleeker of the current candidates, had an interview later that day where a spa medic would assess the comprehensive assortment of physiological tests she’d taken. She had long since passed the required SAT exams. “Lots of physical electives, none a waste,” she said. In a quiet shaded archway she and Catherine decanted the presumptions. Catherine decided to keep her queries free of any slavic inference.

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

“Why not? Rich folk do as they like. The eggs don’t always go to barren couples.”

“How do you mean?”

“Some go to research clinics. One in Bern, Switzerland. So I hear. Some researchers want to map actual exemplary genomes, I’m told. At least those from such persons.”

“May I talk to you afterward?”

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

“I work for an ad agency. A copywriter.” Close enough Catherine reasoned. She believed her wig and new makeup kept her incognito here.

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

“You said that pictures of relatives, especially parents and grandparents were important.”

“Further back too if you have them.”

“Were you surprised by that?”

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

“You mentioned a lot of tests.”

“You are told up front — an expanded California SAT, a physical with lab, balance, stress, colour

discrimination and music intonation — how close to perfect pitch — and fluency tests.”

“Fluency — what’s that?”

“The even oval movement of arms and legs — limbs in general — how smooth, continuous and geometric the arcs are. They put a motion transmitter on your limbs and record the symmetry and fluency of the prescribed moves, circular and elliptical.”

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

“Ah, no squinty-eyed spying.”

Karen looked away for a moment, not quite hiding a latent smile.

“And the stress tests?”

“Lung heart capacity measures, and the ‘ups’ — sit, pull, push.”

“What about the balance assay you mentioned?”

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

Again, Catherine nodded with a tacit if awed acquiescence.

“You mentioned an expanded SAT.”

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

“You never meet the buyers?”

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

“I detect a smile.”

“Some ask to see you nude.”

“You don’t think that’s out of line?”

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

“There is such a thing?”

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

“Not often. So.”

A fleeting smile touched Karen’s face. Jovially Catherine asked, “Any other ‘electives’?”

“They try to spot drug liable constitutions.”

“Is that possible?”

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

“That sounds specious. Put on.”

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

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

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

“That seems complicated.”

“The probes are small. No worse than the latest diabetic lancets.”

“Do you have diabetes?”

“No. A friend of a friend does.”

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

“They give you a massage.”

“Who’s they?”

“Two nurses.” Dryly Karen added, “Well, nothing’s sacred any more, right?”

“And you’re not putting me on.”

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

“It seems disingenuous.”

Karen became apathetic. “You want a picture?”

“It would fill in some blanks.”

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

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

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

“You said two. The nurses.”

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

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

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

With a diffidence that she hoped didn’t show, Catherine remembered venturing on.

“Standardized...can you be specific?”

“About the massage?”

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

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

“Is there penetration?”

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

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

“As I said, it’s not mandatory. Outside the SAT, a candidate can alter any test she wishes. Though

apparently few do.” Karen barely shrugged, her lidded eyes dulling a smile.

“So, that’s it at this stage? You’re through?”

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

“After the massage?”

“You shower first. No makeup.”

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

“It was a toss up. I was feeling pretty good then.” Again, the close smile.

“A minute can be a long time.”

“Some want to see your sex.”

Catherine hesitated. “How so?”

Karen suppressed a yawn.

“You’re joking.”

“Some judge the entire ensemble I guess.”

“Including the look of the sex?”

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

“Part of the canon.”

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

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

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

“Did you comply? I am curious.”

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

“Was it all worth it do you think?”

“I’m in the top percentile. Near the best dollar tier. And you get some useful tests you might not bother with.”

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

“In Switzerland I understand. Some talk I overheard. Bern I believe. Eggs and sperm. The boys visit a place somewhere nearby.”

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

Karen shook her head, carding a smile. “Not here. That I know of.”

When they parted before Karen’s college gate, Catherine had decided the buyer or buyers must be queuing up for this top drawer candidate, if what she learned was near the truth. She tried to imagine what fussy Willardson might have thought: the legs of a Balanchine dancer, the torso of a

middle distance runner, the face of Pushkin's Tatyana, as Catherine imagined it, the poise of a downhill racer, the will and acumen of an arbitrageur with a statistical facility to prove it. An heiress of an exclusive genome! Karen's parting smile was a surprise, more amiable than Catherine imagined.

A day later a brief phone message arrived from Karen, which read: "A new tie-in for you. Late today on my dorm terrace for details. If 8:30 is not good, we have to make it sometime next week." By then Catherine was aware that Karen led a busy life and arrived on time, just as the sun cleared some clouds, giving one side of the school's gabled square an amber aura, the other a dense royal purple shadow. Karen, a gold ray of sunlight etching her chin and bare shoulder, sat at a pedestal table on the terrace just off her second floor digs before a coffee thermos and two mugs. Catherine was promptly shown a postcard of a swank villa where Karen had been asked to go for an interview. Catherine was easily incredulous.

"You're actually going for another interview — to this toffy lair in Montecito?"

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

"A what?"

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

"You believe him?" The incredulity in Catherine's voice was more shrill than she intended.

"A limo, both ways."

"You've lost me."

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

Catherine was newly resigned. "When?"

"End of next week. Just after mid-terms."

"An interview. Not a 'social' call?"

"There's more to it."

"I'm sure." Only when she looked up did she realize Karen's calm demeanour was not companionable.

"You had me — us — tailed, right?"

"What are you talking about? No — absolutely not!"

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

Catherine was only momentarily flummoxed. "Someone saw us together at the spa. Anyway, doesn't that rather disqualify that someone as an astute appraiser? All things considered."

"What if that someone knew you worked for a trendy magazine? Or whatever?"

"Well they'd be mislead. In any case, why would anyone want me along for pete sake?"

"You tell me."

Catherine was confused and wary. "You're not really considering going?"

Again Karen's placid stare was both daunting and captivating. "I just know the broker suggested I bring you along. Prerumed you were a candidate." Following another pause, this one less onerous,

she added, “You’re interested, right?”

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

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

Catherine barely smiled.

“Just so.”

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

Languidly Karen shrugged. “They mainly read the market and real estate press there anyway, so I’m told.” The imputation amused Catherine: the residents of Montecito might not be that interested in egg donors. Suggesting that Karen’s earlier head up concern was a ploy or example of her posturing. Her affable smile followed. Such that Catherine wondered who was the target, the subject of interest here — she, or this twenty-something wonder who rather defied the probabilities. Her suspicions then were many and treacherous as the potholes in a Russian industrial city. Could this paragon be a spook for a Borozov heavy? The possibility framed the reality. If she believed she had approached the girl at the spa, she knew such encounters could be adroitly staged. Yet it was hard to imagine Karen anything but her own master, her own helmsman, and her private school an exclusive community. Cautiously, Catherine decided the charmer’s cool was just that — exemplary and innate. A being where ichor not blood coursed the veins. And she was tempted, this wily importunate Sunni an interesting if stray puzzle piece. “All in all, a rare adventure,” Karen added as if to settle the matter. Catherine managed a ready half-smile.

But after a night out with a keenly amorous Michael, the idea of joining Karen in her stagy auction at the villa lost its appeal. The whole business struck her as peremptory if not despotic, however inevitable in that avid, agog age...the tireless marketplace hatching another way for young women to sell their bodies. Ambitious Karen would do well, but the idea of participating was repugnant. The requisite period for the fertility drugs to take effect would be dreary and she hardly wanted her genes hawked to a stranger or an institution. She also had a hard time believing such a swank residence would be selected for — or its owners amenable to — such an evaluation. The tests Karen enumerated were exacting, some of them likely specious, some certainly invasive. Moreover, was she keen to glean copy for a tale that might petrify her position at ABN? Wanker Darin would likely find the story important (titillating) and keep her in the menstrual trenches for weeks. Yet her instincts told her something else was afoot here and to slight the matter at this stage might be premature, an expedient cop out. Are supposedly exemplary eggs now so bloody valuable? It was the probability that incensed. The ‘grin and bear it’ exploit.

A similar sense of unease beset Hejaz as he again viewed the the pictures someone had taken

of pretty Catherine Whyte in Pachis's flat and studio. The work of a Borozov field op, most like. Abdul had acquired and sent Hejaz a set, who was now struck by the uncanny match to the cabaret performer. His regard, in and of itself, was becoming an obsession, a bent he might, should ponder, when he was alone. How easily such pics derailed abstract thought. The limpid carnal female presence foreshadowed a breech, an engrossment that mocked piety, sanctity. The macho Arab faced a modern-day reckoning when the female was showcase pretty and her indignant voice publicly applauded. Hejaz still did not know if the elder Borozov knew of the journalist's double. The pics of the one girl in Charlie's hot tub certainly diminished the efficacy of adding others.

The Russian wanton, he'd learned via the tabloid press, had performed in the Apsara chain, Kissy's exclusive venture — a combination modish casino and show lounge — now in London, Bern and Prague, in addition to St. Petersburg and Moscow. In one production the double had apparently danced the role of Tatiana in a take off of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Hejaz had done some research on the show lounge club. Mythologically, Apsaras were dancers that seduced both God and man 'sprites for all cultures and occasions' — parenthetically a Devi here, a Peaseblossom there. Bewitching dancers all, though Zoya had apparently given her performance a 'balletic turn', according to one tabloid story. The setting in a late Bern production incorporated rich greenery, background birdsong, and near nude dancers blending and emerging from the greenery. The show was one especially designed for wealthy voyeuristic codgers, Hejaz mused, a reliable constituency then world wide. Tabloid skinny claimed that beautifully crafted face masks hid some of the finest young dancers in Europe! One poster featured a pretty elegant dancer wearing a cloisonné style face mask and little else, the dance move she struck a faintly blurred slow-mo take. The fetish for seeing ever more idealized, younger women nude seemed ordained world wide, some recent TV series full of brandished tits and buttocks, the tits themselves filched and fondled in select hunk hands...living jewels most men could barely imagine let alone touch. The beginning of the end. So vigilant Hejaz believed.

Zoya performed for at least one Russian photographer with sites on the internet, one Levrenti Ganyanov, a long standing profligate. The few pictures Hejaz could find were unusual in that the wanton Ganyanov had taken mostly full figure shots of young Zoya Stolbanov posing as a Greek sculptor might have positioned her. Despite his more salacious work, Ganyanov was obviously taken with exceptional proportion and symmetry. Yet Hejaz was cravenly disappointed she had not, it seemed, posed for Ganyanov's 'raptor camera', as it was called, his sets of shameless pictures — the amusement and laughter of the models often as conspicuous as their starkly factual bodies. He looked through all the Ganyanov files but could find only the one small set of the Apsara performer, the pictures studied and tame compared to the rest, which featured a herd of brazen beauties often in licentious clinches. Hejaz could barely believe that such flagrant posing might be fun, risible. The sets with two and three girls rubbing one another were even more incredible for him. A heinous sin so fondly enacted, so prettily captured. He had rarely seen women so, their intimate fluids so

incontrovertibly ‘there’. Were some diseased he wondered? It looked like pus. And their color, the delicate white pinks...after the finest light silks his mother wore...he was dumfounded and aroused. They did not even have hair...but the finest camel skin. The smooth patina bothered, alarmed him. He had little idea such contours even existed — lanced by such intricate seams. The whores he could barely afford were lumps of drying brick compared to these doe like denizens. There were no images of hardcore coupling, though in some, one girl managed to smoothly minimize a good sized dildo, a device called a ‘prickler’, so named because of the tiny thin strands that protruded from its penis member. A second smaller salient touched a part he’d rarely noticed, something called a glans, which looked suspiciously like a large pimple in some frames. Again the expression of droll amusement on the girls, even enjoyment mauled him. The set began with one toying with the device as a youngster playing with a hand gun, then led to the incremental insertions and lastly an expression daftly euphoric as the device was fully in place and the battery switches caressed by a loitering hand. Again, it was the attractiveness of the girls being so used that astonished him.

His excitement was both overwhelming and vexing. He had not abused himself so since his teens. Only his hatred, his utter contempt sustained him. Pink was surely the color of hell. The girls on the one site were aliens, sinister malevolent beings not of this earth. Shāyṭan’s proliferating masterpieces. About pornography in general Aram once said, “It is the way some people try to stay the boredom, subvert the ennui.” That Aram might be so dismissive struck Hejaz as flippant. Was he so immune to such corruption and dissolution? Hejaz recalled then a recent sobering exchange he had with Aram, who had been the first to raise the likelihood of the dancer and journalist being a match. Said Aram, “Borozov should know about this Apsara dancer. Certainly by now.”

Said Hejaz, “You’ve not said anything about Ammon’s fatwa. His sobering day of reckoning.”

Aram had slowly turned to stare at Hejaz, as a father might look upon an impatient youngster. “It is a question some of the elders have decided on.” He smiled. “The showcase murder of a young girl strengthens the spirit of Islam, you think?”

Hejaz scowled. “Who knows.”

“Ammon may yet experience a calming epiphany then.”

Hejaz remained bemused. “Him? Hardly. Too pissed off, disgruntled that guy.”

Aram eyed Hejaz with a patient smile. “Despondence, you know, is a major sin.”

“Well, manic Ammon’s not despondent.”

THIRTEEN

A last minute decision to go to the Montecito address had not been resolute. In the taxi Catherine debated the matter until the sumptuous villa’s entrance and tiled walkway appeared before her. Such a stately mansion and lush manicured landscape was hard to imagine. Willardson might have said the estate was more palazzo than villa, with its Florentine vaults, red tapered columns and light ochre

capitals. She decided she had to get out with Karen more often. The grounds beyond the entrance broadened into an expansive well-groomed Eden, Olive trees and wisteria bordering a main path to a distant tea house and thatched pavilion. She was further charmed by the Eastern, medieval-style mosaics that framed the grand entrance doors. Her disbelief took her breath away.

Two stout Asian gentlemen checked her invitation and surrogate ID. Then broadly smiled and pointed toward the tea house. “Just follow the main pathway.”

As she walked, taking in the profusion of rare scents and exotic colors, the tale of a revised Eden was recalled. ‘If two Asians had been the originals in the garden, they might have eaten the serpent instead and all would be well thereafter.’ Something inside of her said the serpent still resided somewhere, that being here was not efficacious. On seeing the low-lying staircase that led to the tea house she again hesitated and indulged a scowl. The physical peril in the CIS and Russian Federation was at times immutable — violence might come from any quarter. But here the jeopardy seemed elusive as the fragrant breeze. Karen would be on the steps to the tea house, as agreed — the Sirenic Karen, a beauty for all occasions. ‘Beauty is Nature’s brag, and must be shown.’ (Catherine’s slog with Milton was not entirely in vain.) So was she in or out, in this illusive isle of time? Well, she had returned to the West looking for a change of scenery and freedom from surveillance, threat and pursuit. The likelihood that she might be a ‘specimen’ in this idyllic setting — a thing to be stared or gawked at, appraised, evaluated — was a fine irony. She smiled. Joking in Eden was an apostasy.

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

“I came early. No one’s about. The sun’s too nice to pass up. Rather choosy about tan lines.”

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

“Another minute and we go up. Someone will come in due course.”

“You said swim suits in the park garden.”

“I left a carryall in the tea house at the top — which is ours for a time. You’ll like it.” With a Mona Lisa smile she added, “The ‘Come Kingdom’.”

The jest did not immediately register with Catherine for she was then placing the exotic birdsong while savoring the serenity of the grounds — Italian in inspiration perhaps but English permissive in evolution, as if the original planner had a client with an adventuresome if not carefree nature. Coleus and day lilies grew in abundance about severe implacable succulents, vivifying her own prickly dilemma. A central pond reflected philodendron and a miniature Sugar Loaf mountain, again suggestive of a world apart. Additional surprises and distractions, however many and ornate, she was determined to take in with her usual flinty care.

In the tea house Karen’s easy exhibitionism embodied a further taunt for she was in no hurry to fetch her bikini. After looking over the tea house she lolled on a low rattan chaise, her figure an art

class hologram, her egret eyes rarely leaving her silent companion, an attention Catherine hadn't expected and must have looked restive for Karen fetched a flask of brandy from under the chaise with a canny smile, her unexpectedly pithy words enhancing the come on. "A genteel swim suit, that." Catherine had put her one piece on under her street clothes, which she'd just removed. Karen continued, "You are what they hype: smart, fair, thin. I wish I had a second bikini...for my Clea...who, um, fits in so well." What flagged Catherine was her apprehension of the lean rarefied beauty, a novel experience that daunted as it teased. The mention of Clea — Lawrence Durrell's Clea being the only Clea she knew — also disarmed, Clea being a tonic for the lovelorn, intimating a liability — from a focused Justine! — that teased as it informed. Durrell was one of her few escapes in Russia. Despite a durable dismay, Catherine was too engrossed if not smitten to leave. When Karen rose to put on her bikini she paused to smooth her hair, allowing Catherine a close view, her light roan skin hairless below her head and free of tan lines. "You want to see the complete picture, right?" After a pause she added, "Trust enhances an adventure, yes?" It seemed the intrusion of 'the copywriter' had been shelved. At least for now. Karen added, her tanned elegant back to Catherine as she tied the stays to her string bikini, "My sun screen is good, if you want."

And so, in the fussed-over garden the two Eves loitered by the koi pond, as requested of Karen earlier, though by whom she didn't say, where the unreality of it all seemed to Catherine to confirm her new subversive second nature. For if Karen's earlier nimble words teased, her easy, even fond manner here inveigled. The insinuation — that they were fast friends — she adroitly played to, displaying a new dry bonhomie. "The koi are lining up. Yes."

In due course a large man dressed in white robes sauntered out from behind a hedgerow carrying a period lute, a detail that added to Catherine's sense of wonder. Genial handshakes followed. The matter at hand — the egg auction — was not mentioned; Karen and the fellow might have been ingratiating delegates at a horticultural convention. The gent, a Sunni Muslim Catherine thought, handed Karen the instrument, then suggested she try it out near the Cleia Temple, where the echoes were 'exquisite' — a lush grassy bower Karen found without waver, full of Anthurium and Calla Lily planters, the ones Catherine could name — surrounded by Cherry trees. "I take it we're to be discreetly observed," Catherine blandly said. Karen smiled after a brief survey of the surround, then easily slipped out of her bikini before settling on a low backless cedar bench to play the lyre, remarking, "The totem sun." Catherine looked off with a select moue and knelt with her suit in place.

"Someone's to be serenaded?" Catherine ventured.

"More or less. Very peaceful here. No one will come. It is not how they operate. In response to Catherine's dry smile she added, "The buyer we met is a regular at the spa. And such buyers like to look on at their leisure. Usually."

When Karen began testing some strings on the lute, Catherine pulled a curl from her wig over an eye, and imagined for a second time that day herself acting as an automaton as she knelt by Karen's

feet, out of sight of the pathway and hedgerows, waiting out a footling interval as Karen tuned the strings.

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

“The written bids are in.”

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

“Word of mouth only. So far. When I first arrived.” A ready smile followed.

Catherine then recalled the ‘friendly handshake’ — supposedly from the successful buyer.”

In any case, Karen was feeling pre-eminent. “It’s in the bag; no consolation offers here. My buyer wants a final look. Confirmation most like.”

Catherine smiled in spite of herself, her skin white as the Mallow border to the entrance of the bower, her presence all the more tingling as she reckoned with a burgeoning insinuation: the villa they had come to could very well be a Borozov ‘out take’ center, a business nub at the ready, a fact gleaned in her earliest research on the mobster’s international holdings, which belatedly implicated Karen’s ‘mansion’. The main residence might even have harbored a residency before the collapse, to serve ancillary functions now — spying and recruitment for a commercial enterprise. Exemplary eggs included in the mix. And now, in the midst of this swank paradise, a strange beautiful hoyden with wide strong shoulders, fluted navel, perfectly embossed breasts and period lyre, whose insouciance could be breathtaking...her tan total, ancient and fussed over as the chords she played, a half smile touching her lips...beauty that knew its worth and prided daring. After a time Catherine languidly stretched out on the luxuriant grass, in this confessional cell, idling in the fragrant calm, Karen’s classic baroque musicianship a condolent surprise. Catherine hadn’t expected to hear a galliard here!

During a pause Catherine spoke.

“You play well.”

“One of the time outs.”

“Still, I’d like to know if you have any qualms? Giving up a genetic being so after yourself?”

“For a cash windfall and layoff in Grindelwald?”

“Giving in effect a child to what — some mideast broker?”

“A few eggs. Including a genome to the DNA gamers.”

“Still, your blueprint for a unique individual.”

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

“You seem to have it all laid out.”

Karen suddenly smiled and put the lyre aside without comment. Then slipped down to kneel directly behind and above Catherine, studying her upside down face with ironic candor, before lifting her head and shoulders onto her thighs. “They began like this...” — fated words as the long brown fingers began to stroke Catherine’s neck and shoulders, the deft fingers gently soothing as the amiable voice instructed. “They spent a time tracking the upper bod first.”

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

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

But as the recognition itself further dismayed, beggaring certainty, Catherine put an end to the captivation by displacing the liquid hands. A scintilla of sobriety followed, as Karen sat back with amenable concern. The blush, Catherine suspected, must have reached her toes as she restored her top. The interval that arrested.

Karen then rose and knelt beside Catherine, stroking an idled calf and instep then, causing her subject a frisson of pain as she manipulated the ankle. Even in the suit, Catherine could not remember seeing herself so rawly factual, nor so elfin beside Karen's finely segmented body, the navel alone a sculptor's dream. Only then did she realize how Karen's inner lips hung down from the nether curve of her haunches like a couple of stubby fingers, a lad finding an opening, a sight she found troublesome, intimating as it did those porn babes who might get all the the king's horses and all the king's men inside. Karen, noting the look, again gave Catherine every opportunity to retreat, to end the interlude then and there, finally standing and briefly stretching, exhibiting the well defined, proportionate sinew that otherwise defied disparagement, her buff triangular back and plenary bum with its neat gluteal arc a near incarnate match of Michelangelo's David! With as much solicitude, despite her shivering, Catherine too stood and flexed idled arms. After a bemused smile, Karen retrieved and replaced her bikini. Catherine wanted to disarm, tranquilize the incident, but couldn't find the words. Instead she said, but without conviction, "a bit of a flounder," while looking in the direction of one hedgerow and the gambrel roof of an annex beyond. Karen genially, belatedly nodded, but as much to herself, for she was already elsewhere Catherine thought, planning, executing trial runs, her mind an ongoing abstraction of itself.

"A salty tide," Karen said after a time, musing again as much to herself.

A specific request intruded to delay Catherine's much sought departure. Karen was asked to stand nude for a minute by the Aegeia Shrine — an open sun bright area. Karen took up the exploit with her usual ready nonchalance while Catherine stood bemused. "It's what you anticipated?" she asked, her snit with Pachis rankling still; posing so was not then a diversion for her. "Voyeurs linger," Karen remarked, the imputation being that a further candid look had been anticipated as she once more removed her bikini. "Your coming was nice," she added. "One tee'd up plus." Catherine managed

managed a smile, saying, “You do look great,” as Karen set out for the shrine. “He’s there,” she said looking back. “Here’s ‘seeing me’”

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

Standing alone against the pale marble of the shrine, Karen’s beauty was replete in its factual detail, a vivid color medical illustration heedful Catherine felt culpable taking in, her new unfamiliar fascination all but numbing in its acuity, an absorption that delayed her seeing a stealthy intruder — with his digital camera — a curiosity that seemed to have but one explanation: someone was taking in the wonderwork on the sly! So unlike the one conspicuous buyer, a denizen from a casbah, who keenly eyed the graven image before him, his raised hands frequently gesturing wonder, amazement. This same ‘ogler’ suavely asked Karen to caress and point her breasts, a request that incited a rare scowl in his paragon, who yet did as asked and stood for another long minute as the chap looked on, his approbation manifest, unequivocal.

Karen was fulsomely thanked when he desisted. By then the camera gent had disappeared, though in that luxurious foliage it was hard to tell. Catherine was almost certain he hadn’t seen her. In any case, his camera, when she spotted him, was pointed at tony Karen and the happily voyeuristic buyer.

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

The next day, alone in her Santa Barbara pad, Catherine emerged from her dress closet and stood before her pier glass in a silk teddy, one of the coming-out benders on her return from Russia. Was it catching, she wondered, such dalliance by another name? Was polymorphous perverse, and the daring that went with it, Pachis’ reading of her amatory disposition? The fact that she had finally not lost her nerve in broaching Karen’s own sinewy body set the querulous tone of this morning after. The curiosity loomed afresh.

Some lines from Dryden intervened.

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

So: a Maenad-Borozov morning! Hence the resort to the interrogative details. Mirror mirror standing tall, who's the vainest of them all? The chick with an egg, the buyer with scratch, or the gadfly in a Mondaine teddy? Karen's visit to the villa with her in tow added the footnote she could not now ignore. Did the Sunni ghoul know who the second damsel in that choice bower was? If Kissy Borozov had hit upon yet another way for young women to sell their bodies, the enterprise had now become a must see for herself, in all the fleshy detail, despite her earlier reservations. The disconcerting curiosities — her discoveries of a recondite self, the enigmatic villa itself, the mysterious Sunni — all begged for explication, all risks newly mandated. Ironically, such a story would fall within the purview of her new job. Even Darin the Deplorable might spruce up his toffy condescension, the throne king newly cogitating on his ample bottom. Somethings you only see when ensnared. Moreover, daring had always been a seductive element in her work. Here it pertly reasserted itself. For one, the villa was registered under the name of Leonid Antonovich Chizhov, a banker crony of the Borozov's who, as far as she knew, never crossed the pond. An ABN search had confirmed the registration.

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

Almost as an automaton she fetched a regional ordnance map of Montecito, to eye again the gully that narrowed to the trail that ascended to the estate's perimeter, the lush dew spangled gardens there now misting the back of her mind. She had always been a collector of maps, timetables and itineraries, a habit that complimented her many investigations over the years. But as she looked and planned her route up the rise to the villa from the mesquite spidered ravine, the vivid memories of her 'fall' still drolly entertained. She had of course believed all along that sex was a multi-headed creature, but until her encounter with Karen the ways of men like Pachis and Michael had been sufficient. Even now, despite his moods, it was Michael she deemed to feel most comfortable with. Perhaps it was the dismay at having someone of Karen's street smarts discover her essentially callow, unfledged state that chafed. Perhaps she was still smarting from Pachis' supple manhandling of her the week before — a person she had deemed an eccentric but an unassuming and tenable teammate years before. Perhaps it was the protracted abstinence in Russia that made her vulnerable to any and all gaiety, dalliance.

The next day she returned to Montecito and set out in the late afternoon to discreetly inspect the villa — on her own! As she climbed the steep gritty path that led to the estate perimeter, the ongoing 'interrogation' of herself ceased: case dismissed! She had a body, and it dealt with her ego, endor-

phins et al, as best it could. Period. She would live to tell all one day.

With belated amazement she realized she'd been climbing for nearly half-an-hour, the steep sandy pathway bordered with catclaw, argave and arrow weed. The path had begun near a wading pool and its wide cement deck and multiple, periodically surging fountains. Children squealed in delight as they danced about the sudden random sprays. The belated discovery of the path surprised — this direct rise to the perimeter. Indeed, it seemed one might walk in on a dare. Looking back, the curiosity became an entreaty. She had to learn what really went on in the estate. And to do that you had to resort to stealth. A planned set of intrusions, if necessary, this first a cursory reconnoitre. More certainly to follow. Her mind was made up.

This urgent need to explore the estate itself on the sly Michael found impulsive when he discovered her the following day laying out her dark 'cat suit' as he called it — cap, tank top and tights, tight sleeveless turtleneck, mylar knee highs and soft ribbed shoes. This outfit prompted one of his throaty guffaws, such that Catherine too sensed an impulsiveness she might be wary of. She stood then stiffly looking out through her suite's Sky Track blinds at the cyan haze blurring the distant hills. With some impatience she said: "There's no easy way to get an apt take on the place."

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

"She or he would undoubtedly miss things. No good snoop likes abstruse assignments. Besides, I would have to pay her or him myself. In his present mood Deplorable D. isn't granting stipends let alone paying hirelings for speculative assignments."

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

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

After a first sip he proffered a scowl. "Are you so sure? You'd be an upper tier candidate, why not just join the queue. They'd be flattered."

"'Flattery' has nothing to do with it. Anyway, I doubt there is a 'queue', as such, and I would learn only what the promoters want to convey. No, I have to find out how defensive and retaliatory the outfit is. The villa could even have been a residency at one time. It's certainly got the look, the cupola aeralas and leaded windows. That you don't find out via e-mail or interview."

"Well, I'd let your secretary know what you're up to, and your ABN lawyer with that sharp private investigator."

"Both done. Yesterday, actually."

"I'm sure the lawyer was pleased."

"Delighted."

It was all she could do to look away as he touched her hair, believing his concern genuine...a

troubled smile could lead to an affectionate interlude she mightn't stray from.

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

The climb to reach the villa perimeter was more physically arduous than she remembered the day before. If there were some beam splitters at the property corners they would have been activated by now. All well concealed she concluded, if there, after reaching the shadows of a hedgerow that afforded a view of a side entrance while the sun descended. As some house personnel or staff departed, her ease of entry seemed ordained. But she wanted an outside look first. How ironic it should be, from this vantage, a durable, homey place, with radiant reflections and snuggling vines. Not unlike the timeless and easy stead-fastness of Karen's early 20th Century college!

If the security seemed lax, below par, her vigilant wariness discounted the likelihood. A growing suspicion suggested the villa itself could be a multi-task center, what indeed the Cheka once deemed a residency. Then, through an ornate window, she glimpsed a medley of bodies and genial faces, United Nations style Poobahs — including her boss! This discovery came as a splash of cold water. What in god's name was the weasel doing here? In such company? Looking again at the window glazing and casing she decided the voices within were likely immune to passive listening devices. That at least one window blind had been left partly open prompted a further debate with herself.

As she reassessed the inconspicuous side entrance a second time, she nearly ran into two heavies taking a leak into some bushes — security yard bulls bored and spoiling for action she guessed. In the shade of a nearby roof overhang she stood, waited, listening to the conversation; complaint, she recalled, doubled as soul food.

"Jees I had to piss."

"You watched the film?"

"Yeah, kept waiting for something to happen."

"Fat chance."

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

"Bloody pitiful."

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

"I can taste it tonight."

"Yeah, some nights the flics don't cut it."

"That one babe — something else."

"The one who pulled the sharpie."

"The Sunday face."

“Yea, for sure.”

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

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

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

So, she thought, at least one boss chap called — ‘Vitaly’.

“He says they even have them strip at the spa, then finger the pussy to assess arousal. An in-house specialty.”

“Looking. Always fucking looking.”

“Better believe it.”

In her sullen amusement she lost count of the area footfalls as the heavies left, and swiftly sought a move curtailed as it began, the large figure swift and sure binding an arm — her arm! The embarrassing lapse — not in a Moscow tenement but balmy Montecito! The sudden unreality nearly drew her into a swoon.

“Okay, okay,” she pleaded.

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

“I said okay!”

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

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

“I guess.”

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

“Something like that.”

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

The comment teased. The talkative duo trading scurrilities while summoning in house security? In watching them stand down after their conversation ceased was her initial gaff it seemed, the shuffling steps of the two disguising a third. ‘Impetuous,’ she could hear Michael say. The Black, both large and intimidating, despite his good looks, was thoroughly conversant with arm restraints. A second guard frisked her but without gratuitous insult. She couldn’t help wonder if the commentary varied over time.

They photographed her, took her identity papers, Olympus camera, and outer clothes, leaving her in her tank top and tights in a small bare room with a goon who, improvidence being a mugger, reminded her of Deplorable D. As peculiar was an Arabian chap who came into the room to stare at her as if by chance — no less, if memory served, than the one seen on the fated earlier visit here. He

stood apart for several seconds. But Catherine was keen to admonish the lingering silence.

“A keen eye for the ladies, have we?”

“Ladies, yes.”

“Ribs, legs, or babbling brooks?”

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

“Before or after they kick me out?”

“We must see...they have a protocol about such visitations here. I’m only surprised you were so sly in coming. I feel certain we shall meet again.”

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

Still, the eerie calm dragged on. The prospect of the villa being some kind of legation or intelligence annex seemed possible, given its perimeter guards. She wryly recalled how the Russians were past masters at keeping foreign directories and registers bogus, behind or out of date. In such a chary state she imagined the head wolverine sniffing the facts. First: She was, more than likely, a prying stringer guilty of trespass, not a curious ingenue stolidly making up her mind. Second: If charged, ABN must suspend her for a time (she was too good to fire). Third: If Kissy were involved here (Bossy being in a limbo), which her instincts told her he could be, he prided himself as wit not mugger; for now his ‘man in Montecito’ bided his time; after this chilly wait they might chat. Possible. Fourth: She would be booked, according to protocol, warned then kicked out. Possible. Fifth: She would not be harmed — in the bone yard sense — and resistance must incite. Sixth: She manifestly was, lest she forget, sitting in a credible dungeon! *Twice stung, Thrice mad, Thrice mad Petrograd!*

If such doggerel did not pacify, it did relieve the occasional shudder. What’s keeping the swine? Perhaps she did arrive on a night when nobody’s home and they had a dilemma on their hands. Moreover, she had learned very little about the mysterious estate, which remained just that. She tried to eschew the allusions to the jeopardy Michael alluded to. Moreover, was she sublimating here — trying to convince herself that a gifted young siren was not about to transfigure her life; that heady unfamiliar lasciviousness might prompt unwittingness, even nonrecognition of a former self?...

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

When the Black yard-bull re-entered it was with a newly edged resolve. He conducted her to a bright modern washroom, not a bog she noted, and told her rules had to be adhered to, even as he seemed unenthusiastic about the necessity here. Security clearance tout court he called it. Put on the gown hanging on the washroom door...nothing under it, hair to be let loose, all clothes to the proctor by the door...the house authority on lingerie, she mused. The second time he issued the instructions his

manner was testy. And he was huge. Schnell, schnell! she imagined someone shouting. So. Not the mutual embarrassment she imagined. Reluctantly she decided to comply even though she believed the injunction injuria. She ached to see what really went on here, rash as that might be. Article Five: resistance must incite...even as she brooded on the craven nature of compliance. Resistance here, moi? ‘Remember, don’t be obnoxious; pretend to be rather dumb and terribly earnest. Let them condescend to *you*.’ Her lawyer’s late begrudged advice.

When she approached the door, clutching her gown with a demureness she tried to disown, the large ominous Black was suddenly thoughtful as he regarded the clothes she held out to him.

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

In an attempt to mull her own dismay, she said, “Who else, Chuckie Warren.” But she was disappointed.

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

“I think he’s bankrupt.”

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

In turn Catherine was led into a bright room before a sullen woman seated at the foot of a gleaming examination table. Some of the high mirrored vitrines she guessed could house cameras. She planned to balk at the exam to further learn just how shirty the outfit was and thence what might be afoot in this upscale bower with its gene menagerie. A long shot but one she was prepared to take. The place posed a riddle that warped even her dismay, for she believed it full of a daunting past and perturbing activities now.

But on seeing her the woman brightened, smiled and beckoned as if they were old campaigners — so it seemed, her words surprising and unexpected as her sudden prompt cordiality. Catherine was about to declare that she was there under duress when the woman jauntily spoke up.

“Hi there, I’m Grace. Joe, our grounds security head, said you were a waste of time. Meaning of course that you’re not a worry. Moreover, such an exam is inappropriate anyway unless part of an overall assessment sanctioned by a spa director. But we can and do check an intruder’s attire. We have had some busybodies intent on placing bugging devices and spy cams. A month ago one young brat tried to add a permanent cyan dye to the our own pool water, a kid who didn’t get the evaluation she expected. Some of the egos you wouldn’t believe. Iceberg Lettuce — one of the steamed rejects Joe named. If pressed, we get the local sheriff’s deputies to check out a really obnoxious prowler. So we’ll just sit here and talk for a few minutes. When the proctor arrives with your things you can leave. They — Joe, Nick and Vitaly, our main security lads — have exercised due diligence, so nobody’s up a creek.” Grace’s short reedy laughter was high spirited as it was infectious and Catherine, more

intrigued than ever, easily silently nodded as Grace continued. “It seems they, the buyers, get more demanding each year, but what can you do. They pay the piper, and pay him well, the darlings. And with college tuitions being what they are, and good jobs not plentiful!...”

Again Catherine nodded, doing her best to convert her now rabid curiosity into nonchalance. But Grace seemed grateful for an audience. “Ordinarily I do some physicals for the upper tier donors and I guess because I was working late tonight on some reports, they figured I could see you — make a second assessment. They mainly wanted to make sure you weren’t concealing something. You’re not unlike some donors wary about the auctions we sometimes convene — curious, want to look the place over on the sly. The directors don’t approve of course and they’ve had to set an example or two. How you got as far as you did is an embarrassment for tonight’s detail, and they don’t want or need another warning. Believe me. So. Coffee, tea, cranberry juice? They can’t hear us out there so don’t be worried about my carrying on. I can say someone like you would have no trouble getting top dollar. I rarely see such a promising Zelda, ha, ha. For one, you’ve no piercings or tattoos. And a lot of kids these days have them. For many buyers such marks and mutilations are a complete turn off.”

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

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

The question seemed innocent enough.

“I’m staying with, visiting, a friend. A friend who goes to the spa. And got an interview here.” Catherine shrugged, hoping to appear stolidly curious. “There is a lot of talk — about the vetting procedure. Just wanted to familiarize myself, I guess. Maybe even meet someone on the QT. You have evening seminars I understand.” She hoped the group Darin was seen with would constitute such a gathering and cue a comment.

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

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

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

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

“Yes, but the desirable traits, and there is a growing consensus here, don’t hang out with old serendipity. The gene genie is out of the bottle. You don’t have it, chances are you may not. Genes are the cartoon you cannot rub out, hon. More and more people want to detail the cartoon.”

“But is it a humanizing exercise? I sometimes wonder. Does the question sound naive?” Again, Catherine was doing her best to prolong the pithy dialogue, just as the smiling proctor entered and placed Catherine’s effects on Grace’s examining table.

“I wouldn’t know about that. Progress is a dual edged sword, and some humans disparage order and ease, preferring to live on an edge. Otherwise they’re taking up too much space they say. Such gamine astute hardbodies the video marketplace itself touts — today’s swish adventurous doers.” Grace’s ready laughter seemed at times robust enough to excuse humanity itself. “Well hon, I talk way too much, and you must be anxious to leave. Use the screen in the corner if you like.”

As she dressed, allowing Grace to help straighten the turtleneck, Catherine began placing some of the questions that lingered, in hopes of finding out if her imagination was working overtime. The outcome this day did seem suspiciously benign. Moreover, the whole business seemed more than ever gallingly meretricious: an institutionalized way of keeping anxiety at a fever pitch, the suspicion that one might never ‘measure up’.

“I still wonder — is it really necessary — all this physical assessment?” Catherine began again, and was surprised by the candor with which Grace now addressed the issue.

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

“Bidding. I had no idea. You solicit sperm as well?” The consternation in Catherine’s voice caught Grace’s genial attention.

“Hon, humans don’t tango solo. The crucial, pivotal exemplar comes from a seemly zygote. A prized commodity in the growing underground economy, which today’s computers envisage quite well, I understand. The men, by the way, are assessed in a residential hospital nearby. The presumption about the eventual use of purchased egg, sperm and fetal tissue is not rocket science. Exemplary genomes aren’t stochastic — having a random probability distribution. Which you don’t see by guessing.”

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

“Well, a lot of our applicants are unsure what it’s all about. There are fewer men of course, mostly loners. The girls hang out more, comparing the few brochures out there, wondering if the cash is ticketed and whether they must sign a parental release.”

“So one might think.”

“Caution we don’t discourage. Though coming here as you did, dressed as Mata Hari, did alert one of our worry warts. As I’ve said, the security folk have had visitors who bring in a variety of concealed devices. Newsies usually. But when the Sunni chap saw you, he assumed you were in for a peek — and would split if you weren’t in earnest. I must say I’m curious why you came as you did.”

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

“Remember ours is a special assessment venue, hon. The mandate and criteria are private and classified. The actual marketing is done elsewhere.”

“There’s no supervisor I could speak to directly?”

“No, hon. You must put all queries to the spa’s registrar. I can’t say her staff won’t expand a bit — you are a rarity — but I’m just an old gandy RN. Who can’t afford to retire.”

“Excuse me for asking...I couldn’t help note the guests in the large conference auditorium.”

By then Grace was straightening up the room, replacing a chair, as if this overtime session was indeed over.

“It’s a plenum of the overseers, I believe. Who periodically review the clinic’s mandate.”

“The ones who approve what — the aims, the corporal and intellectual criteria?”

Grace’s smile was then less indulgent it seemed. “All that. They review and update current interests — research, culture, existing rules for the auctions. They set the standards for the shopping list and broker’s code.”

“And such criteria are classified?”

“The brokers insist on it. Hon, it’s getting on. And I still have some evaluations to write up. Put your pretty head to rest. If you’re secretly here to earn some extra cash and you haven’t got a buyer by week’s end — I’m a cockeyed optimist.” Again, a reedy chuckle filled the room. Despite the apparent benignity and geniality, Catherine could not ditch her suspicions. Perhaps she had dwelled too long in the land of comrade criminal. When she was ready to leave, Grace pointed to a hallway that would lead to the main entrance and wished her well. “The proctor, who’s office is off the entrance, will order a taxi,” she added just before Catherine left.

The long specified hallway seemed as much gallery and sectional loggia as a passageway. Unlike the utilitarian area Grace worked in, Catherine could have been in a period Italian palazzo here. In

her present suspicious frame of mind, the rich yet serene beauty of the place was almost a rebuke. Beautiful tapestries lined the walls, one entitled *The Fates*, after a Giovanni Antonio Bazzi mural, featuring ladies you did not dispute with. Further along a sculpture of a First Century copy of the *Esqualine Venus* by Praxiteles in which the arms had been added — ‘judiciously’ the plaque advised. As unbelievable was the gleaming marble floor, faux or not, much of it patterned after the *Sala Regia* in the Vatican she believed. Her incredulity remained acute.

Finding herself still on her own — no proctor in sight — she decided to do some exploring, her curiosity then a constant goad.

In an adjoining hallway, a series of sculptures aligned opposing walls, all life size, one side given to male figures, the other female. She imagined the ‘marble’ some kind of epoxy though it was hard to tell, the intimation of creamy marble uncanny. What was not in doubt was the modernity of the figures depicted, all the males reminiscent of Greek antecedents, the females modern leggy hoydens — very cute ‘boys’ with slim but observant hips and pert matching breasts. Not a *Playboy* bomber among the lot. What was also arresting was the clinical nudity — no body hair, the nipples and pubes fastidiously detailed. Each example, as attested by a small plaque, featured slight variants of proportion, limb articulation, cambered musculature, facial lineaments — every one a distinct paragon it seemed, from lithe to sinewy to gracile. One would have a hard time choosing, all else being equal. Even the short stylized coiffeurs had a halcyon presentation. The future casts of genetically engineered boys and girls? Prototypes slightly improved upon here? Bods definitely left standing on their own, as the wise woman said. Designed by elegance-infused minimalists. The matter seemed pertinent, given the insipid fad for monster boobs, pun intended. Just who such a gallery was created for added to the consuming mystery. The sudden opportunity to do more reconnoitring prompted her to turn into a narrower side corridor where she would pretend being lost if she were stopped, a state she decided she could easily affect. Beyond a display case of idealized portrait busts she heard someone talking on a cell phone. The exchange was not amicable. “She left? On her own? Nice. No, not the main hallway.”

She could hear someone hurrying along the wider corridor in the opposite direction. She walked quickly but smoothly to another intersection and turned left. It was a dimmer hall than the one she left. Stacked boxes aligned one side. Some contained leather bound book collections, others faïence tiles and borders for the tiles. Further down the corridor a door to a salon or study was slightly ajar, the walls covered in woven and beaded tapestries. Some bookcase shelves were empty, and the visible furniture, a silk-upholstered daybed, a lacquered period cabinet with matching end table, looked newly installed. She wanted to see more of the room yet could hear footsteps inside and hurried on.

The dim corridor led to a cleft of bright light from a doorway one had to pass through to continue. Two lads stood just inside, one fingering a belt or what might well be a weapon. She was about to turn back when the two approached with stoney grins and a wily proposition. She listened

with as much equanimity as she was able to muster; neither were soup jockeys. Initially she said, “I’m sorry, I got lost. I’m looking for the public entrance.” In response, the larger of the two stolidly smiled. “We have a problem,” he said in the manner of an apology. She tried to look appreciative.

The surreal aspect continued when the gent ‘invited’ her to stay the night. “We have some very nice guest suites. We’ll discuss our dilemma on the way. Please.” After a short silent walk, the shorter of the two firmly taking her arm, she was shown a lovely Edwardian suite — otherwise endowed with modern plumbing fixtures. If she was registered as a guest, they explained, security would not have to file a report. “You wouldn’t want the spa told of your impulsive trespass this night would you? Or your newspaper boss,” the one gent advised, leaving her newly askance,. “You are a promising candidate and such a report could prompt a dismissal from the spa — leaving your telltale ABN news copy aborted. Not something you’d want, surely.”

A forbidding silence followed this lordly assessment. They apparently had deduced who she was from the photograph, and decided America’s ‘newly grounded journalist’ Catherine Whyte coming to the villa as a wary egg donor was an investigative ruse. Acceding to their imposition entailed a further adventure Catherine assumed, yet she did not want to telegraph her suspicion and discomfort; if a cryptic Borozov were involved here he’d be alerted by now. She now believed she may have been videotaped with Grace, and could easily be recorded in a room such as this with its many crystal facets. Moreover, what was Darin the Deplorable doing at a conclave of egg brokers in a mansion what could well house a serving residency? As per usual the tycoons led a mazy life. Cool Karen said they wanted a good look. Well the elegant suite was a treat for a lass with a spare night on her hands. She shrugged, nodded her assent, doing her best to pretend accord. The price of eggs! The second stockier man then stepped forward — the ‘carrot bearer’ she assumed.

“You can of course leave, but you’ll make things a lot easier for us if you stay the night. On the registry log you’ll appear as a guest of Grace’s not a snoop. A stay that won’t append your record with whomever. If you need to make a call, use the phone inside the room. The public outlets are closed and locked after hours. If you insist on leaving, please call the proctor on the room phone and he’ll arrange a taxi. The basket inside contains among other things a smoked salmon sandwich, a fruit medley and a Flichman Malbec. We don’t have an after-hour kitchen. Unfortunately.”

He wryly smiled.

Their departure was as ominous as their coming, a call to the proctor a spur to further intervention, less innocuous she thought. So. She suspected rooms here were bugged, tiny camera lenses disguised in the ceiling fixtures, say. And if the villa doubled as a diplomatic sanctum or residency, the pics or tapes of her here could be added to an SVR codex. Grace was a fine performer. A newly head up Catherine concluded that a lot more was going here than gene-egg marketing, however lucrative that might be. The suite itself was both stylish and lovely, with expansive arched windows that overlooked a blossom-laden trophy garden. The fruit and health snacks, she noted with some

amusement, fairly bristled on a sideboard — for a special guest, one might assume, not a resolute snoop. With great reluctance she decided to stay the night. Her lawyer would make enquiries if she didn't contact him within two days. The extra day was her addendum.

It was all wildly incommensurate — the involution and fussiness extrinsic to a buccaneer like Bossy Borozov. Even Kissy for that matter. Or so she thought. She did not have such a fond opinion of herself to think the big 'B' would take this trouble to wing a sly buttinsky; she would have been lectured, roughed up a bit perhaps — an assault more nearly satisfying to a vengeful adversary than threat of a mundane physical — and sent packing ages ago. She had played along thus far, alert to the details, but learned very little. She might take a leisurely bath in the swirl tub, test the many creams and soaps, all top drawer she guessed, and dry herself in the balmy air jets and thick soft towels. Play along, let them have a good look. A Cheka detention cell at the Waldorf, in a world modern, worrisome if not terrifying, abstruse, extravagant and unbelievable, perhaps incomprehensible.

Returning from the swirl bath in a luxurious bath robe, she passed one of the room's myriad reflections and stopped for a flinty look. So *what's up doc?*..

Her bedroom overlooked a lovely picturesque pond, its lead glass windows triple glazed, the bed's thick goose down duvet suggestive of a recent 'snow fall'. Yet the bright bedside light appeared to lack a switch or accessible bulb. Cooperate: Red Magoo cannot see in the dark. Welcome to The Aquarium! — the phrase some GRU wag (a rarity to be sure) dubbed the GRU headquarters in Yasenevo. Catherine had tried to find possible sensors and lenses in the suite but could not confirm any. A fine problematic scenario she decided — alone in the lair of the wolf, who hadn't yet decided what to do with her, but had heard stories about her illustrious dimples, et cetera. She snorted. Such concern would demand this kind of verification? Well, her lawyer and his investigator would take action day after tomorrow if she hadn't contacted them, which she decided not to do on the recommended phone — a time frame a Borozov henchman would have guessed at. Thus did her newly menaced state of mind read the interlude in this lavish chamber, her cooperation again a precipitous gamble she labored to play out. What a performer they had in gandy dancer Grace! She was then so belatedly undecided a tear smarted a cheek. After a shrug she slipped beneath the duvet, suppressing a snigger when she discovered that it was electric and also controlled the light switch. Soon she was warm enough to test the silk sheets, and she soon fell asleep musing on the days' events, and her own largely unrehearsed and unrelenting daring.

The following morning a further electric shock on awakening: a set of work clothes, not unlike her own, was primly laid out on a sofa chair, replacing her stealth ensemble. They obviously had taken note of her work ware at ABN. As if to rub it in, they sent the stagy, style mad Elana — yes, the very same art salon Elana! — to draw a morning bath with an additional hair rinse conditioning offer, another gambit best not to resist, hot poop being the creature's special bag. As Elana worked on her sullen client, it was all Catherine could do to reassure herself she wasn't going mad. Loopy Elana

helped with the comparative example.

“You phiz in a chino, honest injun. The Admiral is a mensch and likes one dress for breaky. He wants to meet you. You could use some sun. I use the Enfilade sun blockers with dual moisturizers. Cuts down on the free radicals too.”

“Who’s the mensch Admiral? One of the free radicals?” Catherine tried to keep her rank curiosity in tow. Breakfast, here?

“They warned me about you. He speaks to many of our guests.”

“He’s a real Admiral?”

“Oh for sure. Retired Rear Admiral of the fleet at Archangel.”

“All the rust buckets.”

“Not with subs like the Kursk in the water.”

“The Kursk?”

“The most fantastic underwater leviathan ever built. More like a palace I hear.”

“A submarine a palace? Isn’t that the one that sank?”

“They told me you were a great comedian. There, now doesn’t that look fantastic. I wish I had a neck like yours.”

“Maybe not today.” She was amazed that Elana did not know about the Kursk.

She was about to ask Elana how long she’d worked here when the girl suddenly left, leaving behind a costume, a stylish gown — suitable for dining with the unbeknown Admiral Catherine mused. A droll Hobson’s choice, given that the chosen business weeds had disappeared — a belated change of plan she imagined, the day’s recommended gown being yet another tease? So, again solo in a bright room, a body spied on, possible sites for tiny lenses a distracting exercise. What do they want, in this naked egg bower? Something was atrociously amiss — a Borozov playing a footling game like this? Perhaps Kissy’s pseudonym Maenad was not fanciful...and he too fancied a hybrid being, Elana and the others for show only, Catherine’s newly planted boyish form a recondite treat. Ha, ha, ha! She sensed a warming glow to her skin, her apprehensive state growing. Shall we dance? she imagined the nameless Admiral exclaiming. To her surprise if not amazement the lone frock was a near perfect fit, the lingerie with it top drawer. Then a young waiter arrived to escort her to the dining room. The antic dream showed no signs of concluding. For one daft moment she imagined dining with the enigmatic Admiral in the lovely oversize bathrobe.

In a linen, crystal, silver plate and chandelier dining room, its large arched windows overlooking hedges of scarlet azaleas, the hostess introduced her to the smartly dressed aging Admiral who cordially greeted her — a sly photo op, perhaps. The warmth of the room’s gas braziers augmented the amity. She sat beside the Admiral across from two chess mavens. With cup mate grins they approved her dress. They all agreed — the new Russian couturiers were wonderfully creative. She

listened in silence, trying to piece together any stray or resonant words. All in vain. They talked at length about the current clever chess strategies — usually a waste in their estimation. She merely smiled when they sought her opinion. They did assure her the villa was a good place to improve her chess game and so enhance her spa ranking, a late-adopted program apparently. Many staff members loved chess and played it well. They admired her dedication and wished her well. She enacted a second smile, as Alice sometimes did in Wonderland.

Breakfast over, she was escorted to the front entrance rotunda, where her ‘arrival’, so characterized by the proctor, was suavely treated as a mere mix up in addresses: she had obviously wanted to visit the spa itself, its address along with an introductory gift certificate to its services promptly furnished. Thus was she free to go, a development that surprised and drolly entertained, but not impede. On returning to her room for her things, her work ensemble hanging in a closet, she was determined to undo all of Elana’s banal handiwork with her hair...just as the dizziness and nausea hit. Soon she crouched by the wardrobe while the scene faded into darkness. Her coffee had likely been spiked. Dining with the Admiral had been a limited success...

Vitaly was not pleased by the phone directives coming from Sergei, Bossy’s current ‘girl Friday’ and team mediator. “Whatever you’ve got going Sergei, it’s not playing well here. She’s an ABN journalist for pete sake, and this shanghaiing business is not what we do here.”

Sergei resumed in his usual spare monotone. “The sedative lasts a few hours, so keep her there one more night, then send her on her way. Let Elana’s crew and that medical team do their work. Insurance. Kissy got a late advisement from mother Muerner. Yes, the same. Make sure she has no material evidence of her stay. Easy enough for a whizzbang like you.”

“Look it, She obviously’s seen things — no, I don’t know exactly what — but we’ll be on her radar for some time. I think an accident might be the best, all things considered.”

“Absolutely not. We’ve many plans for dealing with her and its imperative that she leave bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Wide-eyed for sure.”

“So nice chatting with you.”

“You’re on notice. This is risky.”

Awakening, rather slowly, ‘coming to’ in an equally strange and quiet room with what Catherine first imagined an acute state of paramnesia — ‘remembering’ scenes and events experienced for the first time — she again doubted her sanity, certainly her surround. A parquet side table displayed English quill boxes and vintage inkwells. But in an adjoining room before a cheval glass the probabilities intruded, though they too made little sense despite their glaring likelihood. As she sat before the mirror, barely noting the sparsely furnished bedroom or the lovely gardens below leaded glass

windows, her face and form looked decidedly forlorn she thought. The list was not long but unyielding. She was dressed in day clothes she could not remember owning, and a strong sedative had likely laced her coffee. Thus the imagined photo op with the stiff laconic Admiral may have had a louche sequel; she had not applied such makeup, nor dressed herself so, and she smelled of a strong mint bath soap she could not recall Elana using. Any evidence of a carnal liaison must upstage her coming, to say the least.

A note by the bed, next to her wig, said a taxi limo was on call to take her directly to an address of her choosing.

The mirrored face before her looked bathetic and inescapable.

So. Round One — Whyte. Round Two — Borozov and company, however bizarre the contest seemed — here! She would awake, surely. No single nightmare prevailed over time. Or so she imagined.

When at last at home, incredibly and incontrovertibly at home, ensconced in her own think tank — her very own modest swirl tub, to wash away the alien soap smell — the idea of assault malingered as an example of the lone tree falling in the primeval forest...no one about to confirm it. Yet whatever happened yielded no telltale mark or stain; she was alive and apparently well. More than less. She decided that consulting her own physician was a must, and phoned to book an appointment.

By the morrow, after a lengthy sleep aided by a pill of her own choosing, she had all but ‘snapped out of it’ and began the day by calling her secretary, assuring her she was still in a journalistic trench and would surface in a day to two to deal with Deplorable D. Then she called scapegrace Pachis himself. He would espouse ignorance of course, but his tone of voice could answer a query or two in her own mind.

“Pachis, love, I need an info package, from a friendly brown nose.” But he grunted and rang off offering a paltry urgency: so he was in hock, poor lamb, and might not talk to hecklers. Stay clear of her for a fortnight at least, she could hear some cutout telling him.

But as she began writing out her thoughts and guesstimates in her work notes, a stray call arrived, the voice anonymous. It seemed she had a dedicated following these days, with or without sly Pachis’s prompting.

The voice on the phone, notable for a slight sibilance, tersely directed she do the following: “Come alone to the Cayuse Park at 2 PM, sit in the middle concourse and keep looking in front of you. No wig, no heavy clothing. Someone will advise you from behind. If you look back the individual will see you are a stranger and pass on by. Don’t be clever. This is a one time offer. It’s imperative you come by yourself.” Pachis or not, the bizarre narrative seemed then self-perpetuating. She bridled her anger and debated what to do, before deciding there was no decision to make — as the confusions proliferated.

The Cayuse was an wide sandy coast near Pebble Beach backed by a high rock-bound bluff that fell away into a series of spare woodland gullies, the curved coast framing one of these. A secluded haunt, dress optional, a place she'd never been to, nor, as she drolly recollected that day, tested for sound bytes. How the Russians daunted trade craft! In the end she almost didn't go; crap shoots she tried to avoid. Luckily the wait was short, the nearer eye invitations growing by the second when her name was uttered from behind in a faintly Slavic accent. The quiet voice could have been that of the original phone caller, his identity and purpose, given his succinct directions, but one more of the many conundrums.

"There are several large boulders off the upper cliff footpath: stand next to the largest of these, hands away from your sides, eyes always forward. I'll meet you there — and do the talking. You listen or I leave. Remove the shirt; a swim suit's okay if you're a shy hiker." Her sideways glimpse of him when he left revealed a lithe nude Adonis! She curtly, dryly guffawed. Of the many sun bathers about, most she thought were interested in her presence not her schedule, a guesstimate that offered little assurance given the import of her arriving there at all. Thus she easily returned to her car, only to pause, and begrudgingly, heatedly change her mind. After a moment's reprise from her heated swearing, she removed her shirt, checked the hook of her halter top, grimaced, and sought out the elevated footpath.

By the largest designated boulder she stood, contrapposto, looking out over a distant rugged shoreline, hands on hips, as an agile shadow sidled in behind, the punctilio at once hardcore, her wry self put to the test as he instructed her to stand nearer the boulder and keep staring forward while he sought to vet her hairdo, barrette and latterly her swim suit. About what she anticipated and raked the near environs for onlookers, not entirely encouraged she saw none.

"The digital honer you used on one of B's secretaries was set in the lining of an attaché case I'm told. The operational wizards must have been impressed!"

"Bless them."

"We're well screened here by the boulder. If you have a camera chum hereabouts he may be disappointed."

After her hairdo and barrette passed muster, he asked her to reverse her halter so he could see the cups. Which she slowly did after an arid laugh. When finished he slid her swim suit bottom off her bum. Her brief recoil seemed to further goad his concern. After an ambiguous hesitation he impatiently stated: "It's the gusset seams I want to see. As you must know. Orifices are not always that efficient and rather notionl."

"Please be advised or I'm leaving."

"Widen your stance a bit and keep looking forward."

With one hand she kept track of his progress in examining the fabric. If she anticipated a more intimate probe, she debated how she might smartly belt him without attracting the notice of any tribal

oaf below. Then suddenly, unexpectedly his voice became buoyant, genial, after her swim suit bottom returned with a snap.

“Today, righteous, you appear to be clean; we can talk.”

“What do you do in the wintertime?” she asked as she straightened her suit, accepting that sexual encounters were a norm here.

“Go skiing. You want more details, I’ll see you at the lookout scarp at the very top. There’s a hollow there you can sit down in. Same rule applies: keep your eyes forward and no questions. I’ll do the talking.”

She warmed to a pleasureless flush. Again she debated following her interlocutor’s instructions, but knew going back was as tedious as...though she did say, emphatically, “I’m not keen on going where we can’t be seen.”

“It’s a good spot for private words. If you won’t come fine, but you’ll miss a tale you know nothing about. It involves your life in and out of the Russian Federation. And earlier. A lot earlier. A story for altars and firesides, as the poet says. There is no danger in the telling of it, but the recognition of its pertinence will change your outlook. And maybe your life.”

“And here I thought you might have something important to say.”

But his footfalls were already out of ear shot when she’d finished. What to do? With a scold’s misgiving she followed, continuing to a small pine studded draw that was indeed discrete and secluded. As he said — a good place for private words — which proved to be summary and daunting as they seemed fantastic, were it not for a few stark, aberrant memories of her own. His glimpsed naked form was indeed that of a near perfect Adonis, his wide eyes masked by large dark glasses, his speech pithy and brisk, which she listened to with a forensic resolve, several times biting her lip.

“The villa’s Admiral was a port commander at the Kronstadt naval base who got sick from radiation poisoning. He’s better now and acts as a facilitator for the Borozovs. The breakfast with him will serve as a pretext — many guests enjoy dining with him. You now know you were drugged. One means of mustering the evidence of a tryst — to bargain with you later if necessary. An opportune deception. There’s more. Much more. The egg business, which prompted your coming to the villa, we’ll leave in limbo, for now.” Seamlessly he continued.

“You have a sister, Zoya, an identical twin as it turns out, and an older half sister. You were, with considerable effort and daring, given an American mother early on, who was a time recovering from a breach birth. It was an early and adroit maternity ward switch, the mother’s babe removed and given to an adoption agency. It the maneuver sounds daring and melodramatic, I’m assured it was. But successful. Your devoted American mum accepted you as her own. A mum who cherishes you — a mum, moreover, you are very fond of I understand.”

If Catherine was then dumbstruck, speechless, giddy guffawing and chortling ‘on deck’ — but only for a time — as the intricate story unfolded.

“Now *your* actual birth mother, an influential dissident, was the subject of some arcane if not wildcat drug interventions — in a Soviet prison. As a young babe Zoya survived meningitis — which you did not, the reason given on your fake death certificate. You are buried in a Moscow cemetery. To get to the nub: a friend of Kissy’s badly wants to know what long term effect the drugs your mother was subjected to have had on you and your twin. Hence a double blind experiment: one twin in a happy American home, the other in an expedient Russian domicile — to control for an environment variable. Your own doctor’s files have been covertly scrutinized, and you’ve been discretely examined in situ before, as you were at the villa. Yes. A female medic took some blood and a mouth swab at the villa while you were unconscious. As I said, it’s a complicated story. You were born on a collective farm near Kiev, and have an identical twin, and a half sister. Your twin is now a professional show lounge dancer. Your half sister, who was born before your mother’s imprisonment and drug treatment, is a missing person today, her whereabouts unknown. Think: *bespredel*. We’ll be in touch.”

He then left swiftly, surely as he came, his seamlessly tanned backside suggestive of Polyclitus’ Doryphorus (Spear Bearer). *Bespredel* — unmitigated lawlessness, wretchedness, perversity, hopelessness — the lingering Russian state of being. His words amazed, dumfounded. She could well imagine someone photographing her while she was unconscious in the villa — to intimate some kind of tryst. Insurance he said. But a medic, taking fluid and tissue samples while she was unconscious? That was a shock. Her mind was a welter. Was her explicator a mere cutout sent to taunt, confuse, disable? Her instincts said no. Such an operative would not sit among the groundlings. He had weathered all the risks and imparted too much detail to be an adjunct courier. She had anticipated a vetting, which he accomplished without being abusively assertive; so she chose to believe. Her Sunday spy. The FSB she knew had relentlessly spied on her in her Russian hotels, such tapes now part of a secret and impregnable archive she assumed. It was not the first time she’d chanced a fall — going this day to the Cayuse — only to end up more confused and bedevilled than ever. She had little idea what was really going on. Why all this info now — and from whom? She could hardly imagine a Borozov being party to such a gambit, nor gain anything by orchestrating it. Was the lordly Muerner involved here? Was enigmatic Kissy playing some ‘parental’ game, using the Cayuse chappie to reopen old questions about her origins that surfaced and distracted from time to time? It seemed she’d been turned to stone, to look out upon this sobering vista the rest of her life. She — a ‘changleing’ child? Her sweet dear American mum a surrogate parent who never let on, or knew? A Russian identical twin — and a half sister — subjects of an ongoing clandestine clinical assessment! And why all this skinny now — at this location? As she looked down the steep embankment, she reassessed his caution in meeting her — how the large boulder would have screened her presence from the naked cruisers and wannabes below but not a witness offshore with a tele lens. And then to cite that trailing signal she’d planted in a secretary’s brief case! Where would he have learned about that? She smiled to think he might imagine her trying it a second time — given her near failure with the first, a rare

coincidence of band widths being the fly in the ointment that belatedly sent her packing, though by then the baby formula itself, and its distribution network, were confirmed. Her abrupt expulsion thus intimated embarrassment, for some in the Cheka and Interior Ministry folk may have wanted more time to backlog some of her maneuvers — her assumption at the time. But who was calling the shots now?

She was as head up and restless the following morning, the details imparted at the Cayuse lingering as a hectic flush. Some of her life's past scenes were reviewed in the shower, then over a largely untouched breakfast: the special school, a particular nurse, her loving often anxious mother, the toffy stranger beholden to her father, the fitness instructor who came highly recommended, and got her on a vitamin and muscle toning program to remedy an 'eating disorder', even getting her mother to agree to brief stays in an area clinic. Then there was the time on a brief holiday in London when she got high as a mooner only to wake up in another clinic. And what in god's name might they be looking for during these suspect 'visitations', these putatively covert assessments? How could one possibly know in detail what mischief went on in a Soviet lockup over three decades ago? What long standing effects might be thus anticipated, assessed, affirmed, recorded, if the drugs or whatever were as potent as her interlocutor intimated? And why the secrecy? To coddle her devoted but timid mom — who would not be in on the secret? To blinker the subject herself, cognizance of one's circumstance being a pesky intervening variable with some ongoing — 'double blind' he said — assessments? Or, most likely, to protect some of the facilitators, the person or persons who managed to get her out and into America? Was she then a walking time bomb? Was she leading a shortened life, her usual robust health simply a foil to some insidious deterioration to come? And why such a hugger mugger revelation now? Could it be another sly Borozov gambol to both tease and addle her once again? And, more pressing and vexing, was she already on some photoshopped site being raped while drugged? "We'll be in touch," the Cayuse chap had said. Moreover, given these new facts, the daunting prospect of a covert recording of the events at the villa, especially in the tea house, mauled, left her in an alien funk. All of which begged the other vexing question: how much detailing would she entrust to her lame boss, Deplorable D., who was presumably one of the overseers to the egg custodians — a paper shuffler who tended to shy away from, if not rebuke, extempore investigations. Thus meeting him in his Hill's retreat that weekend to tell him of Kissy's possible gambit in egg marketing was like informing an illustrious steward that the oysters were off. While fawning over his garden's vivid lush bougainvillea, he seemed immune to unwelcome advisement, however pertinent.

"Well, until your B. initiates a shabby future's scam here, or the like, with associates the FBI are wary of, we must be fair and patient. As I've said before, stories that tend to buffet frangible democracies are imprudent and partisan — to say nothing of the sensationalism we do make every effort to nix. So how's the new feminism progressing these days?..." She didn't confront him with his being at the villa nor disclose her own curious and dismaying adventure there. She did visit her female

doctor for a thorough checkup and allowed herself to be reassured that she still had the body of a pristine teenager. “Well, a lot of today’s teens aren’t that fit, are they?” “Relax, you’re not one of them!” In response Catherine mugged a smile.

But the week that followed was uneventful on the clandestine disclosure front. And the Cayuse chap sent no calling card. It was a limbo she hadn’t anticipated and could not get her ducks in a row for further reconnoitring. The original application to the egg clinic sat unattended on her home desk. Her picture had been published several times since the inaugural OO Magazine cover, and her anonymity diminished. Thus, given her boss’s turgid interest in feminism, she let her new ‘job’ at ABN divert, provide some background entertainment. She could write about the day’s feminism in her sleep. Known as the Life Force Guru — her pompous in-house title — she fancifully proposed to byline her column as the The Krafft Lady. But Krafft (i.e. Krafft-Ebing) failed the DDT, the Deplorable D. Test. She: “Well, it’s all about untrammelled daring-do isn’t it? Doing your own thing. Natural, healthy, victimless, fun.” He: “Provided you keep it civil of course.”

Just barely did Catherine keep from clobbering the blockhead.

FOURTEEN

Kissy especially liked the neglected Bastide Manor House near Cap Martin on the Cote d’Azur. The rather seedy state of the Romanesque Revival architecture and raw landscape, kept showoff parvenus like Bossy elsewhere — usually at the Hôtel Ritz-Carleton. A thick tangled pergola spread across the house’s porch. Nearby, the remains of an old church with a chapel facilitated reflection. Such sylvan beauty bored cultural nimrods like Bossy. A vista just off the porch presented a bosket about as close to a placid, picturesque hinterland as one was to find. It was here not so long ago he’d ‘schooled’ Dilsat Farouk, who’d since delivered the crucial warning note, and was now nealy finished with her treatment at that same clinic. This day he would meet again with Aram Mir, the self-styled Moslem who kept him up to date on the vagaries of several rash Islamic rulers and the deeds of their adopted fanatics.

Kissy sat at a medieval pine table beneath a wide cantilevered umbrella just off the bosket — an outdoor prayer niche he thought of it — when the robust, sandy robed Aram arrived, his body guards having fanned out throughout the grounds. The greeting was, as ever, politely formal. After pouring Aram a mineral water, Kissy said, with concern.

“You mentioned some urgency in your late message.” Kissy assumed a new target was under consideration requiring an additional or fresh materiel outlay.

“I have made a list. Straightforward.” Aram placed a hand written page on the tray table. Kissy took it up with his usual look of ready sufferance, a look that intensified as he studied it. “Make a hand written copy,” Aram added.

“Your rare perfume ingredients...and supplementary plastic. A lot of both. Especially the latter. You’re going to raze the Eiffel Tower? Topple Big Ben?”

“The executive tower of Fornax Film Productions.”

“In Los Angeles?”

Aram’s silence was that of an impatient parent before an obstinate child.

“The whole building? Raze? In the scriptural sense?”

Aram barely smiled.

“But Fornax takes up only a few floors, does it not?”

“Some other floors are used by the video distributor who peddles their prurient and sadistic offal.”

Such language Kissy still hadn’t reckoned with, and wondered if he’d not been listening all that carefully in the past — the tone here even more caustic than the last time they met.

“A lot of broken bodies. If we’re talking...demolition. A lot of inconvenience, enmity. Not too ‘entertaining’.”

Aram looked coerced. Not enjoying this. His grimace a novelty for Kissy, which increased his suspicions. “They make, as you know, a convulsively hideous series called Face Off, egregious as human imagination can conceive. I have a tape of an executive planning session. The ever greater salacious provocation to garner an increasingly jaded audience. The episodes currently air on cable, essentially showcasing a flagrantly lewd and often sadistic carnality. Tales for the obscene addicted, some new psycho mumbo jumbo to humour the oglers. Such flagrancy now unctuously dismissed as ‘mature’.”

“Aram, we’re entering a distant orbit here.”

There was no enthusiasm or wit in Aram’s words. The canny jester had vanished. Recently chastened by an influential sheikh, Kissy wondered? The newly aloof Aram continued, “We will talk again...when you are more discursive. We will expect the material the end of the month. The usual offshore drop.”

It was perhaps the one time Kissy was not altogether relieved to see the back of Aram Mir, this oddly new exponent — of mass murder. Who had no time to chat, yet insisted on a face to face meeting. What in God’s name had got into the man? Did he think Kissy was wearing a wire? Whatever trust had been there before seemed abeyant now. Yet he could barely imagine Aram being coerced to commit such a devastating act. Would Sergei even consider requisitioning that amount of plastic for such a deed? Though he suspected Bossy would likely assent to the request. The more fool him. Kissy now wondered if Aram was newly persuaded to undertake a sly assessment of the younger brother, perhaps to appease his own vigilantes! At such times Kissy sensed his brief tenure over before it began. Was that it then — the perceptive Aram sent to vet the stand-in performer? That Aram would undertake such an evaluation seemed out of character. Still, some would listen to Aram.

That night Kissy watched two episodes of the specified program, Face Off, and tended to agree with Aram, or whoever, that a new level of wanton American ‘entertainment’ was at large. So what else was new? The adventures were often predatory in nature and detailed the jeopardy of pretty young folk, one cute sorceress being destined to be burned alive after a lengthy trial — a sorceress

looking like a Victoria's Secret model lacking lingerie! The obscenity was the ostensible acceptance of the pornographic bedlam. One project he had toyed with now seemed overdue, a book he once contemplated writing. The Blue Book, a history of the conscientious graphic rendering of sadistic menace and torment, its cynical or credulous writers, and the attractive, ambitious actors attuned to pandering to avid executive producers. As for Face Off — only a sadistically primed audience must find such programs engaging, the ensuing boredom with the status quo ante the next hurdle to overcome. Was daily life in pacific lands so enervating that only vengeful graphic mayhem might allow a brief respite from it? A stand-in joke. In any case, the ubiquitous presence of such entertainment cautioned. The audience for such fare he'd underestimated — the 'naughty bits' aficionados, the 'bits' now extending to near entireties. More and more he sensed, despite his reluctance, the topicality of jihad. Just when he was equanimously falling in love. He thought of his bust of Nefertiti and wondered if his love of exemplary beauty was not partly to blame. The problem with democracy — the returning, boomeranging iron laws of hierarchy and oligarchy. Robert Michels in Political Parties said it as well as anyone, presaging the beauty, shrewdness and will that daunts, molests. All that. So why not let the huge peccant beast die a natural death? Its offspring were already ailing — fat, inactive, benighted. Putting a bomb under its bum would only rouse its vindictive wrath. Set off the conflagration. Was that what Aram's real minders wanted — a total unrelenting world-wide jihad — as intimidated by this newly stolid Aram? Or was Aram, as predicated, simply testing the iffy stand-in? — the problematic Maenad? The ever lingering haunt.

The other problem, almost as pressing though not as consequential, at least not yet, was what to do with the prowler — his very own inamorata — who had obviously tried to case the villa at Montecito. The pictures they now had of the sapphic interlude could serve a derogatory purpose, the even ambient light in the tea house sufficient to enhance, vivify the images. He was disappointed of course. That she might be seduced by a harpy like Karen Guk suggested a sly wanton nature or, he strove to believe, a calculated ruse to learn about the whole enterprise that centered around the Montecito hub. A prospect even he did not welcome at this time. The egg business was important for the Bern clinic but would not distract her for long. He was assured by Vitaly that she may have glimpsed some of the materiel in the basement, where the moronic security detail had initially placed her. A cellar that just happened to have a sampling of advanced stainless steel fuel rods, some of which Vitaly's team were in the process of evaluating with a turned American expert. Would she have known what she saw? To a layman they could be stanchions for a children's play center. If she had a good look she would not be in doubt. He drew the late collection of digital photographs from the folder on his desk. There seemed little doubt the seduction of Catherine Whyte was real, the debonair Karen excelling at her liquid fingering. Oddly, he imagined both women participating, Karen herself given to unfeigned enjoyment. Both lovely in their way of course. Artemis and her doe. He had been briefed on the need to sully her late recondite coming to the villa, make it look like a craven assignation, with

Vitaly or the Admiral, say. She was drugged of course and remained oblivious of what transpired, likely propped up for a shot or two, a glass of scotch and lover nearby. As for the ensuing medical exam, it must have been a request from Gervase himself to Sergei and thence Vitaly — to facilitate the Bern maven's ongoing assessment of the stellar reporter, whose closet origins he'd been belatedly apprised of from Muerner himself. The one satisfaction being that Sergei's plan to place Catherine in Charlie Warren's hot tub was now defunct, given the belated discovery of a clone already there!

FIFTEEN

In her new vapid role as LFG (Life Force Guru), the chary Catherine attended a rehearsal of one of the spring fashion shows, a collection designed by the erstwhile film-maker Anton Plombiers — the current Enfilade designer —and found, her slagged astonishment rekindled, the now busy Karen modelling a fabric-print dress, the pattern a pastiche of Karen's own face! As entertaining was the recondite label, βροζοω, a fanciful insignia of the OPUS group, one of Kissy's Russian investment arms, which had bought up the Paris based Enfilade line. The highlight of the coming show, beside the appearance of tony Karen herself, was a set of gowns that seemed spun from the finest Steuben glass. Said ABN's fashion editor about Karen's presence in one, with Catherine's blessing: "A cool cucumber wrapped in the finest Steuben condom"— words that intimated Catherine didn't stand alone in the breach.

Later, on an open plaza that overlooked the ocean, agile Karen, looking like something from Ali Baba, performed balance gymnastics with a magic ball as the rehearsal wound down with a display of minimalist lingerie/sportswear, behind which slipstreamed the 'debut' of a new theatrical makeup applied on nude models to ape the tighter swimsuits. A gaggle of lecherous, green-painted men followed, but were deftly slapped about by the elegant models. More and more she imagined the prodigious Kissy at work here. His byline had not surfaced by accident. Maenad. A being seeking release from a limited mind and body to get a glimpse of a peerless paradise. So she believed.

Afterward, Catherine joined Karen in the bright make-ready and change room, Karen's egret eyes were alert to one and all, the spell she exerted all but ineffable, the haunt of a chimaera.

"Glad you came."

"You look great — tony frock that first one, all faces."

"More in the real show."

"Any surprises?"

"I am free, after."

"The egg scouts tea'd up, are they?"

"I am free after."

Catherine smiled. The thought of Bossy's or Kissy's liege lads possibly exploiting this paragon was more than she bargained for, and her own unrelenting curiosity, given Michael's ongoing

philandering, an endurance test. Was she, just perhaps, something of a Siren herself, as Michael carelessly teased, affirming his own occasional wonder if not dismay? As they studied one another in the make-ready mirror, Karen's folded arms framing herself, Catherine imagined a poised Artemis seeking unsuspecting prey. Nearly Man-Michael's form — only leaner, smoother, intermittently softer, better proportioned. Fortune's being.

If she managed to depart the rehearsal with a promise to attend the 'real' show and hang around after, the tear sheet on her desk when she returned further blurred her identity. Her secretary had placed a snippet from *Quidnunc*, a tuxedo tabloid, which contained a photo of Pachis and ostensibly herself (though identified as Coren Wily, a model) standing next to Abram Salakhova, the celebrated art collector/industrialist, the picture taken at a London gallery earlier that year. A further head up in the *Quidnunc* piece was that Pachis was identified as a friend and colleague of Luis Führ, the mod photographer of stylish, fitfully adventurous women.

That artistic liaison was becoming more and more enigmatic for she did not recognize the photo nor the dress, making it either a mischievous pastiche or evidence of a twin! Could Pachis be abetting a life she was still unmindful of, that of a Russian dancer sporting an alias? Possible. The magazine was dated a month before the attack, after which the dancer vanished. How the curiosities these days baffled and intimidated. Wilde's *Lady Bracknell* had weighed in on one aspect of the subject: to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both smacked of carelessness.

But surprises often gang up on one. Like the revelation at the Cayuse, the parcel from David Willardson arrived out of the blue the following day, and promised to further scramble the horizon despite the whimsy of the covering letter.

Dear Catherine,

*Apropos your interest in Russian arts and crafts, a new publishing house, Corybant Press, is promoting a book you may find topical. It's entitled *Musing the Maenad*. Enclosed, an advance copy. The silent publisher is Felix Muerner, the Bern Clinic maven and new European head of the Paleomena conglomerate, my erstwhile employer. I also enclose an invitation to his clinic's 30th anniversary party at his Sonoma estate. David W.*

The invitation card featured a water garden and some elegant figure statues, paragons all. Illustrations by Louis Führ were then on display in a gallery on the estate. With some chagrin she reckoned with Führ being showcased in such a venue.

When she got to the book she already had a scotch in hand and a homebody's pique at intrusive behavior. As she perused the slick pages, she was soon quietly swearing. The book showcased the tale of a Maenad (a female follower of Bacchus, traditionally associated with divine possession and frenzied rites) infatuated with a Minoan aristo, a Hebe (guardian of youth and the cupbearer to the gods who served ambrosia at heavenly feasts). A drama both droll and sad, if not tragic, as it turned out. While the pics vexed (her mood at the moment, for, to the best of her recollection, she had posed for none of

them), the story presaged the time of the catastrophe, the sudden calamitous end of the aesthetically rich Bronze Age. The book's text was by Louis Führ, illustrations by Louis Führ and Stanley Leatherby, i.e. Pachis — a Bert and Ernie muppet duo she was beginning to think of them. The picture taker and his photoshop Hieronymus Bosch. Well she was scrounging for comic relief. Without much success.

The Minoan aristocrat, the story's Hebe, survives a stint with a Dionysian sorority, the Thyiads, and ends up as a careworn Egyptian consort. As Catherine considered the virtuosity of the arresting illustrations, the prospect of a raffish twin of herself began to dismay. She set the scotch aside. The fact that dear Pachis had helped with the illustrations further vexed, in that the final 'tableaux', as they were called — a seamless amalgam of photography and photoshop rendering — contained no poses she had struck in his Vancouver studio. At least none she could remember, intimating that his main interest in her could have been as a nude picture procurer for the frightful Borozovs. A prospect that turned her stomach.

There was more.

On one page of the book showing a sun flecked garden, her proxy stood with chère Viola — Pachis' late model! — both women eying an owl and a snake in a spreading oak tree, 'Following a Cloudburst,' the spare text intimated. The period setting transfixed as much as her stand-in cajoled. Under this very tree in the antic spa of Kallithea, near Old Rhodes Town, had she watched a cat stalk a young bird. Then, on another page — more consternation — a meeting of her double with a faun who looked like Pachis — on a shingle very like the one near Faliraki where she encountered the poseur!

As she ventured further into the handsome pages, she canceled a late supper invitation from a newly, rawly returned Michael. She wasn't feeling quite herself. (Meaning: don't call at the last minute — particularly when your date may be a multiple personality.)

Then she did something she hadn't done for a while: fetched her apricot brandy — scotch was then less agreeable — and began prinking before a mirror in a baddie getup Michael had given her for a weekend lark some time ago — a private joke. Which, having absented himself that evening, he must miss. Now, looking at this near-nude Kirdis maiden with a trophy penis about her neck, she mused that the Cheka were after her body all the time — voyeurism, the essence of spying. Thus, the ostensibly flattering remarks of cagy Grace made her look at herself anew, amused that her nearly callow form could yet serve as a model of something rarefied, the unblemished pale skin perhaps something a Kirdis maiden might find entertaining. The imputation teased, importuned, the form itself, free its pigment — gracile, balanced, proportionate. Nothing in excess. But nothing. Not unlike the model in Führ's book. A book Felix Muerner, the enigmatic connoisseur, had seen published. She snorted and bottomed another two fingers. She was at sea here. Musing a Maenad. Maenad Kissy. Ha!

Her last recollection that night was studying the book's lustral initiation scene, reminiscent of a painting she'd seen at the earlier salon showing with Willardson — a painting not a photographic assembly she had assumed — the setting now acutely familiar, the cozy grotto at Kallithea where she and Michael stood but a month before. Despite the celebratory masks of the bathers, she felt the breath on her neck of the sirens administering the rite...the initiation of a young kore into the labyrinthine realm of what...a tribade or Thyiad sect, full of Maenads perhaps? Not ones for decorous veils. Thus did the old supposition reassert itself. Was Kissy a career loner finding consolation, solace in sumptuous art? Obsessed by a clever journalist investigator who happened to revive a favorite fable? If the prospect once seemed obtuse, an idle spare time amusement, it finely needled now, her nose already aflame. She had never met the illustrious and enigmatic Felix Muerner — who published the book. She knew the reputation of his Bern clinic to be exceptional, though she wasn't sure what they did exactly. But no gaggle of Maenads would keep her from his clinic's celebratory party! Though she doubted the bugger would himself attend. It was known he was elusive and circumspect. She also needed to talk, without remorse or preamble, and phoned the ever attentive Willardson the very next day. Her suspicions that weekend were open ended.

"That's a tall book you sent me." She sat in bed with a stomach bitter in hand.

"Yes, quite a beast isn't it?"

"You don't think I participated— posed for it — do you?"

"The possibility was entertained. I am told that Führ has a phenomenal archive and is given to that modern humbug — photoshop fiddling."

"Well I didn't. Never posed for a photographer." At least while conscious she said to herself, thinking of her fulsome protracted adventure in the villa.

"I rather thought not."

"Can you not give me a fuller genesis of the book?"

"In all candor, it arrived on my desk as dramatically as it did on yours. I get a number of such pretty advance offerings each month. Along with invitations to some or another event, this one being a perquisite of course. I may uncover a few details in the interval. We could meet on the terrace that overlooks Muerner's Japanese gardens. It's a restricted area — usually for the fogeys. We might converse there. If I find anything notable sooner, I'll let you know."

"You're on."

"I trust you're in reasonable health and coping."

"Do I sound that bad?"

"Well, there always seems to be something engaging going around. My own physician rarely fails to reassure me of the prospect."

"Well, maybe one too many last night. Over the book. I presume I'll get to my sainted mother first."

“Oh I think so. It goes on sale this month in Greece, of all places. Someone, I suspect, wants an early verdict. So the window of opportunity — to warn your fellows, if that be necessary — should be ample. And I doubt, if the initial reviews aren’t enthusiastic, it will have legs elsewhere.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, the tale is a fanciful conflation of myth and fantasy. This rendering may addle some critics of course, but the attention to artifact detail is striking, so I’d give odds on its clever promotion — at least in Europe. Americans tend to be underwhelmed by antiquity. Yet who knows? I do look forward to seeing you at the fête. As you know, you are my favorite news hen.”

“A lame contest right now.”

“Enjoy the sabbatical.”

“Ha.”

Kissy Borozov put the book down with a lenient smile. The object of his ardor had never been more fondly showcased. The sobering regret came with the recognition that though the book’s pretty Hebe was inescapably earthbound, this was likely *not* the journalist who adroitly fingered his brother, but a home grown player called Zoya Stolbanov, an uncanny double who, had they been paying attention, was featured in several Russian entertainments, including one dance troupe at the Apsaras. Under their very noses she was — until she stabbed the stray Muslim. He vaguely recalled a dancer whose makeup mask foiled identity, and whose self-importance irked the club’s directors. Only her popularity with some audiences kept her on apparently. But he couldn’t recall seeing one of her acts. The huge irony was the fact that this Zoya was the babe *in* Chuckie Warren’s generic hot tub! Kissy laughed aloud. The match was uncanny. Sergei would be dandling his upper plate like a hot potato.

The verisimilitude in the book, he must admit, was both sobering and edifying. So. Catherine Whyte not quite unique after all. He was still amazed she had done most of her investigative work in Russia herself, patiently suborning a few customs officials and mid-level bureaucrats no doubt. The supplementary fact that Muerner or one of his mavens had taken an interest in Führ’s output, only enhanced the aura that must engulf her sooner or later. And Kissy’s bull headed brother wanted the paragon bird iced. ‘Waxed’ as Sergei put it. It would be an exacting season. Just how she was persuaded to actually pose for some of Leatherby’s own early canvasses in his Vancouver studio struck him as odd. Whereas, her current investigation of the art world derived from her new ABN deployment. A blithe ‘twin’ at work in a Borozov club, if known, would have complicated if not foiled her work in Russia, and maybe nixed her stint with Leatherby, with the wily Pachis. Her CV identified her as an only child. Surely, with her reputation and career blooming, she would have balked at Leatherby’s offer, found it derisive even. Was she that desperate to follow the Borozov trail stateside? All Pachis had was a Fischer-Bakey grant, which he solicited entirely on his own. The artist really only came under their radar when Whyte returned to the United States. They had followed her from

Seattle to Friday Harbor to Vancouver. She must have known little more about his late work than they did. She could not then have known of his association with Führ. The mix and match of painting and photography produced a style neither one or the other. The painterly look was achieved by Pachis incorporating the photographic components, mainly the characters Führ photographed, into the arresting illustrations. An editor's handy man Kissy thought of versatile Pachis. And where, in tarnation, did the one damsel end and the other begin in their work, where some painterly images and discrete photographs might have melded? Did the journalist confuse Leatherby's early mannered style with his entire work? Führ's trademark figure output would surely have put her off. Was she still enamored of Leatherby — an early teen Romeo? The encounter in the Vancouver parkland certainly suggested she could be. In any case, Führ, with Leatherby's help, had showcased a singular, understated beauty. Perhaps that was her early presumption — no one would notice her in the period costuming and minimally abstract style Leatherby used at the time. 'No, not her,' an acquaintance might say, 'We all have near doubles in this life.' Yet he knew the American tabloids would salivate over the story if and when the dual identity was revealed. It was a tease that could mask, even jinx an earnest journalistic career.

His late apprehension of the exceptional Minoan Akrotiri mosaic, and its 'twin', only added to the piquancy now. That particular mosaic invoked his special object of desire and prompted him to showcase it with some slight changes to more nearly match the profile of his inamorata. The mural had indeed given her an intriguing persona, at least among discerning spectators, a singular celebrity that stayed Bossy's rush to reprisal, and may now tease Zoya herself. He looked across the Moscow River's Stone Bridge from his office at the magnificent Cathedral of Christ the Savior — which had been rebuilt from the ground up after Stalin raised the original to accommodate a recreation center and swimming pool! He thought of the durable Taj Mahal to remind himself how the inspiration of a woman might transform a landscape! The one satisfaction was that the use of the Enfilade model, Karen Guk, seemed now supernumerary. If the intent was to sully Whyte's reputation as a journalist, the deeds of her double, including her hot tub stay, would soon be manifest on several continents — so he believed — the sensational measure of the one sufficient to absolve the sturdy career of the other. The hoped for possibility. The tea house photos had now no specific utility. Trying to sully a newly well-known, reputable and liked journalist, could backfire, simply verify her real exemplary talent. He picked up the book again with a condolent smile. But for the dump Aram left on his doorstep, life would be nearly tolerable.

Hejaz flipped through the same book Kissy then treasured but with a mixture of confusion and uneasy disgust. The prospect of a 'double' was, on the available evidence, a near certainty. As far as he knew, Führ worked in Europe, his home studio in Frankfurt in fact. So what would a canny reputable journalist be doing posing for a blowfly like him anyway? So: two illusive targets for angry Ammon?

Would he be satisfied if both were killed? Hejaz' disgust with maniacal Muslims rivalled his hatred of shameless profligate Western and Russian infidels. More and more he wanted to tell the Borozovs to go to hell! Aram's droll humor was of little help. And now even that seemed to be ebbing.

SIXTEEN

Muerner's Sonoma mansion nestled in lush parkland of hemlocks, willow, dogwood, pine, butter and egg flowers, mallow, trillium, milkweed and lavender, circled by a hedged moat full of silver fingerlings. The setting sun left the moss-carpeted walkways with luminous gouts of yellow green.

After leaving a sullen Michael at the winery bar, her coolness toward him persisting, Catherine found Willardson, ever watchful on the terrace just above a flagstone patio where Führ's photo illustrations sat on a row of double-sided easels. She'd been relieved to find the illustrations free of her Doppelgänger, and Musing the Maenad mentioned only in the catalogue. Willardson she found in a reflective humor, his elbows resting on the terrace railing that overlooked the patio and further moat. She joined him in a quiet perusal of the splendid further grounds, and decided she liked the slyly avuncular curator because his language, though ornate, stroked and informed as it teased. She was thus impatient, if a little daunted, to get the words flowing, knowing she might exercise a little preciousness herself. She began: "You look finely parsed. As always. And I'm in need of some lucid words this night."

"Splendid. Yes, indeed!"

She was pleased to note the satisfaction he took in the silk frock which showcased her creamy shoulders and back.

"That looks like an Ungaro."

She smiled. "A fair imitation."

He silently gestured to dismiss a triviality.

"A topical question first: You thought the pics in the book, the Maenad thing, extraordinary. If memory serves."

"Yes, given their provenance, and the plainly ambiguous 'she'."

"You don't believe in phantoms I trust."

"Well, the Muerner I know is a sober pragmatist, to the extent that pragmatism can accommodate the ideal. His 'phantoms' are flesh and blood." He wanted to say that there were only so many enlightened connoisseurs in the world but resisted possibly kicking down an open door.

"So, not a hoot, a bagatelle, the book? Sorry; I'm dealing with a few bugaboos these days."

Willardson took a moment to respond. "You may find the following interesting. As breaking news. There is a rumor, only a rumor mind, that comes from the Paleomena foreign desk, which keeps track of Cheka 'noise', of a Russian who scored a win the near match of your own in daring and craft in sleuthing the baby formula scam. The person in question, a dancer and sometime model, fled the

Russian Federation with some precious period gems that belonged an old buccaneer on the General Staff of the New Russian Federation, a former chief procurator who diligently looked after himself... one of the lady's suspected aliases being 'Coren Wiley'. Does that name ring a bell? Outside of Quidnunc? Yes, I read it intermittently. As wondrous if not as spellbinding, is the fact that *that* dancer was recently photographed in gamey Charley Warren's hot tub!"

Catherine was a time taking this in. "The girl with my face card profile."

"Some photographs of the dancer, when a young teen, also appear in an early collection by one Levrenti Ganyanov — a Russian photographer with a largely unenviable reputation. Whereas Louis Führ, a darling of the tarty chic, is credited, along with a photoshop genie, with illustrating the pretty storybook I sent you — in which this dancer also appears. Who performed latterly in the London Apsara under the name of Devi, where she had a contretemps with a Muslim. I take it, from your expression, that this news stirs a piquant resonance or two. The person in question does incite speculation."

Catherine wryly smiled.

"Shall I keep my ear to the salient ground then?"

"I would be grateful."

"Is there any likelihood you're related? She does not appear to be a phantom."

"I wish I knew. Truly. Her own situation seems perilous. Though her whereabouts now are unknown, and my secretary's enquiries dead ended."

"Well then, a fine absorbing puzzle."

"Which I'm doing nothing to perpetuate, believe me."

"Do let me know how I might help."

"I will."

He winked at her. "Decent and deliberative beings...are often accomplices, fellow travellers."

Catherine fondly smiled. Such words!

A series of loud voices from the ballroom off the gallery suggested the debate about Führ's work had reached some kind of standoff, Michael's voice figuring plainly among the critics — those who felt the collection was manifestly technique masquerading as art. Since his latest amour had gone off, Michael was doggedly mindful again — imagining her recent stint with Pachis agreeable. She sensed a frisson of excitement that both teased and appalled; in such a mood Michael could be keenly possessive and grimly obdurate.

Said Willardson, "I think the real show is about to begin." He motioned for Catherine to proceed to a near staircase."

"Hmm, isn't it wisdom before vanity?"

"Absolutely." Again he gestured for her to proceed, adding, "Incidentally, I think Führ retains the copyright for illustrations in the book, despite a possible collaborative effort."

“A dour conclusion.”

In the ballroom, the Muerner paradigm was indeed a topical matter, as stories of his deeds and tutelage made the rounds. Willardson suggested that were Catherine to look carefully, she might find some physical paragons among the guests whom Muerner, in his capacity as a transformative medic, may have had a hand in ‘finishing’. It was, by and large, an exceptionally attractive congregation. By then Michael had calmed down sufficiently to straighten his cufflinks — a sign he might be incipiently belligerent — though from the distance they viewed the stand off, the dynamics were hard to estimate. Then the strident voice of the docent, the adulator of Führ’s work, suddenly cracked and he was reduced to a hoarse whisper. But by then most patrons had lost interest. Michael looked let down.

Catherine smiled, her sense of relief substantial.

The evening’s finale, which was summarily announced when the combatants reached a verbal dead end, featured a spirited dance ensemble reconfiguring parts of Rossini’s *Il Signor Brushino* — a pastiche full of willful mistaken identities and incontinent buffa effects that featured eight prodigy dancers wearing Commedia dell-arte face masks — “to ‘mask’ the academies they likely attended,” Michael ventured, roused by the skimpy costumes they wore. Catherine barely smiled as she took in the idyllic forms Muerner seemed to be a curator of, for the near perfect bodies of the dancers, men and women, appeared to be interchangeable. The night ended with as fine a champagne as she could remember and, at closing, mutual mass hugging of the posturing, cordial and stoic alike.

‘Well, it is a labyrinth,’ she said to her mirrored face the following morning. She was not good at negotiating mazes, like the eugenics one Muerner fashioned. As much as she remained wary of such aesthetics, she found herself indulging in its complex discriminations of late. Michael showed little interest in revisiting the discord of the night last, and lingered only so long as she shed her robe and climbed into the swirl bath. Looking at the rich foam about her she mused, “You wouldn’t think of a witch’s brew...such sweet bubbles.” Said Michael as he wiped off his remaining shaving lather, “Your point being?” She smiled. “My current state... finding myself in a strange stew pot.” As he applied the aftershave he said, “I think you like stews.”

She smiled. “From my favorite brawler.”

Michael grimaced and left after giving her a brotherly kiss.

Well, he did overdo the champagne she thought, and was dealing with a morning after — leaving her alone with her dusky thoughts, which were sometimes best sorted in silence, including, the late unbidden *boyfriend* issue. Was seeking a *life parter* in that day and age anachronistic? The very mutability of the time defying the odds? *I’ll see you again, whenever spring breaks through.* Whenever. Noel Coward was a professional romantic. Spring could be a long time coming. She was having a sullen time that day...turning about in this restless memory pool. Now, with the Cayuse revelations, and her subsequent reflections, came a resurfacing of past things that seemed to fragment definition and

recognition. Even now the name, Coren Wiley, a fabrication no doubt, served to implicate past bespredel in Holy Rodina — the putative land of her birth! No, the periodical had not made a mistake. “The picture of Ms. Wiley is one of several and conforms to our illustration inventory.” So said the paper’s archive supervisor in a late advisory. So: a ‘rechristened’ double, a real person visible to others as well as herself. Who seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth. Wiley indeed.

Again, it was her new job that she looked to provide a serviceable distraction from the bewildering recollections. If female perplexity was one aspect of her new job that daunted amusement, the advert in the latest OO Magazine proved irresistible, given her interest then in the experience of calming waters, here the newly fashionable experience of ‘Lustral Bathing’. The bold face quote beside the picture of a snooty New York model read: ‘The muses speak — of a new beauty spa which, among many singularities, boasts a new electrolyte bath that convenes a sauna-birching cycle. Here top Bopoζoπ model Chanticleer tingles for salubrity.’ The fact that Chanticleer was the ineffable Karen Guk took a minute to absorb.

Well, tingling for salubrity would require the usual intense dedication on her part...thence did she find herself in the acclaimed spa on her way to the cold pool from the caldarium when she was unexpectedly accosted by a willowy beauty whom she did not know.

“I’ve information you may want,” the beauty said.

“A lot of it about.”

“When you can, sit in the Finnish bath, keep looking in front of you and don’t converse. Please lap an extra towel if and when you are ready.” The Finnish bath, Catherine remembered from her initial reconnoitre, was a quiet, steamy preserve, with renowned masseuses.

Her message delivered, the cutout disappeared into the spa’s mists.

In this last and warmest room of the baths, pale forms mingled as Karen’s thin voice suddenly addressed from behind. “On the left side they tend to leave you alone.”

This darker designated left side, which had fewer concealing shrouds of steam and few occupants, the newly emerged, statuesque Karen beckoned to. Maneuvering a lethargic Catherine onto the wide wall base made them roughly the same height.

With the ease of a matador Karen shed their rich towelling, leaving them as inmates, pledged, pressed as tyros, privacy assured because it seemed newly irrelevant. Deeds thus to confess, affirm... the egg momma or scalper a beguiling phantom. So the numinous interval transpired, words slippery as dew worms, perspiration pearled. That Karen might be a Borozov plant was apt, if largely unplanned for — a poignant recognition as Karen’s lean fingers traced a newly budded breast, an electric thrill, the kiss that followed tenderly, fluently shared. It was the period when Catherine decided she was what they fancifully call ‘undersided’. It lasted that long weekend. ‘The great bracing rinse wash... with scents and sense to ween understanding.’ Such precious commentary, from her magazine

copy, she would later wrote in her diary, with a fondness that beguiled chagrin. As did the pictures in Karen's historic scrapbook — a compilation of her first modeling ventures — all a visual treat! A book they examined together the 'morning after'. A wondrous time out for an otherwise chary Catherine.

The collection, entitled *Very Truly Yours*, contained camp images of a lithe teen with will-o'-the-wisp hair and little makeup. 'Before the Fall', Karen had titled the collection which included: a closeup of her egret eyes framed by an Arabic head dress captioned in Karen's own writing, 'Bit part in a short doc called Oasis'; a hammy Charles Atlas pose simply captioned 'Ms. Universe'; her amused head emerging from a digitized zygote titled 'The great egg broker' (a computer pastiche); and a lovely profile nude, kneeling in a retail ad — 'My first nympho shoot' — which advertised a body lotion, the ad copy reading: *The lather says it all -- Incence!*

The ineffable spell that followed the viewing of the scrapbook was again transformative.

But it was Catherine's incidental, raw discovery of the *second* set of pictures — of them together — that sullied the new felicity! The flinty denouement began with a terse summons from Deplorable D.

"A matter of some importance; noon today suits me best."

Catherine might have prized the lot of photos but for their furtive existence. In essence, they augured for her the recognition of a latent disposition, as opposed to an obsession or aberration — which, unfortunately, did not mitigate the evidentiary consequences! She had, with some resolve, overlooked the possibility of Karen's duplicity, and that the numinous interludes with her should have been so diligently documented.

The day she answered DD's summons, the ABN executive lads had settled in the glass conference room just beyond Darin's office, their voices just audible, the doors not yet closed, where the thin voice of DD droned on: "Think of slavery and savage tribalism in Africa. Like kinky sex, it's always obtained, but it's not something you lay on a mixed reconciliation committee."

The door to Darin's study was also ajar, the room empty. She entered and sat down in the chair before his wide desk. He entered moments later, closed and locked the door. He drew an envelope from a top drawer and placed it before her, saying, "The contents are a recent delivery — from an anonymous source. I kid you not." He sat down gesturing that she should open the envelope, which she did after a second take of her hide-bound boss. A set of photos emerged. She looked carefully at each one, an oddly pretty muster given its provenance in an edenic tea house and Karen's art nouveau apartment, a distinct reminder that vodka and gin can be a M.A.D. duo. That wily Karen might be a stinger-treeshaker had crossed her mind but not tempered her esprit. Some of the blithe moments captured by those frames she would fondly remember always. Yet now, this day, her sense of being jilted bore a sudden adolescent piquancy. When she looked up Darin was staring out his broad window that faced the Aon Center with its checkerboard facade. His well rehearsed words seemed to come from a recorder.

“Its going to be a bear to tame. Do we want your raunchy porno sapphic interludes with your Russian tart in our sight for the next year? Our Life Force Editor a ‘Krafft’ card who instructs attentive homemakers? Our sponsors are not incontrovertibly insouciant. The Board, then, may suspend with a year’s salary, with the option. I will of course try to keep the audience to a minimum and your portable pension fund in tact. About the best I can do.” He seemed satisfied with his performance and looked at her with a cagey smile. “You were never really happy here anyway, no?” She too smiled and was a moment responding.

“If I change my mind...you’ll be the first to know. You’ll hear from my lawyer. In due course.”

Then she rose and left, not wishing to prolong the hearing, his sudden bewildered expression one she would treasure for a while. Her anger, she had handily decided, was best kept on a leash. Always advisable to leave the pinhead in a quandary. She doubted the Board would sack her, but contesting the issue could be acutely messy. She would need time to work it out. She felt she might pass the matter off as a research venture in her capacity as a chronicler of the current feminism — a job he had urged her to take on after all. Though a story that would ‘acquit’ most of the pictures eluded her then, and he had several cronies on the board.

In the taxi she mulled over the salients: If she was not a randy Messalina, she *was* married to ABN — to Caesar — whose wife must beggar suspicion. Well, The Professor-of-the-Art-of-Puffing had spoken. She liked Sheridan. Otherwise, she thought of cameras, often as not, as misleading news tools, in her wish for words alone, by, of, and for themselves — not glimpsed, not craftily or incidentally showcased.

Such a sweet creamy off-the-cob romantic! Seduced by a multi-talented siren, who could play the spy, student, fashion memes equally well!

The sunlight in a neighborhood park was lush that afternoon, and she spent it carpe diem, the gin on hold. Not for a long time had someone got under her skin so. She had verbally scuffled with Deplorable D. many times, but never before thought of murdering him with such panache. Karen was another matter. Paragons live as Titans, their own torment and actions beyond the pale. Were the pictures with Karen thus enough — in the eyes of Darin’s shills? Was she still to learn what went on in the Montecito villa via a set of salacious prints, still to surface, that suggested she fancied being drugged and raped as well? Remembrance of the awful smell of the villa’s peculiar soap now made her nauseous — just as a body suddenly emerged out of the leafy cover of the park, one she could not slight, a pug, an ample presence that stifled belief itself — except for a whiff of a rank cologne.

In trying to ignore him she inadvertently backed herself into a hollow tree, where he approached and softly stated: “The Cayuse has more storytellers than butterflies, and one may be on the ridge tomorrow at 2 PM, talkative if a bit rushed. We do require able versatile talent, as you will have guessed. Our benefit is that Kissy is not Bossy; our problem is that Kissy is not Bossy.”

She kept her mouth shut this time, mainly because she was speechless. The timing of the encoun-

ter struck her as diabolical. That someone might send such a one! Now! Knowing precisely where she was! Moreover, what was really meant by such an entry and pronouncement defied both credibility and comprehension, his presence alone an IED — her world suddenly reduced to a stoney fissure in the Cayuse. On leaving, he left behind a further incendiary taunt: “You’ll recall what too many Germans said about Nazi rhetoric: You do not eat a meal as hot as it’s cooked. A lapse many came to regret. A sad homily on the West’s tolerance if not acceptance of the new steaming social anarchists, who champion scalding rebuke. The ever smouldering new dealers.” Her mind reeled at the audaciousness, the presumption, the precious hooey. Her newly lidded eyes told him to piss off despite her attempt to ignore him.

As she watched him leave it was all she could do to keep from hurling a rock. Bastard. That someone would send such a swine — at this time, this hour! Dear God. Someone knowing her particular situation and where to find — her! It seemed all too apparent she had acquired a much larger audience than anticipated. And now to be so shamelessly baited, condescended to...and for what for gawdsake? Some cryptic organization trying to what — recruit her? Her! The imputations seemed as elusive and menacing as cave bats...when all she sought that past week was to find out what in effect might never be ‘found out’ — to let a strange, new promising entanglement blossom a bit, discover if she was what she imagined she might be or become, if her impatience with sly Michael and brazen Pachis were catalysts, hunks she was losing patience with. Karen’s open address and candor granted one a furlough. “Canny bitch,” Michael had said, alluding no doubt to the bait of the siren’s elegant looks. The encounter in the spa, the so-called Finnish bath, had all but obliterated her former self, made her a full fledged player in the weekend that followed. That such proximity might be so satisfying, so numinous — a word she’d been overusing of late. At that moment, the ache for Karen’s approach seemed unrelenting.

Returning to the Cayuse was a little like itching a no-see-um bite, disbelief goading obsession. The rake’s progress. She sunned this time in an old two piece that had relaxed with age. The only thing it fully concealed was her pique. Let the bugger or buggers find her this time. As she pretended to doze she could feel the strong intermittent breezes feeling her up. The Cayuse chap might be less Argus-eyed this time. What amused was how readily she blended in with the many mangy groundlings here. The awaited instruction, in a soft modulated voice, came from a gal seated back of her, who may have been there all along.

“A well-built gent by the ranger’s lean-to further up the rise is waiting with arms crossed. Stand on the closed side and face south.”

“How long will he wait?”

“Not long.”

Rising, she took in the gal, an older tough but beautiful woman with a melancholic face...another

creature not enamored of her assignment nor the locale Catherine imagined.

A gent in corbeau shades materialized from behind a walled-in corner of the lean-to, less anxious this time about being seen. A couple of lotharios squatted nearby jawing and drinking beer with two earth mothers. The corbeau gent was about to speak when a shrill ear-piercing scream from the showers off the parking lot below rent the balmy atmosphere. Everyone turned to look down at the stalls. The ensuing silence from below seemed to lull the general concern. "Just another kid fiddling with the hot-cold inlet valves," one of the beer drinkers said to a few chuckles. Though Catherine imagined more than a hot-cold expletive. The man in the shades hesitated but then fled, scurrying down the path behind the lean to. She doubted he would return. Not the Cayuse chap she decided.

She also noted as she descended the rise that some sunbathers had left, including the woman who advised her, making her wonder if the man came with a larger team. As she took note of the raptor eyes upon her, she felt newly sorely alone and promptly returned to her car.

That night she engaged Michael in a bout of avid love making, her nearly nude form suddenly encountered in a hallway, a reliable turn-on for him and test to see if his caresses were as imaginative and satisfying as they sometimes were. Her late sexual discovery invited further investigation, indeed a kind of inquisition.

Unlike her love making with Karen, it was indeed a kind of mauling, though also in its way restorative. The beguiling power of passivity! But the trysts could not be compared, his mandate more straightforward and compelling. Yet this night he seemed aware of a special need, and heedfully stayed his time, sustaining the intensity she craved...in her seemingly wish not to eschew half of humanity!

The next morning she noted he slept in; the poor lad was perhaps exhausted she mused. Wanting a novel start that day, to better discern the wiles of art and romance, she promptly phoned David Willardson to ask if he had any more ghosts to contend with. He, in turn, invited her an older art gallery in West Hollywood. "It's rumored to be suffering from my neglect. A belvedere on the roof offers an engaging vista and is a splendid spot for quiet attentive words."

She left snoring Michael a detailed note, and spotted Willardson in the gallery's atrium, where she sat by him upon a lone Roman curule seat, her flamingo wrap top and beige skirt both aces in her wardrobe. Slyly he squinted at her and, while making to light a cigarette, said, "You look very civilized. And you want to talk."

"Very much."

"I need a duck. Upstairs is the stylish shade rich belvedere."

"One urgent query."

"Be it short."

"It gets me to the pertinent set of questions. You're a fan of the book's artists? You never said."

"Of Führ or your bohemian?"

"The Maenad artist. Both I guess. Some illustrations in the book look photographic, some painter-

ly. Most some kind of fusion.”

He smiled. “What’s it worth?”

“I’m nearly broke.”

“Yes, I heard. Pulled the old plug.”

“Cashiered more like.”

“Maybe for the best, all things considered.”

“We’ll see. An overdue escape.”

“Dearest she, it’s the daily grind.” He paused to reconsider. “As for Führ, et al, including Pachis of course — the work is a clever composite blend of photography and painting. Suggesting a purpose or need beyond a specified narrative — disseminating, touting a timeless ideal, an eidolon, for instance, — the exposition of a gracile symmetrical beauty that so piques some heterodox modernists. Muerner’s aesthetic. Kissy’s too, I believe. They may work as a team — like Führ and Leatherby ostensibly do.”

“Have you figured out who does what?”

“A joint effort I think. The one a patron of the other. Yes, a likely duo.”

Again Willardson affected holding a cigarette and pointed above.

The belvedere atop the gallery had recently weathered a storm, air there alive, sweet and playful, the sun playing peekaboo with the clouds in a lifting haze. They sat on patio lounge chairs near the parapet railing, smiling at one another as co-respondents, while she kept her breeze rilled skirt respectable. Willardson, in turn, who sensed her mood, got immediately to the point.

“It’s a sporty marriage, Pachis’s painterly interpolation of Führ’s still and photo-shopped images — the most likely prospect, the brush being somewhat more amenable to pundits than the lens alone. Where one begins and the other leaves off is the riddle, as intended perhaps. In any case — the human figure idealized by a spare, balanced, proportionate beauty. I should add that, in my opinion, you see in Kissy Borozov a closet patron of such artwork. I know that may or may not surprise you. Kissy, unlike his brother, is more philosopher than brass cat, his dealings, however recondite, with Felix Muerner a key I think — both, in their way, favoring a decorous gracefulness in art and life, shall we say. A vista that masks his mordant ugly family. I do know they meet from time to time.”

“‘Graceful’ — Kissy?” This characterization did surprise her.

“A compensatory obsession. His art patronage, given his favored projects, tends to bear this out.”

Catherine lamely smiled.

“There was once a distinction between what was considered fine art and expressive license, which is rarely apparent today. Kissy does harbor a sensitivity to decorum and understatement most modern artists lack. Particularly those trying to slight aestheticism. At least what we see in his salons.” Catherine mutely, wryly smiled, but listened on as Willardson savored another intake.

“Muerner now, as my late research reveals, is an eminent patron with an eye for able and gifted

artists whose works verify his aesthetic judgments about form and its articulation — which derives in part from the Age of Pericles — the sense of the human as divine, and the divine, human — the ‘nothing in excess’ human, the one needing no embellishment.”

“That seems a bit of a stretch.”

Yet the lecture continued.

“The picture book, I suggest, is but another herald in Muerner’s media showcasing of lithe beauty and durable health. I suspect some of the performers in the book are composites of body types he’s scoured the globe to find. Lithe form, symmetry and harmony, ‘concinnity’ in apprehendable form.” Willardson then savored the first full inhalation from his cigarette. “From your silence I trust my words may echo some intrinsic thoughts.”

“Some yes. Such that I was hoping you might comment again on the period mosaic. The Akrotiri gal. The babe some think I resemble.”

“I sense it’s a fondly fancied and rendered amalgam. Such similar identities can be inspirational. A treasured Kissy discovery or recollection, say.”

She smiled, as much to herself. “Yes. But do tell how does one go about investigating a puzzling someone *like* Kissy, or Muerner for that matter? As far as I know, and you’ve not disabused me of the fact, that Muerner may in fact be an icon not a person. His clinic a kind of shadow Mecca — its tentacles a Medusa who turns skeptics to stone. Sorry, a bit mindful these days.”

“I think I may have some information on that in due course. And you’ll be the second or third person in the world to know when I do. He *is* reputed to be a universal genius — Muerner. He completed his medical training in Nazi Germany at a very young age, though he never became a Nazi.”

“Will this info come fairly soon?”

“For the patient at heart, very soon.”

“Promise?”

It was then apparent he’d said all he intended to, and began to point out changes to the metropolis skyline that he approved of. “They finally got rid of that old AT&T monstrosity. Even managed to leave some palms.”

That night, after an Italian supper with her ersatz companion, as she sometimes thought of Michael, she sought again a candid comparative appraisal — both to reassure on one hand, and counter on the other. Playing again to his voyeuristic instincts would also help decide if his subsequent lovemaking was as considerate and mindful as the night before. She was amused to find him pensively taking up her challenge — the impious dare — after he found her before a full-length mirror, house coat backed to a chair, the book turned to a page that dangled from her hand, the stance of the figure there and in the mirror analogous.

“Any similarities, Hephaestus?”

It took him a moment to decide she was serious. “He was that sturdy cobbler with a deformed limb, right?”

“The smithy.”

“And ugly as hell, wasn’t he?”

“The same. So?”

He adopted a convincingly conscientious demeanor. “You want an unvarnished covariant analysis, right?”

“One in one.”

“Well, same eyes, lips, nose...same face in a prototypical way. It’s a word you’ve used recently.” He then paused.

“What else?”

“Freckles, chest...navel.”

“Yes.”

“Hair.”

“An identical twin, you could say?”

“Her legs may be a little better.”

“It’s the angle.”

“They seem thinner, longer.”

“Not by much.”

Their eyes met in the mirror.

“I like your ears better.” It seemed the candid display was inviting suspicion.

“Hers are pretty okay.”

“Yours seem more lucid, compact.”

“That’s a relief.”

“This is not just about identity, is it.”

The statement surprised her, particularly when he fetched the house coat and set it about her shoulders.

“It is, actually.”

“Never doubted you were you.” The comment surprised her. As did his look of sobriety. “Until now,” he added. “You’re a mystery these days. Not sure I’m up to it. Too earthbound.”

“So?”

She was fond of him, yet needed an excuse for being so readily stood up like this!

“Hardly a mystery...I should think,” she said with some wistfulness, thinking that she couldn’t have been more factual standing as she was.

“You’ve changed.”

“So?”

“Don’t know the rules of this new game.”

“It’s hardly a game.”

He wanly smiled, touched her hair and left the room, with an oddly stoic look she’d not seen before.

This was not like him at all she thought. The suspicion now was that he might need an excuse — to keep her at arm’s length — the better to take in new gals in his current playbook. She was casting about for an explanation here. Had his manner sometimes seemed expedient of late — despite the engaging fun? All along she suspected he was too good looking, too macho, too immediate, too possessed of himself to admit another. Was that it? That he would easily tire of a steady diet of her? But being the essential lothario, he would not cavil at coming back at his convenience between trysts. And she would likely be there for him, barring the arrival of her special esteemed prince. It had been her unsung triumph in Russia — avoiding the snares. Allowing for the fact that eroticism, in that general melancholic drabness, seemed an impertinence. At least for her. And the Russian male, for all his reputed stoicism, was anything *but* around his jill. The cad, complainer and brute extraordinaire. So she came to believe. The rigid unforgiving male hierarchy.

But that dialogue with herself ended when he suddenly returned with two glasses of Armagnac. “Got to get the warbler stoned first,” he said. “She’s a screech when pissed.” If the ensuing interval was not quite numinous, the final exhaustion was indeed replete, multiple organism being a rarity for her, no lubrication needed.

As Michael soundly snored, happy Viking that he was, she re-visited the book to re-affirm her growing suspicions about her double. Was that really a tiny mole near the umbilicus, or just a dirt/dust mite on the print plate the editor had missed? The jury would be out on that one. She closed the book, turned off the light, and stared out at the city night lights, thinking they would get some rain after all. Listlessly she wondered, again, why one might be so focused in hell, so awash in paradise.

Then, in the midst of her romantic angst, a sudden, late breaking development from Willardson — some new evidence to be pondered and evaluated, which he left unspecified over the phone. “A supper tonight at my maisonette would be ideal. Some rather nice sole has come into my possession, and I’m determined to see it meetly taken in.” “Can it be a latish supper, 7:30 say?” Catherine asked. “Make it 8:00.”

The sudden invitation helped stanch the late confusion. Dining with the kingfish, her special ‘heart man’, was to ride on the side of felicity if not salubrity. Hence the quandary she sometimes indulged on how to dress for a visit to the maven — one of the reliably fun games. His ‘cultivation of her best instincts’, as he once put it, seemed a subtext of his sleepless decorum which, she had long since concluded, ruled out passion. The ‘Swiftian problem’, a colleague of his once remarked — the

physical or libidinal being rather reptilian, thus slighting the quintessence of romance. Hence their relationship thrived on affection, the purest form of it, so she thought, which she was not about to slight nor take for granted. Thus the need to offer something other than her conversation, her often endless, plaintive, one-sided questions, which he had over the years taken up with amiable yet meticulous concern. But this day she seemed more willing to ‘fit in’. In fact, she changed thrice before heading to the elevator, the final switch a return to the original tunica blouse with its side vent which allowed a side glimpse of a breast swell when standing at the right angle. But the set of stark anatomical prints that lay on an exhibit table in his maisonette study which, sherry in hand, they gravitated to after her arrival, upstaged thoughts about dress. The print on top featured an array of realistic nude male figures standing as the famous bronze statue of Poseidon or Zeus, about to hurl his trident, or perhaps thunderbolt, the forms in a variety of somas, from the ostensibly perfect, at the center, to the nearly grotesque at the edges, the face alone softened into a generalized mask.

“Yes, I thought you would be interested,” he said as they surveyed the collection. A friend sent them, suing for an urbane opinion. All from Muerner’s archive. A private file, apparently. Unfortunately my friend didn’t, or can’t, tell me how he came to possess them. Though he did enclose an interesting letter, which I’ll get to in a minute.”

One image she recognized immediately. “Good lord, something like the Cayuse chappy — the one in the center!”

“The one you met?”

“Well, he wasn’t keen on my taking a clinical look.”

Willardson’s dry words did nothing to temper her edgy wonder.

“My friend believes them to be the gross anatomical speculations that Muerner’s team of morphologists have worked on hypothetical changes to specified gene strands. How slight changes may affect a particular sinew, long bone, chin or knee cap.”

“I presume ‘gross’ the germane designation.”

But Willardson was not to be derailed. “All within the realm of possible alteration to a specified genome which my friend, a rather earnest chap, assures me.” He then looked up at her and winked.

She was still chuckling to herself as she noted the progressive ungainliness in the outlying images. She immediately looked up to find Willardson staring with an alien resignation at the print, his voice now more condolent.

“You recognize the fellow then, the central being?”

She smiled as she took in the validity of that figure again, its vivid clinical detail, and said, “Vaguely, yes.”

“I ask because the contents of the letter have a contingent importance if you do.”

“Contingent?”

“Which we will get to in short order. But I must also ask you to glance at this multi-figured picture

as well. Please be assured, I'm as perplexed as you will be. But feel you must see unedited what my friend sent."

The resignation in his voice was such that she took up the second print with a mixture of camp curiosity, and soon, chagrin. Immediately she identified the central 'person' in this set of gross anatomical portraits. She tried very hard to put her dismay in perspective.

"My word — a little like someone I know." Not a little, she said to herself. She looked up but Willardson appeared abstracted, staring at nothing in particular, not taking her in as she imagined. Inwardly she smiled at her conscientiousness in dressing that day, for here the nude form was manifest, the likeness to her own self dismaying, even the generalized face suggestive of a compeer. She derived some consolation from the fact that Willardson had never seen her so.

He glanced again at the images. "Some deformities in the margins are the predicted result of specific drugs on a normal genome. The subtext on the back speculates on such changes — the effects a potent drug regimen could have on the child of an otherwise normal well-favoured person. The center example is what might have been expected without the intervening drugs — over all, an exemplary lean supple form according to the notes. Some leg sinews especially are apparently ideal on the central example — the patella, fibula head and media condyle at the knee and annular ligament on the ankle for instance — all plusses for a dancer, as specified in the notes — which further detail the serendipitous assembly of bones and tissue in the one central example. This second set of renderings are recent formulations, according to the letter — backlogged to the profile Muerner had of one parent — who was in a psychiatric lockup at the time, where the experimental drugs were administered. The Lysenko aberration lingered then. The presumption that a special cocktail of drugs and conditioning was all that was needed to put things aright — to amend aberrant behavior and create the ideal Soviet citizen. Many ascribed social deviants and political dissidents were treated so over the decades, the long term effects less conjectural today apparently — especially on offspring. The extreme examples are postulates that derive from genetic mutations the drugs might have caused. The surfacing of so-called 'aberrant' genes. As you may know, the 'ideal' is self-evident for Muerner."

"David, you've lost me."

"I suspect not. But I too, you must realize, have only just begun to take it all in. I trust you are not disappointed I endeavored to follow up on the confusions we shared at our last meeting."

By then she was revisiting specific details. "The drugs, you're intimating, may have altered the mother's offspring? The fetal genes so concatenated — if that is the word — to produce what, an anomaly, a freak? At least the possibility? Hard to believe." She felt warm, but was grateful Willardson earnestly took up her point.

"Only a 'freak' in the extreme postulates. Normative even winsome possibilities have not been ruled out. My friend has discovered only these examples. And claims no identity of the mother, nor the specific drugs she was given. It all seems highly speculative but for Muerner's unrelenting re-

search.”

Catherine crossed her arms in front and stifled a sigh as she did so. “Hard to fathom. This Muerner seems a bit unhinged sometimes.” She was too embarrassed by the centrality of the winsome example to speculate on its presence. Fortunately the face was a generalized mask, despite her initial intimation.

“I assume you’ve wondered about your background — but decided perhaps that your mother here served you exceptionally well, had devoted her life to you, in fact, and the question of your past, your origin, would be an aggravation.”

“Discretion being the better part of valor. I regret you had to run into this, David. It’s as puzzling for me as it must be for you.”

The following pause she deemed the working out of a truce.

“Would you like me to withdraw? Leave the thread alone? You may have these two prints — the only samples I possess. I shall tell my friend that his quest and presumptions are miscast and possibly mischievous.”

He fetched and topped up her second glass of sherry. They continued to stand, as if summoned before a magistrate.

“No. It’s something that’s overdue. You’re probably the one person I trust on this side of the pond so maybe it’s just as well. I’ve often suspected that something was going on behind my back. Well, sometimes suspected. But as it was nothing that interfered with my career, my health, I tended to shelve it. But the fact I’ve belatedly come to apprise, is that my dear sainted mother may not be my real mother. Which leaves one at sea. My given father here is little more than a lodger. The imputation that my real mother might have been incarcerated, callously drugged...that’s a mindful, let alone susceptible to the consequential effects of such drugs a maven like Muerner deems feasible.”

“There is mention of it in the letter, which I’ll fetch presently. Your half sister — by your American mum — is aware of any of this?”

“Not likely. I rarely see her anymore. Margaret. Her fashion career — she’s a popular fashion model — often takes her abroad. I doubt she much cares about things like genetic anomalies. She’s a free spirit, as they say. A tall beautiful freak.”

“Unlike fashion, genes work independent of trends, fads. Yet the adepts in places like the Bern Clinic are today in the vanguard of the body-mind ‘couturiers’. The genetic ‘cat walk’, so to speak.” He paused and studied her with a cordial detachment, finally saying, “It may be time you met Hārun. Yes, it may be.”

Again he had eluded her. “Who the heck is Hārun?”

“A busy mystic. Who bears for you an important grudge. He also goes by the name of Aram, Aram Mir. But for me he is, simply, Hārun. He lives a complex existence.”

“David, your sherry is delicious. But you’re playing possum here.”

“Of course — the letter.” Which he produced from a drawer in the viewing table. “There are some photographs enclosed. But I think you’d better read the letter first.” Which Catherine took up with a lax smile, reading it aloud without interruption.

March 24, Bern

Dear David,

The enclosed family snapshots are copies, the originals being part of a surveillance file on a border guard, one Yakov Nikolaevich Stolbanov, booked by the KGB 15th Directorate — government installation security — after a smuggling citation which also implicated the wife. The one picture shows a daughter and a putative half sister ‘Zia (Anastasiya, last name Kniažnin) on the left. The copies were made by a former kolkhozy commissar who assisted in the investigation of the Stolbanov family. He too has an interest in the family history. Zoya Stolbanov, the dancer, appears to be on ‘Zia’s right, and also in two of the other photos. Her name appears on the back of these photos. Apropos your interest in the late book Muerner sponsored, I thought you might have a look. Do let me know if your friend looks anything like Zoya. Could she be the journalist on the OO Cover? I will fill in some details when I’m convinced we’re on a sturdy branch.

I can confirm that the mother, Liisa Stolbanov (né Uhlgren, also the likely mother of Anastasiya), was a dissident, and entered a Soviet medical clinic as a ‘re-education patient’ in Smolensk (not Perm as once thought) where she was given a regimen of what we now call psychotropic drugs. It appears she became pregnant during her stay, the likely outcome of a rape, and ostensibly gave birth to identical twins. An abortion was never sanctioned, apparently. Muerner himself was recruited by the Soviets after the war, as you may know, and worked for a time in Smolensk. He completed his training as an endocrinologist in the Third Reich — he was sixteen or seventeen when he graduated, and was for a time seconded to the clinic at the Struthof-Natzweiler camp in Alsace, near Strasbourg, and later in a camp that conducted hypothermia experiments — possibly Dachau. In Russia he worked as a medical statistician during the late Lysenko period, serving for a time at the clinic where Liisa Stolbanov was first committed — a history your Ms. Whyte may want to detail sooner or later. He kept two sets of statistics apparently. His second secret set was eventually used by the lobbyists who discredited some Lysenko loyalists. It is likely he was instrumental in getting one twin out of the Soviet Union — possibly not entirely on humanitarian grounds. There is a death certificate for one Masha Kusnetsova Stolbanov (possibly Catherine Whyte) who purportedly died of meningitis shortly after birth. One may assume, given his genetic bent, that Muerner wanted a double blind study to assess the effects of the drugs given the mother, in two entirely different environments, a shuffle he’s capable of. The twin, Zoya, was sick at the time with meningitis but recovered — the genesis of Masha’s death certificate.

‘Zia’s father, a respected intelligence officer, was killed early on in Afghanistan. The putative father of the twins spent a year or two in a ghetto near Smolensk before his death, the last of several such domiciles apparently. Sadly, my trail ends there; records of the half sister and putative second twin have been expunged from the available

archives. At least those currently opened. Zoya Stolbanov is the sole child registered to Liisa and Yakov Stolbanov, though Zoya's whereabouts today is unknown — or concealed. Her last known appearance was as a performer at the Apsara club in London, where she promptly disappeared after an encounter with a Muslim extremist who apparently lost an eye in the mêlée. I trust you'll welcome this letter.

Most cordially, age quod agis, Alex

Willardson smiled. "Three Russian sisters — a heady possibility."

Looking at the photographs, Catherine sensed a slight seismic list to the room. The resemblance with a much younger Zoya was uncanny, given Catherine's 'own' family album at the time. 'Zia' — Anastasiya — she noted, was as different as her half-sister Margaret.

"David, please, keep it up front. I know you usually do."

"So you really didn't know the specifics of this history."

"Until my encounter with a chap at the Cayuse — a long involuted story — I had only an inkling that my dear American mother may have 'birthed' a changeling, about which I never had a need to ask. Such a devoted parent she was that it seemed heartless to press such a question. Maybe I was just impatient with all the current hoopla about propriety and inheritance, and discordant, inconsolable women — all that — and ducked out. I don't know. My suspicions were late coming of course."

"Alex Ifraimov was an assistant curator at the Hermitage, and kept me up to date on activities over the years. He served as a plant for the Cheka at one stage, acting abroad as a buyer and artistic representative but really reporting on stray trends and the like, artists and agents maneuvering outside the box, possible defectors, though I doubt he was too observant about such traffic; it's never wise to reveal too much in such a climate with the corruption in high places as rampant as it was and is. He did keep a secret set of notes based on KGB documents, mainly service lists of collaborators, grafters and extortionists, forgers, enforcers — which he hid under the floor boards of his dacha. He's about to have the collection published in Britain where he now resides. As far as I know he was never suspected of being anything but a loyal Chekist drudge, and believes it's time to come clean — well, reveal some vile players who no longer count I presume. Today he has a research assistant at Oxford, England, where he now resides."

A forbearing Catherine smiled. With a ready if seasoned grin, Willardson continued:

"Now Hārun, yes dear Hārun, a Sunni Muslim, known also as Aram to some select players, the child of an Armenian father and Russian mother, eventually devised the means for Alex's defection, and has cultivated many contacts in the Mid and far East. I suspect he is behind the recent rash of stench bombings in the U.S. A possibility. He actually studied chemistry at Cambridge. He began at Queen Mary University, where the KGB tried to recruit him — a late revelation — but fell out over Chechnya. He's had to adopt many guises to avoid KGB, now SVR agents, a measure of his acumen and dissimulation, if you like. He now, I understand from Alex, keeps an eye on some of some terrorist cells in Europe and the Americas. He is a Chechnyan sympathizer, of course, but not a terrorist. I do

think he can and will provide a general overview of events that may elucidate some of your own concerns — for he knows an entrepreneur who serves as a principal egg and fetal tissue broker for the Muerner Clinic. He would also be familiar with some drugs the Cheka has used as behavioral modification agents on troublemakers and terrorists — Chechnyans being high on the list, thus intimating a drug cocktail similar to what your birth mother may have been given. The consequences of which have prompted ongoing observational studies — one must assume. Which may relate to the Bern Clinic's — likely Muerner's — presumed ongoing interest in you. And your elusive, putative twin of course."

Catherine briefly silently shook her head. Willardson paused for a moment, as if newly short of breath, before continuing.

"It's a heady domain I think — the realm of the altruist — envisioning a utopian future, hosting a progeny of exemplary humans who enhance the idea of 'human'. A dynamic that slights the fact that the neater, more precise and fastidious one tries to be, the greater the ensuing mess and animosity one sometimes creates."

Said a somber Catherine, "How reassuring."

Again Willardson paused, as if to catch his breath.

"A consequence radical reformers tend to overlook. But right now I think we should get you off and running. Hāran retains a concordance of modern human folly and inanity you'll find engaging. A sage really. I shall give you an address."

"A real brick, this Hārun?"

"More than you will think at first, I dare say."

Catherine was decidedly diffident. "Where did you come across a player like that?"

Promptly Willardson said, marshalling a reserve determination, "At an auction house in Paris. He wanted my opinion of Johann Georg Paul Fischer. Something about an engraving that depicted a Muslim satrap. A long story. We've kept in touch over the years. Surprising as it may seem, we share a trust in the worth of things like — civility, good manners, durable tradition, open debate, classical European music and philosophy, and the therapeutic value of deft humor. Also an appreciation of the Islamist fear and dread of some of the above. Yes — a shared trust. I last met him at the Zurich Kunsthalle a while back.

"You 'share' a lot."

Willardson smiled. "Hārun's knowledge of the new social normlessness — a dissolution that seeds rancor and foils humanitarian hopes for consensus, unanimity — helps one understand the current cultural and behavioral bust." He paused and took an awaited breath, as if going further was for him trying. "It is an ongoing question among some observers — the promise of ease, delight, intemperance, and hence credulity — advertising's quarry — in generating Western hubris, cupidity and distemper."

"Do you?"

“The latent resurgence of eugenics points to a formidable hierarchy, an aristocracy in fact. It is a highly politically incorrect presumption, of course, meaning it may be nearer the truth than people are comfortable with. Americans, some say, don’t envy as much as they aspire. A simplification but not I think simplistic. On the whole, they do seem to resent less the success of their neighbor than a dearth of opportunity for themselves.”

“There’s a difference?”

Willardson sat down, drew out a monogrammed silk handkerchief and blew his nose. “Sniffles accompany portentous monologues I find. The onerous precepts. Which keep popping up these days. If you do not share my perspective, do tell. We can talk about other things — or nothing at all. Silence often is golden — when savouring a fine sherry.”

“No, I want, need to hear more. Sherry keeps one...upbeat.”

“Well, my thoughts often center on questions of sagacity and cogency, which thrive in non-articled candid-thinking communities — an idea not shared by some reformers today. Moreover, inherited intelligence plays a larger role than such reformers acknowledge. The question is: do comfort, leisure and security blunt intellectual exertion, the will to learn and understand; certainly the need for it is less when you’re comparatively well off. Such leisure can also spawn envy, suspicion of the exceptionally gifted individual. Does this envy prompt a covetousness that debilitates the proficiency of a species over time? Such enmity can foment a hectic philistinism, a protracted antipathy and summary beligerence. Our minds conspire when our options and bodies disappoint — disappointment being one aegis of capitalism. Art I believe can salve disappointment — well romantic art — which enshrines reverence, a key ingredient in the lineaments of acceptance, I think, in that it affirms a contemplative reconciliation, tranquility. If Cleopatra’s nose was a storied curio, then Michael Jackson’s may have been a baleful advisement today, pointing to an aesthetic intimidation if not squalor. Hence we arrive at the paradox — of espoused beauty and intelligence that molests. Invoking the idea of sin. As in the Islamic idea of *behaving* independently of devout belief, commandment. Human hubris writ large — as in *imagining* a purely human devised perfection. Slighting God as a miser or imp.”

Catherine’s impatience was by then antsy. “Oh come on. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. It is a contentious subject.”

“So the Muslim hates us because we are decadent. Fine. But hooked on seemly beauty, salubrity?”

“Why is it Islam, by and large, never countenanced the portrayal of the human form — particularly in suggestively idyllic form? Was it always so vulnerable, so prostrate before it? Can humans envisage the truly ‘godlike’ — intimating that God may indeed be a bit of a sluggard or miser? The beautiful houris awaiting the devout Muslim are not there by accident. The conquerer after all, uses up much sexual energy in his jihad. Yet when the conquerer rests he subverts his own dynamic. It is the manifest, pervasive power of the female — which the Muslim innately distrusts, yet constantly restlessly dreams about.”

“David, let’s stay with this Hārun/Aram dude. At least for the time being..”

Willardson smiled, knowing well the ennui even antagonism his pet commentaries sometimes provoked. Yet he was on a roll here.

“Being a witness to Islamic radicalism, Hārun’s mindful of the vilification of Western materialism, and the craving that convenes it. He believes the Islamists have been distracted, some would say molested, not by the energy and vitality of the West, but its endemic indulgences: its promiscuity, drugs, acutely invidious advertising, unbridled touting of carnality, the arrant violence and sexuality in its entertainments, many of which thrive on menace alone, the brazenness embedded in much of its slick marketing, and its endemic waste. I’m paraphrasing of course. If you get him to talk, he has a cogent assessment of the cultural normlessness or anomie that may evoke the above. He also has an insider’s track on the clandestine use of fetal material world wide, surely another of the new epiphanies — which ties in nicely and severally with your own topical investigation, yes? The problematic soma again. I regret not seeing Hārun more often.”

Again Catherine patiently smiled.

“Yes, to the nub: he is very lately involved in a hunt for an ardent terrorist you will have a mutual interest in, I trust — which relates to a Russian fugitive, the very being who appears to look like you and has roused the ire of this fanatical Islamist, a Brotherhood radical who served on a Shura Council, a kind of Minotaur who’s ventured beyond his labyrinth. The very fanatic who saw your double perform at the Apsara in London and apparently went berserk backstage. Zoya wasn’t seriously hurt but the angry Islamist lost an eye in the assault. A bemusing tale to be sure. The club’s enforcers handed him over to the Muslim guardians there. This is all recent news by the way, from a couple of discreet sources. If Zoya is related to you, and the odds seem pretty good that she is, you have a busy adventure before you. This Brotherhood terrorist, whose cell has taken out a fatwa on your twin, appears responsible for several recent bombings in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It’s this newly avid terrorist Hārun especially wishes to retire.”

Catherine was aghast. “You’re telling me now I may have a killer maniac looking for me?”

“He’s not looking for a journalist, obviously, but your similarity to his target is a sobering reality. I know you’ve been careful since your return, but you may be less safe than you were. An added precaution.”

“Happy days. So he has a name, this bugaboo?”

“Ammon Farouk is the short name given in the English tabloids. A great grandfather on his mother’s side comes from Kashmir. Rug merchants in the main. I’ve not had a lot of time to follow up. I spoke with Hārun last month. The attack on the Apsara performer occurred a month ago today.”

Catherine had lapsed into an expression of dour incredulity as Willardson continued.

“If Ammon had not made such a spectacle of himself in a foreign country — Muslims like Hārun

generally do not cherish homebred numbskulls acting out out witlessly, especially in public — your double would likely be dancing still. With this Brotherhood Minotaur we are well beyond the maze, the Labyrinth.”

Catherine wryly chuckled. “The only doll I know who got mixed up in a maze with a Minotaur eventually hanged herself.”

“Well, she was an awful romantic.”

“And quite dead in the end. David, I can’t help feeling you still hold some inconvenient cards.”

Willardson sighed. “You have it in one. The part, I think, that does not quite fit is that this Ammon was at one time reputed to be descended from the Umayyads, the founders of the first caliphate. It’s hard to imagine a personage of almost mystical stature being so heedless, reckless. Particularly in a public arena. Which suggests to me there must have been something in Zoya’s act itself that incited the furor. Something even that touched him personally. It’s only a supposition, but without it the available facts seem woefully inadequate.”

“And for want of a better plan you want me to scrape acquaintance with this busy Hārūn chap.”

Willardson smiled and compliantly nodded. “Hārūn is not the easiest chap to get to know, but he is conversant with what scores the pious conscience. The day’s steadfast Muslim often finds himself in an forbidding normless world. The contextual presumption of modern genetics is a fine piquant tease, is it not? The discovery of faulty human genomes insinuates the Creator’s mediocrity, blundering, miserliness, perversity even. The attribution of this unsavory nature to a *male* Creator, indeed an Allāh, is becoming a new provocation. The day’s unveiled, argumentative women, so many exceedingly misandrous, aggravate the tension.”

Catherine fondly smiled. “All the ‘Me Too’ divas.”

By then they sat in Willardson’s commodious oak-panelled study, his several thousand books, many custom bound, neatly shelved below a segmented ceiling of fluted arabesques carved in rare hardwoods, an archive that provided a quiet timeless firmament. He sprawled on a fauteuil, a scotch balanced on his considerable paunch, she curled up in a gilded enclosed armchair, known as a *voyeuse*, nearer the radiant fire, pear kirsch in hand and the remains of a Madeiran nut cake on a side table, to which he had added, with some persuasion, an Irish cream ale chaser. He had long since offered up his guest room for the night, an option she was on the verge of accepting. Latterly he had wandered off on several diverse subjects, the last the drop-front *secrétaire* by his desk, circa 1750, which had been designed for a woman’s use, a purchase he had negotiated on a visit to a private salon to assess a Watteau...his modulated voice all the while, so she thought, lulling the complexities she had inherited. But by then she was well beyond being slyly patronized or cajoled, and elected to enjoy the serenity his rooms seemed to exude. But she did have a lingering question.

“How would you get inside Muerner’s cabal, if such it is? To learn about the new medical Svengalis. And how my biological mother ‘lost’ a child to such a one.”

“Depends, on whether the chaps in the know still worry about endangering the person or persons who got you out, and whether they might trust you, their ‘escapee’: knowledge of such an abduction will have consequences. As of today, too many contentious issues surround the presumptions behind their work. As for opening the door — nothing short of an initiation into their special mysteries, I should think.”

She smiled. “Meaning what, exactly? For a cautious pinkie.”

“Well, take up the cause of the wonder workers, offer your services on the QT. Want to write a book. Make out you are a secret if reluctant admirer, that sort of thing; project great earnestness and insufficiency. Newly empathic adepts can be seductive finds, the late convert often being the exemplary believer...off the top of my head...the old stew pot a little cold.”

“Ah, simple as that.” Again she smiled, but this time mainly on her own. With a mutual amusement they toasted one another in silence.

When at last she padded off to bed, already half asleep, the light kiss on his forehead still moist, he sat for a time staring into the fireplace embers, thinking that she was indeed an embodiment of his central thesis — how beauty lay in the mind and being, not merely the fleshy disguise; that the ‘nothing in excess’ she epitomized was the clincher, to the extent that the ineluctable ‘nothing’ might not itself constitute an excess. He could not think of a human whose understated physicality — in its balance, articulation, tone, sheen — better matched her intelligence, candor, humor, perception, resilience, resourcefulness, equanimity — her sanity. The ‘accident’ that begged the question in and of his mind. Was there a part of her not finished, chased, as it were, by a peerless master? Well, he was a bit of a quixotic sot wasn’t he? But he doubted many people were cognizant of such beauty, of its myriad subtleties, Muerner excepted perhaps — it’s ineffable nothing in excess. *In Excelsis* this ‘nothing’. He indeed wondered if her real mother had, despite her ordeal, delivered a pair of veritable *Wunderkinder* — one of which Providence delivered from the Soviet cauldron and its obsessional presumptions. If he was to fancy one of her sex, she would be a Dulcinea to sure, a being many dreamers conjure but rarely actually discover.

After a last grog shot, he wished her well, with the lovelorn tenderness he traded in, then decided he could use some protracted shuteye himself. He thought again of the stark clinical renderings they had looked at earlier, and the near embarrassment caused by her chagrin at the one. Before departing the study he had a second look. The being pictured there in the center, a plausible likeness, was surely all a young discerning tyke might yearn for. Like the alert, feckless, lubricious imp he once was.

Abdul had just returned from Los Angeles where he attended a friend’s marriage and would soon prepare Joseph Sall to ‘bomb’ a second derelict mortgage bank. He sat now with Hejaz before a favorite board game, which began amiably until they discovered one of the pieces was missing. For a time they looked on the board like stalled automatons. Hejaz broke the silence.

“The journalist’s headed to the mosque we think. Likely to meet red-eye Aram.”

“A surprise, is it?”

“He uses the alias ‘Hārun’ with outsiders.”

“He’s sympathetic to Sufism isn’t he?”

“A follower of Abu-Joseph al-Ghazali. Well a sympathizer.”

“Rare given where he came from and espouses. What he’s done.”

“Neither devout nor a mystic, yes. He shouldn’t be underestimated though.”

“No.”

“They fancy the sea. The gift of water.”

“Yes.”

“Can’t be all bad.”

“He is an engaging strategist. Lots of ideas.”

“He is that.”

The silence that followed this pronouncement had a canny imputation neither man would dispute. The smarter Islamists were often the discretionary warriors. The specialists. Hejaz harbored a latent envy for intrepid players like Hārun, and wondered if, in his own faith, he had overlooked such resource. He was beginning to notice a lingering distemper, as if such innovation was itself a degree of intoxication not sanctioned in the Quran. Aram’s ‘humor’ seemed more daunting than ever.

SEVENTEEN

Catherine’s initial meeting with Hārun was not promising. Willardson had given her an introductory letter, also a time, and an address that she sought out with nearly the same diffidence she sought out the bravo at the Cayuse. The Moorish-style building housed both a mosque and welfare center, mere blocks from the Montecito villa as it turned out — a coincidence that amazed as it cautioned! Such happenstance, for her, was almost never benign — at least in the Russian Land of Long Nights.

A female janitor who mopped the front steps threw up her hands at the mention of Hārun’s name, yet pointed out a gent standing smoking near a pillar off the entrance. “I ask him to move...he tells me he a Mujaddid sent by God.” She loudly guffawed. “Security mans joke with him. He see kateeb here.” She partly relented. “Maybe seeking hajj.” Replacing the mop in her cart she dismissively shrugged and carried on.

Catherine imagined the man, the enigmatic Hārun, something of a precious cynic — at first. Pretending to be a Mujaddid, one who appears every century to revive Islam, was surely a bit ambitious; she’d done some reading about Islam. When he obliquely eyed her, she approached and proffered David’s letter of introduction, then quietly but forthrightly explained her interest in the day’s terrorists, and the controversy posed by genetic research in places like the Muerner Clinic. His dismissive silence was palpable. He responded just as she was considering taking her leave.

“The news hen wants to learn the riddle of the egg.”

“Yes.”

“David Abercrombie sends me the Maid of Orleans.”

She tried to smile. “No voices or visions though.”

“What can you want?”

“Quite a lot.”

That he might be ill-tempered as well Willardson hadn’t warned her of, but the banter was sufficiently brisk for her to stolidly continue.

“David believes I resemble a Russian dancer that a terrorist you’re trying to impede wants to rub out. I think he may be right. He also said you may have some insight into the exploits of the Russian mafia. The Borozov chapter. One of the wire pullers in Holy Rodina. In particular the sale and use of reproductive material that seems to convene a ready market in Europe and the West, an exploit that may incite a few apocalyptic critics. More or less.”

“David is an optimist.”

Their eyes briefly met. “I believe so.”

“A Celt.”

“A credit all round, yes.”

“Very round.” He barely smiled. “You know O’toole’s Law?”

“I’ve heard of Murphy’s — what can go wrong, will.”

“O’Toole thought Murphy an optimist. Mind games — all there is.”

She had the feeling he had recently suffered a misfortune, for he did not resemble the chipper gamester Willardson had described. He must have sensed her impatience, for his manner improved.

“So many minds. So. Yes. You help me stymie a terrorist, I help you appraise the new hardbody exemplars.”

She thought for a moment. “That must be a sight. So who’s the terrorist?”

He had returned to his unfocused absorbed look. “You have a double, a Doppelgänger, who’s causing a great stir. David and I have talked about it. He informed me of your coming. You’re late. I think we should retire to a more quiet congenial place. There is a mihrab around the corner that faces a discrete observation and instruction room for cooperative infidels. There we will begin. Please pull your shawl closer to your face.”

When they were settled in adjacent seats, looking out into the vast airy sanctuary, he softly fluently began:

“Your double, an erstwhile nimble Slavic dancer, is being pursued by a fuming Briareus. He lost an eye. The eye of a Beholder. Briareus is the hundred-handed-one of ancient mythology. One of Mother Earth’s first children, who never grew up. Despite his many flunkies, his many limbs, our terrorist is as limited in his pursuit of your double as a Cyclops. He’s picked some bad Western habits.”

“The one eyed monster. With a big appetite. So he fancies her, in a hey ho but unforgivable way.”

“Our hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.”

In recognizing the words of Kahlil Gibran she almost despaired. A mystic in search of a terrorist and a Doppelgänger was not in her estimation a promising strategist or ally. But she did not doubt Willardson’s late advisement: it was at least worth a try. And the man’s English was surprisingly good. And so, in an old but princely mansion, not far from the mosque, their second venue that day, Hārūn began with the convoluted tale of her double, detailing the narrative as they inspected some of her patents — specifically some dance costumes she’d worn in a Moscow revue, three of which now hung from headless mannequins in a bright room lined with flowery arabesque panelling. They sat on a cushioned dais near the surprisingly elegant costumes, which a wary Catherine imagined too small for any credible twin of hers.

“You had a plan in mind when you collected these?” she asked.

“Forensic items. One has some of the terrorist’s blood on it. He made a mess of a wardrobe in the attack. They tell a story.”

Harūn then adopted a smile and said he usually had tea at this hour. Sometimes with a snack. He then wiped the small narrow table before them with a pristine handkerchief. Shortly thereafter a woman entered the room with a lunch tray. Catherine declined the apple-walnut spinach salad but accepted a flat bread and pot of jasmine tea. Hārūn accepted only a pot of tea, then stared into the sanctuary as he began, as if a shadow theatre played before him.

“The Slavic Soloist we call her, a daring performer, smuggler of precious gems and icons, and a suspected bearer of some fulsome recriminating info relating to a Russian oligarch — a late advisement. The terrorist we wish to retire, a busy trader and broker in his other life, apparently entered her Apsara dressing room and assaulted her at the end of a performance. He has a fondness for dancers and a princely expectation of his desserts. Some kind of struggle ensued. The net result being she stabbed him in the eye with hat pin. There is likely more to the story, for she not only survived but managed to give the slip to his bodyguards, the house heavies and the late-coming bobbies. He was acutely embarrassed — he almost spent the night in a busy emergency ward — and remains something of a pariah in his own community. The one eye may be permanently blinded. And yes, he’s now referred to as a Cyclops — among select observers.

Catherine carded a smile. “I’ve never much cared for hats.” But Hārūn was attuned then to the story not page turners.

“It is a complicated narrative. His loathing of the West, parenthetically since the attack, is indeed a vocation. The allurements it fosters iniquitous. Those promoting pretty bods are anathema, his past lust for such a one now a curse. Indeed, the facilitators of such endowment are committing *Shirk* — ascribing to themselves an ideal, empyrean vision — more or less. In short, *human* idealization is for him is idolatry, the heinous sin. This last observation comes from a former Shura Council member.

The fatwa against your double remains in place. Our terrorist now fancies himself a scourge, an avenger. One vilifying seduction, in its many guises. Since the attack.”

“‘Fancies.’ Always trouble that,” Catherine responded with campy ease. “You know his real name?”

“His short name is Ammon Altakhsas Farouk. He’s used several aliases, one fanciful sobriquet being al-Wahhāb.”

“The ‘giver of gifts’. Must be a headache — this Ammon.”

“The dancer plainly scored his conscience.”

“So who is the ‘we’ that want him retired?”

Hārūn eyed her for a moment before replying. “Some marshals in the Islamic Reform Movement, an influential Saudi sheikh or two — who don’t appreciate fumbler in their morality brigade — possibly a faction in the Russian mafia that hawk reproductive material — a late development.”

“The trustees of the Bern Clinic are in the dark I presume.”

“Not for long I expect.”

“Can you tell me more about this egg, sperm trade?”

Again Hārūn looked away. “You would know the secret of life? It may lie in the promise of life. It is in exchanging the gifts of life that you shall find abundance and be satisfied.”

“That’s a big help. From your trusted oracle, I presume.”

“I understand from David that you may be deficient in your estimation of the younger Borozov brother, his philosophy and interests.”

“I’m sure I am. I’m not an expert on Great White Sharks either, but their victims are hard to ignore.”

Hārūn indulged a wan smile.

“I am a good listener.”

“The embittered Ammon is the one we must focus on, for now. Humanity and the egg game in due course. He has been out of control for some time. Several wildcat suicide bombings point to his influence. This new rage, this murderous flagrancy, followed his encounter with Zoya. Sooner or later he must find her, the fatwa’s *lex tallonis*.”

“And he’s not looking for a tête-à-tête. So. Dead or ‘dead’, this soloist. To coin a phrase.” An intimidating revelation, if true she mused. How ironic that she might be in such peril in this free commodious land, the ground of which she kissed on her arrival. She knew the Borozovs would readily connive at her demise, but were unlikely to bother with a gadfly celebrity an ocean away — after all she had barely made a dint in the business conglomerate they had assembled. But this new peril she might still be oblivious of. She wondered how much Willardson was aware of this, yet wanted another to spell it out. Hārūn placidly continued.

“He can be clever our Cyclops. At least away from fleshpots and blue eyed sirens. But you are safer

here than on your own. Something you must consider. Ammon's need to avenge himself is apparently implacable."

"So how will he find his 'eyesore', this Cyclops?"

Hārūn took a time responding. "Being a foxy thief, this Lilith, Ammon's Night Monster, could very well travel here to hawk her wares, mainly gems we think, disguised perhaps as an egg donor. A tenable cover."

"Here. Treasure and eggs? Here?..."

"A voice alone cannot carry the tongue and lips that gave it wings."

"Okay, okay."

For the first time Hārūn studied her directly. "Always useful to sound out the airheads."

"So what happens now?"

"One option would be for her to present herself to the spa's clinic as a donor. She would be as invisible here as elsewhere. She would enjoy the anonymity of candidate status, a sequestration the spa's clinic helps foster, while identifying some of the brokers — who tend to buy and sell more than reproductive tissue. If she has some precious gems with her, she will find a ready serviceable market. It is a distinct possibility. Coming here is not as far fetched as it sounds. She's vanished, suggesting she may be seeking a new haunt and identity. A new identity would facilitate an ocean crossing. Difficult but not impossible. Though the odds may seem somewhat slim, it is that likelihood we should play to. From one source we know that an expatriate Russian ballroom dancer sold her eggs to the Fertility Center in the University Hospital, Southampton. Our soloist could well be aware of the money offered, but would not likely approach such a facility in Britain. But in America, with a new name, she would enjoy a vernal anonymity. It is a possibility we must not discount. Her coming, being here is credible."

"Sounds tenuous — scouting an egg clinic here. Not something I'd do."

Hārūn again looked abstracted. "It would put her out of harm's way for a time. Especially if she elects to stay at one of the residences the spa retains — this villa being one."

"A spa residence — here? Hey ho."

Hārūn smiled.

Catherine winced. "Am I a windfall or what! You're not making this up, I presume."

"It's a safe convenient nub for a fugitive. The office of the spa registrar is nearby."

Catherine's amazement took a moment to abate. "So the embarrassment he suffered in London hasn't waned."

"Well, he can't mope for long; he has too many mosque and business obligations. And now, with a fatwa's reckoning in hand, he's been given full vent to his rage. Imagine, an Apsara — a being beloved by God and man — having to seek asylum. The likelihood of her coming here *is* feasible. Yes. A supposition we can play to, deftly exploit."

“With the putative double. A team effort, yes?”

He politely smiled. “Of course.”

She too drew a latent smile as Hārun rose only to lead her into a sunny atrium, then summon a masked dancer wearing one of the soloist’s costumes and a balalaika performer who began with the Kalinka folk tune. Hārun seemed immune to Catherine’s confusion and barely concealed apprehension as the dancer began a beguiling performance. With some deliberation he said: “You and we, in turn, must learn to emulate the pattern of her dance. Bring her alive, in this singular but accommodating place.”

Catherine tried to smile. “It gets a bit mazy.”

“Clear as the morning light. The pivotal resolve.”

As she watched the sinuous creature before her, the form and movement reminded her more of a folk ballet than a sexy show lounge performer. Sensing a limit to her patience she asked, “So what does the ‘doorkeeper’ here suggest we do? In concrete terms.”

Quite suddenly the music and dancing stopped, the dancer and musician withdrew into an adjoining room. Hārun stood directly before her, his eyes, she thought, assessing her mood, her credence and resolve. He seemed persuaded.

“We make you into the Russian Soloist. Hawking her wares. Here. Staying in this villa. Where she can be glimpsed, prospectively seen. We have our own spielers.”

“Awesome,” she said vacantly. Then, “You’re really not serious?”

“Awesome, yes.”

“Me?”

Again he faintly smiled.

“But what really is the likelihood that he or his goon would come across her here?”

“The world is full of fugitives seeking some kind of asylum. Ammon’s spies work far afield, and informers breed like lice in the age of jihad. Such informers extend to this continent. We put about some pithy rumors about the arrival of a singular candidate. Simple enough.”

“You exchange pleasantries now and then?... Okay, okay. So he’s on the prowl. But what...about the soloist’s language? She speaks English?”

“With a rich slavic accent. Very easy to mimic.”

“I can’t believe this. So I learn to sound like what — a cockney wolfing potato chips. But what if she should really show up on her own?”

“We will have two superb players performing one part. Twice the power to bag the ogre and set the duo free.”

“Whew. Ha. Powder puff and powder monkey. Or some such. I really can’t believe this. Sorry. It’s sounds, well, rather harum-scarum.”

“Come see the world that your other ‘she’ never leaves. From her cabined peephole.”

“Sounds like Keats.” Hārūn’s English continued to amaze.

He looked at her with incipient wonder, then softly stated, “England does not have a monopoly on poets.”

“Of course.”

But she was not to be derailed.

“Will this impersonation not complicate my twin’s life? If it gets out — as you imply. May it not alarm her? Prompt her to act — impulsively, carelessly perhaps?”

“Sooner or later the twain must meet, be joined, reconciled. It’s very likely she’s seen the OO Magazine cover. The ruse here is a first step. Rumours catch fire today.”

“A big first step.”

“A best defence is often a canny offence.”

If she doubted both the sanity and salubrity of the proposal, she was tempted at least to facilitate the main deception — if only to better find her bearings in this chimerical world where, as Muggeridge once said, everything was true but the facts. She hated quitting a scene that begged for deconstruction — one of her goads, when the gin was plentiful. But, but...the ‘buts’ were lining up.

“You can of course leave now, with our blessing.”

It was, she decided later, perhaps the one forthright comment he made to her.

“How soon must I decide?”

“Soon.”

“There is a ‘point of no return’, yes?”

He promptly nodded. “Once you learn the dance — her habits, manners, actions — it’s best you see the matter to a conclusion. The ‘identity’ will be a long shadow. Elsewhere.”

“But no assurance — of success, or discovery.”

“Her presence and well being is a key to our resolution. She is, after all, an escape artist.”

“So I pose as a donor. A candidate. But won’t that alone be an imprudent giveaway if he’s as familiar with her looks and nature as you say?”

“No. Skin deep you are a very good match I’m told. However, simply being here will reveal an anticipated aim, an intention. For an informer.”

“You implied having a team working on finding him — players *you’d* use in implementing this ruse.”

“The very best.”

“But if he can learn through his spies of her coming here — it’s not entirely secure this multi-task villa?”

“The art of self defense requires that some moves, some deeds be known. What is witnessed by stealth or accident will serve as an unwritten *surah* for this Islamist.”

“So he gets to see me ‘smelling the roses’ or whatever. What’s a *surah* again?”

“A pronouncement of fated truth. More or less.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“What is true and what must serve as fact are rarely the same. One must know and feed the adversary’s susceptibilities.”

Concluding that her own concerns for her safety were likely existential in or out of this roundelay, she sought some factual answers.

“What if the clinic suspects my application? One of my concerns.” She didn’t expand on her late visit to the Montecito villa she’d all but foundered in, and the auction protocol that so dismayed!

“We do not have a connection with the spa. The presumption of your donor status will be a given — simply in your coming and residing here. You will see. During the spring break several youngsters fill our guest rooms, and most are registered at the spa for evaluation. The gardens and fountains here, modelled after a historic park in Kabul, attract many visitors.”

“Yes, they are lovely — the fountains and flowers. What I’ve seen so far. But what if somebody checks with the clinic? This pit bull will surely sniff around.”

“The fact is you are a shoo-in there, regardless. Staying here would make such doubt inexpedient. It is your presence here that matters. And it won’t be that difficult to get a name into the spa registry.”

She was a time putting the matter aside. Finally she asked, “If you could candidly say...how dangerous is it, really?”

“The team of sitters I have for you, if you take up the challenge, is top drawer. The terrorist’s team would be instructed to undertake an abduction. The more ardent Islamists favor ceremonial executions. Something they can do at their leisure. Remember, you are as safe here as elsewhere.”

It was the moment she nearly balked. It seemed ironic that this enterprise should be so daunting compared to the ugly situations she’d weathered in the Russian Federation. She risked assault there many times, yet the risks were more assessable. Here luck itself seemed ‘futures’. But the prospect of freeing her double from this menace, perhaps even meeting her, disarmed the worry. She had to see where hers and her Doppelgänger’s life threads lay.

“I’d like to see the spa’s donor prospectus.” Her growing curiosity had foiled her initial diffidence.

“One of our female minders will secure one. If you decide to follow through with our plan, you must let us vet all outside communication. A prospectus will be easy to acquire.”

“Well, let’s begin with the spa’s ‘broadsheet’, with emphasis added.” A document that proved to be as infuriating in its presumptions, audacity and exactions as any she might have imagined, such that she decided she had to see into the shadows, throw some much needed light onto this growing and essentially clandestine business. If she distrusted sheer anger in Russia, here it seemed a concordant necessity. That mindful Willardson was familiar with the program eased her incredulity.

Thus was she nominally cast that day as an applicant for the program of elite donors. To wit: being observed in this exceptional Moorish-inspired estate, awaiting a regimen of clinic testing — for

all furtive witnesses.

One of the in-house agents, known only as Barbara, a tall strong woman, a former Olympic skeleton sledder, outlined the strategic nuances of being glimpsed but not really seen in this residence. “We don’t want the identity confirmed too soon, for several reasons. First, we want to learn where a snoop might hang out when your presence here becomes suspected — we have a good idea of the likely venues but we want corroboration. The name Corin Wiley will be placed in the spa’s upper candidate registry, as well as on a Latvian freighter’s passengers’ list — from a presumed entry visa. We have our own gate mouths who will tell of a look-alike candidate among the ambient café /pub crowd — cat nip for snoops and tabloid trolls. Talk Ammon will learn of in due course. If you look carefully at the translucent curtains throughout the villa, you’ll find they are constantly in rapid random motion — slight twitches to the knots and crosses in the fabric, making it difficult for a tele camera to register a distinct image. An inaugural defensive feature adopted by the former apprehensive owner that will aid us now. In short, we want the suspicion of your identity a spur to newsmongers. We hope to be cognizant of such a one or two within a week. The likelihood of your double coming here is credible. We’ll keep you up to date on events as they happen. Hārun and my team will be discussing other matters in due course — mainly your attire and daily routine.”

“You’re sure a crack shooter won’t have a chance?”

“Not if you follow our instructions for your movements here. Moreover, confirming your identity and domicile here will take time. Allowing for us to pinpoint newcomers. Besides, Ammon will want an abduction not an onsite killing. Again, you’re as safe here as anywhere else. Believe me.”

Catherine said very little from then on, listening to the suggestions for her dress, actions and makeup, which were formulated from late descriptions of her double, lifted mainly from a Moscow tabloid that featured a lengthy piece on the Apsara chain of clubs. Simple enough, she assumed, though the belief that she could pass as Corin Wiley remained a trying intimation. After inspecting the small but comfortable two room suite she was assigned, with its discreet perimeter guards, she agreed to proceed on the proviso that she would have at all times a cell phone to an outside source, which Hārun agreed to, only if she would use it in an emergency.

“Which there may be.”

“Only if you decide so. Your privacy is assured, and the grounds are as well protected as any legation”

She wryly smiled. “Not a great consolation.”

Belatedly he wagged a finger.

But it was the prospect of fleshing out her past, hobbling an ‘explosive’ maniac, and meeting a possible sibling that opened an acceptable vista. She’d been in tight spots before and harboured a sixth sense for the signs that prompted one to flee. She promised Hārun she would persist. At least for a time. Michael was not thrilled with the dare nor the assignment being so open-ended, but seemed

pleased she had found an assignment worth pursuing and appeared reconciled to her leave taking for a protracted period. When she rang off she wryly imagined him promptly calling his latest pet, but didn't have the heart to dial his number again.

And so, in the early morning, the contrived show began — nominally for egg buyers, specifically terrorist sentinels — the nearly invisible security detail ghosting the margins. Hārun suggested that her twin may in due course learn of her 'impersonator', and possibly seek out a room in one of the area's inns or pension lodgings, if she can find the means to travel here. "She would be curious, yes."

Catherine hid a sudden emotional stab with a quiet curt smile.

"A possibility," Hārun added.

"You are asking a lot," she soberly said.

"You've arrived in a good harbor."

"God and Allāh willing. That's not a sarcasm, by the way."

To ostensibly prepare for the calisthenics part of the initial examination, she rehearsed her own Adoration of the Sun exercises, while the cool Barbara watched in a seemly silence. She later told Hārun she had limited patience with operational cliff hangers."

Despite the laden invigilation, the light in one selected chamber of the villa, a high vaulted atrium, seemed ethereal, recalling for Catherine the 'unity of the real', a phrase in the Qur'ān. The irony worked to sojourn the sumptuous mischief: the temptress once again performing on a consequent stage...well a surround imitative of a special venue. While doing, in turn, some exercises Barbara prescribed for an innovative dancer, in weighted sandals, she found herself reflected in the rooms' gilded mirrors. "All the avid Lothsarios have been banished from this wing," Barbara remarked, with amused candor. With mock wistfulness Catherine added, "So. No ripe 'flesh against flesh...until the morning cup.' That's Sappho not Kahlil, by the way."

"Sappho's one of my touchstones," Barbara quietly responded, surprising Catherine. So, her minder a possible classic lezbo.

Another matter was not so easily disposed of. Barbara outlined the situation. "The team suggested it. I tend to agree. With companionable others your double would be an inveterate teaser. Here she'd be circumspect. Watchful, observant. We've concluded you should have a hand gun — discretely housed in a hand bag — easily glimpsed on occasion. Dark hard edged objects are less ambiguous than soft. Guns are eye candy here." Here she paused, as if recollecting an apt story, a hiatus that was momentary however. "We've also concluded that we should better disclose an identity, a factual presence."

"What does that mean?"

"Appearing sometimes in brief summer attire. Spies will be seeking a form as much as a face. All activity should appear routine, casual."

"'Brief' eh. How 'brief'?"

“I’ve persuaded Hārūn of its utility.”

Catherine indulged a wry smile. “Flashing what — my toenail polish? A plucked eyebrow?”

But Barbara was undeterred. “No. A thin summer wrap, while reading in the sunny glassed-in loggia, something she would do. There — but not conspicuous.”

“Lookit, it’s hardly likely a bod will be the match of a face. I’ve no tan — which she may very well have. Won’t the game then be over sooner than later?”

“A small risk. But a prudent requisite. And from what we’ve seen, and been told from some freelance Russian sources — yes, they exist — any dissimilarities are negligible. And she has no tan. You are a likely match in every respect, except that your teeth may be better. The loggia’s sectional sofa she’d seek out in her spare time...providing a suggestive identity...for the busy watchers.”

“They’re that many — and that observant?”

“We have our own gatemouths. Enough said. Ammon’s MO, when he learns of a likely presence, will center on matching habit with form. Another of the givens.”

“Another thing — if she’s such an exceptional agile performer aren’t we also way off base by my attempting to ‘prep’ for this audition?”

“You share a talent. By the time Ammon’s spotters learn of your presence you will be practiced and accomplished.”

“You’re really rather desperate, right?”

“The odds are in our favor.”

Catherine was a moment responding. “‘Accomplished.’ Sounds long term.”

“Your twin is known for her enterprise, but also her sudden time outs.”

“Ah. So these ‘time outs’, or whatever, that appear to be useful in matching me to my twin — how and when do I affect them?”

“May I suggest you try the one hot tub just off the loggia in the afternoon, with a cocktail. It’s fairly well screened — part of it can be seen from the adjacent villa’s second floor. The glass throughout most of this villa is match-grade military shell proof by the way — the former owner being a very wary magnate. Though, as we’ve said, Ammon will seek an abduction, not a shooting. You’ll wear dark glasses in and out, to keep the compilers busy. You’ll rehearse some dance moves here near the atrium before visiting the hot tub. She is a conscientious trainer apparently and sometimes trains in her costumes. Thus you should occasionally rehearse in some. Her signature costume consisted of a head-piece, a royal crown, a pyjamas-style skirt and a belt girdle, a zaraband — of Rajputana inspiration. Wearing parts of it would be a further prompt.”

Catherine indulged a scowl. “But no top. On what I saw.”

“She sometimes wore a wide style of appliqué pectoral. Which we have. Another recollection to affirm a presence.”

“How long do I do all this workout-rehearsal-display stuff?”

“Until the Cyclops leaves his cave. We’ll know soon enough.”

And so, after her workout and dip in the hot tub, she towelled herself just off the loggia arches, the better to grant the anticipated spooks a glimpse of the pale kore, the large dark sun glasses leaving her a commensurate tease she thought, for she wore only a thong in the tub. Some days Hārun squatted nearby, his conduct that of a fastidious sentinel, immune to the heat or presence of her, nestling sphinx-like with binoculars and cell phone on the loggia’s cobbled limpet shell flooring. What surprised was the ease one adapted to a kept life, given the Moorish aesthetics and quiet solitude. That she might be the target of a brutish eagle-eyed roué seemed at times surreal. But she decided the show would, must go on — at least for the specified trial period.

“Do you think anyone is paying attention?” she asked her keeper who slipped by one day as she lay on her front reading a paperback on a loggia chaise, wearing only her thong, thus giving the putative spies a peek at her best feature in her candid estimation. “Our Cyclops is about to drink unwatered wine,” came the quiet reply. Which she recalled had signalled the end for the critter. “God et’s hope so,” she promptly said.

“I haven’t heard any rumblings from the cave,” she whispered a day later to a newly arrived Barbara who looked out from behind a loggia column with a pair of binoculars.

“In the fullness of time,” Barbara answered, her clear ready voice an upgrade to Hārun’s pensive heed.

Some days the filtered light intimated the presence of a third reality in the atrium, as on the day she rehearsed with one of her double’s capes, the whisper and zephyr of satin silk before the recondite eyes, which she was assured were then about in the neighborhood. Coloured screens filtered the light for this and the later exhibitions, when the tiara styled head dress and tiered asymmetrical skirt replaced the cape, in an approximate replay of the earlier known ‘travesty’ when she was attacked. By then Barbara, an erstwhile modern dancer and judo master, was helping direct the performance, proposing steps and devising makeup — a precious staging that amused as it amazed. Occasionally Catherine would catch sight of herself in a silvered wall mirror, a light smile conspiring with collyrium eyes and beeswaxed lips, her form a live arabesque, an Apsara, a Devi, who melded into the sun gilded chambers. Hārun’s select words seemed less preachy then, though she had decided that he was likely gay, a problem for a Muslim, his presence a sober reminder. But it was in the very dancing, her mastery of the moves they devised — some from Russian folk dance tapes as well as ballet — that upstaged the arrant tease, the moves that fused her aerobics, eurythmics, some of which mimicked belly dancing. Such workouts ending in the ‘intermezzi’, as Barbara called them, the breathing spells, where the caleans, the water pipes, a late restful habit, were not far off. Afterward, a superb masseuse would chase away the lingering cares with her herbal creams, and ‘chase’ was the word Catherine thought of — how fine gold work is polished, caressed, ‘chased’, to reveal its lustrous patina, here the craft of a silent Czech whose eyes intimated another Montecito Grace. One night Barbara took over

with seemly authority, sculpting her spent student with a solemn thoroughness. It was one of the best massages Catherine had experienced before or since.

Then an old poster — a stray extra it seemed — appeared on a table in the loggia, an advertisement that told of an earlier Zoya performance in a nightclub in Marseilles, the Cavee — in a raven black wig! It sat on a side table for a day without comment, then vanished. “Devi is making the rounds?” she asked Barbara.

“Sadly, her performance at the time was cancelled because of a bad ankle,” Barbara replied.

“So she’s human,” Catherine announced with some amusement, one of her own sore achilles tendons newly on the mend. But like Hārun, Barbara seemed a universe apart that week, glued to her ever busy binoculars and cell phone — in Arabic, German and English.

A sudden break in the daily routine was mandated by a new ploy, a kind of masquerade, a further manifestation of her ‘coming out’. “Another means for our soloist to be ‘incorporated’,” as Hārun put it, which took place on the day he conducted an auction on a rear loading bay of the villa that was screened by the rock garden, in effect an exceedingly brisk, upscale flea market. An advent that prompted a nimble dialogue. “You want me there, in person?” “Coren Wiley, yes, stealing a look — sometimes removing her glasses for a better assessment. For her a kind of hajj.” “A flea market, a hajj?” “Her Mecca, yes. Somedays.” On show: several items reminiscent of those Kissy had flaunted at the opening of his salon, also some new and beguiling objects, including two Shahadah prayer discs, a pristine sealed Qur’an, a set of well fabricated Russian ikon paintings, and a bronze bust in an Islamic warrior — the collection to backdrop what Hārun called ‘a new and revelatory appearance!’

In a pretty shawl with a wide floppy hat, an apposite ‘outside’ disguise, she and a similarly dressed woman, hovered about the items on sale. She was amused that two male buyers also found it prudent to dress alike, some even sporting a moustache similar to the one fastidious Hārun cultivated. He was obviously concerned for his own safety and dressed his bodyguards accordingly. When she removed her hat, to attend to an adjustment to the front dip, her dark glasses then in her hand, the disclosure drew several glances in her direction. The sudden silence among some buyers seemed to affirm a ready audience. So she imagined. Hārun had faintly smiled — a rarity for him. Later he affably commented, “Seeing, beholding, not spying, seals some options for our Cyclops. One broker had a cell phone camera disguised in a sleeve.”

“You’re sure?”

“Our Cyclops should be apprehended within the week.”

“God willing.”

“He is.”

Later they compared notes in the sitting room off the upper floor atrium. She had just washed her hair and nestled in a large wing chair in a thick robe, her turbaned head suggestive of a caliph suffering an envoy, deputy or scribe. The loose flowing robes Hārun lived in concealed a medley of

weapons and at least two cell phones. They spoke warmly of the flea market — of her sensational ‘coming out’.

“It wasn’t just a bit craven?”

It was the interval when Hārun disclosed some topical information she was only partly relieved to hear.

“Only now can his field agents attest to the feasibility — of your identity. What his minions spied before was but a tease for the Cyclops. A mistaken informer is always at risk around a fanatic. But after such an open simple act in public, he could hardly not be persuaded. Failure to act now would be an apostasy. It is time.”

“So the face is officially out. On record. The molly maid is in residence.”

Calmly Hārun replied, “You may keep your heart in wonder at the daily adventures of your life.”

By then she was accustomed to Hārun’s Gibran. “I may get few calling cards.” She helped herself to a peeled gold kiwi fruit on a side table.

“You may glimpse the Pneuma.”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. Pneuma? A lot of hot air, in my general parlance.”

Hārun looked at her with what she deemed amusement, then said, “It’s time you took some time out, took up some selective reading. Indoors. Visit our study rather than the hot tub. For the next few days. There is now a document there that may interest you. A kind of manifesto and charter. Which relates to the founders and patrons of the Bern Clinic, the eggheads you wish to ‘candle’ — is that the word? See in lucid detail. The ‘eye’ of the genetics’ mavens.”

“There is such a thing?”

He wanly smiled.

“A treatise you’ve been awfully Garbo about.”

“And a man/woman said, speak to us of knowledge and self-knowledge.”

She had long since decided that Gibran was his prompter in dealing with her. “So what is this doomsday document? A lordly tome to snooze by? Is that it? I hide in the library as the Cyclops leaves his cave? He not being much of a reader I assume.”

Hārun was a moment responding. “The sanctity of one grave promise is at stake here.”

Try as she might she could not keep a perfectly straight face. “Sanctity, huh. What promise? Hārun!”

“It was agreed. One of David’s stipulations.”

“David Willardson?” Her ready incredulity surprised even herself.

“It is partly my doing. I didn’t want to divert you from our mission to entice the monster.”

“Well, you’ve got my attention now. Do amaze me. You and David — in cahoots. Good lord.”

“It is overdue. The presentation of this document. For the lion hearted.”

“Lion hearted, eh?” She gave Hārūn a pawky look as she slowly shook her head. “Well, my late night reading has been rather slim.”

To honor the closet pact with Willardson, and her apparent ongoing success, Hārūn led Catherine to a study off the atrium and set before her a document that transfixed, as he intimated: a utopian manifesto, the means to man’s perfectibility, what he called ‘the revelation of the Pneuma’— another flea market or fire sale offering in her estimation. She barely got beyond the preamble. Human bod ‘perfection’ she long ago decided was largely a mug’s game. Though she imagined the muggers getting better at it, with few of the hoi polloi following what they were up to because it was esoteric.

“It is a Western document,” was Hārūn’s spare comment. She took it up a second time, as much to bolster her vexation.

The tract exalted in a presumption of genetic change and the promise of what she deemed Hayek-style capitalism. The world was too small to avoid the inevitable — that only hard science and technology could resolve the larger problems of scarcity, pollution and dread, and science flourished best in a laissez-faire surround free of all sententious dogma. Borozov, Konstantin Alexandrovich (Kissy) and Muerner, Felix Zveno, were among the trustees of an eminent think tank — a fact that took a while for her to assimilate. Research at the Bern Clinic tended to affirm the main conclusion: chromosomes were a ‘hard constituency’. There was a lot of talk about form, structure, intelligence and probability theory. Also a presumption of the mental landscape paralleling the physical: one key word being ‘coherence’, which invoked the iron law of parsimony — nothing superfluous, no stray adjuncts — the very simplicity of scientific endeavor and its attendant faith. The general acuity of the Western world population was believed to be in decline: those who might wisely, thoughtfully, humanely provide for children were having fewer of them, and the public might never be aware of the fact in a highly distracting milieu. In short, the well-trained dedicated people needed to solve the complex problems appeared to be progressively smaller part of an expanding population. Would there be enough? In the given time? The toffy pending question.

That she really didn’t understand a word, Hārūn took in his stride. The discovery of a Borozov — the younger brother, Kissy — among the trustees only added to her wonder and dismay. To Hārūn she remarked, “Kissy B. as a probability theorist...who would have imagined!”

“The classic liberal chose to exempt himself. Yet could not contend with his dreams.”

“Yah, yah. But why now, all this carnal, complementarity stuff. If that’s what it is. The mental somehow paralleling the physical.”

“You would touch with your fingers the body/mind of your dreams.”

“I’m listening.”

As much to himself he said, “It’s time. To see what the wondrous Felix Muerner’s gene-donor exemplars actually look like. It’s not a Muslim study, but one we strive to understand; only then can one adroitly pick and choose the salubrious and beneficial from the superficial and invidious.”

She sighed, yet assumed that the horse trading of the clinic, the basis of all this soma business, beings elusive and wondrous, was about to be revealed. As much to herself she mused: “So the veil of epiphany, or whatever, is to be lifted to actually see the new snazzy egg mommas — the precious smarties who can drive our Islamist bonkers.” She looked up at Hārūn. “The thought keeps elbowing in.”

“The distractions of splendor — the too-real Apsara.”

“I can’t imagine a better tour guide.”

He surprised her by solemnly nodding and briefly grimacing. “It’s time. To see, behold the estimable beings, examples of the envisaged creatures the assessment folk at the Montecito spa so assiduously summon and recruit. To, in fact, behold Muerner’s utopian vision behind it all. His special obsession, his animus. You wish to write of its craving, yes? And in time its elegy.”

Catherine smiled. “Dear me.”

He looked then as though a door had been carelessly opened, a secret chamber about to be apprized, as if he was conceding a point he labored to resist. A resignation she felt honor bound to trust. She further decided not to reveal her experience with Karen — both at the spa and the villa. To learn whether Karen’s involvement was as canny as she now thought. To what extent her account jived with the current topical reality.

EIGHTEEN

Ammon was pleased with the plan. He was, in outline, familiar with the crippled girl’s past and knew she hated the West with a singular venom. Two members of her Sunni family had been tortured and hanged under Saddam Hussein. She had joined some armed gangs for a time and may have participated in the fall of Tikrit. She had in effect offered up herself as a martyr! Some explosives would be fitted into her peritoneum, the rest in a heavy voluminous gown and coat. An awed Ammon believed the girl a divine Mala’ika. On the day she arrived for an examination of an injured foot, a major section of the Bern clinic would be levelled. It would be a sign. The end of the beginning; only in the West did one second guess the True Believers!

About that time, and in an analogous buoyant mood, Kissy’s late words with Dilsat about her treatment at the Bern clinic were about ballet, and his love of the music such composers as Khachaturian, Rachmaninoff, Bizet, Prokofiev, Jacques Offenbach and Charles Gounod wrote for it. He even arranged for Dilsat to attend a rehearsal of the Mariinsky Theatre production of Spartacus featuring Alexei Repnikov and Ekaterina Kondaurova. She had loved it but might only dream of such a career she said. “A time and place thing,” she placidly stated.

“Dreams keep us afloat,” Kissy added. “There are many dance ensembles, professional and amateur — folk, jazz, latin, contemporary — as well as ballet, of course.”

“The thought of just getting back on my feet is dream enough for now,” she declared. Then she asked him to tell her more about the clinic mandate and scientists who shape it.

He was of course more than willing to offer his perspective on the clinic; indeed, he’d rarely been asked to do so before. A performance he felt up to now, and dealt with a stubborn smile as he began.

“The clinic serves of course the aegis of improvement — in stubborn disease, exceptional injury or textbook anomaly. Muerner’s esthetic sense animates some cutting edge tissue and genetic research, but that is mainly kept in house. Examples of transformed persons emerge of course, but the contract with the subject does not allow referential publicity or self-promotion — and the decision to proceed comes from a team of clinic arbiters themselves. Muerner’s Wunderkinder bias has a classic Attic splendor component, but he doesn’t broadcast it. He believes the appeal of the paragon will be entirely sufficient to inculcate a respectful mindset over time — as genetic manipulation becomes one day proficient in its transformation of both the human mindset and body. It’s a touchy subject for a lot of people, but he’s a private boffin not a public crusader. I doubt he even believes the general public a worthwhile constituency in any case. A bit of a fanatic yet highly esteemed by his colleagues. Not one to easily slight or dismiss — for his exceptional specialists are respected and honored world wide.”

“Sounds like a good place for a diagnosis at least.”

“I’m certain they will suggest more than that, and have you airborne in no time. They are not only good but diligent in all their undertakings.” But Dilsat was thinking then of the special ink and the crypto message embedded in her application letter she would present to the clinic the following day.

Before she returned to her room, Kissy handed her a DVD of the ballet she’d just seen the rehearsal of, saying as he did so, “Please do remember, you’re worth far more than any ballet star here. Sadly, you won’t have the wide audience you deserve.” Moving words that lingered as she watched the ballet with Dasha that night. Later, in bed, she rehearsed her arrival at the clinic on the morrow.

Kissy could not sleep that night, and listened to the Barcarolle from the Tales of Hoffman sung by Anna Netrebko and Elina Garanca. Sometimes only exquisite female voices could get him through the night, and the fact that Dilsat looked like a young Anna Netrebko left him backhanding a tear. Singular beauty and ineffable talent. What Maenad ever imagined that?

Unable to sleep, he got up and revisited the note Dilsat would deliver to the clinic head.

An observant Dilsat was initially amazed by the clinic’s network of modern buildings overlooking a wintry snow white park, no edifice above three stories, their glass facades revealing interiors of pearl grey and a motile medical staff in crisp white uniforms. ‘Motile’, from her nursing lingo, meant an absence of — loitering— a frequent pastime in the women’s quarter of many Cairo homes.

The clinic security tended to confirm Kissy’s description, inconspicuous but likely ubiquitous. Cameras fitted into some soffits and all entrances, all doors framed with heavy astragals, and info stations placed every twelve meters or so throughout the facility, each resembling a small climate

control keypad. She assumed they alerted the staff to fires, power failures, computer malfunctions, special emergencies — as well a patient files. In addition, the lengthy admittance procedure appeared to serve as a means to further assess a patient and the remedy sought.

A Russian makeup artist had fashioned her hair and face into an attractive and largely unrecognizable being. Her first look at the finished product left her smiling and almost aghast. “We all have many faces,” the diligent artist remarked. Her passport identified her as Yasmine Romila Aziz, the granddaughter of a former Nawab. She dressed as a modern European business woman. The current clinic registrar, a jovial woman named Heidi, seemed full of companionable good will.

“I see from the application that you had a snow board accident.”

“Yes. A dare. From some ski pals.”

“The number of skiers and climbers we see grows each year — mainly from retirees who think they can get back to the slopes and rock faces. The optimism would beggar a Scientologist. The youngster in all of us.” Dilsat smiled at Heidi’s easy deadpan manner, doing her best to fit in.

“You can be examined this afternoon, and enter the rehabilitation out-patient program tomorrow, if convenient. We’ve just had a cancellation.”

Again Dilsat sought to engage. “I’ve read a lot about the clinic. There is a tour?”

“Not as such. Much of the work is classified. In some cases Patents Pending for the research underway. You’ll see quite a bit before your regimen is complete though. See how the tail wags. Our lower limb resident here is a genius by the way. You’ll be back on point in no time. She’ll even have suggestions for improving over all daily function. She too was a dancer in her teens. Nearly continued on with it apparently.”

“I’m grateful her study of medicine wasn’t neglected.”

“She’s had a lot of experience. Doctors Without Borders. She’s been in Syria, Iraq and Sudan. And Egypt during the uprising. Egypt was a trial she said. Most everyone was so distrustful.”

Dilsat smiled. If she only knew.

What Kissy did not tell Dilsat was, in his mind, the necessary omission. He believed the time frame would amply allow for her treatment to be completed, well after her delivery of the crucial warning letter. But the unexpected silence from Aram, or Hārūn, as he was called outside of his inner circle — who had never before failed to touch base at the appointed bi-weekly time — was worrying. Kissy suspected, hoped the lapse was but a new internal struggle that Aram wanted to keep in house. New cell minders often refashioned deeds and reset time frames. With the onset of Dilsat’s treatment regimen, following the delivery of her note, he received the coded reply from Gervase Maistre, the clinic’s protocol minder, which confirmed what was anticipated: a possible assault one day from a fanatical faction. For bookish Kissy, Gervase’s words intimated a Greek moirai, ‘the fates that shape our ends’ — one of Muerner’s select quotes. As Kissy read the measured words, the stoic Gervase came alive. He was grateful Gervase afforded him a detailed response.

The rumor mill has indeed suggested such an attack, surprising as it seems. Someone has widened the envelope, decided that cutting edge medical research has indeed crossed a line. A large file of exemplary coded genomes — from Muerner's select sine qua non inventory — has gone missing. If the theft — if that is what it is — were the work of an investigative journalist, it would have been headlined by now. Hence we look for a newly disgruntled or suborned in-house snitch. Sadly, fanatics and Islamists are not lacking in willing saboteurs, who more and more come in many ethnicities, sexes, ages, deformities and illnesses. Nor are they lacking in weapons and cleverly concocted explosive devices. The clinic watchdogs are good but not infallible. There is a lot of experimentation ongoing — the use of exotic fluids and semi-solids that enhance some explosive materials, a few readily obtained and easily transported. They haven't yet a nuclear device they can fit into a womb, but the poetic license must be well-nigh irresistible — one of Muerner's finely sardonic comments. The timely note in the application form from your cutout, the engaging girl with the injured leg, Muerner and I have jointly taken up — with much gratitude. She will be assigned a fast track treatment regimen of course.

It was then Kissy felt Dilsat should be briefed on the tactic of a possible in house attacker, and to run shy of any patient who looked suspicious, someone in heavy apparel, with a gift wrapped parcel, or suitcase. A gunman or bomber would need access to the clinic as a registered outpatient to actually get inside. Dilsat's treatment would be completed posthaste, but her jeopardy increased given Gervase's recent advisements. Yes, it was time to give her an update on newly conceived threats and deeds; his conscience dictated naught else. He trusted her resolve; she was too bright to have overlooked such contingencies, he believed. He would talk to her that night.

He then closed his eyes — to think again how the heady ideas incorporated in the Western presumption of progress slighted the Muslim hierarchy, the notion of pluralism especially being a form of *lèse-majesté* for the more doctrinaire clerics. Gervase's own vigilance would not diminish the overall gravity. It was the one time in his life Kissy had offered someone he newly cared for — the nimble adventitious Dilsat — a risky job. A task she had accepted with an equanimity or stoicism he envied. Aram was another matter. How he might fit in all this, given his late silence, was one of the inopportune puzzles. Kissy watched again an episode of the sordid Face Off videos that so incited Aram's opprobrium. He thought of a line from the peripatetic Lawrence George Durrell, one of his erstwhile 'tutors': 'We are the children of our landscape; in the measure to which we are responsive to it.' And what was the landscape today? A video treat for a bug-eyed spider? Still, he did not have stature enough in the organization to foil the more obdurate players in Aram's community. The fact that Aram's belated intimation of an attack on the Bern clinic was done so furtively, suggested that he was no longer in agreement with, or trusted by, his cell's stewards. The one plus was that the clinic's growing reproductive material needs were still being met. Yet the darker horizon loomed, the presumption being that Kissy, the lesser brother, might be seen as a fumbler, a sorry summer soldier, slighting the needs of the new ascending power brokers — a player you readily cashiered.

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Hejaz looked up at Sayyid, Aram's replacement, with a puzzled smile. He had slipped in via the back entrance as quietly as Aram sometimes did. Sayyid and Abdul played soccer together while at Birmingham City University in England. Yet his sudden appearance at this field office in Agami was disconcerting, his coming unexpected and ominous, his words blunt and caustic. The blustery weather seemed apt.

"The transport of all reproductive materiel will soon be curtailed. The Russian service we've tolerated is at an end. It is a 'new ball game', a cliché that sums up the matter well."

So the bombing was 'on deck', Hejaz thought with considerable stoicism.

"All communication with the Russian Sergei will be cordial but noncommittal. He has handled summary delays before. We must contain all suspicion. The team needed for the act is now being assembled."

It was indeed a sobering realignment for Hejaz. The fallout would likely descend on the reticent solemn Kissy. Kissy, the careless broker. Bossy would be furious when he learned of the termination of a lucrative and growing revenue stream and act accordingly. Kissy, it seemed, might be deemed a careless, untrustworthy creature after all.

"Will the current delivery schedule still be cancelled by this office?" It seemed obvious they wouldn't but Hejaz was not willing to bow out yet.

"The traffic with the Borozovs will be curtailed. In due course. Sit tight. We'll be in touch."

Hejaz wondered if Aram would survive. Had the newly diffident sheikh finally bent some ears? Had Ammon, whose rabid obsession with harrowing elusive beauty, now centered on facilitators like the Bern clinic? Edenic genes now *haram*. Possible.

NINETEEN

A discreet look at some of the spa's current genetic exemplars was underway; Catherine's request had been fast tracked. It began with one live physical assessment, which Hārun's initial description of proved as daftly unreal in the flesh. At his suggestion she donned a head shawl with a droll smile. Ensnared behind a lattice screen — a confessional she thought of it — they viewed a portion of a male audition, reminding her that sperm was only slightly less valued than eggs for some brokers. That Hārun could arrange such a viewing suggested a special contact within the spa's staff! His network of players continued to impress a chary Catherine, who began the look-see with a general request.

"Do tell what's being looked for here, what's imperative. And take your time." It was the period when Hārun seemed elsewhere, a body without a presence. Though his words remained engaging.

"One aspect the brokers here deem important is the question of gene documentation in sperm. Does a state akin to satyriasis, say, produce a fuller and hardier index of available traits? The consequence of what' glibly yet suggestively called 'unbridled passion'. The dark glasses, by the way, are a

clinic requisite. Individual identity is kept in house. A broker can see a picture of the irises .”

“That’s an enormous help. But please continue. The scene is not, well, unbecoming.” She had, in their time together, been warming to Hārun’s stilted language, and found the exemplary gents being assessed here a tolerable sight.

“There is a growing suspicion that a comfortable and sedentary life, especially when neurotically stressed, vitiates miscellany, multiformity and vigor in genes, meaning a full cache of possible traits is crimped, leaving offspring less potential which, the hypothesis asserts, may be maximized only in a fervent and busy life. Hence the initial quest for a strong vital presence.”

“The marauding warrior, yes? Pillage, plunder, rapine and slaughter — the innate self starter.”

Hārun barely smiled. “With this set of brokers we are, as it turns out, not far from the mindset of Ibn Saud and Abd al-Wahhab.”

“Rutting fanaticism, on the fly. Sounds like a trustworthy mate. The scene before us is germane?”

“The brokers are previewing select individuals who have demonstrated exceptional strength, stamina, rich sperm counts — crucial here — and reliable erections. As well as pleasing shapes and much higher than average intelligence on the standard SAT test.”

“You’re not kidding are you...you can actually find such males?”

“Eugenics is an earnest business.”

“Earnest. How do they get the sperm? Without shortchanging the esteemed rut.”

“A facilitator gets the party underway.”

“A tart.”

“A professional facilitator.”

“Why are many of the brokers dressed so much like you?”

“They all have a fierce respect, or need, for anonymity.”

“Isn’t it arrantly patronizing though — all these desert robes?”

“It is a reliable dress to conceal the individual. And his effects.”

But Catherine was already on to another of the many curiosities.

“Why are some of the subjects kneeling?”

“Some brokers look to the shoulder line of a planted archer as an indicative sign.”

“That makes enormous sense.”

“An atavistic quirk. Warriors of the desert, perhaps. The one broker here was an Ikhwan militiaman.”

“The Bedouin Brotherhood. Beast well jolly. They all look much alike — the lads.”

“The idyllic form tends not to be idiosyncratic.”

“And they can count all fingers and toes, as you’ve suggested.”

“The cut off level is a standard IQ score of about 110. The higher the greater remuneration.”

“And the youngster in the back?”

Hārūn looked up, initially unaware of the boy it seemed. “Likely a specific contract sale. A broker with individualized criteria, and an exclusive ready buyer.”

“Cute. For a pedophile?” She glanced at Hārūn but detected no reaction whatever.

“Unlikely. Here.” Then from the genie a rare show of impatience. “I think it’s time to move on. In the lab behind this space the sperm are matched to exemplary female eggs in ostensibly auspicious combinations by computer. Once a pairing is agreed upon, the computer program posits a probability human from the genome profiles.”

“An electronic crap shoot.”

“The stakes are high.”

“What again is the take?”

“For the true headliners, if their eggs and sperm are plentiful, healthy and fully attested, several times the going rate. Sixty thousand plus for the ladies. Somewhat less for the gents.”

Catherine was a time lulling her own impatience. At last she merely asked, “Why all this emphasis on the physical? Surely other measures are as telling?”

“The physical, in its detailed nuance provides, I’m told, initial indices that tell much about the general health, potency, alertness, perception, acuity, dexterity — all indicative of a likely matching intellectual facility. It is so assumed. Without the physical, the written and oral exams are ‘orphaned’, to use one of Muerner’s metaphors.”

“Says who?”

“The current marketplace.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“What would you buy — a beautiful mind, or a splendidly revealed soma *with* a beautiful mind? The standard argument.”

“Who knows? But is rank exploitation that salubrious?”

“The fulsomely visual is now a commonplace.”

She wanted to say that some folks might choose to disagree, but felt the issue nearly an anachronism these days.

“Tell me again where I fit in in all this, and please don’t edit out the fulsome bits.”

“It is now known a very special candidate resides here. ‘Your beauty finds you worthy...like the running brook that sings to the night.’”

“A catchy lyric that. But is it apt?”

“You wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think so.”

What continued to puzzle and amaze Catherine was Hārūn’s general lassitude, the heavy-lidded eye and faint sweet smile — all of which served to parody the import of some of his remarks. Yet she was a sucker for deft placid observance. Hence his words continued to command assessment on their own. Even if, as she suspected, he did not always prize them himself.

“You said I might review some of the individual corporeal assessments.”

“We have cam renderings of three such evaluations, for both sexes — one exceptional, one average, one unacceptable. I suggest you watch and listen to them all with Barbara — before you come to any fast conclusions about endowment.”

“I’m listening.”

“What you will hear, during a video, is a select detailed description made by the examiner during the assessment — a transcript of which an overseer can review if there is a question.”

“Are there often such questions?”

“Background material usually...a missing ancestry datum and the like.”

“Well, I’ve seen the boys, and I have no doubt they welcome a facilitator offering them a good time after they parse irregular verbs. I assume the chaps who aren’t turned on by milkmaids don’t obtain, as they say.” Again she looked at Hārun without discovery. “In any case, I would like to see what happens in detail to at least one lass, to fine tune my growing wonder at what has happened to the West in my absence! The egg becoming such a sine qua non — actually defining the chick it seems.”

“License, ease, entitlement give leave to intently look on, complain.”

“Meaning?”

“One’s imperfections and ill-luck seem more and more ‘undeserved’ in a luridly visual, show-case world.”

“Ah. The salient inequality rebuke.”

Hārun barely nodded, giving nothing away. “I think Barbara will make a peerless docent for the individual sessions — some being more intense than others.”

“Well, let’s get ‘cracking’.” If dangling participles interested her slightly more than jujubes or coin machines, she believed the psychological attributes of women who might willingly engage in a stark physical assessment held a key here. In a private theatre off the upper loggia, she and a rather sullen Barbara watched one such assessment, captured by a wall mounted cam corder in a bright room.

“The procedure must be disconcerting for some candidates,” Catherine ventured.”

Barbara silently but promptly nodded.

“And they trust the identity info is secure?”

“I presume they do.”

“The clinic directors — they do any follow up with supplementary questions?”

“Of course. These youngsters are not dumb and have been known to bribe assayers, even insert images on the sly. Also, the late performance-enhancing substances can sometimes elude the standard conventional testing.”

Catherine shrugged. “Not a surprise, I presume.”

“No. The drugs today are many and complex. Some cynics say that Olympic and sports’ medals generally might be shared with the athlete’s pharmacologist — both standing on a podium say.” Catherine smiled. Barbara paused, appearing newly determined, as a pianist starting over. “As Hārūn has said: we are interested in the tracts of the terrorist Cyclops; the working standards set by the clinic...are incidental. For us. But we understand your interest. We do know the spa has a top drawer forensic lab, which serves a district medical examiner. The spa may have to deal with some frank publicity down the road, but such censure it’s avoided up to now.”

“I take it some routine assessments on the current set of candidates, such as the metabolic and endocrinal — my short list — have been completed.”

“Yes. And securely stored.”

“Which means what exactly?”

“That a broker must make application to the spas’s director to receive specific things — like enzymatic assays — which are carded to a password and pin number assigned by the spa’s registrar.”

“The buyer can see the candidate though.”

“Dark glasses are worn in the actual examination. A potential buyer is given colour patch of the iris colour.

“So the identity of a donor is more or less secure.”

“It is a bona fide of the clinic.

An hour later Catherine returned to her suite and brewed some loose-leaf herb tea. Oddly, her *Doppelgänger* was a teetotaler, suggesting either a reformed alkie or health groupie. Catherine opted for the first possibility, since she had thus far gone along with Hārūn’s refusal to hide some gin in the suite. “The risk is...ongoing,” he had mumbled. If only the bugger knew.

With a fragrant cup in hand she tried to make sense of the tape she and Barbara just watched. Had events in a decade overtaken her so? And was ‘self-esteem’ the pivotal word here? Appearance intimatin deportment? She settled back in her room’s bolstered daybed and cued again the tape she and Barbara had watched an hour ago. She had to view it once more — to counter disbelief. The words of the evaluator seemed even more flattering the second time around. How indeed had it all begun — this age of the newly sought paragon?

Before beginning the tape, Catherine had briefly looked over some general knowledge and ‘cognitive ability’ tests, and was impressed by one candidate’s fluency in both. (Which Karen’s own testing barely touched.) In describing a candidate familiar with Cervantes, Machiavelli and Wittgenstein, and exceptional in covariance coefficients, fractal geometry and continuum mechanics, i.e. rheology, the evaluator’s remarks sounded like a foreign language. She had wanted to see this candidate’s tape but it was not included in the set Barbara had given her. “Some candidates sanction only specific brokers access to such.”

One elective test centered on a candidate's sense of humor — how adept at double entendres, punning, inventiveness in devising limericks, and a naturalness with irony and parody. Conditioning after all relies on memory — one of Harun's precepts. Such that Catherine was amazed at the adroitness of at least two candidates who 'juggled' the above in conversations that dealt with the world's absurdities and conundrums. "The least able often dispense the awesome advice," was the capsule comment of one candidate regarding fanatics. "Energumens" she called them. But these remarks were mere footnotes compared to the physical reassessment juggernaut. The notable Muerner factor, Catherine began to think of it. Ogling *all* the possibilities. A master's degree in ogling. Thus it was with some diffidence she watched and listened a second time to the first of Barbara's proffered tapes — the one being entirely enough — which featured a young female exemplar, a special candidate who was working on a degree in oceanography, a putative paragon in a form fitting singlet with Google on the front, wearing also overside dark glasses. The session began with a general review of skin sheen integrity and resilience, hair-nail 'candescence', the hands of the examiner, an attractive middle-aged woman, deft, brisk and thorough — an oddly staid exercise as it progressed, save for the escaped laughter of a youngster discovering the sweep of the autonomic nervous system and the cachet of being a treasure apprehended in awe. If the girl's face looked somewhat banal — what one could see — her form was about as ideal-elegant as they come. Lean, lithe, 'meetly toned', as Willardson might have said. And tall: five feet eleven inches, and one hundred and fifty-two pounds. A doer who excelled at down hill skiing. Almost at once Catherine found herself finical, vigilant and querulous. 'Seeing' the indexed traits was a revelation.

The girl appeared to easily converse with the assayer, an exchange not on the audio transcript, which featured only the fondly patronizing voice of the evaluator as she surveyed the candidate before her: "I've taken special note of the muscle fluency tests of all limbs and digits, including the independent flexing of eyebrows and eyelids — specifically being able to close either lid completely while leaving the other fully open — an ability that is becoming a fair index of ductility, which the candidate has excelled at in all tests. The standard default measurements also approximate the upper tier model, including the median arches of the feet and each toe's symmetry and placement, each five toes a reverse match of the other set — happy tiny faces the lot." Here the examiner inserted a chipper laugh. "If the feet are somewhat longer than the exemplar default, the flexibility and torque of the arches is uniform and exceptional, the clearance vault jump several inches higher than the minimal default.

The narration then essentially skipped a beat, or so it seemed now.

"The legs and arms are also exemplary, not only in their proportion, alignment and length — note rectilinear alignment of humerus with bones of forearm — that bracket a near perfect 33 24 32 torso. Note also the overall clean, well-defined musculature — what more and more anorexics should be made cognizant of, for the diet to maintain the exercise regimen this candidate follows is sturdy and

satisfying — such that there is nothing here for equivocal advisement. The innate flexibility, both rotational and orthogonal, of the limbs and trunk, is exemplary. The lower limbs are lithe yet unusually strong — a measure of the training regimen this candidate has followed. The gluteus medii especially well defined. As are the iliaci down to the sartori and vasti. I could detail the knee and calve muscles but the picture we have before us is nearly textbook. No anatomical illustrator has pictured a more naturally trig symmetrical leg; indeed, my commentary this day may seem redundant.”

Catherine stopped the tape to refresh her cup, smiling at the low pitched voice of the keen examiner who, she imagined, could be a gay and, in an age of genetic discrimination, should be thought a fit observer and arbitrator. When she resumed the tape, the candidate amiably smiled before pulling the singlet over her head and backing it to a chair, to stand nude and akimbo before the examiner who also promptly smiled. The nagging suspicion that the assessment henceforward served a male proclivity kept surfacing. But because she was undergoing a reassessment of herself, Catherine wanted to know the topical prattle first hand. The examiner eyed with obvious satisfaction the revelatory detail. If the latinate words tried Catherine’s layman’s lexicon, she could hardly imagine a more idealized example of a young female.

“My word. Yes. The torso *is* exceptional. The deltoids well defined, the dorsi, serratis and obliques all distinctly parsed. Likewise the albae and subclavii distinct from the infraspinati. The umbilicus a near perfect floret. The platysmae and trapezi fully instated. The greater pectoralis a substratum for the breast tissue which is itself remarkable. Though somewhat smaller than a B ectype, the cambers are perfectly spherical and matched, hemispheric yet rising, without excessive lateral play, to a spiculum at the retrousse nipple, and amply set on the long torso well below the wide shoulders, enhancing both the shoulders and the sternum plane, leaving a defining bracket at the heel of the greater pectoralis. Remarkable.” For a time the voice ceased as the girl presented the standard front, side and three-quarter poses for the cameras, hands akimbo and above the head. Again the girl handsomely smiled as the clinician palmed her breasts. “Note the concise contour definition and matching central nipple placement, an example that may in fact redefine the standard for uppermost candidates. I also note the eminent tissue resilience and little granularity, also the identical definition of the nipples when pointed. All the while the clinician kept shaking her head, letting on that they were indeed blessed with a nonesuch. After a short apparently apathetic conversation, which was not part of the sound track, the girl readily nodded. This particular lack of conversation Catherine had taken up with Barbara:

“We can’t hear what the examiner actually said to the girl.”

“No. All incidental comments are considered...extraneous.”

“Pity.”

The clinician then had the girl stand in full view of the camera. “The candidate has shaved her legs, but left the underarm and pubic hair untouched as requested. Both of a fine soft quality —

essentially a Two — and sparingly distributed, with little hair on the inguen, upper thighs and none above the mons. A central cleft interlacement of fine hair provides a combed lacery to the neatly sculpted mons. The underarm hair is similarly spare, soft and fine. Again a Two. Please recall that a three or four is the normal caliper.”

A matter Catherine had confronted Barbara about. “Pubic hair big ghee is it?”

“Much unruly hair is generally...not prized.”

The tape however was a model of gratuity, as the examiner continued.

“If I may permit a subjective assessment, a footnote, the candidate has a creamy white epidermis subtly defined and smooth as bone china — one example of which I added to my own personal china collection this week!” The girl appeared to laugh, then stopped as the examiner placed a new linen on the service table. “The waist is a subtle female arc to a fully convex bum with a dimple to the posterior auricularis, somewhat smaller than the B Ectype but every bit as contoured. The thighs, though strong, do not touch below the inguen. With a further nod or cue the girl sat on the inclined table and flexed her knees, fitting her heels in the placement cups which the examiner lengthened to accommodate the longer legs.

It was here Catherine nearly bowed out. Her incredulity was becoming acerbic. Only the prospect of finding something peccant, aberrant kept her alert. The examiner carried on as if giving her audience a favorable weather report.

“As was seen in the upright stance, the labia are also exceptional in their matching camber and sloped taper.” On a further nod and smile from the examiner, the girl fluently salved her vestibule and vagina from a vial handed to her. “It is interesting that the minora, except for the clitoral sheath, remain almost contingent even when the lower limbs are extended. Please note the smoothness, incisive matching equilateral definition and sheen to the lips, the overall pristine salubrity of the vestibule tissue. And the distinct caul setting of the clitoris — almost an ideograph drawing of the glans. The vulva, note, is readily tumescent.” Again some apparently affable words were exchanged which were not part of the transcript. “And yes, the candidate says she is readily orgasmic, disease free, and wishes her orgasm confirmed.”

“This too is germane?” Catherine had wryly asked languid Barbara.

“For some buyers.”

“Right.”

Wanly Barbara continued. “Several diseases leave early inchoate lesions. Which in some cases may be more apparent in arousal...the clinic literature posits the possibility.”

Catherine couldn’t resist. “The grave ‘crotcheteers’.”

Barbara lamely smiled.

On a brief willing nod from the girl when she had finished salving herself, the clinician typed something on her computer and a startled Catherine watched as a sizeable robot was ushered in, riding

on its own caterpillar treads with two gowned aids.

She had looked at Barbara who was then inspecting her nails. “This is a sleeper.”

Without looking up Barbara said, “They call it Cuspy, sometimes R-Too.”

By then it was obvious that Cuspy was a very lucky robot.

“It’s how the clinic gets around the question of assault, is it?”

Again, Barbara appeared to make some effort to assert herself. “It houses several sensors that provide digital readings — no pun intended. The orgasm is a logarithmic manifold. Cuspy incorporates all info from the epithelial probes. Which are now being placed, I believe.” She seemed inclined to say more but desisted.

In droll dismay Catherine watched as the aids swabbed parts of the girl’s body, adding electrical conduits to several patches on the skin surface. Cuspy’s organ, itself attached to a plethora of conduits that led to what looked like a mainframe, seemed porous as a sponge. The girl was repositioned in the chair in a more declined position. One of Cuspy’s armatures was fitted to the girl’s upper chest, while its organ, which issued from a kind of calyx, was fitted into the vulva. The calix itself housed what looked like a hive of sensors. The voice of the narrator continued: “We find the present position the best for the sexual interface assessment with this candidate. It is the most comfortable and the easiest to accommodate the slope of most vaginas. The numerous external patches cue the many sensors within the robot itself. Our candidate has agreed to a full set of readings, during latency, arousal and prospective orgasm. These in turn will be correlated to many other specific readings relating to organ health and fitness. Needless to say, we are grateful for her participation. She has asked that the attendants remain during the interval.”

For a time it looked as if Cuspy was himself on the lamb, yet the hint of an awakening in the girl was soon manifest. As she gave herself up to the stimulation, actually ‘tweaking’ the robot from a small console in her hands, the clinician continued with a blow by blow account: “The candidate is not a virgin but has had only two partners to date. She has orgasmic sex, usually oral, with her current partner about three times a week and has no sign whatever of an STD. As one can see even at this stage, she is naturally well lubricated, the vestibule lactescent, the clitoris completely indexed from its caul.” By then Cuspy was slowly ‘withdrawing and interposing’ the examiner said. With the setting of a timer the overt performance began with a proficiency Catherine had never witnessed, a slowly accelerating delving and surface stroking that within a protracted minute, produced a slow rivulet of ejaculate as the girl happily recoiled, folded in on herself, a reflex the attendants helped mitigate by holding the girl’s head while caressing her neck and spine to a relaxed standstill. Catherine had read about such alacrity, but never witnessed it until now. The orgasm indeed seemed interminable. “The orgasm can be multiple and sustained; referentially sub-clinically spastic in its completeness.” When at last the girl signalled a diminution, she began robustly laughing, dimpling her cleanly muscled torso while the attendants helped her to her feet. Belatedly Catherine discovered she was also beguiled, as

well as astonished and dismayed. The fact that she had recently succumbed to an incomparable enchantress herself, brought a frisson of recognition if not alarm. Given the plethora of images she was exposed to in this video, she too would have had no trouble caressing this lovely girl child, a fact she would remind herself from time to time — at least until she had more time to evaluate her own latent instincts. More and more she realized the power of pornography to besot — to short circuit all manner of manners, politesse, urbanity, compassion, sagacity and finally she believed love. What duo — of the several sexes — would ever survive a steady diet of such ostentation, that limits anticipation, any nostalgic reminiscence. Was not pervasive entitlement a drug in and of itself? And with such endowment so fulsome, who bothers with kind, leisurely, mutually teasing preambles? The examiner ended with a footnote, reminding the viewer that full colour prints of the subject's irises were available in print form from the clinic registrar, the large dark glasses masking the eyes in this tape.

By then Catherine was dealing with an ungainly flush. So. So much for modesty, shyness as a romance trigger; the fulsome modern commodity culture was taking up the slack. Was the terrorist they sought to eliminate really a terrorist she wondered? Yes he was. For he could easily blow up this tier one bird and feel nothing but pride doing it. But then most of the terrorists she'd seen would never themselves make it to the upper tiers. Might that be part of the problem — being sexually misprized in that insidiously invidious age? As ugly as sin was taking on a life of its own. Yet throughout the section they watched together, dedicated austere Barbara could have been watching a toothpaste commercial. Well, she was one of the snake wranglers wasn't she? Still, Catherine decided she was largely an ignoramus here — if that were not a contradiction in syntax. She had been too drolly, sardonically absorbed to opt for candid judgement; now she felt the urgency to candidly proceed and demand some answers. A labour almost of love. Barbara, she decided, would have a different and perhaps more apathetic take on carnal appraisal. They talked that evening in the quiet Persian decorated study, a fading sun gilding the walls.

“What difference could all this possibly make? I ask only for information.”

There was a lengthy pause, which she feared might be terminal. But Barbara's sober voice returned, saying, “Frigidity is not entirely undocumented.”

“Well hardly here I should think. And even if so, is the nurture-kindness thing so irrelevant here?”

Barbara seemed to debate the point of continuing. “If arousal is not conspicuous and sustained, the documentation of the egg is diminished, leaving fewer viable traits in the genome. The current presumption. Acute sensual engagement is a crucial matter. The research literature supports this hypothesis. The girl you and I observed knew what she was doing. Her exceptional endowment and performance may well double the rate.”

“Tell me again what they stand to make.”

“A handful today — seventy, eighty thousand each. This candidate likely more. Half when she agrees to take the fertility drugs, half when her eggs are harvested.”

“And never ever in harm’s way?”

“The pyramid would then collapse.”

“A pyramid covers a lot of dirt.”

“Why perturb the original when you will one day benefit from, even own, an enhanced copy?”

By then Barbara seemed resigned to Catherine’s urgent questioning.

“What do you mean ‘own’?”

“We are in the realm of unprecedented wealth, sumptuousness, ruthlessness and power.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s not apparent?”

“But why submit to this rigmarole? If money is the object, the beauty we just saw could realize any number of lucrative advertising or promotional roles. She’d be a natural as a top sports model, surely.”

Barbara was a time responding, and when she did she seemed to be addressing a larger audience.

“Modelling is not universally acclaimed today. Particularly in the feminist self-reliant camp. To say nothing of most staid traditional cultures. And today’s working models tend to be somewhat anorexic and/or aptly synthetic. Many people consider modelling little better than whoring — a form of extortion with an essentially gratuitous gift. Moreover, the world beauty scrimmages are considered rather gauche. The intelligent woman wants an engaging career not a sinecure. Hence the popularity of things like medicine, journalism and the law. And of late, science and engineering. Conspicuous beauty in a strident democracy can be a provocation, even an embarrassment. But here one may be paid sub rosa. The beauty is not tarnished, gainsaid. And may benefit both an infertile couple and a budding ambitious science. Invariably the successful candidates have a sturdy college program underway — again the testing heavily favors such ability and resolve. Habits bespeak the character. The providential bonus is a healthy physical attractiveness. The ‘lay’ of the land.”

Then Catherine was direct. “You don’t of course expect me to attend to all this?” The incredulity in her voice was palpable and unexpected.

But Barbara surprised her. Making her wonder again how encapsulated her information was — the drip feed she seemed connected to. “It would be risky. Physically you and your double are strikingly similar — that we have long since confirmed. Clinically some incongruities could be apparent. Knowledge of a skin tint, drug rash or Rosacea, for instance. Besides, you have already bypassed this level — simply by being here. Now we simply wait, and observe, as you enjoy a sabbatical.”

“What guarantee do I have that I won’t be accosted by one of the hectic brokers here — one who could be a stand in for the terrorist?”

“My team, our team, is astutely vigilant. Such a person would have to approach the front desk monitors and concierge with an advisement from the spa’s registrar. Something only a well-known

broker might request. Ammon's team will first confirm your presence here, as they likely have by now. Then decide on a plan to effect an abduction. By then we'll be tracking their messages. He'll be neutralized in due course." Seeing Catherine's diffidence she added, "Trust us. It's inevitable."

"But no guarantee."

"Coming here remains your best option. For your safety and your editorial research. The team here is exemplary."

"The invisible team. Sorry."

"Yes, the best."

"Something I'm not too good at — hanging around. A limited shelf life."

"The Cyclops' reputed impatience may be a plus. The soloist herself is unlikely to hang out here too long. She's not sightseeing. A fact that must whet his urgency."

Giving into her own wonder Catherine added, "She seems like a nesting doll someday."

Again Barbara's demur smile. "'The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.' Hārun's Gibran's sayings have infected us all."

"Some 'unfolding'. Sorry."

"'The soul resides in articulation and symmetry. Beauty is its ecstasy.'" A further faint smile. "In all of this — don't doubt Hārun's, resolve."

Catherine chuckled. "He's a kind of necromancer...for me."

With some deference Barbara replied, "Rather too earthbound for that I think."

"No condolences then."

"None needed."

"Not a role I've been cast in before — extempore exhibitionist."

"You are an able player. Discrete and fully alive. Without you we would never snare the ogre at this stage."

Later Catherine reflected on how the candidates she'd actually seen seemed immune to scrutiny. Though she'd not witnessed the disappointment in the rejects Grace had mentioned, the ones for whom innate, inborn appearance was less complimentary. It seemed 'les visuels', from Sartre's lexicon, had proliferated exponentially. Meaning the aesthetic criteria were more self-evident than the 'beauty myth' advocates would have us believe. The historic examples courted consensus.

Thus was she alerted when a spa supervisor approached Barbara to suggest a buyer wished to see their 'in house candidate' in the villa's gallery off the atrium. It seemed a broker had already negotiated a retainer for her eggs. The 'buyer' was promptly identified as an agent of the troublesome Ammon, the obsessed Cyclops. An entry level maneuver. She went immediately to Hārun.

"You did not mention any guest appearances. And how the hell did he get this far?"

"It is a late, unexpected, and altogether crucial development. It is, for all intents and purposes, an act of desperation. By requesting such a viewing, Ammon either has some doubts, or he's desperate to

proceed and prepared to disregard the dangers. His operative's coming and going will provide many leads for us. He has been sanctioned to record you with a lone cell camera."

"Well, you better spell it out. And prepare for a flat 'no'. This has gone on rather long enough." That she even remained to hear him out would later summon a grimace to her face. That she credulously accepted his assurance of her verisimilitude — that she could actually pass for the soloist in such an intimate command performance — would entertain her the rest of her life. Such was the dynamic in the prized fishbowl. "I keep seeing a repeat of the London Apsara encounter — less a ready hat pin."

"As I've said — Ammon will be fully aware of the exceptional and risky nature of his request. His operative will have in his possession only the clothes on his back and his camera — the images from which will be copied here — and his actions coming and going will be fully monitored."

"So the Cyclops won't leave his cave. Yet."

"No. His man will leave without interference from us. And so confirm the Corin Wiley personage Ammon's team has centered on. We'll be able to follow him and his cutouts with much greater precision than before — regardless. The countdown has begun. Again, you are in no danger whatsoever. And, as we have often said, you can change your mind. It is for you to decide. Please consider, it will not be the Cyclops himself — but one of his field men."

"Two eyes instead of one."

Hārun lightly smiled. "Whoever. He will come and leave only as he came."

"You must think I'm a siren."

He faintly smiled. "I've not heard you sing."

A day later she sat in a small contiguous office off the gallery looking at and disbelieving the face in a small wall mirror, the costume closest to the theater signboard photos of the beguiling Zoya as she last performed in the Apsara Club, where she was stalked and assaulted. So, who is aping who, in this impersonation game that seemed to blind with light and startling pink flesh? The protocol was precise: she was to sit in the office in the late, gossamer costume, then, on cue, enter the larger salon, and perform a set of Sun Adoration calisthenics. Hārun had altered the original request by saying that the performer had injured herself recently and would have to scale down her act. That such a caveat even materialized amazed as it confounded. Surely she would be revealed as a stand in. The dance getup itself actually 'italizised' the body shape as she thought of it. To Hārun she exclaimed, "You surely can't agree to this. You risk losing his interest altogether...he's obviously looking for some telltale mark or characteristic. And you are asking a hell of a lot. Again."

"It is a gamble. But without it he will lose interest and we will have to act peremptorily. This cutout will have a finely planned bolt hole. We must keep him 'close', as the prudent say. He is now a visible, tractable lead *to* the Cyclops' whereabouts. A lead we can ill afford to forego at this stage."

An incredulous and wary Catherine scrounged for a realistic assessment. “Would our closet clone, my double, be that willing if she’s as cool and cocky as you say?” To which Hārun replied, “Without question, for it would mean the immanence of a contract sale.”

The hour thus arrived with her misgivings no less apprehensive. Again the unreality, the illusoriness seemed pervasive. Whew! Thus, it was — now or never. The very consequential happening, as if by divination, where she would perform alone in the appointed gallery, actually an empty auditorium, all in earshot of a vigilant Hārun on a radio net. He assured her no broker would accost her afterward, though she now wondered as she waited if that must not be an essential next step. “No, he assured her again, no broker. None whatever. None. Zip. The spa’s mandate demands the written consent of a candidate.”

And so the fanciful debut loomed — a begrudged command performance! Was she a fail-safe looney or determined lynx? The face in the mirror was reproachful, and lamely resolved. ‘Velleity’ came to mind — the least degree of volition. How was even that possible she mused as she awaited her cue in the spare but elegant costume? She had latterly rehearsed in it several times before the mazy curtains, after some artful persuasion. Her double rehearsed regularly apparently. Again she mused that the only things he wouldn’t plainly see were her eyes — the collyrium framing two hawkish eyelets. The partly jewelled necklace, lacy top and sheer skirt, slipped about her moving form like a water break. Bodies! Bodeful bodies. The manly jinx? Hārun’s undivided proximity was severally tested on the voice activated ear phone just before she entered the lofty space. One last call to the helmsman seemed obligatory. “My gawd, what a room. The light is harsh and it’s also a potpourri gas chamber. Tell me I’m in the wrong place.”

“The large glass panel at the far end is a two-way mirror; do the set before them.”

“Lovely. Two minutes’ tribute.”

“No one’s counting. He’s here, the stand-in Cyclops.”

“Bless him.”

“Like the tempest, she shakes the earth beneath us and the sky above us.”

“Yeah, yeah. A bloody smooth floor too. This is madness.”

“It may be the most useful thing you do in this lifetime.”

She curtly laughed.

As she approached the wide mirror, she was bemsused by the stark image of the doeskin youngster before her, but as she began the stretches, arabesques, tournants...the anxiety eased somewhat. If she did not see her ‘patron’ she was startled by a deep base voice speaking in a surround sound, an orator’s voice, she thought. “No top, no choli,” it said with some testiness. Readily done after a silent oath. Choli — the lad knows his attire. A close call slipping it off — to nix the hesitation that betrays dismay. The prude, she reminded herself, was the adopted one. “The chamber smells!” the voice added with even more censoriousness. And behold, within the minute — the scented air from some

ceiling vents ceased, so it seemed. The man's English, she decided, was possibly an first language, making the scene even more rarefied. Could this be another honest-to-God *English* terrorist? Another head lopper?

With surprising aplomb she began — only to cue the testy voice again.

“No, no, no — no dhoti. As you did in London. You did not hide your ‘pronoun’.” Catherine could hear distant muffled voices. The request chafed. Yet again she seemed to behave as an automaton. Get on with the gig, dharling. Easy enough to remove a silk thong — hardly a dhoti. The translucent skirt the merest morning mist. He wanted a detailed look. Thanks to Pachis' Occam's razor he would. In due course she performed her routine twice, goose bumps alive the second time round, while maintaining the fluent, measured tempo of tai chi, completing her final extensions directly before the mirror, the lingering chill of the room adding to the sense of qualmsiness,. Still, she could barely imagine him mistaking her for the talented soloist — the one with the leggier legs that must intimate other differences as well. Faces may be homologous, figures almost never — over time. Perhaps in allowing herself to be baited so, she really wanted to force the issue — remove herself from the ongoing confusion — and menace. That Hārun urged the performance daunted and puzzled. It seemed he, they, had the more to lose.

When she finished the light immediately dimmed and the lofty chamber reverted to a uniform gloom. In looking about her one last time the intimation was palpable — the mirror before her the eye of one enormous bug, waiting a tug on its digital membrane. She wanted to laugh, indeed imagined some heckling...nixing an encore.

The maid service was restored and in high gear when she awoke the following day. Hārun handed her a large six figure cheque. “Our payment, for services rendered — double the highest fee paid out this week.”

“A costly dumb show.”

Hārun faintly smiled. “Ammon's witness wore a campy face mask, which we checked out of course. Yes, the Cyclops' cutout came as Charlie Sheen with a camera phone. We were able to record the pictures it sent. You are a peerless match.”

She squinted at him. “Charlie, you say. Well one yardbird's much like another.” She sensed her role as resident critic had wained a bit.

“Ammon can't sit on his hands for long. You've accelerated and vivified the pageant.”

“So when can I be a citizen again?”

Hārun easily smiled. “Give us a few days.”

The conversation with Sergei, Bossy's secretary, was brisk. Harold Orlov, Bossy's lead operator and business broker in America seemed fully conversant with late events.

“The signal was not hard to track. We've recorded the cutout talking to Ammon's current deputy,

the deputy more or less affirming the recognition of the dancer from the photos the cutout sent. We've yet to hear Ammon's response. “

“If the identity is ratified, she's no longer exempt. The American team will promptly be readied once Ammon orders an abduction. Given her early coming to the villa, the egg sale would be nearing an end in any case, and she won't stay put for long once she's been paid. Hence some urgency for the abduction team — if Ammon decides it's the dancer not the reporter. How long before she leaves would you say?”

“A day or two. She's been there a while now. Before seeking out Hārun, she was in the one villa's parkland estate with your spy. They fucked later in the tea house. Two busy pussies. Now on a treasured memory chip.”

“A day or two you say.”

“We can find no contact she's made with an outsider. Meaning no trade with a possible editor or publisher. To date.”

“That shouldn't be long in coming if she's acquitted whatever contract she had with Hārun.”

“A prompt offing will end the matter for Bossy a lot sooner.”

“But leave an opening for one more investigation. Broader this time. Including the ministry. The Americans would insist on it. Best let our jihadis intervene.”

“Your call. We'll log her whereabouts in the meantime.”

“Yes. Keep me up to date. Hourly, if she proves more gung ho than we think. She is a sturdy pry and escape artist.”

“Of course.”

When Sergei put down his cell phone he wryly smiled — at the prospect of a jihadi ‘waxing’ the Whyte bird, leaving them home free. Again he entertained himself with the prospect of the two girls being finally in cahoots — one shilling for the other. Unlikely, but a faint possibility. Either one dead would leave a bead on the other. Vexed Bossy was determined, finally, to see any and all ‘dead ringers’ offed. But Catherine Whyte impersonating the Apsara ‘dancer’? This Ammon must have biddies on the brain. Who could have imagined her a match! Something seemed wildly amiss here.

As Catherine cast a final look about her rooms, the atmosphere was almost that of checkout time at a Holiday Inn. Through her window a new small pod of hopefuls filled the private garden, most relaxing in shaded sunlight. Her own sojourn ostensibly over, her bags packed, she received an invitation from Hārun for a sit down salutation, and ventured into his small study to spend some time reviewing events with her ever languid mentor, whose torpid gaze suggested but another neglected fakir or lethargic bureaucrat. Thus his come-on to stage a dramatic finale, a bravura coda, caught her completely off guard.

“The last show wasn't the final divertissement — the soft-core skin flic? Hārun!”

“You performed splendidly. And our terrorist has these days a moist eye. He thinks one of my minders a secret ally, and we expressly wish to oblige that thinking. He’s desperate, mad cap. ‘Even those who limp go not backward.’”

“Oh gawd. Do your voices or your Muezzin ever let up?”

He briefly smiled. “You heard us out before; please do so now. Again, you and only you must decide.”

“Ha, ha, ha...only me.”

But it was left to Ann, one of the sentinel captains, and the woman who had spoken to Catherine on her second trip to the Cayuse! — the extent of Hārun’s team astounded — to complete the already dense and involuted drama, which she did that night in a sauna reserved for the few shadowy female field agents. That Hārun might be a lead player in such a team continued to amaze. She wryly thought of the term ‘embedded’. Several agents patronized the sauna and its gifted masseuse, most, according to Ann, part of Hārun’s team and, with the exception of Ann and Barbara, unknown to Catherine. Unlike the steam bath where the assured sleek Karen had materialized, the few patrons here sat discreetly wrapped. When the steam became dense, Ann began her spiel in a soft German accented English.

“Let me preface my words by saying you can leave when you wish. You have well acquitted the original compact. But you will find this second ending, this coda, as Hārun calls it, useful later in your investigation, for it will finger some major players we might not otherwise identify and you may want to name in your own account.”

“The ending that never comes.”

“It rarely gets this revelatory, but I must backtrack a bit to fill you in. Now that he has located his thief, his ‘soloist...’

“You’re convinced he really has?”

“Our evidence confirms it: we’ve recorded two recent messages from Cairo to an American source that verifies a positive identification...in consequence of which we’ve learned, through our mole, that an abduction is in the planning stages here. It won’t happen of course. ”

“‘God willing.’ As the devout Muslim says.”

“Please be assured, the cell has been infiltrated — a cell Ammon swiftly hastily convened for his own purposes. But we don’t want to wrap up its main players just yet, for we want to learn who they associate with and what they may undertake in future. There are other targets. The bombing of a medical facility for one, believe it or not. ”

“A medical facility?...”

Ann smiled. “Implausible as it seems, yes. With your help we’ve identified many players and by following their exploits and associations we will gain invaluable information for future reference. The wider ‘struggle’ is ongoing as you know; the terrorist never sleeps. Well, to insure the fatwa’s nullity, we

want, as Harūn intimated, to stage the death of Corin Wiley — an alias your twin has used.” Facing Catherine’s mute askance look, Ann swiftly added, “Yes, exactly that. A drug overdose. Ammon’s abduction cell members will be left in a kind of limbo for a time — a suspension that makes them recruitable by partisans involved in other terrorist acts, the slog against iniquitous regimes and institutions ongoing — giving us new names and venues via cell intercepts to add to our roster. The one affirming the other. Yes, it’s so. Well, as you can imagine, we need a credible stand-in — to play the deceased.” Deferring to Catherine’s rapt incredulity, Ann promptly continued, “Yes, I know, sounds ad hoc but hear me out. The tactic solves many issues for us and leaves you freer than before. A short stay in a morgue for identification is all that’s required, from where you will quietly leave. The medical examiner there is one of ours. The stay is necessary to facilitate identification and the media interest in all such celebrity suicides. It’s been carefully worked out, including an apt legend for the fictitious Corin Wiley — one of the dancer’s noms de guerre. A well scripted uncle will identify the body for the coroner’s office.”

“It seems like a bad horror movie you leave early on.”

“Your only part will be to lie in the morgue for half an hour or so. Covered in a sheet, with a slow-release medical air cylinder at your side.”

“Sounds madcap.”

“Sadly, you will never know just how carefully it’s all been worked out. Nor the years we have tried to stymie some of the fanatics herding select suicide bombers. Yes, years. But again, you must decide. There are some benefits for you and your twin. But we need a stand-in body. Too many risks with a dummy in a morgue. Underlings must not suspect. You’ll be carefully watched at all times. No one will intrude, you’ll simply be there, glimpsed. Another untimely departed, to be mourned, lamented.”

“Ha. Love the idea of being ‘glimpsed’.” As if to ease her misgivings, Catherine continued, “So, the bedevilled Ammon actually thinks *I* was the Russian spellbinder... seems incredible.”

“He would have left off immediately had he been in doubt. To a crony on his cell he used the work *Shirk* to describe her act, as infamous as blasphemy was to an early crusader.”

“It sounds awfully provisional, regressive this plan of yours.”

“To be candid, no one really thought we’d get this far — see the Ammon’s cell’s operatives. Let lone its proxies. There’s no risk. You’ll be hidden in a secure hospital annex.”

“So. He’ll have to waive his pound of flesh. I have a hard time believing any of this. What does a severed head weigh anyway?”

Ann studiously thought for a moment. “Most women a little over ten pounds, I think.” She then mugged a smile and resumed. “His hatred is now a vocation — newly centered, we believe, on those who champion Western notions of the ideal. ‘Beauty that molests’, as you say. Specifically here, revenge for a graven insult — a beguiling Apsara dancing on a blessed space, his prayer mat we have learned, from the London authorities who questioned him. A matching pattern apparently.”

Catherine was again dumfounded. “A Muslim prayer mat — in that club?”

“‘A timeless storybook artifact — the flying carpet,’ the stage director recently told a London lawyer — one of ours. An embarrassing fact the club wants nixed. Yes, it was part of her act.”

Catherine promptly chuckled. “A grim comedy of errors that.”

“Ammon is determined. A taped beheading or stoning may enhance his *éclat* with some radicals he is now cozying up to. He is desperate now that the media no longer supports his initial story — of being attacked. He is fond of saying that you can do anything with swords but sit on them.”

“Napoleon or Tallyrand said as much. How will I know he is ‘well and truly benched’?” Words Michael might have used she surmised.

“The death of his hex, his witch, will stymie his team, and null the fatwa. He’s a poor ‘back bencher’. We plan to stage a further embarrassing lapse. Pics of him disorderly in an exclusive brothel — we have a masterful plant who will egg him on. He is obsessed with sex. This time *he’ll* be arrested.”

“You actually think that likely?”

“Yes. He’s very impulsive and always archly overcompensating.”

Catherine thought for a time — or rather attempted to deal with her own dismay. Though she did realize the demise of Corin Wiley might lessen the jeopardy facing her double. As much to end the nettled debate she said, “I’ll have to explain my absence to my mother.”

“That is a given.”

“How long before I can resurrect myself — as myself — and seek to discover the whereabouts of my putative twin?”

“Give us a fortnight after your stay in the morgue.”

“She’s not well, my mum, and savors my calls.

“Your mother knows of your past investigative work. You may write her, say you are on a demanding assignment, and ask her to be discreet, and assure her you’ll be in touch shortly. You should imply you’ll be in Europe. A phone call is out, of course. Too risky. Her husband, your stepfather as we now know, or a friend, could be with your mother. Possible gossips, busybodies we want to eschew. You are a topical celebrity. Your mother will be carefully, discreetly watched of course — during your hiatus.”

“She is circumspect, but a worrier.”

“Ammon’s team will act quickly now that his quarry has been identified. Our alternate strategy must be promptly fielded should you decide you’ve had enough.”

To herself Catherine thought she indeed...had enough. Then, as a cloud of steam momentarily cleared, leaving her a brief glimpse of the chamber’s denizens, she changed her mind. The chance of being free of one identity charade was appealing. What she couldn’t accomplish alone, finally entirely on her own! One might even get a good night’s sleep and resume neglected research. Yet she was all too familiar with stories that defied resolutions. Life didn’t honor tidiness. It also now dawned on her

that the death of Coren Wiley would leave one less blow hole for her twin, though such a death would addle one team of abductors.

“And you really think all this is necessary?” The question itself seemed then both gratuitous and pertinent.

“It’s an opportunity not to be missed.”

“You’d better detail the whole thing again, and take your time. Also, how long I must be incognito.”

Ammon could not settle his inner furies. On first watching the frames from the memory chip, he believed the creature in the vaulted chamber the same Apsara, the same jinn. But now he wasn’t sure. It was the few camera stills of her when the lights dimmed that cued his doubt. She looked in that weak light heavier than he recalled. The strong but indirect light in the exhibition room rather obliterated surface patinas and scrutable contours. The early confirmation of the face by an in situ field agent — the one on his team who had also presented himself as a buyer at the embankment flea market — set the plan in motion. Now, however, Ammon could not discount some belated misgivings after reviewing the late digital frames a second time. This woman, he suspected, was heavier, and though agile, despite her favored ankle, not as sleek as the London performer. A more pronounced belly for one, and heavier thighs. The jinn would be a fugitive now — to elude her pursuers — and might have gained weight of course. But there was something else, which also now surfaced in his recollection, something he had only surmised after the fact. The woman he had so recently seen, moved in a more measured, straightforward way. He had, with mounting regret, spent many hours ogling cabaret performers. The London dancer was an artful siren, as they say in the West, every move made designed to captivate, enamor. The performer here was simply doing a calisthenic workout, frank and uneventful as watching a camel groomer. Nothing overt about it. The methodical precision itself so unlike the blithe spirited turns of the exhibitionist. They had spied her rehearsing in the villa, but the curtain shroud cut down on the acuteness of the image. Moreover, such displays could easily be a ploy. The face revealed at the flea market *was* a revelation — a positive identity he thought at the time. Viewing her perform in the select auditorium engaged at first, but not now reassured. Something was amiss. He could not imagine his tormentor changing her bearing that much. He even sensed some embarrassment as she proceeded, as if she had been perfunctorily coached. She was simply not as fluent and daring if memory served. In the end he must seek a further delay. Could, would the journalist herself participate in this? The thought kept intruding, yet seemed improbable given the journalist’s past.

Then Ammon changed his mind — again. Yes, he would go ahead with the abduction. And find out what this jinn knew about the arch goings on at the villa. Intimations of a clinic bombing might well be current, and the voices at the villa shrill and revealing. The thought of an interrogation calmed

his dudgeon. The journalist, with her reputation, would not be touting herself at the villa — trying to sell her eggs to a fertility clinic or rehearsing fake nautch dancing, or pass herself off as Corin Wiley. The journalist was not a fugitive, though she had taken a leave of absence from ABN, according to his sources. More undercover work, perhaps.

Moreover, the dancer would be desperate, short of funds, and heard about the lucrative market for select eggs, as hers would surely be. A Corin Wiley had registered at the clinic, the dancer's alias they believed. Yes, this dancer was the elusive jinn, idled, closeting her identity, putting on weight, less active, desperate and scrounging for cash. Finding and interrogating her would settle many questions. The thought of finally beheading her urged the deed itself though he sometimes doubted his resolve. Her beautiful dove-like breasts the intoxicant that bedevilled. The breasts were the same. Which he had a raging thirst to caress and kiss. A delight he must revile, vilify. He must..must!

Dilsat noted the portly young woman in the wide shawl and voluminous coat getting out of the taxi, on the very day she left the clinic after a final happy assessment of the surgery done to her leg. Their eyes met. Dilsat thought she recognized the woman. "Hannah?" The woman immediately looked away. Hannah Nasr had been a schoolmate. Dilsat smiled, shrugged, cordially approached. The woman's uppity nature had sometimes been a trial, yet they had often played together before her family moved to Iraq. They had both disliked one or more of their school teachers. But the woman now seemed confused, impatient, frantic even. Suddenly she waved Dilsat away. A fevered gesture Dilsat slowly but acutely fathomed. The ready forlorn stricken look was enough, enjoined by the long heavy coat and a small suitcase the car's driver had just handed to his passenger. It was suddenly all too apparent from the scenario she had gone over with Kissy — in exacting detail.

A welling sovereign anger obliterated Dilsat's sense of peril, and she vehemently hurled her purse at the woman, knocking her off balance as the driver turned, surprised, shocked. A sacrificial transport dupe Dilsat guessed him to be. Her rage at the thought of her former friend being the sacrificial lamb to a terrorist cell — that would bomb an exemplary clinic! — steeled her resolve, and she picked up a large stone from the clinic's entrance flower garden and hurled it at the approaching driver, missing him but cracking a rear window of the car, setting off a shrill alarm. A second stone was in her hands when the driver came after her, but not before she rounded on Hannah, aiming the second stone as the woman limped off toward the entrance. Dilsat just managed to escape the clutches of the driver, but not the sudden deafening explosion. Only fleetingly was she aware of a vast obliterating silence....

It would later be determined that the signal from the car's alarm system may have triggered the the explosives timer. May have. The clinic suffered extensive damage to its entrance rotunda and record's bay. Had the bomber actually got inside the damage would have been far worse. Five people were killed in the explosion. Two bodies of the clinic staff were readily identified. The two bodies

nearest the car remained unknowns, as were the few tissue remains of a third nearest the entrance — the presumed bomber.

Catherine Whyte read the Times copy with a dismay that took her breath away. The Bern Clinic? If it was believed the clinic would be functional within the month, the darker horizon seemed to affirm Hārun's comments about Islamist intransigence with specific progressive exploits, here a trust in the universal benefit of genetic amelioration — man 'cleaning up' God's act. Yet she sensed something awry, the reason for such a phobia, let alone deadly rebuke, eluded her, the clinic's research being a potential boon to a variety of patients, some with intractable diseases! She thought of the one Sunni broker who had been so taken with Karen. Seeing her on the villa's grounds had been a revelation for him, which he seemed only too keen to enshrine elsewhere.

What was she missing here?

TWENTY

Catherine's staged death scene in the modest hotel would affirm an identity. A special team finalized the look of the deceased, giving her a somewhat jaundiced look. Evidence of recent vomiting and diarrhea would be discovered in the bathroom. The rosh photographs were taken of a body lying on a bed in a stylish house coat; drug paraphernalia cluttered a side table. News of the death would soon headline several tabloids. The sedative she was given began to work promptly, to buoyant reassurance that the corpse was a shoo-in. It had been one problematic issue — just how 'inert' the body should be. Catherine had balked at being unconscious. Hence a sedative that would relax the body but not dim the mind. They would have to rely on her acting skills, period — which, in the face of some menacing threats, they did.

As an experience to encapsulate the surreal her brief time in the morgue with Ann's examiner, first stripped and then secreted beneath a sheet with medical air cylinder, was a show stopper! It had been decided that at least one regular employee, assigned an elsewhere task, must momentarily see the body. Playing a corpse kept one oddly alert. During her brief stay on the examiner's table, she thought of the photo play of witness, how such work was a form of spying, a collaborative peep show. The sedative allowed her to relax through much of the seemingly interminable wait for the arrival of the designated relative and his brief 'stage appearance'. With the sheet pulled back, the putative identification took place. The 'family' did not agree to an autopsy. A blood sample had confirmed the cause of death. Keenly she wondered what her peripatetic twin would make of it all? It was perhaps the first time in her life she may have looked her age. A gothic visage, fixed with a grimace, timing her breath to the staged intervals. She hoped her twin would now anticipate a less perilous state, though she must surely wonder at such a demise. It was an ineffable stay for Catherine herself, especially given the heady anticipation of what she might get on with when her sojourn with Hārun's minders ended, her ample payment in hand freeing her of ABN for a time. All future investigations would be limited by her own imagination. Former informers and contacts would savor her exemption from mainstream

media moguls. Deplorable D. faded as a sun bleached print. He had cravenly kicked her out; she would stay out. The board might even come to question his peremptory decision. Could her mother be relied on to keep her daughter's late assignment from friends and neighbors? Catherine's instincts said yes. As promised, the secreted medical air cylinder kept her breathing even and relaxed, though no less alert to all sounds and voices.

A louche surprise awaited her in the chosen morgue however. The advent of her scapegrace boss, who apparently haunted charnel houses, was a preternatural shock, his voice just beyond the identification bay a feral jolt. He sought details on this pathetic death from the medical examiner, who confirmed the name of Coren Wiley, which must have meant little to her boss, ever so conscientious was he to get the available facts straight. The examiner seemed resigned to accommodate this earnest high-profile inquisitor. They talked in what seemed reverential tones, and for an agonizing interval she imagined the game could become more involuted still — that this intruder might actually be shown the face of the deceased! She vowed to kill him if the opportunity arose. A blow from the medical air cylinder would finish the bugger off, so she rhapsodized.

She was all ears. The inveterate cad was on form.

"One must of course stomach reality in our gritty profession but this is sad — a very pretty youngster resorting to this."

The examiner's voice now struck her as that of an ally. "Well the age has still to be determined."

"Will an autopsy be performed?"

"No, the family didn't think it necessary. Lab tests affirmed the cause of death."

Deplorable D. seemed disappointed yet remained patronizing. "The family is always a consideration. If we cannot slight the details in our coverage, we will be succinct and unassuming, as is our standard of course." Luckily, Catherine mused, the syndicated troublemaker known as Catherine Whyte had already been cashiered. Would Deplorable D. be pleased that his gadfly's leaving was indefinite, that it might even rank as a disappearance?

To her inner self she said: How sweet to get beyond all this. Yet the stilted conversation reminded her that Coren Wiley was no longer a walk-on role for her twin. That was the one shadow. Perhaps touched off by Darin's intrusion, she was also reminded how antsy one could become when physical activity was curtailed; how suspicious, tenty, the mute, immobilized being became.

Key recollections doubled up then to taunt her with the earlier 'absences'. What she once deemed rarified lapses of memory, now suggested a series of stealth visits by unknown assessors, ancillary to the copying of her own doctor's files. Was Muerner's evaluation of her so bloody important? Her own role in his health pageant had been italicized and she resented the notice.

Several voices off were then heard conferring, just as the gurney began to move. The belated discovery in the 'jury-rigged' morgue was that she could barely move an atom of her large muscles, while her senses remained keenly alert. The revelation infuriated and alarmed. The initial sedative

may have been augmented with a delayed muscle relaxant, a predicament noted by the sudden fluid movement of the gurney, its fluent glide a welcome surprise.

Her anger lessened as the gurney moved, the words of the lab examiner, who'd been there all along, reassuring. "You'll soon be on your own," the calm voice above her said. The realization that she could at last move, a discovery arrived at slowly but surely, also heartened. With flaring determination she decided the time had come to find a safe place of her own estimable choosing. Again the words of the sitter were a reprieve. "Your street clothes have been stashed in the open locker to our right, next to a storage room you can dress in. The floor is clear now. But you must hurry. Ann is waiting at the end of this hallway with your travel gear and identity papers. A taxi will be waiting in the employee parking stalls, at the base of the fire escape riser. Good luck."

A vigilant Ann stood with some impatience by the exit door with the designated coat, suitcase and shoulder bag, passport, identity cards and special makeup kit when Catherine approached. With a catch in her voice Catherine said, "I'm still a bit dazed."

"Likely the sedative."

Catherine wanted to rebuke someone for not explaining more fully the drug she was given but decided the urgency of departure was, as Willardson might have said, 'hegemonic'. Extravagant words consoled then.

Together they headed down the fire escape. Below the riser a taxi waited and soon, with amazing alacrity, the spectre of an austerely beautiful Ann faded in the distance. It was the first satisfying breath Catherine had taken in donkey's years. A kind of rebirth, she told her devoted mom a month later. "I was in effect a stranger in my own hectic, shameless country."

That first night she spent in a large residential hotel, her feet up, luxuriating in a marinade of novel idleness — in that she hadn't leisurely watched television for ages and dumbly sat before the livid screen, reminding herself that decency and civility were apparently recessive genes. One of the news stories dwelt on a deranged shooting in a shopping mall, few louche details omitted from the coverage she guessed. Plaintively, she sought out a popular TV drama series set in 18th century Scotland. In the segments she watched, a particularly sadistic gay, a slightly cross-eyed English Redcoat captain, spends a good hour gruesomely torturing a nude Scots Highlander in vivid graphic detail, at one point driving a nail through his hand, burning the captain's crest into the man's chest, and further tormenting the man with the captain's own dark-haired curls which he intimates belongs to the man's beloved wife. After briefly masturbating full-frontal, the captain savagely sodomizes the very distraught Scot. Catherine smiled in spite of herself — at this apparently new norm in television entertainment. Was the white heterosexual male, the age's new outcast, germane here, and a monstrously sadistic gay the approved agent of retribution?... Moreover, when such acutely graphic spectacles become routine, as they would, what new outrage will be needed to retain such an audience? She imagined some alert Islamist using such sordidness to excoriate the West and recruit another coterie of dedicated bombers.

You want your children to live in such a rank obscene surround? She recalled a journalist quip from the muddled, sublimely ineffectual peace conference in 1919 in Paris that followed WW1: the delegates there, the pundit averred, were working for “a just and lasting war”. Given the mess those delegates left Arabia in, the comment had legs. She wondered if she was really that distraught with the age’s incensed radicals, the eclectic terrorists. Was there not a disgust with so many modern things that one sometimes succumbed to a general lassitude...viewing all lucid savagery as a languid spectator?

So what did you expect, St. Joan? She knew all too well how easy it was to denounce and hate. To impugn. To bind oneself to the myriad vexations of life. Another of the fine self-motivating, self-dramatic obsessions. As teething as deciding what one ought, might to do next. Fortunately she had purchased a new book on nanotechnology and managed to lose herself the remainder of the evening in a minuscule mysterious netherworld she could barely fathom. A world that appeared to be as fantastically efficient as it was darkly, enigmatically protean.

She fell asleep thinking of love’s close, solicitous embrace, one of the excuses for hanging around.

TWENTY-ONE

Kissy looked out at the misted forest beyond the veranda of his Kiev dacha. Ducks were circling the lily pond. The setting sun bronzed the placid surface of the pond.

Two deaths. One faked, planned for, the other not. He had learned via Gervase that none other than Catherine Whyte had been involved in the staging of Coren Wily’s death — to stymie the formidable Ammon. And Zoya was being seen by a plastic surgeon in the recovered clinic — for an altered face. A new identity to elude her assassins. He might have sensed some accord but for the loss of his recondite protégé, a death that left him appalled, shell shocked. He knew the risk was considerable and had been touched by her stoic acceptance of Gervase’s update and willingness to proceed. Then the timing was off — someone had used another’s explosive materiel, which the mysterious ‘other’ must have had all along, suggesting Aram was not trusted by his own Islamic cell in the end. Or himself, for that matter. Two employees in the admissions and records department were killed, and a nursing supervisor badly injured. The three other victims would remain unknown. A private DNA test would affirm the identity of the clinic’s ‘recent outpatient’, a fact only he and two of Muerner’s staff would share. A witness a block away had seen a young woman pick up and throw a rock at a taxi parked near the clinic. A police sketch of the stone thrower, using the witness’s problematic description, was inconclusive. Though for Kissy, it was a feasible rendering of an upright Dilsat, her dress especially. How she came to act as she did Kissy would ever after wonder about. Had she recognized someone? It seemed she had ascertained the intent, the imminent bombing, and elected to intervene — not flee the scene as he might have expected. The destruction would have been far worse had the bomber actually set foot inside the clinic. As it was, the records bay — hard copy and digital backup — was the most severely damaged, the treatment regimens for some patients being

carefully reconstructed. He had not yet talked with Muerner — another of the awaiting reproofs. The one plus — if such a word applied here — was that Bossy would be at odds with whoever authorized the bombing. The minus was Bossy's ongoing suspicion of his brother's ability to run the business, keep the noisome ducks at bay. The ineffable tragedy was the loss of the young, perceptive and resilient Dilsat al Haiq who, somehow, fortuitously limited the destruction of the clinic. He knew romance with her was out of the question, though the thought crossed his mind...had he been fifteen, ten years younger. The fact that he had not reckoned with, indeed underestimated, the 'other' community of jihadis Aram alluded to, would not be excused. Finesse required players respectful of the game. A bygone presumption he'd been reluctant to abandon. It was thus perhaps time to leave. He still had no idea what they might say to Dilsat's mother. He had never sensed such an indelible loss.

The explosion at the Bern clinic was a sobering if wry reminder for Catherine of Hārun's sobering assessment of presumptive genetic manipulation — emending God's divine design. The fact that the clinic target seemed so novel, in the jihadist's scheme of things, affirmed that likelihood. The lesser attacks on Glow Worm Films, Behr Brue, Nixit and the abortion clinic, paled against this target, especially as no other stench bombings had taken place, at least that she knew of. The attack on the clinic intensified the enigma its research posed for her, and how one should evaluate the Muerner mavens themselves. The Borozovs would not be pleased with the attack, Kissy especially if what Willardson said about his genial association with Muerner — still one of the conundrums — was true. A rival gang's assertion newly manifest to all observant players reset the clock. But for her — an open-ended holiday loomed! A timely get away. To quietly, calmly re-assess such dire dismaying events. Entirely, uniquely, on her own!

On the Aljazeera website Abdul read the story of the clinic bombing with an apathy he was cultivating then. Almost as a footnote, on the same site, he read about the suicide death of a Corin Wiley — a demise that must have rankled obdurate Ammon, who had boldly set out to rid the world of a tart as well as a 'tart baker', as he once described the clinic, the bombing of which stuck Abdul as acutely reprehensible, for he had come to share Aram's loathing of killing hapless civilians.

When he finally sat down with Hejaz, the bombing hung in the balance. Hejaz was a moment fielding Abdul's many open questions, offering, when he did, a startling update.

"A recent rumor credits another team with the bombing. Ammon's team is staying mum, so far. They may or may not have been in cahoots. There's likely more to the matter than we know." He paused for a sip of tea. "You've not heard the sequel I assume."

"What 'sequel'?"

"Ammon's new sorry plight. His cell lost contact with him after the Wiley suicide. He apparently believed Wiley was the Russian dancer. He was apparently found drunk and disorderly, not in his usual hangouts, but an élite show lounge and arrested. He's charged with assault. This time.

“It’s hard to believe his team wasn’t involved in the clinic attack?”

“We don’t know. As I said, there may have been some overlap. As for the death of Corin Wiley, there is evidence that Aram, or Hārūn as he’s sometimes called, may have been involved.”

“Is that surprising?”

“In any case, Ammon’s pariah status is now set in stone I think.”

“Where is Aram anyway?”

“Anybody’s guess. His genie may be working overtime. He may have begun a Hajj — one prized comment. Who knows?”

Kissy looked out of the Bellevue Towers that overlooked Burrard Inlet, the mountain cradled waterway in Vancouver, Canada, the mountain peaks snow-capped against a clear blue sky. A jet lingered high in the upper firmament, detectable mainly by a slender vapor trail. Despite all, he felt ‘at home’ here. His arrival a long awaited escape.

Bossy was of course incensed at the clinic target, the loss of a lucrative client, and the fact Kissy did not impede the bombing. The cell that facilitated it was a new faction under an adversarial Imam, as Aram belatedly acknowledged, Ammon’s taint all but sidelining him. That Kissy had not frustrated this newcomer was a lapse Bossy might not overlook. Still, being here in Canada, in one of the last of the carefree playgrounds, Kissy might relax somewhat, at least for a time, accepting the suicide of Corin Wiley as a clever expedient. Ammon was apparently incensed by the death, sufficient to indulge another crazed assault in some dive, this time getting himself arrested. If the journalist had been recruited to be an ‘understudy’ for the specious socialite, Coren Wiley, she had likely abandoned ABN, and might now try to track down her peripatetic twin. A meeting he would wish to see. It was going to be a fine afternoon, cumulous clouds now drifting in to embrace the sovereign sunshine; a little flummery he might exercise in this haven. He presumed, hoped that Aram was well and playing a smart judicious game. He also believed Zoya must be wonderstruck, if not relieved, and wished her well.

Well, that singular Zoya Stolbanov, had just concluded a brief but enjoyable visitation with her aunt. Now, via the Simplon Orient Express, she headed once more to the Bern Clinic, to complete her new face. The last of the operations was scheduled the day after tomorrow and would go ahead. Indeed the clinic had, it seemed, expeditiously resurrected itself. Her wig, dark glasses and elaborate makeup left her an unknown as she boarded the train. One gent asked her to join him in his compartment, but turned away when she said she would be delighted if she could bring her aunt with her, whom she expected to meet shortly.

Now seated opposite two European women in stylish dress, the older occasionally snoring, Zoya held a paper in front of her, gleaning more details about the clinic’s recovery. A director of vascular surgery was quoted as being optimistic about the clinic soon resuming its role as a pre-eminent medical

treatment and research facility. So: her new face was still in the works — now urgently so, in that she didn't want someone casting her again as Corin Wiley. Whose 'death' raised a lot of questions, especially since the journalist had apparently vanished too. As the verdant upland hills swept by her coach window, she noted how some distant staring cows resembled carnival targets. She was reminded of the famous English film *Murder On The Orient Express* and smiled, for she was now an ostensible dead person alive and well on a similar train! She worried about the journalist, her likely twin, but believed her to be hale and coping, being the escape artist she plainly was. Corin Wiley's background, at least that divulged in the media, was very different from hers. She imagined someone cooking up a legend, not unlike one the Cheka might have fabricated. Führ, her erstwhile companion, she knew was obsessed with sleek houris, was known for his photoshop manipulations, and the painterly renderings of them by an American artist. She had posed for him as the enigmatic Hebe, the illusive Nitocris,... but never liked the oily-tongued dork and his 'unctuous eroticism', a phrase she copied from a tabloid. If anything, she had as much respect for the rank Ganyanov. So was there actually a body to affirm the story of the suicide? Would the journalist herself be addled by the similarities? Or been an adjunct to them? How she longed to meet her. The possibility was perhaps slightly more realizable now...the newly teasing possibility she impatiently awaited.

She had recently taken up, again, travel brochures that showcased the history of wondrous mystical Ephesus. She had been there twice with her proconsular investigator lover, Yuri, while she still performed as an understudy in a lively folk dance troupe — that had actually performed in a club in Cairo, members of which later performed in the Apsaras. A time that seemed memorable, fanciable now. She had but one letter from Yuri since the attack, the letter addressed to the clinic. He had cancer and she feared he was not getting the treatment he needed. He strongly advised her not to try to visit him. The FSB questioning of him was ongoing. "You are free, stay free, beloved." Grim advice she had, as grimly, taken to heart. He closed the letter with: "Remember me as you once did. Like our time in Selçuk and Ephesus. We shall meet again, one fine day. Hold me to that promise, dearest Zoya." That letter became a touchstone through her ordeal. But she had long since lost touch with her Yuri and didn't know where to find him now. He too lived a fraught hectic life. She had at the time fallen in love in Ephesus. A past she might recollect now as a phantom Apsara, or Helen as Yuri once called her — the one to provoke a memorable war. Such fond memories adorn a chosen place.

To Istanbul, Soke and Ephesus then — but only via smitten memory. A needed face lift awaited.

TWENTY-TWO

With her new name, wig, clever makeup, passport, bank cards, driver's license and liberal sum of cash — the duration of her 'demise' remained open-ended — Catherine elected to savor a carefree holiday, and decided she'd like to visit again historic Islamic Cairo, which she had to leave on an early too short holiday, and booked on the first available flight to Cairo, where she might slip stream behind the

heedful flocks of tourists and their guides. In due course she planned to sort out her ethical basis for confronting the slippery Muerner-Borozov mavens, who had left a standing invitation for her to join the ‘trust’. Learning of Muerner’s exclusive utopian mania — and his élite clinic’s reliance on toffy egg donors to abet it — served as a further goad. The peerless egg scalper. It would be an interesting re-introduction given the clinic’s current state — if she agreed. The psalm singers she now thought of the unlikely Muerner-Kissy duo. The promise of future non-interference from Ann’s coterie she took with a grain of salt; someone was always hovering at the margin of a conspiracy. But on the whole she believed they would leave her alone. She regretted not being able to advise Michael about her situation, but had promised Hārun a month of silence. She would seek Michael out in due course. Pachis she believed a lost cause when his ‘other’ deeds surfaced. That he might be so duplicitous still hurt.

Hence, sometimes wistful and often distracted, she became another tourist fondly in love with the medieval Cairo, cognizant of the Tales of the Arabian Nights, where the deeds that fascinated and intrigued also grandly perturbed. Such was the gravity of that period for her — to glean the spirit of jihad, while tempering one’s own anger as she reckoned with Saud/Wahhab intransigence and institutionalized cultural hatred, which the genetic juggernaut was bound to aggravate. Had aggravated. The Great Satan’s infatuation with peerless bods and polymorphous gratification seemed insatiable — in essence, God being slighted if not blasphemed as a miser, plodder and bully!

It was Willardson’s last remarks to her that gave a fine spin to late events, and her dour recollection of them remained acute. She thought of Michel de Montaigne and his ‘pithy dialogue of the mind with itself’. A veritable touchstone with Willardson, whose words lingered.

*You must remember Muerner is the éminence grise who sets the theoretical constructs. The imputation of him being a Neofascist means he must remain more or less sub rosa to direct his research. The panacea prospects of gene manipulation are heady indeed. The coming of the paragons, ‘the observed of all the observers’. The beings of wide ability and beauty...**all** that human hearts endure...!*

Well, Willardson’s caution, endurance didn’t figure in her lighthearted escape to the tourist meccas — to better renew her sense of self in a timeless *enduring* realm. Hey ho! The radiant sun detailed the storied bazaar stalls and their variegated distractions, the scents of herbs and spices alone transporting. One young woman even waved at her in the jovial way tour members might acknowledge a member at a distance, suggesting the woman was perhaps nearsighted, a bus mate too eager to ingratiate. One evening she even sought out a sympathetic Western nightclub, featuring both anonymity and polymorphism, at least on the dance floor. Frilly words she adorned her diary with. The likelihood that she might have danced there with one of Borozov’s pugs fondly amused her later. Another chap even looked a bit like Michael, and knew how to move. The booze helped of course. Yet she managed to get away without being picked up. Several hands had touched her, but only in the imploring not abusive sense. Another cute lad did catch her eye, as well as a sultry Persian — so she imagined —who

seemed the better travesty. The following morning she again summoned the on call masseuse who managed a dispersion of the prickly senses. The woman was a magician with sore feet and ankles. The new tight shoes Catherine had gone clubbing in she trashed on the morrow.

The next day, ostensibly a courtesy of the hotel, via her morning tray, came a gilt invitation to the Reina, a popular club in the Zamalek district of Gezira Island. She soon learned that all guests received the generic invitation which, curiously, included a Commedia dell'arte Columbina eye mask! A girl at reception was enthusiastic. "You're in luck this day — all theatre shows in the club are free — happens once a year on our Independence Day! Enjoy.

With her mask in hand, she readily sought out the club, which proved to be a captivating labyrinth of several theatre venues, its elegant chambers exclusive to a rich stylish and apparently privacy craving clientele. As startling was the discovery that one of the club's directors was none other than Konstantin 'Kissy' Borozov, another intrusive fact she would take under advisement. Was the presence of the club in a Muslim country also a test of who might openly attend? In one washroom she encountered this enlightened graffiti: *The age of wanton Olympic boys*. She mused: Kissy Borozov as Hermes, the divine messenger and trickster?

A runway fashion show, as touted in the invitation, was an energetic if roguish affair: chichi gowns, svelte models and salty herms in cyan green body paint who deftly parted skirts and filched tops to bare a line of yummy scanties. The models, lithe stunners all, smacked the herms with angry palms as they restored their attire. The herms looked confused and hurt and appealed to the audience who obviously relished the jape. If it was a performance, the players were more or less adept at making it look impromptu.

But the fashion show lounge was but one of several entertainments in this ornate expansive club. All 'bite sized' it seemed — bite sized regalements for a single night out!

In the popular Soma Theater, patrons took in some dramatic aesthetic interventions to the human form — cued by new plastic, reconstructive procedures. Function as well as beauty was articulated in a 3D film that floated before each spectator's eye in the small cozy theatre, featuring examples of skeletal re-articulation, contouring and toning of muscle and connective tissue. Images of exceptional decathlon and pentathlon athletes were duly interpolated into the film. The promotional message intimated that the interventions presented were imminently possible. Was the sensibility behind such ascriptions perverse, she again wondered? Still, in proceeding with her own story, she must hold to her skepticism; more and more the standards here seemed supererogatory, 'convened' by an autocratic sense of the ideal. Indeed, 'conjured' was the word that came to mind instead of 'convened'.

While debating leaving, she looked again at the club's play board and was surprised to discover that two of the club's directors, including Kissy, were scholars of Egyptian antiquity. Kissy? Wanting to see all she could, she joined an avid group that soon filled a large vault of a room decorated in the style of a bright Karnak garden, with lush velvet fauteuils lining the perimeter. A large golden mosaic

of the Horus wadjet eye filled the center of the polished flagstaff floor. From the wings came a group of stylish women dressed in the long tunics or haiks of ancient Egyptian peeresses, each bowing like a concert pianist before the spirited applause. The applause grew as stage hands brought in a set of period musical instruments: a large engraved harp, two odd looking lutes, two tambourines and at least one sistrum, a kind of rattle.

A gentleman dressed as a swank royal herald entered and announced to ready applause a performance by “The Amarna Players.” He handsomely smiled and signalled for quiet. “Yes, we are tonight, royal consorts all!”

As one of the performers began a Eulogy to the Incomparable King Akhenaten, translated by a second reader, the players added a nimble musical accompaniment that was highly entertaining for Catherine. Music that reminded her of the lyric tunes of Ernesto Lecuona, La Negra and the like, which she loved, miniature masterpieces he composed for piano. She was amazed. Such an ensemble — in a venue Kissy might have devised? The poetry the match of the seductive music. And here she had anticipated a tarty display!

In another venue she briefly watched a troupe of clowns perform a series of ‘faulty’ airborne flips and tumbles, one catching a flier just as he or she was about to crash. The timing was exceptional, each miscarried maneuver salvaged before disaster. She imagined performers in the Circ de Soleil trying out new grand moves that spectacularly failed, the recovery as miraculous as the posh attempt, the virtuosity gleaning authentic audience sighs. Was Kissy recapitulating his own ups and downs Catherine wryly wondered? The laughter concluding each act was as pervasive as the glowers and frowns on the performers. Many shook their heads at the ‘unexpected’ audience reception, but continued to attempt ever more spectacular vaults and flips, ever saved at the last minute by deft intervention. The virtuosic athleticism seemed immersed in a larger whole, each near disaster flowing into the next. The urgency to see more of this entertainment mecca was becoming obsessive. That Kissy might have been instrumental in fashioning some of it confounded.

Had she ever been more fondly incredulous?

A fanciful dance theatre she found more or less by accident. She initially missed the item in the program card. It was called A Mid Summer Dream Night. A ballet that showcased a young, nimble, surefooted ensemble, the dancers enlaced in wings, lacy garlands and tresses, the passing moves of a corps of Peaseblossoms. With panache one performer, a credible Mab, changed from a fond partner to a stark ominous banshee as she scattered a gaggle of wood gnomes in order to apprehend the most agile glen nymph, identified as Titania in the program, a tall, nearly albino dancer in her mid teens, her body stocking Acanthus adorned to mask some carnal detail, who danced with a grace and certainty you’d expect from a gifted professional. She slipped through all the banshee snares with a liquid fluency that transfixed the audience. Translucent blades the banshee took up whipped the air like dragonfly wings. Without pause or apparent care the nimble Titania swept through the whizzing

wings like a will-o'-the-wisp — all done to the Dance of the Hours by Ponchielli, a choice of music Catherine marvelled at. Could this be a finely droll Kissy 'carrying on' too? After some particularly harrowing moves the nymph collapsed and was tenderly gathered up by the gnomes who had regrouped to confront the banshee, the gnomes coiling, enveloping their queen with what looked like wisteria and meadow fox tail. Without the opera glasses, fetched from an arm rest, the scene might have resembled little more than bits of fluff careening a lake water. Several times Titania's limp form was borne aloft by one or another of the luckier gnome heroes, until a stately sizeable gnome appeared, whose coming drew the others off to the margins, leaving the glen nymph prettily sprawled on a wispy hillock. She was awakened by an ambrosial drink the new more arresting gnome delivered to her lips in stooped eurythmic reverence, framing the loving moves of the newly awakened Titania as she sought his embrace. The curiosity for Catherine was the choreography that apostrophized this coda. If there was a move or gesture not finely crafted and paced, she'd missed it. That someone like Kissy might be responsible for such a performance struck her as finely ironic. The applause in the sudden theatre darkness was deafening. As the lights returned, a smiling Titania fluently curtsied to ardent applause. The troupe returned for several curtain calls. The pacing of the work itself had seemed virtuosic, the dancing what you would expect from a young, dextrous, enthusiastic company, less the minimal costuming and some early nymphomaniacal antics. But for their wings, tresses and pointed ears, the three principals were mother of pearl figurines, the gnomes burdened with mock curved penises, much like their thyrsi. Titania performed one last grand *jété en tournant entrelacé*, according to a rapt audience member, thus concluding the act, then vanished in a finely timed blackout light. The applause was sustained and thunderous. That many in the audience were women, including two matrons back of her, struck Catherine as significant. Their overheard conversation was as interesting as the ballet itself. Indeed, it provided a telling history

"You rarely see witty topography like that in the older houses. At least so blithe, unaffected."

The friend happily agreed. "The one soloist a year ago was a real gem. Another virtuosic Russian. A remarkable understudy at the time. She ended up dancing in the Apsaras, but hasn't performed after the London attack. You hear stories — of many impresarios who want her but are stymied by vengeful Islamists."

"I've heard she's got a champion in the older Soviet hierarchy though — a former procurator in fact. Well a procurator's investigator."

"Not one of the Borozov's?"

"No, much more exclusive than that. What I've heard, you understand. Someone connected to Yeltsin's old shadow cabinet."

"Does the chap have a name?"

"I'm still making inquiries."

"Good luck."

Both women chuckled.

“She left here that last time very suddenly — a puzzle given her popularity. She did it differently, of course, more dance structure, fewer ad libs. The crowd was smaller than tonight’s. Though that one last night she got a standing ovation.”

“I’m told Sergei Polunin choreographed this performance.”

“It must be a great temptation for some performers to apply here — members of the corps de ballet of the Kirov make far less. As long as the pretence of anonymity holds, to foil the periodic semi-nudity, more will surely come. The eye makeup alone is becoming an art praxis. A new ballet that features nesting dolls is in rehearsal apparently.”

“It may enjoy a limited run though. The Turkish authorities are becoming more strict. I’ve heard rumors that the club may in fact be closed after this season. Something to do with the attack.”

“It’s a wonder it survived as long as it has.”

“Well with Russian mafiya backers, and flush European tourists — it’s a reliably tax source. The one mob backer is a stranger in his own house, I’m told. The Kissy chap.”

The detailed commentary rawly teased Catherine’s credulity.

Later, alone and wistful in her room, she recollected her own performance of her Adoration of the Sun exercises before the demanding broker-terrorist, and wondered, again, what would have been the clue to Zoya’s identity. Can even identical twins be matches when out of their teens? Would her double have been similarly bemused performing before the glassy mirror in the villa’s hall on another occasion? A veritable twin, whom she stolidly enacted the murder of? It seemed she had facilitated a gripping but largely unreadable chapter that may not end well. After a sleepless night she phoned the desk and asked again for the on call masseuse. Someone to ‘recast’ her current wistful habit of thought. “Of course, mad’moiselle, that can be arranged.”

She was not quite drunk and wrapped in a bath towel when the commanding Ilse arrived. Built like a pocket battle cruiser — powerful, concise, emphatic — Ilse directly set up her table. “So,” she said, “much like the last time. When that was — a year ago? You’ve put on some weight. Good for you.” Catherine smiled, and all but shrugged as she helped Ilse position the narrow platform. *Much like last time? A year ago?* More and more the ostensible twin seemed indivisible, a virtual singularity, and Catherine’s ongoing complicity with the fact a dumb show, a play within a play. Although she had no inkling of a script.

As Ilse worked a gamut of positions, Catherine marshalled the questions she might put to Ilse without rousing her curiosity. Occasionally joints crackled with recreant energy, as momentary pain dissolved into sudden palliation. She would recall one of Ilse’s leitmotifs throughout the deft manhandling: “You need to get out more. Pale skin like that. Indoors is no good for gürwurz like you. You become *Die frau ohne Schatten*.” Catherine smiled. She knew the Richard Strauss opera about a

‘shadowless’ heroine and began to place her anxious questions as Ilse worked the tarsal and metatarsal ligaments.

“I’ve forgotten when we first met — I’ve been drinking a bit much these past weeks.”

“I am not surprised.” The response being unanticipated, for Ilse was not being ironic, Catherine promptly sought a back up line.

“I must admit, now, I don’t recall...meeting you.”

Ilse briefly stopped, her mind newly resolved. “I was mistaken; I’ve not been before. We have not met until this day.”

Catherine narrowed her aim. “You know, I was accosted in the hotel lobby by someone who obviously mistook me for another. And seemed surprised I was not the person she believed me to be.”

With a show of empathy Ilse said, “You do have a resemblance to one of the clients. A dancer. Some time ago.”

“They say we all have a double somewhere.”

“Somewhere, yes.”

“It is a curiosity.”

Ilse paused to rub more unguent on her hands. “Your face is maybe similar. But you are not as thin. And other things.”

“I am curious.”

“We should not discuss clients.”

“These ‘other things’ sound ominous.”

“I am embarrassed by my confusing you with the other. As I’ve said, your face a close likeness. You have fine skin...too much makeup maybe.”

“A modern habit.”

“Should be discouraged.”

Catherine continued with what she hoped would be interpreted as a naturally chatty nature. “But not knowing this other client in question, I’d love to know the ‘other things’. Where the double begins and ends so to speak.”

Gravely Ilse continued after a solemn pause. “It is a difficult matter. You can be trusted I’m sure. But one never knows.”

“Just a generality or two. You *have* whetted my curiosity.”

“I shouldn’t have. It is not the generality.”

Catherine brightened. “Good lord.”

“Yes, that too.”

“You make me feel I’ve got a terminal illness.”

“No. You are the healthy one.”

“Well, that’s a relief. Though health is a comparative business.”

“You are not maybe an addict.”

Promptly Catherine added, “Except for information. That I’m addicted to. Yes, I know, nosey.”

Again Ilse pursed her lips. “It is a sad matter. Best left alone.”

Catherine briefly smiled. “Anything you might suggest avoiding? A word to the wise so to speak?”

Ilse remained silent as she worked the calf muscles. The matter seemed closed for this fail safe trooper. “You have a life,” she said after a quiet quarter minute. “Put the matter away.”

“Did you not say the last time that I needed a hobby?”

“Nie. Someone else.”

“I thought for sure...aren’t you the one who recommended a spa in Constance?”

“Nie. Maybe Hilda, not me. Yah Hilda.”

“Well, perhaps Hilda — though the name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“You maybe drink more than you should.”

“Won’t argue with that.”

“You have the same gladiolus and xiphoid process. Scapulae too. Yah. You could be double. ‘Spitting image’ English say. If you got out more.”

“Do I have any good features? You’ve got me a bit worried.”

Ilse seemed then to conclude a protracted inner debate. “It is maybe fine, no harm. Yah. Your plantaris in back of knee will not give way so very soon. Too many times pas de chat. ‘Sore no?’ I ask her last time. ‘Yes sore,’ she said. Then she surprise me with — ‘So, please, if you me, would you stay in this show?’ Nie I say, knee needs TLC. Time for long holiday. You have reputation, much respect. And sturdy loyal audience.”

“That must have helped.”

“I think so.”

With some resignation Catherine asked, “What would you have done? If you were her? I promise to be discrete.”

Ilse happily reflected for a moment. “Go to most popular island — Rügen for holiday. On Pomeranian coast. Yah.”

“Rügen?”

“Quiet during Winter. Full of wellness hotels. Good place to take time out and baby knee. Yah.”

“I would never have thought of that.”

“Yah. Rügen.”

“Simple.”

“Good. I think we have one or two relaxations left” — one of Ilse’s rare but apt comments as she worked her way to the extremities. If it was not the most felicitous interlude of Catherine’s short life, it was certainly the most memorable. Karen would have appreciated Ilse. Perhaps even appreciated Ilse’s late-recommended associate. “I have friend who needs work. She is good. She uses new shiatsu

method. Very strong. I think you must like Marketa.”

Catherine rather regretted having to promptly leave the hotel when the session was over. Slyly prying topical info from the wary Ilse just might compromise her identity if she hung around.

The following day before packing, a warming morning sun accenting her hotel furnishings, Catherine read the English language *Hürriyet Daily News*, which featured several writers — both in columns and letters — dourly commenting on European Union members’ insolvency. She noted, for example, that Greek pensioners receive about 96% of their salaries, according to one study. And that the dirt cheap Athens Metro sells about 90 million tickets a year while needing 500 million to break even. Also, despite having four times more teachers than exemplary Finland, student performance in Greece was one of the lowest in the Union. No wonder comparison itself was being deemed imperious, tyrannical. That very morning she had looked across to a bus shelter that was covered in, for her, very scabrous graffiti — a rarity in that district. She mused that neglected artists had done it, their means to revile, bad mouth a largely philistine population, given how acute discontent often spurs, goads derisive action. It was in this forensic frame of mind that she received the riveting letter with her breakfast tray, the letter coming via the hotel’s executive housekeeper — sent by someone she guessed to be an in situ agent, the elusive minder who was ‘on her case’. The spry words in the letter were engrossing as the picture accompanying it, very like the one Willardson had shown her a month before: males standing as classic Greek sculptures, but only one of these, nearest the center, conspicuously circled. The unexpected letter piqued as it teased, and stymied her wish to depart. The impervious note, minus any salutation, read:

For the connoisseur, the bow legs and knobby knees may not amuse, nor the dippy elbow cartilages or short bent necks — in the marginal examples. Semyan, the lad circled in the center, the luckier of the Zeus incarnations, awaits you by the terrace pool. FM

For all the precious hype, the initials served to spook. Felix Muerner? A trustee or confidante with the same initials? She was only momentarily askance. A new urgency tinged with anger rushed her through her morning ablutions. She donned a thick hotel wrap, her swim suit underneath, and packed in her carryall the mace an embedded reporter with UN Blue Berets had given her. If fear concentrated the mind, active involvement steeled the nerves.

Then another sobering revelation! The chap sitting by the shimmering azure pool turned out to be none other than the elusive chap she first met at the Cayuse — who was likely the idyllic form in the ‘figure set’ that accompanied the note! He introduced himself as Semyan and gestured to a vacant natural stone grotto off the hotel swimming pool for a talk (and the lengthy rebuke she had in store for him). It was some time before they got around to the ‘clinic matters’, as he would put it. Indeed, he seemed puzzled, then miffed by her initial brusque insinuations, and was quick to respond to the first, vigorously shaking his head.

“No rape. Absolutely not.”

“You harbor a fine sophistry about rape. You obviously knew what happened in the villa. You said as much at the Cayuse. Someone undressed and washed me while I was out. With a strong bath soap, from the smell of it, I’ve never used. Why was I washed?”

“I don’t know.”

“And this dalliance you referred to — rape by another name. You were sitting in the gallery, watching?”

“Two women, both strangers, came to the villa, one a physician who took some blood samples and a mouth swab — what I saw. The other had a camera. You were in bed asleep, clothed in the dress you blacked out in. The one you had on when you dined with the Admiral and his friends. I was there to see that the episode remained in camera. In private. No outside intervention. The girl with the camera climbed in with you after the physician finished, set her camera on a cabinet and used the self-timer. Insurance pics most like.”

“A cozy ‘in camera’ tryst. Was she naked?”

Semyan smarted. “It wasn’t like...what you’re thinking.”

“Like what?”

“You were handled very carefully throughout. From what I saw. There was no sex. You were carefully put in the bed after you collapsed. The one girl, the physician did some testing — I didn’t see all she did. She did take a blood sample and a mouth swab, as I’ve said. The other girl was simply in the bed with you and had an arm about you when the pics were taken — four or five in all. She had on a dress not unlike the one you had on. In a couple of frames she kissed you.”

“Wonderful. So who washed me?”

“That I don’t know. Lookit, you weren’t abused or assaulted.”

“Irish Spring, or whatever, being a reliable camouflage.”

He shrugged. “It was probably all the suite contained. Maybe the examination left traces of something — I simply don’t know. Some of the rooms there are a bit musty — please, there was absolutely no assault. My god, you’ve worked in Russia, the Soviet Union. You must know. Bodies are so many inconveniences for most folk there. To be returned in pristine condition or buried without trace. I repeat: you were not abused. You think Kissy or Muerner, for that matter, would countenance such a thing? The pics were simply insurance. You know how strict the spa is with intruders, with protecting its privacy.”

She didn’t know whether to believe him or not, the ineluctable facts were louche enough. But she knew he had words about Muerner and possibly Kissy she keenly wanted to hear, and thus fought down her anger enough to change tack.

“‘Insurance’...well, whatever happened I’ll take up later. You can’t be the first stray shill in this outfit.”

By then the heat in the grotto was intense and they both sat on their robes on a shaded bench. He

continued: “As I was about to say, we both are specific articulated subjects for Muerner. ‘Lagan,’ he says — sea trophies.”

“Cast off goods attached to a buoy. That’s good.”

“I’m not sure what attributes chance or providence has given you — but I take them to be exceptional.”

“From whom?”

“From everybody.”

“Muerner?”

“Especially Muerner, I should think.”

“You’ve met him then.”

“His secretary Gervase has given me a succinct assessment of my own circumstance. My kismet.”

“Sounds like Muerner. You know his past?”

“Not in detail. Some say he began his career as a medic in the Third Reich. He was recruited by the Soviets after the war and seconded to a clinic that was directed by a internal medicine professor, a Marxist and holdover Lysenkoist, a fanatic who was convinced that deviance might be eliminated via a new generation of mind altering drugs — drugs that modified the general character but not physically debilitate, over time. The general aim — from what I’ve been told.”

“A tall order. You wouldn’t happen to know what happened to my ‘birth’ mother? It is one of the slighted or shelved details in all this.”

“Only that she was at one time a so-called patient at a clinic near Perm. One of the abler dissidents and, presumably, a recipient of the clinic’s potent drug regimen. Gervase has been spare on some details.”

“So. Anything else I’ve ‘missed’?”

“I’m sure you’ll learn more in due course. All I have, for certain, is my record in the army. I was part of a spetsnaz company.

“Some ‘lagan’.”

Semyan smiled.

“What about this Soviet professor Muerner worked under? Any particulars there?”

“It seems Muerner convinced him of the utility of post treatment studies, given the potency of the drugs they were administering. The net result being the professor entrusted you and your twin’s care to his protégé, as he apparently thought of Muerner, who managed to get you out of the medical lockup and out of the country. How I’m not sure — a death certificate cited meningitis apparently. Muerner defected during an invitational lecture tour a year after you were squirrelled out. The details of which I’m ignorant of, except that his ensuing double blind study necessitated one of you being in a far less punitive environment. I think it is time you met some of the mavens, the savants. Get a few more fact about Muerner’s work before you decide to bolt or take up arms.” He paused, as if expect-

ing more abuse and innuendo. “Yes, I did and do find you attractive. But you weren’t...”

He didn’t finish the sentence, and she was sufficiently cowed by the suggestive details to pass on. For now. With a new candor their eyes met. Such a beautiful elegant male she had never consorted with, and that fulsome fact nearly prompted her to consider leaving. Such beauty, in and off itself, a taunt in her estimation. Suggesting why, perhaps, the standard often rather ugly suicide bomber had a passion for mayhem and murder, given the starkness of the inequality of life. The constant invidious glare of the age’s lavish advertising and streaming videos. The ‘Come Kingdom’ Karen had called it. That dissolute probability had daunted her before. She continued with a dour smile.

“If I choose to, when and where do I meet these ‘savants’? These elusive fanatics.”

“Tonight on the terrace off the game lounge is good. The group here have been given a table at one end. It’s a noisy club clientele— difficult to be overheard.” He studied her for a moment. “Come you may be surprised.” She winced and remained silent. “Well, at least engaged,” he added. “What one would think.”

She proffered a leaden smile. “You’ll be there, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“And the Admiral?”

“For sure.”

“Any terrorists looking on do you think?”

He lamely sighed. “Always possible.”

“What about the big ‘K’? Kissy B. Any trace of him in this coterie?”

“I’ve never seen the man. Gervase did not mention him being here. At least to me.”

“You never asked?”

“No. Why would I?”

“So how did you recognize me at the Cayuse.”

“The OO cover gave you a presence, no? And Muerner’s group have been following you, as mentioned. Hārun, by he way, is one of Muerner’s informants. Hārun needed you to catch a terrorist, Muerner to continue to assess your own discrete viability, hence the expedient examination in the villa. The explosion at the clinic has, of course, complicated things.”

Looking at him and his persistently engaging half-smile she imagined a pastiche the Russian artist Anatole Krasnyansky delighted in: fanciful array of faces within a risible assortment of musical instruments. What is it they say, hell is full of vivid clutter and colour!

At the last he said, “Lend them an ear. All they ask.”

She still wanted to belt him but decided the moment was waning if not now inopportune. The ‘them’ he mentioned she fervidly wanted to meet!

Kissy did not hear the men enter. He had been listening to an old CTV post-Olympic ceremony

featuring two young kids, one English one French, sing 'I Believe'. Curiously the song later prompted him to put on a tape of one of his wistful masterpieces — Shostakovich's humbly named Second Waltz from his Suite for Jazz Orchestra. The music always stirred in him a feeling of durable empathy, a poignant animated loveliness that only a trialled Russian might write. He turned the volume up, slipped into a marinated reverie where he fancied himself dancing with Catherine Whyte in a ballroom of the Winter Palace, and not heard the door open. Very briefly did he glimpse the silencer, feeling only the first dart. Not entirely unexpected he might have said, had he lived — Bossy dead-heading the phthisic branches of his family tree, with his usual intrepid, arm's length savagery. His impatience with his restricted life had finally demanded some scapegoats. His Maenad brother had not been attending to business.

Kissy's weighed body was dumped in Howe Sound, while a body identified as Kissy's was that of a homeless vagrant deemed to have suffered a massive heart attack. The coroner needed money to fight a pending lawsuit and was able to discount his diffidence about the identity. This second body was also dumped in Howe Sound. A lavish casket filled with computer software, including several high-tech memory chips, was airlifted via a private carrier to Moscow.

Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov's simple but imposing gravestone would be erected in a cemetery near the former estate of Leo Tolstoy. His obituary cited a long-standing heart condition.

Aram Mir, aka as Hārun, was also in Bossy's sights but had thus far eluded the team sent to confront him about his brother's dealings. Bossy would not have appreciated the irony that his brother too was sympathetic to the self-styled Ismailis who had broken away from the main body of Islam to produce the famous Cult of the Assassins. Aram lived not unlike an Ismaili, in the moderate urbane sense, most of his life, but in his later years developed a dislike of the stylish worldly ways of the Aga Kahn. "A too suave accommodationist." Words Kissy had earlier put down to the impatience of a disgruntled idealist. An idealist he had ever admired at a distance.

Kalid Jandu, Catherine's earlier seat mate on her return to America, read Kissy's obituary with a renewed sense of loss. Kissy had contributed to the rebuilding of an aging mosque in Beirut. He and Kissy were on the council of the apartment strata they lived in in St. Petersburg when Kissy was a docent at the Hermitage. Kalid was studying the fisheries along the Neva River and Lake Ladoga. They both liked Raphael. The Russians would never learn, he feared, how Islam's tribal feuds were one of nature's infinities.

Catherine learned of Kissy's demise on a brief back page piece in the Washington Post. There was no mention of the Fischer-Bakey foundation and the Apsara chain of clubs were referenced as show lounge casinos run by both brothers. There was no mention of the Club Reina. She had to know more but seemed barred from ever finding out what happened. Such crimes — she doubted the

story of a heart attack — were spawned by a longstanding paranoia, a Russian syndrome the wondrous Shostakovich, one of her heroes, struggled so gallantly to subvert in his music. She then listened to his mesmeric Waltz from the Suite for Jazz Orchestra. One of her treasured melodies. A buoyant lyric beauty touched by the droll trombone that introduced a repeat refrain. Humor that few classicists honored. Not unlike the overture to *Der Rosenkavalier* for her. An amused loveliness that fostered serenity, tranquility even.

She was surprised to learn that Kissy had been living for a time in Canada. In Vancouver! A fact she had to check out.

TWENTY-THREE

The eugenics mavens Catherine met in the pub room of the Ankara Hilton were benighted as Semyan hinted, an insider klatch at their vespers, conversation low but distinct and rich with affirmation, amidst the surrounding din. A regal Ann looked on with a droll smile as Semyan and the Vyhak twins, Peter and Lev — Lev being the pug Catherine encountered in the park! — argued the merits of a Euro dollar. If life in the former USSR was exigent, Catherine thought, you at least fathomed the despair; fervency there was as often a rage, not an exaltation. Yet the ardent words here — prompted by the success of authoritarian conservatism, at least in parts of Europe — she had heard before and felt the fond if not avid exclamations essentially beyond comprehension or equivocation. Instead, she spent the while examining the faces and gestures — the very body language of these virtuosic minders of a presumed historic momentum, only to decide her sense of whimsy hadn't diminished.

Later, after showing her to her room, the stiff Admiral hunkered down in the room's one sofa chair to further explicate a favorite theory. She had decided to prepare for bed regardless; perhaps her snoring might foil the lecture that seemed to proceed independent of her presence. From the bathroom she could see the back of his grey head; not once did he turn to face her — an act she deemed to be as much posturing as gentlemanly deference, for he seemed immune to constraint. He was proud of his English he said, and the dedicated KGB specialist who once instructed him. Her subjection to the body snatching he was a party to appeared to have slipped his mind, or was sufficiently trivial or nugatory to be winked at. A matter she did not bring up. She doubted he would be interested in her personal history anyway. Why would he? This meritorious panjandrum. Moreover, her quiet droll rejoinders apropos his commentary only seemed to animate his argument.

"No, we are not a Camorra, nor do we ply the media, though we are careful to vet our select players. You read the manifesto: a natural order will arise over time, science and technology admit no other, a point Muerner can be especially cogent on. You wish to see the genetic horizon, mental and physical...well it's gradually taking shape, and it's a spectacular vista, as steeply hierarchal as any Cabane des Diablerets, in set terms. It is the real new Jerusalem. For all initiates."

"Exclusive power and privilege tend to corrupt." She said. She could have been reading bingo numbers she felt.

“Especially when we fail to acknowledge the carpetbaggers. Competence soon stymies the fakirs. And is the basis of a sober, civil, respectful community.”

“Joking aside.”

“The story you write will be incomplete without a chronicle of your own endowment. We all have antecedents; yours holds a prospectus few share I’m told.”

So he was familiar with some of her history.

“More great expectations.”

“Which we will never proceed to honor by moralistic pretension alone. Not a bad start.”

No, not bad at all, for a juggernaut, she said to herself. Life in a nutcracker.

Then he surprised her. “From the weariness in your voice, I can tell that you are tired. I tend to talk a lot. Goodnight.”

He left as effortlessly and patronizingly as he entered, a near grimace freezing his face as he directly and primly sought the door.

Watching him depart she sensed a slight disappointment: she had really wanted to hear more, so copious had the precious commentary become. And she smarted at being baited so.

She was left in a limbo that weekend to entertain two options, namely a) join the suave enterprise and patronize the new utopian mavens to better see the mountain, or b) flee, in a literal sense, for her life, her articulated but particular life! You were chosen, predestined, they said, in so many words, now undertake the pilgrimage to the hub, to see in lucid unprecedented detail a peerless genetic benefaction, and the Arcadia it augurs. Ironically, it was her exercise time — when her physical presence was conspicuous — that seemed to attract the same hovering Admiral and his precious wisdom, which he had gleaned over a life of much “travail and error” he mused. The pillars of his Valhalla were based on a handful of ardent maxims. Which he subsumed with mischievous satisfaction: *There is no short cut to maturity; Truth only ‘lies’ in the middle; Spread AIDS and STDs, rid the world of love mongers; and the clincher, Unlimited variation, i.e. boundless multiculturalism, is no variation at all!* Meaning a sturdy if not rigid hierarchy of forms — this last precept the basis for the elegance and salubrity the brokers and their gurus took for granted. The undeclared aristos. Ugliness, sloth, disease, dissipation, rancor and premature aging as temporal mismanagement. She could barely keep from snorting, wary liberal that she was, her nearly flawless skin and pretty limbs coyly reminding her of a snide coincidence — which she was always poignantly reminded of around the Admiral. While the seething angst, due in part to the fragmentation of culture around the world, indexed the normlessness. Intimating that inferior and miasma shared a genealogy.

Well, if the mavens spoke in Apollonian meters, Semyan, the lad with the wistful smile who had haunted the Cayuse, proved to be the resident Dionysus. The time out lad. Sovereign of all that is moist, he relieved one of dry demand decisions — a piquant fact she used to excuse herself for not sending the suspected ravisher packing. Like the Admiral he too seemed to haunt her exercise regimen

— in his case her yoga session at the end of the day when he patiently joined in, with as much apparent dedication, only to finally part her kimono and divide her against herself. Less a conquest than a hallucination. String theory, he wryly called it, giddy lyre practice. She imagined her succumbing to it the result of boredom and the lethargy that foils the making of a crucial decision — fair ground for the rummaging three-legged boyo. As direct and unassuming as Karen had been, he too gave her ample opportunity to flout his guile, to ignore or leave his embrace. *Yes I wanted to, might have (raped 'her')...but I didn't!* So he'd couched the belated plea.

Perhaps she simply wanted to know if he was a brute — to inform her later arbitration of the matter! Perhaps she wanted to see if the exquisitely beautiful male was as precious to her...a curiosity that imbued their first night together. Perhaps his own precarious life made her the more desirable, her very presence an unanticipated harbor, a shelter...she perhaps would never know what his interest was. But her predilection, she wryly decided, centered on the male animal and his terrible ache. Being parted against herself flattered her essentially compassionate nature. In the end the pleasure he gave her seemed but a compensating entitlement, his ardor received as it was given.

But when he left, her repose soon lapsed as her early recollections again charged the sleepless night, the curious salients of her now articulated past — how she had been sent to a fine accelerated school and eventually learned she was a 'late blessing' from her dear mother, one who'd been selected by the very one who eventually founded the tentacled Bern clinic! Life for her began in earnest at that model school, which challenged, charmed and framed the happiest period of her life, each student deemed a 'special case', a 'life essential to life'. The late discovery that she had been under some kind of scrutiny all along knocked her galley west! A fortuitous test case under regular periodic review! The advent of the 'soloist', whom Hārun characterized as her twin sister, as did the alert Willardson via his friend's letter, only added to the unrelenting wonder.

To review the pertinent facts, she elected to write an updated letter to her sweet and by now perplexed mother. A private letter she hoped the mavens would understand, and so decide to extend her grace period. A letter she let Semyan read, which he did with notable care.

Dearest Mom,

I know by now that Ann has explained to you the necessity of the adventure I've undertaken. In due course the full story will be told; for the time being, however, you must be discreet. Trust me.

Some assignments are a kind of rebirth. Well, the gestation period here has been hangdog, to say the least. When I assisted in the rout of a single terrorist, I rediscovered a daring and committed Saturnian world, a culture that effaces, 'anachronises' culture. If bodies can be idealized to the point of near perfection, why not language, philosophy, faith, optimism itself? And if such a 'human form divine' could become ubiquitous, who would notice, savour its rarity? My special dilemma is to reconcile myself to my own luck, and that you, my dear mum, were and are a godsend! Please bear with me.

If modern fertility precepts and genetic engineering are still esoteric and arcane, the able and unhindered practitioners are themselves committed votaries. I find myself before one such ‘cabal’, which performs wonders (miracles for some) on a daily basis. Miracles, however, that have a Wunderkinder bias that may not serve a ‘human’ population well in the long run. The intervening variable, it seems, comes from advertising, which claims to demonstrate that some beings sell more products than others, if capitalism and progress may not be crimped. Meaning compassion is a lame duck. So say the phalanx of beauty babe brokers, who conjure a realm of designer zygotes poised to rescind the gift of life! If fanatics have a habit of self-destructing, that prospect seems on hold for the time being. I know this sounds a bit windy but the afterthoughts often bear fruit.

Think of you often; do take your medicine! One day soon we will take a long holiday together.

Love and a super hug,

Cathy

In the end, she decided that if they tried to disabuse her of these subversive thoughts, she was out, though she doubted they would try. How well they knew the trappings of perception and curiosity! As if to absolve herself from a commitment, the liaison with Semyan continued unabated, and soon migrated to a countryside farm near Bern, and its ineffable Johannesburg Kirstenbosch-style garden, a walking steed completing the sylphic triad. By then she was quaintly composed — time itself tenuous in a demi-paradise. The seamless polymorphous perverse she mused. The sun in the quiet tree rich garden remained variegated yet lustrously warm. It seemed she might live within the spell itself — sustained by Semyan’s stray commentary, his in-between musing. One day the subject of Muerner slipped into their discourse. They sat on a patch of silk-like grass that extended to a man-made lake, then laden with pink cherry blossoms, Semyan’s telling words ever a lure.

“Rumor has it that Muerner began his crusade because of a drummer, a rock hopeful on the block where he lived; he could not believe one that dissolute. ‘The ubiquitous libido beat that vulgarizes, trivializes all occasions.’ Angry words to marshal a beginning.”

“You said ‘crusade’...”

“To retard humanity’s fall from grace. A ‘paean to Aristotle’ he once remarked. Though I never understood what that really meant.”

“Haven’t a clue. Cloud-Cuckoo-Land.”

“Well, a bit cloudy.”

Their shared laughter seemed to cue the song of a hopeful thrush — a moment both placatory and entertaining, though she had little doubt Semyan was sounding her out.

“On the rocks,” he called her distrust of the Muerner clinic — a remark spawned in a late afternoon gloaming on the edge of a canyon that defined one edge of the park, where he taught her to walk on her hands, beginning on a gentle back slope, holding up her ankles and arching her back...two sky clad mortals at the edge of the world, conversation the in-between caress. As usual, she began the

exchange.

“I still wonder why a professional like Muerner would patronize a buccaneer like Borozov?”

“He gets, or got, the peerless material.”

“From a shameless mobster?”

“For a practical research scientist. Garnering the components of ideal genomes.”

She returned to an upright stance. “Fanatic you mean, who you believe to be an expert one can trust.”

“As far as I know he has not harmed anyone.”

“That you know of.”

“His concordance of *human* potential you won’t find as detailed or as harmonious elsewhere, I think. Plus an outpatient clinic that performs wonders. For a plurality of human beings.”

“Even for two outliers like us.”

“More or less.”

One evening very near the canyon the eyes of a wild or escaped goat munching some grass peered down at them, a furtive regard Semyan took an imaginary bead on. Catherine was more than incidentally curious. “They never look as though they are actually looking at you.”

“She’s enjoying a meal.”

“Old Horny.”

“They do find grass in many places.”

“Does our being nude as newts make a difference?”

“She’s probably not come across Ecamsule bods before now.” Ecamsule was their daily sun screen.

“Tell me again about our genetic makeup.” She could imagine the goat assessing theirs.

“Ask Muerner.”

“I intend to.”

“Your birth mother may have been an early test case for a clinic in the late USSR, where the Gandalf that Muerner labored under, proceeded with his drug interventions — the Soviet fetish, making a silk purse. Well, a a homespun one — the new Soviet Man, Woman.”

“So they say.”

But the explanation was interrupted by a fond look and emphatic embrace and, in due course — exclamatory unrehearsed sighs that seemed to prompt the very noisy retreat of several goats, their hooves thunderous in the clear canyon quiet, a sound that convulsed them both into spastic laughter! A ‘seminal’ moment she thought later.

Next day they rested on a parcel of grass by the warm overflow from a hot spring. “A flawless foot,” he said, caressing her. She laughed at the remark and thought: that is what he is, a busy cajoler softening her up...for Magus Muerner to re-cast her lot, the anticipated conversion. Is she in or out? The idea had flared often enough — she an albatross, earnestly borne in the froggie pond.

Later, in the intimate shade of a grotto, he noted the change.

“You’re tired, bored...bothered?”

“Mostly if not entirely my fault.”

“You wanted more...self-deprecating jokes?”

“I’ve always been a sucker for able yet pensive heroes.”

“It doesn't show.”

“Tomorrow I think I have to make a Gordian decision.”

“Have to...Gordian?”

Again she took in his sovereign beauty. “A dilemma lost...on all immortals and daimones.”

“Never been introduced.”

“You are either a gifted teaser or very well coached.”

“That sounds neatly dismissive.”

“One sober night in what, five? Not bad. Considering. The sabbatical has run its course I think. Gervase, the ubiquitous secretary, phoned late last night hoping for a yeah or nay — about a newly proposed compact with the clinic, to fill in some blanks.” She looked at him with a chary smile. “I know you won’t tell me, but I’d love to know the genesis of this interlude.”

He too yielded to a waiting smile. “I like you. You may be imagining more to it.”

“But you’re here. Not entirely by accident.”

“They wanted finally to show their hand. That’s true.” After a moment’s reflection he added, “In a way, you remind me of a hill creature. Motionless on a precipice. Undecided. Always fronting a mask.”

She smiled in spite of herself. He was a find. “The princes of darkness are gentlemen, they say.”

“You see a darkness I don’t.”

She dreamt anew that night of ferrying across her private Styx, where peril kept one alert, observant, the icy water an ichor to steel soft bodied qualms and show life as it is, full of elusive beauty and caverned menace, the subterranean view of the seeker-survivor! Such that the following morning, she decided she must deal with the late clinic proposal, which would set the stage for a mutual compact with the clinic.

Gervase Maistre, the meritorious clinic manager himself, stood by a large mahogany desk and smiled as Catherine entered the storeroom that served as a temporary office to accommodate some renovations in the adjacent study damaged in the explosion. He began after seeing Catherine comfortably seated before the desk.

“The archives here are irreplaceable. It has a history this one building, long before our tenure. A displaced hounded Prokofiev stayed here for a time.” He then pulled out a document from the desk’s top drawer, the proposed compact with the clinic — which sanctioned further medical assessments of her, to allow the clinic’s disclosure of its own files on her, to her. He placed the document on the space

between them. “Please — you have a copy of the compact. We’re keen to know your mind.”

Catherine mindfully glanced at it. One outside issue had to be cleared up before she dealt with the contract stipulations.

“I have some idea why the periodic assessments of me were done covertly, but I’d like to hear the reasons from you. I also want to know, as you must realize, what happened to my birth mother and my twin. And my presumed half sister Anastasiya.”

Gervase gravely smiled. “Sadly, the fate of your mother remains unknown. A decade after your adoption she vanished from the collective she was placed in. It is a question Muerner has not abandoned, by the way. One day we hope to know more. The archives are slowly opening up. As for your twin, she was for a time a member of a youthful, repertory dance troupe. She ended up performing in the Apsara chain but disappeared after the attack in London. Muerner’s team kept track of her up until the attack, periodically assessing her when possible. She has always known of her ‘special case’ status with Muerner of course, and accommodated his team of examiners. Muerner will have more information in due course.”

(It had been Muerner’s instructions to Gervase to keep Zoya’s recent stay at the Bern clinic secret until Catherine made up her mind about the worth of the clinic’s research. “We also think the disclosure should come from Zoya not a member of the clinic,” Muerner had said.)

“Now your half sister Anastasiya remains a ghost. Her disappearance may have had something to do with her mother’s dissident behavior. Perhaps one day a pertinent archive will reveal a few facts.”

Catherine was disappointed Gervase’s commentary was so spare on details, but as there seemed little purpose in quibbling — at this stage — she simply nodded, looking off with a lingering wistfulness. “Do continue with singular aspects of my early life.”

“Well, the first was Muerner’s wish that your bond with your new mother remain uncompromised, that your regard of her approximated the normal. A happy normal. Which regular adoptions don’t always guarantee. Hence the very early switch in the nursery. A nurse who worked in the maternity ward had recently lost a baby and facilitated the exchange. She was well paid by the way. The babies were a credible match, the mother recovering at the time from a breach birth and excessive bleeding. Moreover, there was always the possibility that had you known your past you may, as a young adult, have sought advice elsewhere, or acted willfully, disparagingly, and thus introduced variables, both psychological and physiological, we could not control for. I know it sounds callous...Muerner *is* a resolute experimenter but, in my estimation, a civilized man. Your birth mother’s situation was dire. Your twin came down with meningitis and was not at first expected to survive; an illness that was used as the cause of *your* demise, to foil your removal. Zoya did recover of course.” He paused, as if to edit a comment, then: “Please be assured you’ve been assessed by the best practitioners in the business. As you will learn, the clinic hires only top drawer professionals.”

Gervase paused only to clear his throat.

“Now the Soviet quack Muerner worked under in Moscow was forlornly inept, and apparently believed you died shortly after birth. I trust you will one day you may meet the few who are still alive who helped with your removal. For the time being we must remain discreet. Furtive deeds leave long shadows in Russia. As you well know. It is doubtful Muerner could have got both of you out of the Soviet Union — he was lucky to succeed with you. Without the cover of the meningitis, you would not be known as Catherine Whyte, but Masha Kusnetsova Stolbanov. It seems highly arbitrary. But you would not otherwise be living as you are now.”

By then Catherine was more or less inured to some facts being forbidding. After slightly shaking her head she returned to the wording of the compact before her and looked up with a lax smile.

“I’ve never been told what exactly were the drugs my birth mother was given.”

“You may be surprised to learn that the actual cocktail is still largely unknown. We know of course what drugs can affect personality, but the actual drugs given at the time were classified. Muerner was essentially a statistician then, but knew from the effects they had on other inmates, as well as your mother, that some were exceedingly powerful. Devastating even. He also knew, from his own training, that such interventions might very well affect a patient’s offspring. Hence his wish to better comprehend that likelihood, using environment as a dependent variable.”

A wary Catherine, impatient to settle her own misgivings over the compact, returned to its specific details.

“You wish me to live under an assumed identity for a period of four months.”

“Longer would be useful as the momentum builds.”

“What momentum?”

“The coming choices for researchers and medics afforded by the ongoing research into genetic mapping, activation and modification, stem-cell adaptations, various tissue growth factors, and the allied specialties. Some breakthroughs are imminent. You have a past that will pace aspects of the above. Keep us on our toes. This is Muerner speaking.” Gervase did his best to bestow a smile. “We have done our best to also assess your twin — to better anticipate and profile any long-term effects of the drugs your mother was given.”

“So she knows of your interest. And has abided your examination regimen all along.” Stating the fact unexpectedly haunted.

“Until her disappearance.”

“It all seems so...figmental, chimerical.”

“I’m sure Muerner’s recollections are acute — not at all chimerical, as you suggest. He lived through them and survived. An accomplishment.

“So it would seem,” Catherine mused.

“If I may quote Muerner himself here, the words a kind of talisman for him: ‘A remembrance of things past’ — in the Shakespearean not Proust sense. The providential ending. The sonnet that

ends with thoughts of restoration. He knows his Shakespeare. Sonnet 30.”

Catherine smiled. “My word. That’s a neat finesse.”

“I think Thucydides put it well: ‘We are lovers of beauty without extravagance, and lovers of wisdom without unmanliness.’ A minority opinion today, perhaps — yet a vision Muerner treasures of course.”

Catherine patiently smiled then returned to the compact with a fey smile. “The ‘mutual consent’ clause means I can leave when and how I choose to do so. But there can be no guarantee of my safety, or not being liable to any further purloining — not being awake when the body snatchers come?”

“Your well being remains a concern.”

“Which means?”

“Your future cooperation will be as you define it.”

Woodenly she kept on. “Repeat again what's expected.”

“Co-operation in our clinical updates. At your convenience, of course. Though I understand you’ve pretty well absolved the concerns here — by being in such good health.”

“Please go over the genesis of my situation again...the question still haunts.”

Gervase clasped his hands in front as if about to pray. “Your brilliant able mother — she had a graduate degree in bio-chemistry — was sent to a psychiatric ‘hospital’ for treatment of an adroitly captious attitude toward the state. To put it mildly. The Soviets, in the age of Lysenko, who had trashed the study of genetics, believed relentless conditioning the key to heredity. Lysenko’s associates also worked to develop a truth serum, and drugs that could make one swiftly, excruciatingly sick, as interrogation tools. In the main, they sought a regimen of drugs that, allied to proper conditioning, would alter aberrant personalities — persons still unaware of the happy benefits of Communism. To accomplish the above, they had retained several scientists, one of them a Russian doctor once imprisoned in a German camp, who was employed to assemble a palette of the mind altering drugs. Muerner was one of his assistants. I would give you his name but he’s still under Cheka scrutiny and wishes to remain anonymous. He managed to defect shortly after Muerner left and is at work on a book about his experience in the Soviet Union using and alias. He is now 101. A completely disingenuous opportunist, according to Muerner.”

Gervase looked up expecting an editorial comment. As none was forthcoming — Catherine then was a study of pensiveness — he continued thus:

“As a psychiatric patient, your mother was given, as you now know, a series of chemical substances, some of which Muerner believed would alter her personality, even possibly skew her genetic makeup. An open question then. As the Soviet authorities wanted to study the effects of these drugs in the domestic milieu, your mother was allowed to return to her home from time to time, and became pregnant by her second husband, though Muerner suspected she may have been raped. She had a lot of enemies at this time. And she was an attractive woman. In this trying state she gave birth to twins,

who were to be studied for an indefinite period — again the Soviet bias at that time being that the right medication was all powerful, that children especially could be brought up to state standards that belied the nature of stolid or aberrant parents. Feeding, sleep patterns, health, disposition, cognition — all were equated to the environment of children from putatively exemplary parents. Such statistics being one aspect of Muerner's work then. It was the Lysenko heyday, remember, when drugs were probative, and things like genetics dismissed as a sly bourgeois ruse to slow and frustrate dynamic Soviet medical science. Well, the German doctor was alarmed when one twin developed meningitis. It seems Muerner's plan — to get one twin out — coalesced about then. He faked a death certificate for the healthy twin — you — then spirited you out of the country into the hands of a European adoption agency which was then sending some infants to the United States, given the turmoil in Europe. He obviously had adroit help — both in securing your departure, and in getting you into a family he needed for his study. He did have some party connections, and was instrumental in finally invalidating the Lysenko legacy. His supervisor, the Russian medic the German's earlier recruited, seems not to have questioned the death of the one twin. According to Muerner, several of the same medic's ongoing experiments turned out badly, and the man was doing his best to scapegoat assistants. Muerner was initially blamed for the death of the twin. A 'mutual net benefit' Muerner wryly puts it. He managed to defect several months later. A smuggler got him into Germany in a lorry. By then the Lysenkoist medic had been demoted. In short order Muerner set up the clinic in Bern with some friends, and entrusted your future evaluation to a team from the physiology department, some of who traveled at specified times to America. Thus, if his interest in you is not entirely humanitarian, that same interest would be compromised should you be harmed."

"Up to a point, I presume."

Gervase's face hardened. "Your twin was not so lucky, of course, yet survived the meningitis — remember, at the time she was believed to be the viable one, her twin having died. She displayed an uncommon willfulness as a child apparently, though by then, with the Lysenko heirs in disarray, the harsher drug regimens were under review and, as far as we know, never given to youngsters. In any case, she proved to be every bit as inspired a 'delinquent' or 'dissident' as her mother. Her one school record points to a cagy truant and budding thief. She did have talent as a dancer — a fortuity Soviet authorities readily abetted. For a brief time she was a promising student at a noted academy and performed as a soloist in a folk dance troupe. A party hack eventually introduced her to the Moscow club scene, one of the clubs a show lounge called the Apsara, a private franchise that eventually had some charter clones outside Russia. As you know, she disappeared after the attack in the London club. She may have sought asylum somewhere in Europe — the early supposition." (Gervase was of course minding Muerner's firm injunction here. Zoya had in fact been treated in the Bern Clinic after the attack and lived for a time incognito in Zweisimmen. The death of Coren Wiley — Zoya's late nom de guerre — was a demise Zoya was only just adapting to. Muerner wanted all supernumerary

anxiety, as he put it, out of the way to continue his double blind study before disclosing Zoya's twin!) "There is recent evidence Zoya consorted with at least one sturdy apparat, and managed to glean information incriminating him that also put her in jeopardy, for the man was at the time a secretary to a member of the Duma. The fact that she was a thief as well, of icons and gems — likely at the connivance of one of her Don Juans, one a former procurator's investigator — tripled her peril. She nearly didn't survive."

Catherine forced herself, again, to stick to the amicable scenario. "The time is surely ripe to meet her."

"We hope and trust. Though Providence and circumstance rarely overlap. We do have many discreet and observant friends. One you've known for a while. Zoya's jeopardy has abated. A meeting should be imminent." He paused, as if expecting a deft response, but when none came — Catherine still seemed highly abstracted — he continued.

"Now your mother's first husband was an intelligence officer who was killed in Afghanistan. He was part of an elite officer corps. He was, we understand, exceptionally competent and well respected. His daughter's name was Anastasiya. She is the one who has literally vanished...from all the records we've access to...to date."

Gervase then stiffly smiled.

Catherine promptly, sullenly returned to the here and now. Her past was accreting like a cataract. "When will I learn what the clinic knows of my general health? As opposed to my ostensible survival."

"As soon as you agree to the compact stipulations you will be fully briefed. But until that time we wish to retain information about some examinations. To confirm what now seems apparent."

"I'm that much of a worry? Some kind of time bomb?"

"As a matter of fact, you have naturally and, I may say, wonderfully, bypassed some of the more dire consequences that were anticipated. Indeed, you may be one of the rare exceptions that complicates several suppositions. I have it on good authority that this may be so."

"Such an optimistic assessment is credible?"

"No specialist I've talked to has said otherwise."

"So what happens when I sign on?"

"We will begin a thorough re-evaluation — a series of tests, none of which will have a deleterious effect if that's what concerns you. In part to verify our earlier assessments, including the ones done in camera."

"The 'in situ' examinations."

"Yes, the supplementary ones done to compliment the covert copying of your regular doctor's assessments. Nothing invasive was undertaken, other than some blood, mouth swabs, and one spinal fluid sampling. But the questions of maturity and aging, given your mother's drug regimen, will require your participation to fully assess. The ordinary measurements no longer suffice. Especially in

the early mature years. It may sound tenuous I know, but nullifying hypotheses, however tenable at one time, is a Muerner addiction.”

“Some maturity. I have a week to make up my mind?” Catherine’s impatience was intensifying.

“Yes. You may want to see some of the clinic’s beneficent interventions before you write us off.”

“Indeed. But one additional question needs an answer now. I still wonder why a brahmin like Muerner would have consorted with goons like the Borozovs?”

“Discounting your use of ‘consort’ and ‘goons’, the simple answer is the restrictions that only a subculture can circumvent. The need for willing egg marketeers, if you like.”

“So you admit Muerner’s a bit of a buccaneer?”

“A Sir Francis Drake maybe, but not a Bluebeard. Well, near enough.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“It’s important is it? I’ve never considered Kissy the malignant brother you do. They are quite different. Truly, Kissy was unlike his brother as cheese is to chalk, as the sensitive, cultivated person is to the boor. I can tell from your expression you think I’m dreaming. He’s missed by a lot of people who rather fear openly mourning his loss I think. He was not an operator, a hustler; his brother badly overshadowed him. Imagine Dostoyevsky’s Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov — Alyosha — beset by thoughts of Diogenes of Sinope, and you’re close, as ironic as it may seem. He and Muerner got on. The egg trade remember was only a cash sideline for Bossy.”

Catherine stoically smiled. “So I’ve been told. When can the clinic tour begin?” The comments about Kissy she resisted smiling at. She still could not envision him as presented.

“Today.”

“How about a day after tomorrow? I’ve a few things to sort out.”

“Whenever you are ready.”

It was Gervase’s assessment of Kissy that left Catherine frankly incredulous. She looked up Diogenes of Sinope that night and robustly laughed at the image of Kissy holding up a lamp in daylight looking for an honest man. Kissy that wryly self-effacing? So embedded as he appeared to be in the Russian mob? If near the truth, the characterization was one she missed entirely. Maenad began to take on a new meaning for her. Being ‘hard on dolts and naifs’ could mean impatience with the never ending Russian mob feuds. What philosopher could excuse that ignominy? Which he’d too obviously been enmeshed in. She had always wondered about the one victim of the clinic bombing, putatively a young female, who was found near the taxi. The second body found in that vicinity was identified as male, the third, what remained, the presumed bomber, ostensibly female. And why had the one window to the car been broken — one of the later forensic finds that could have precipitated the blast itself. A young woman was seen throwing a rock at the car at the time. Could Kissy himself have been involved, known something, if the late things said about him were apt? She doubted the heart attack — but murder? Something was missing here, she felt, something she may never find out.

She could not remember being so possibly, tellingly wrong about someone she had been so intently focused on at the time. Living in the shadow of an older brother who perturbed the landscape, was Kissy then a skillful impresario for his gangster brother — an agent adept at white-washing failed or foundering deeds, also stymieing critics with laudable showcase art? In short: a clever subtle influence peddler? That conclusion now appeared to discount her earlier premise — that the two in fact worked hand in glove. That night she sent an e-mail to the director of the Fischer-Bakey Foundation expressing a hope that Kissy's legacy might not be slighted — his input to his galleries not afforded to another. Something she might have done long ago had she known what she was mindful of now.

Kalid Jandu read with some satisfaction the recent stink bombing of a video firm in Los Angeles called Face Off that specialized in savage pornographic assault. In clearing out Israr's room he had come across many DVDs of sadistic assignations and games of barbaric animosity. Torment and destruction in livid color and heady surround sound. The one virtual headset itself looked like a device designed by a torturer. He was further humiliated by the many rap DVDs, some of the covers luridly suggestive. He could barely believe. A son of his caught up in such aesthetic and moral squalor. He hated America then with a passion he could barely fathom. The thought that such 'entertainment' was available world wide, even for children, was a further blow on an already painful bruise. He was, had been, a man of quiet rectitude, his chain smoking and rare manuscript collecting indulgences his wife took in her stride. He had even urged moderation in his ulama. But now? Was he simply an agreeable dolt, as his neighbor Habib said? He had never been in such a quandary, ever! And yet he never believed vehemence, retribution solved anything in the end. But what end might one now contemplate with showcase savagery and self-dramatic grievance as societal norms? Even the suave Western know-it-all liberals seemed to be catering to the new remorseless vigilante constituencies.

The latest message from the sheikh was a sobering comeuppance for Hejaz. He and Abdul were to go to a camp in Pakistan for further training in electronic signal jamming. His camp near Agami was to be closed. He was to report to the cell commander within the week. All his current files were to be destroyed. He looked at the few scattered grains of sand on his desk. His world. The sheikh had had said nothing about Aram.

TWENTY-FOUR

Catherine's first tour of the sanctioned research sectors, her request readily granted, reinstated all past intimations of the surreal. As sobering was her finding that the Bern Clinic was as involved in transformational surgery as it was in esoteric tissue modelling, gene mapping and splicing — Muerner's theories and techniques a world wide standard it seemed, at least to the cognoscenti who then inhabited this elsewhere world.

"So what's happening here?"

She and her guide, a thin fair middle-aged man who spoke English well in a strong Swiss-German accent, stood looking into a chamber in which the participant was lodged in a hyperbaric capsule.

Said the docent, “It is the ongoing conditioning for a lower limb enhancement. Our client desired slightly longer and straighter legs. She suffered as a child from a mild case of rickets. Daily suspensions in an antigravity console causes the longer bones to lose some core brittleness and allow a greater facility in re-articulation and molding.”

“Her bones look pretty good.”

“Her regimen is well underway.”

“There are articulation devices, whatever they’re called, on her legs?”

“Given the change the client wants, most will be accomplished by traction and bone contouring outside the console. The devices you see simply keep note of any minute regression.”

“What’s ‘bone contouring’?”

“Exactly that. Except that the machines doing it are massive and calibrated to cause small, specified, time-recovery injury. Inside another six weeks you won’t recognize this client’s birth endowment.”

“And that constitutes an improvement.”

“The client has long since approved the contour, articulation and linearity. She is a volunteer in an ongoing study.”

“And you think she will come away with what she expected?”

“It’s actually one of the simpler procedures we do here. The slight worry is always that she may perceive other interventions that are not so relatively straight forward. But she was told that up front of course.”

“So it potentially never ends.”

“You can do only so much with the given article. That’s one reason why your own experience is so important to our understanding of wildcat interventions.”

“Some wildcat.”

“You continue to be a marvel, given your background, yes.”

How uncanny was Muerner’s seemingly innate grasp of her sensibility, resolve and nerve. How the mystery of the unknown beckoned, intimating the portentous and ominous. In like manner her half-sister Anastasiya, ‘Zia’ for short, continued to haunt. For hers was the name of the once missing Romanov royal, who came to symbolize the hoped for resurrection of a grand lost era — so unlike the realm of her own birth mother lingered in, confined to a Soviet medical ward — a further prompt to apprehend the sad historic reality. What happened to ‘Zia and eventually her mother Catherine would walk on coals to find out. What indeed would she become if the suppositions about her health were latterly disappointing? It seemed like something the Brothers Grimm might concoct. One twin rescued and entrusted to a loving American mother, the other left in a grim Soviet world to become

a delinquent who could wonderfully dance, her current whereabouts now remote as the arcane ‘Zia’s.

One conversation overheard on her ‘tour’ Catherine made special note of. With her guide she passed an examination room where a young woman, while getting dressed, complained about her treatment at the clinic! She was visible from the hall and seemed unconcerned about her state of undress. Indeed, she stood in front of the changing screen as she shrugged into a T-shirt, while complaining to a nurse and doctor.

“This is so grody. So hard ass. You’ll take care of my birth mark, even my deformed ankle, but — holy Hannah — run away like mice when I want bigger tits.”

The nurse responded, “The comments from the arbiters are emphatic. And it’s rare for them to take up such matters. I quote from the final report: ‘This youngster is a remarkably pretty individual, and her request is Pickwickian and thus beyond consideration.’ ‘Pickwickian’, by the way, means ‘foolish’. A word one evaluator likes. From the horse’s mouth.”

“Some horse. That’s probably how they see women — brood mares for hobby horsies. Nobody asks the mare how she feels.

Said the doctor, “It’s never been routine practice for the clinic. Enlargement is as much fad as a patented betterment.”

“Some practice. What a pedophile looks for — the titless bod. ‘Pickwickian’ sounds about right. From your great nit pickers.”

Said the nurse: “That’s a bit harsh.”

Said the doctor: “We do have an excellent counselling service.”

“Just great.”

Said the nurse: “It’s maybe worth a try.”

That same day Catherine did meet a candidate in corridor who was being assessed much as she was, though for far different reasons. He had apparently killed a young woman in a particularly gruesome manner and seemed amused that he might be an object of intensive study. She encountered him in that section of the clinic that took MRI scans. He awaited an appointment and was attended by two guards. He candidly looked at her as she passed and asked if she had screwed Muerner yet. The query surprised and irked. She was told by one guard to ignore him, but she was not one to shy away from intimidation. She also found it odd that the man should be standing near a window where a young woman was being examined by a buff doctor. The woman lay sideways to the window, her gown drawn above her waist. (Catherine was later told it was an image the examiners wanted planted in the murder’s mind before the scan and follow-up testing; he had been impersonating a doctor at the time of the assault. The woman being so examined was a member of the nursing staff. A lawyer wanted an egram fMRI brain scan promptly following the specifically staged observation.)

Catherine answered the rude inquisitor with her practiced calm. “You haven’t perhaps met Eve, his esteemed friend and colleague.”

“Just one more calculating bird.”

Catherine knew Eve had been in a Nazi camp as a child, where she first met Muerner, the very young doctor the Nazi's recruited. Their story of survival and escape was one of the clinic's hallowed sagas.

“Eve would find that a droll assessment. She's a survivor. Of a past few humans could endure.”

“You get around don't you?”

“Freedom is a great high.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Take a good look lady: you won't see this sweetheart again in your lifetime.”

She managed a rueful smile, and told her docent she'd seen enough that day. She badly wanted additional words with Gervase again and promptly sought him out. He was in his office and greeted her with an easy smile and nod; then, taking her in, attentively said, “You've an additional question or two I suspect.”

“Yes. A puzzle really. To be frank, my memories of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov have intruded almost every minute since our first talk. I don't think I've ever been so misinformed about someone if what you said about him is near the truth. Anything you can add, please, please do.”

Gervase affably nodded and motioned for Catherine to take the seat before the desk as he sought his own ergonomic desk chair while savoring a distant smile.

“Sergei, Bossy's personal secretary, who's gone into hiding after Kissy's death, was my main informer. He does have a good memory. His words linger. I think I can paraphrase one conversation I had with him, one I won't forget. Let's see, he began, yes: — *Oh yes, the Maenad, our oddball Kissy. A head full of fine art, music and poetry, and an anger with modernity that a Maenad might envy. Loves the works of most Russian 20th Century composers. 'Transition music,' was his word, I recall, for most of the modern stuff — what you might have to listen to as an orchestra tuned or played between main themes.* Gervase paused, nodded to himself. “Yes — an alert civilized mind idled, waylaid by subordination — a real downer in his circumstance. He did have a good grasp of the economic picture though — a substantial censor for free range Bossy. The loss of the girl he used to warn the clinic, was a blow.”

Gervase suddenly looked up. “You didn't know — about the girl?”

“Kissy used someone, a girl, to warn about the bombing?”

“Yes. A sad story, and a very recent discovery. Bossy's distrust of Kissy remained, well, baleful — aggravated by the clinic being targeted by an Islamic faction, the clinic being a valued customer — a late aggravation. It's almost certain Bossy had Kissy killed.”

Catherine silently shook her head. “Kissy trained her — this girl?”

“Yes, one of his late recruits. An attractive street urchin, at least when he found her. A long story that. He trained her well. From what we know she at one time wanted to be a medic. And she showed talent as a ballet dancer — in England. She was actually a clinic patient for time. A lower limb injury. We think she recognized something about the car and its occupant, presumably when it stopped by the

clinic entrance. Not sure what. Anyway, Kissy's training likely paid off — minimized the damage. The bomber never got inside the clinic after all. I also think, in the end, Kissy knew his time was up. Even going to Vancouver — one of his favorite places — was no sanctuary. Indeed, it may have been easier to kill him there than here. Fewer neighborhood watchers. Perhaps he wanted to die in a near paradise."

The pause was momentary. Gervase looked across at a speechless, bewildered Catherine, and felt obliged to continue.

"Now did Sergei like the man? Yes and no. Kissy looked down on most of his compeers. Or he didn't really see them at all. He lived in his own world. Even the interior of his Moscow dacha was something out of the early Memphis court of Akhenaten. Sergei dryly wondered if Kissy imagined himself a reincarnated Egyptian. That art work called *The Sale*, Kissy commissioned using Ganyanov's name as patron. It was distinctly Egyptian, one of the sly ruses to alert you and keep the wolves wondering what such pics might accomplish. I believe it worked — for a time. He flattered some of Bossy's pals by having Leatherby put them in that picture — staring like hyenas. It did amuse some of Bossy's minders — and earned Kissy some time, a breathing space. Time he needed to make you, via the mural, into a fascinating if not wondrous public figure it would be harder and harder to assault. Yes, that was his plan, Sergei thought. Kissy must have been disappointed that that first work *The Sale* — it is a fair painting — went missing. No 'net worth' is the way Sergei finally put it. Not sensational enough, too artful, subtle. Muerner's secretary Eve has attempted to find the painting. Without success. The mural of course has survived. It has given you, in effect, a public persona that's kept your illustriousness alive, foiling further derogatory slight or injury. A definite likelihood. Kissy to the core."

Catherine managed to mask both her wonder, and a feeling of dismay she'd never experienced before. When her story was fully told the painting, if it survived, would have less bite than it did. As for the mural — its presence still flummoxed her. Easily she changed the subject. "Do you know how Kissy actually saw me — what his take would have been?"

"Good question. He obviously was impressed by your work, according to Sergei — something Bossy may only have found out later. It seems Kissy likely had something to do with getting you out of the country unscathed. Yes, I know, hard to believe, but the possibility shouldn't be discounted. One of the airline security officials has admitted as much. We don't know the details but it's something Kissy may well have devised. He was a complex figure of a man."

It was these last words that particularly perturbed, flummoxed Catherine. She knew when her time in Russia was up, and that promptly leaving was a priority. But her departure seemed at the time uneventful. Surely not — another Kissy intervention? The imputation was sufficiently vexing for her to change the subject again.

"What has become of the pictures taken of me on this continent? Some I've encountered already.

I assume there are others. A subject that still needles.”

“Well, the set Bossy ended up with — some taken in the Pacific Northwest parkland, some in that Tea House — both sets you now know about — were never used by Sergei. For one, the identical twin was already in Charlie’s hot tub, so there was little point in pursuing that kind of slur; further ‘interpolations’ would not have been connected to you. Also, Führ had taken many pictures of your twin which Pachis copied into his compilations. Sergei must have known Führ’s pictures were not of you, for they were taken we now know in Germany and Russia. The intentional misuse of some pictures of you was never undertaken — Ganyanov initially said there were too few useful takes; and later, when Zoya was discovered in the sensational tub scene, such use had become reductive anyway. In any case, all the covertly-taken pics of you have disappeared, according to Sergei. I suspect Kissy may have destroyed most them before he left for Canada. I believe your former boss was sent some.”

That set remained a vexation for Catherine, though she doubted DD would ever exploit them, being the embarrassment they were for true-blue ABN. Again she shifted her tact. “What plans, schemes, do you think Bossy still entertains, intends to undertake?”

“Well, if he has any he’s keeping them under wraps. He’s drunk on coke most weekends I’m told. His standing in the mob is now beyond salvaging I think. Sergei left last month. He’s filled in some of the blanks, as you can see. He will have to be careful, of course. A ‘missing person’ for a time. Oh yes — another stray incidental fact I remember, which you may find interesting. Kissy particularly liked Debussy. *La Mer* and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faun* being favorites that Eve noted on a visit to Cap-Ferrat with Muerner — which you can imagine what Bossy thought of. Debussy, it seems, was one of the expressionists Kissy made exception for, generally being a dyed-in-the-wool romanticist. Another of the facts I treasure.”

It was perhaps the one disclosure that floored Catherine. Those raptly evocative works she too was particularly fond of. The linking of Kissy with such a storied ‘sea’ brought tears to her eyes. So: one Borozov dead, one still incarcerated and suspect. Would the new dons be any less vigilant? They might murder one another but stood together against an oddball, an ‘outsider’. In a way, her life seemed on hold. No real prospects and little desire to enter the lion’s den again. So what might she say to her estranged twin? Who must speak some English, Catherine’s own Russian being largely rudimentary. Perhaps between the two of them they might forge a dialogue. That they both might have been murdered by Zoya’s trackers — one mistaken for the other — was a sobering thought. Hārun’s imputation was that Ammon was Zoya’s nightmare. Yet Hārun must have known of other potential dangers. Still, Catherine would, must see her twin face to face and acknowledge a veiled but indelible onerous past, without appearing as an intrusive stranger!

The story about Kissy’s arrival in Canada puzzled Catherine — at the time. She assumed he was working on a new network. The one surprise was the fact he seemed to welcome the publicity! To augment his security, his safe keeping? With some urgency she sought and re-read the earlier Toronto

Star pieces. Words that never quite measured up.

SELF-EFFACING BILLIONAIRE SEEKS NEW RESIDENCE

The rumor of Konstantin Alexandrovich Borozov, brother of the notorious Boris Ivanovich, taking up residence in a suburb of Etobicoke, was substantiated Friday when he was interviewed in the arrival lounge at the airport. He said he was hoping to do more business in Canada and also forge closer ties to Canadian artists and playwrights. He has always maintained a low profile and is considered a recondite player in the family his tycoon brother remains head of. A keen Egyptophile, Konstantin, known as 'Kissy', is said to have an art collection that rivals the late Late Bronze Age collection in the British Museum in London. When he's settled, he intends to fund a new department of slavic studies at the University of Toronto.

Then, but a short week later, the telling sequel:

DAPPER RUSSIAN PLUTOCRAT FOUND DEAD

Konstantin Borozov, the elusive Russian impresario, was found dead in a hotel suite in Toronto this weekend. The Russian Proconsul stated that the sometime artistic maven had come to Canada to discuss a production of The Cherry Orchard at next year's Shaw Festival. An inquest has determined that he died of a heart attack. His funeral will be held in Moscow. He will be buried in the Alexander Nevsky cemetery in St. Petersburg.

A very sober Catherine imagined an unclaimed body being buried in St. Petersburg, or no body at all. The further curiosity was that Bossy was still in detention and likely to remain there for some time, a fact that meant a new and unknown player had likely taken over the syndicate.

It was a time when incredulity reigned. Her truck with the Muerner circle was an unrelenting tease or taunt. The question of progress, improvement had always been something of a canard for her. The securely conveniently well off, the insular ones, often seemed out of sorts, the very well favored among these rarely serene, accomplished. So she believed. Christ, she recalled, had been oddly vague about the nature of Paradise. Many rooms, He said. Many. Not unlike the Lubyanka, then. Humans did have a sense of hell: the red hot coal on the back of the hand. Pain, the great leveller. What then Heaven? How tolerable would that be in an eternity? Trillions and trillions of blissful years? And, more to the point, what to do now? Agree to be a subject of further investigation by the Bern clinic experts, or flee as the fabled bat out of hell? It seemed a vortex was drawing her off the discrete edge where she took up little space and need. The testing Muerner wanted to do would be comprehensive and entail (if she joined in) a presumption of sympathy for the mandate of the clinic. She felt there was a show-off aspect to the clinic's work, which implicated her need to see, to know. She was promised a meeting with Muerner but only after the testing was done. She was told he would be in a better position to answer some hard questions. If he only knew! The further delay seemed but one more 'add on'. Still, the dealing was underway and abruptly leaving not really in the cards.

Catherine agreed as much to the special assessments because she had to see more of what was

being done in the state-of-the-art section of the clinic. Muerner's adulatory regard of her she would take with a grain of salt, though the more she learned of the man, the less her sarcasm held sway.

In the end it seemed there was but one way 'out' — to learn all she could. As experimentee and experimenter. The two way mirror.

The initial scans were done in a special network gown that facilitated a unique MRI study of thoracic organs. The elaborate scanner she found both intimidating and fascinating, for the apparatus seemed as complex as a laser bay at MIT. "Its sensors simultaneously correlate organ structure and viability with specific genomes in a detailed and speedy manner," the techie said.

"You've done this more than once?" she dryly asked.

"Many times." Then he added, "Though rarely for a statistic exemplar like you."

"I trust I'll live to tell the tale."

"The radiant energy is no worse than your average cell phone. Muerner's input was in devising the means to index tissue soundness to genetic parameters. It's a much researched issue — the configuration of the genes that specifically define us."

"All Greek to me."

"In the fullness of time such knowledge will be a net benefit of course. We strive to keep the prospects realistic. When one understands the possibilities, the work takes on a new vital importance and, we trust, acceptance."

One idiosyncrasy of her endowment was a surprise. It came the day her skeleton was studied. When she was escorted into the MRI scanner bay, the technician, a small affable gent, promptly wished to examine her hands.

"One thing the early examiners slighted," he said. "Yes, as I thought — those long even fingers. Exceptional!"

She was amused his first words might be so nugatory, in her estimation. "It's worth special mention?" she asked.

"Yes indeed. The presence of a genetic code for it is almost mythological, but there it is, yes, a find that will, in due course allow us to facilitate greater movement and flexibility of the hand when the fingers no longer apportion such different fascia. Our tissue formulating team will be ecstatic."

"So. You want me to lend a hand," she said as he admired her hand.

"Yes. A bird out of the bush. Yes."

One of the last of the intrusions, she was assured.

An additional surprise that day was to learn, from an intern she shared a lunch with, that Muerner was eighty-eight. She had estimated someone well into his nineties, given his past. "A child prodigy," she was told, who completed his doctorate at Heidelberg University at eighteen, not yet twenty-two when the war ended — which made his attachment to Eve something of a fabled romance.

The clinic's assessment of her physical health and cognitive function took a week, the conclusion flattering as her own doctor's summation: she was fit as a fiddle perfectly tuned, younger than the mean age expectancy by at least a decade. "So when does the anticipated ominous deterioration begin?" she asked the head examiner, a bracing older woman who reminded her of Grace.

"Well, if I must be frank, I'd say that when you're well over a hundred you may want to slow down a bit." Even her laughter was that of a Grace twin. Though of shorter duration. "I've talked with Dr. Wagner, our General Assessment department head, and I can say our meddling in your life is now at an end. You are free to call on us at any time of course, but you're no longer a priority. That's official. The anticipated symptoms would be manifest by now — and they plainly aren't. Our wish at this time is to see how your twin has fared — an adventurous undertaking that, as it has turned out. We understand you want to write the story of your past and want to examine us in great detail. Well, that time has come. Please be assured it's been a pleasure for me to finally meet you." The warm smile Grace too had the measure of.

"Will I ever learn exactly what drugs were given my birth mother?"

The question had a life of its own, and now begged a further hearing. The examiner oddly wryly smiled.

"Blunderbuss drugs Muerner called them — why he's remained so interested in their long term effects. The Soviets at the time were interested in behavior, but not underpinnings like creativity or empathy. You must ask Muerner when you see him. Though I suspect his departure from the Soviet Union had some caveats. One likely dealing with secrets the Cheka have 'incarcerated', as Gervase is fond of saying. It is likely such information, if it exists, may not be available in our lifetime. One of the limitations.

TWENTY-FIVE

Catherine's long awaited face to face meeting with Muerner was, she decided, an exclusive. Following the clinic's attentive examination of her, she was invited to his castle mansion estate near Erlach. A rare event she knew, and was asked to come alone. A car was sent to pick her up. As much hearse as limo Catherine thought.

The villa from the outside looked like a renovated medieval fortress, with drum-like towers and bartizans, even a drawbridge, the interior almost as intimidating despite the wondrous artwork, much of it Inca and Aztec in provenance or inspiration, most of it menacing and millenarian. The delicate and still exquisite Eve ushered her into a commodious study with the painting of a jolly horned demon above an Empire desk, reviving a wry memory. The panelled walls and ceiling were hardwood engravings, incisive designs of Polynesian inspiration of ominous if not apocalyptic engagements of gods and goddesses. The muted colors also hinted at dried sanguine tones, sanguine in the dark sense.

When he emerged from a *trompe l'oeil* door vent, the spectacle was complete: A thin timeless young-

ster with an elf lock and what she believed to be a sprig of hart's-tongue in his lapel. She could almost imagine a child suffering from Hutchinson-Gilford progeria, except that this 'child' was free of the hydrocephalus, skin lesions, osteoporosis and arthritis you would expect in such a subject. Whereas Eve was a long standing cameo beauty, not quite anorexic, but full of a life-seasoned gaze that had long since reconciled irony and generosity — so Catherine elected to believe. It was not what she expected and felt a little less uncomfortable with her nagging misgivings about 'progress'. She would have her work cut out for her facing these two veteran maven.

One of Muerner's habits was to preface any comment with a lapsed smile — a smile begun then elided. He began with: "I am grateful you elected to favor us with your cooperation. The work of discovery continues and you've helped the clinic in inestimable ways. Only our future work will realize the extent of it. But you have some questions. I do regret it's taken this long to get some words from the hackney's mouth." With the idled smile he motioned to the chair before the desk before sitting down himself. It seemed the questions Catherine had in hand increased exponentially since her arrival. She decided art would be a mutually prized subject, and smiled after sitting and crossing her legs, her eyes still alert to the art work about the room.

"This may seem impertinent, but I'm surprised not to see more early Mediterranean art — Fourth Century Greek paragons, say. A period that seems to be enjoying a rejuvenation." She tried very hard to keep her gaze civil as she thought of Pachis' late work, Kissy interests, and the clinic's focus. Muerner was a moment responding.

"Classic form alone is less crucial for me than energy, particularly energy that derives from nearly feral cultures like the Aztec. That may seem facile, but the one precedes the other, and energy is a troubling necessity." Then, as he often did, he changed horses mid stream. "I inherited this 'bunker' from a colleague, who was a bit of a fanatic. I never really understood him. Something I missed." He glanced about the room with a diffident appraiser's eye — so she imagined. "Our art connoisseur Willardson was taken with the place. Got drunk as a skunk one night to prove it I suspect. The after supper entertainment he joined by falling off a banquette into the midst of a core of realistic headhunters from New Guinea. Performers of course — in a slo-mo dance sequence, with menacing spears et cetera. He spent a night in one of the clinic's intensive care units. He had us worried for a time. It is the civilized man's nightmare — the transcendent culture of the mentally maimed — like the Aztec!"

The mindful words caught her off guard.. Here was the Muerner the public likely never saw. Reflective, musing, even relaxed as he assessed his own stark surround — which had apparently stymied the observant Willardson. Then once more an abrupt change.

"You will write a story one day, a book. The clinic may be presented in an artful light. To be expected, even encouraged. The informed watch dog is always a help. I hope you finish it. And that I live long enough to read it. You are familiar with the Cheka, the Soviet-Russian spy conglomerate.

That experience will add a nuance or two.”

The candid statement surprised her. As did her prompt detailed answer.

“It’s a difficult subject to research. The extraneous details. One busy agent in the Borozov group proved to be a solid fuel engineer whom the GRU may well have recruited. My work at the time centered on the Moscow-St. Petersburg pharmaceutical cartels, Soviet lobbyists and their UN procurers. It was probably the Russian FSB that watched me.”

“Did you ever hear the name Vassily Ablesimov?”

“No. Not that I recall.”

“A small matter.” His smile summarily brightened. To await as a witness a first candid question. Which Catherine had no trouble fielding.

“The matter that weighs in the balance, so to speak, is why I and not my twin was removed from the clinic we were born in.” For the first time she eyed him without concealing her solemnity.

Muerner smiled and looked off into the orderly Japanese-inspired garden beyond his study’s window.

“Well, first off, to cite some of the considerations for settlement here. The selection of a new satisfactory home — in America — was contingent upon the adoptive child being healthy with no history of disease or abuse. At the time your twin had contracted meningitis and the tacit agreement among my trusted colleagues was that one child must remain. Two disappearances would have provoked undue suspicion. As to your placement in the West, any information about your real origin would have put you and us in a legal limbo. You might have been relegated to foster care until your fate was sorted out, thus compromising your welfare and education — for us a chief worry, given our specified interest. Hence you were given to a kind devoted new mother, who was a time recovering from a difficult but successful birth. The exchanged babe looked like you, and you were only days apart. The maternity ward was understaffed at the time. One nurse there sympathetic and well paid. Were you not well treated we would have another variable to consider in evaluating your endowment. Very potent drugs administered up to the advent of a pregnancy we believed could effect a fetus’s make up, vulnerability to disease and such. If you were brought up in an exemplary household we could presume that any unusual conditions that beset you as you matured, might be attributed to your inheritance and not an abusive sickly environment. I may add that getting you out of the Soviet Union was a trial, and we’ve been careful not to endanger those who assisted in that removal, nor slight the periodic assessments of you and your sister’s general health given that achievement. Your new American mother knows none of this, of course.”

He briefly looked at her with what she believed to be a cultivated empathy before taking a sip from his drink. His first comment, about finding exemplary parents and home, she had taken as a given. Yet was grateful for the confirmation. He put down his drink and folded his hands.

“Now the substances your mother received — both oral and intravenous — were potent and per-

vasive. They did radically change behavior — essentially by turning the subject into a disoriented child. It was still a leftover era of the Lysenko purists, who believed drugs and conditioning were regnant in creating exemplary individuals. As you now must know, genetics they believed to be a sly Western hoax to impede Soviet advancement. In truth, I still don't know what went into some of the concoctions — I was little more than a statistician then, as I was for the German medic I served earlier. I doubt Soviet archives pertinent to your mother's case will see the light of day in my lifetime, if they have not already been destroyed. But I did want to know what the inherited results might be, for some of the symptoms your mother exhibited were bizarre indeed. The presumption was that such intrusions on the eve of a pregnancy could effect offspring. We now know how some faulty genes cause many abnormalities, some very debilitating. And with one-egg twins from a dissident mother — the outcome of a rape I suspect — well, I was determined to see the a comparative net result — especially how the constitution of a babe growing up in a healthy happy environment might mediate, even foil any such morbidity. I only had so much time to issue a death certificate and effect the transfer. Zoya was still sick but not we gambled terminally so. Sadly, I don't know what happened to your real mother. She was alive — just — when I defected. And until the files from that era are opened we may never know...as I've said, some files from that one lockup near Perm may already be destroyed." Muerner's subsequent hands up gesture was, Catherine believed, uncontrived. Though with shrewd maniacs one was never certain.

"Now about our own subsequent assessment of you — which had to be exclusively in-house — once you and I had left Russia. The teams we used to file the covert updates on your general health were drawn from the clinic. ABN's mandated medical examinations every other year were our main information source. We enlisted the help of an ABN secretary, a friend of one of Eve's second cousins, who once worked for Gasprom. She is one of the very few here who knew your past and our needs. She no longer works for ABN, and it's best she remains anonymous — for now. You were in and out of the Moscow environs at the time of her recruitment and she kept us abreast of your whereabouts — and of course copied your medical file updates at ABN on a regular basis. I detect a smile beneath that moue.

"You recruited an ABN employee?"

Facing Catherine's shocked incredulity, Muerner suavely continued.

"Now about the utility of the covert examinations themselves — before the advent of gene mapping. They were general ongoing valuations by a clinic team who visited America from time to time — to look for signs of thalassemia, aberrant lung development, cardio myopathy, breast and colorectal cancer, lympho tumors, motor neuron diseases, also skin health and sinew tone and mass, and bone articulation — to confirm your ABN examinations. Your mother was an exception and I wanted to know what was unusual in her progeny — what might be considered aberrant. The drugs your mother were given could very well have influenced your overall makeup, for they stymied many

motor and perceptive facilities and altered the body's homeostasis. I sense your impatience, but the matter for me was not to be slighted. Had you stayed in the Soviet Union such a study would be denied the comparative variable of a salubrious life largely free of menace and strain, and thus what a beneficial existence might alter, compensate for. Your ABN medical files were several times — thirteen I believe — copied and carefully examined. You were discreetly physically assessed in situ twice early on, once during, and once after your stay at ABN. And yes, this did involve a covert examination predicated on a suitable locale — including the Montecito villa — and a drug placed in one of your beverages. You often resort to a nightcap. The findings were always encouraging — meaning your ABN medic hadn't missed anything. Indeed, it was hard to accept the pristine nature of your health."

"That's an awful lot of cagy hugger-mugger." But Muerner continued unabated.

"Not that difficult when carefully planned. The nagging suspicion was that we might have missed something. It is all too apparent from the most recent tests that we didn't. You — and Zoya — are far more exceptional than we ever anticipated. Modern day gene mapping, only recently available, has affirmed that finding. Though Zoya has a few issues that concern — not genetic though. A bulimia problem for one — not uncommon in her profession. Also some joint pain, occasional skin disorders, a slight deafness in one ear, and emotional highs and lows — all legacies of her exiguous life. It's amazing, given what could have happened, that she should have become such a superb dancer." Catherine sat for a time in a theatric silence, as if waiting a line from a prompter. Muerner genially nodded, then continued. "I think I've covered the bases. Your health and appearance continue to defy the earlier probabilities. Any conditions that related to an anomalous genome would have manifested themselves by now, the accepted given. You should live a long and productive life. You'll find us cooperative in seeing that you do. Zoya too has defied the odds, though her immune system has had greater trials than yours, and she's coped on and off with an addiction problem."

Catherine smiled. "I still find it hard to accept the fact that the purely physical should matter that much — in the making of a civilized life."

Muerner also smiled and drew a photo from a drawer in his desk. "An odd phrase — the 'purely physical' — the meaning of which is usually sarcastic. Please consider the examples here. Several variants of a knee joint and the attendant soft tissue that works it. Tell me what you think."

Reluctantly Catherine looked at the composite photo, which Muerner had placed on the desk before her, aware that by participating in such an evaluation she was conceding a point.

"I presume the central image has some kind of precedence over the others." Indeed, several others outside the most central images looked rather forlorn — misshapen and ungainly.

"All examples come from relatively healthy people aged thirty, given a month or two, and all share similarly exemplary cognitive abilities."

"And such a knee will improve things over all?"

"The examples at the margins will not support an average frame over a seventy year lifetime."

Many back and hip problems will onset in early middle age. A host of other problems derive from these debilities, including the side effects of the medications prescribed. We are ‘one’ being. No inessentials.”

Catherine tried to smile. “So, some folks compensate by doing and discovering other things — the stellar accomplishments possible given a sedentary or difficult life.”

“If you could pick your knee of choice for a child, would you then leave it to chance, to a set of genes that may augur mayhem over time — the humbler phenotypic traits in the marginal examples? The one central knee will allow a full and active life, with plenty of time for reflection, contemplation — free of pervasive pain. Perception, learning to read, reflect, memorize and calculate — all are enhanced in a hale and yes comely individual. Which a civilized culture cultivates and can sustain. It is that culture that determines the flourishing of innate gifts. Also the squandering of them.”

“It’s not a subject I’m ably conversant with.”

“All things being otherwise equal, the choice is not irrelevant in my estimation. I may add that the idealized knee here depicted is very close to your own. Please believe that I strive only to inform; Providence is not always even handed.”

“It’s just that I’ve always believed that things like compassion and generosity often spring from hardship not convenience.”

“Life is never convenient. At the best of times. But it can be less chaotic. An article of faith, without which science would be an impertinence.”

Catherine was at last keen to change the subject. “My real mother may have sided with the ‘science as impertinence’ idea — given the prevailing ‘science’ at the time. My chances of ever finding out are very slim, it seems.”

“Sadly, as Gervase must have told you, the Cheka archives of that period have only been selectively opened. I doubt we will ever learn her fate. The worse you behave toward someone the less you want the world to know. It is one of mankind’s greatest predicaments and characteristics.”

“I am of course keenly interested in my twin. What she ‘coped with’.”

“I believe David and Gervase have filled you in on a few things. Your twin remains a protean player. She seems to have inherited a constitution as sound as yours, no apparent gene screw ups, though her teeth needed much attention and some musculature was slow developing — not a surprise given her diet. She has hepatitis C, which was being ably treated up to the time of the attack. She indulges in cocaine from time to time, perhaps to alleviate the dancing injuries she’s sustained over the years. We also believe she has been assaulted, and likely raped, though she tended to downplay the two incidents she’s mentioned, which seemed to her the luck of the draw. She has also been treated for chlamydia, successfully I might add. She came to rely on the clinic for support when she got into trouble. Her trust was essential, vital to keep track of her, as you can imagine. We readily treated her, when she requested it. Without such periodic treatment she wouldn’t have survived as well as she has

— there *were* several crises — and we'd have no ongoing comparative study. One of our staff helped her after the attack — got her out of London. She's still in Switzerland I believe, but wants to find her own way with a new identity. She inherited most of your genes I suspect, but has lived a rougher life and, I suspect, believes in a special Providence. We trust you will meet her in due course, and that she can fill in an absent chapter or two. For the reasons I've given, she did not know she had a twin. Her enemies, and she's had several, you eschewed. We are scientists here and medics, sometimes consultants, rarely mentors or governors. You will of course meet her — soon I think."

Seeing Catherine looking off, perhaps absorbed in a private moment, he easily continued.

"Now your step sister Anastasiya vanished at an early age, as you now know. Her father's name was Książnin, Karol Mieczysław. An intelligence officer who died in the Afghan war — the war that prompted, incited his wife Liisa's deft subversive dissident activities, which cost her dearly. I trust you'll learn more one day.

"Now Zoya's father was...well David via Alex Ifraimov has explained about your parents as well as anyone can. Your twin was very sick after her birth. Indeed, we believed for a time she mightn't recover. You were the better risk for removal, and Zoya's meningitis became your ascribed death, Masha's death. You had a healthy agreeable home life — largely due to your admirable American mother. Had you remained in your disintegrating family, you wouldn't have fared as well, and we would have no real alternative to assess. Getting both twins out was risky; two 'deaths' would kindle inconvenient attention. One twin had to remain — the survivor. I realize this sounds callous, but we did what we thought best at the time."

Catherine smiled. "It's a story that benumbs."

"You have an American half sister — Margaret, your nominal father's first child — who leads an adventurous life I believe. You meet from time to time."

"From time to time."

"A model, I understand. Working mainly in Europe."

"An ethnic nose — which I'm sure you could do wonders with — is less a liability there. She's too obviously attached to it."

"The one picture I've seen is enchanting. A beauty for all seasons."

"It's one of the derelictions, not meeting more often — both of us are to blame."

"You don't, I think, really like her."

"She sees me as a prude and sluggard."

"Hardly a good judge of character."

"She likes the word 'gweep' — overworked stringer."

"One of the passionate few."

Catherine's lingering question finally surfaced. "Will I ever see the files you accumulated on me and my sister?"

“I believe Eve can arrange for a preview. They are part of the clinic’s private archives. But you are now entitled to a look. Eve will of course be present when you do.”

“And such clandestine evaluations of me are truly over?”

Muerner smiled. “You’re a sovereign client — from now on. We can only suggest.”

“Can you be a bit more emphatic?”

“Independence is a good we all treasure. Yes, you are entirely on your own — to the extent you seek it.”

Muerner then suddenly rose, smiled and proffered a hand, which she perfunctorily took. “You’re part of the clinic’s history. A sacred trust.”

Catherine and Eve regarded the ample file with shared smiles. Catherine opened it with the apparent calm of a bunco dealer. A separate folio was assigned for each twin — twenty-one examination assessments in hers, twenty-two in her twin’s. The folio for herself began when she was three, when the copying of her family doctor’s files began, and concluded with her late assessment at the clinic here. Zoya’s began when she was born and continued to the year last. Zoya was of course grateful for the attention she received but had no inkling of its genesis. Given her own audacity and daring-do she remained an independent player. Indeed, she was wary of all ‘advisers’ and ‘benefactors’ — her clinic doctor her tolerated exception. Each folio comprised graph tables, measurement print outs, physician testimonials, and some x-rays. Catherine’s were obtained by stealth, augmented by five covert physical examinations. Eve was familiar with the files and sat patiently awaiting their return. After reading through many of the dry detailed findings, Catherine took up a few x-rays, ones the ABN secretary had managed to copy, trying to keep her equanimity in tact.

“So. The storied files.” She glanced at Eve.

“Professionally done and assembled — each one. You both continue to defy the odds. Indeed, you’ve been the subjects of more than one lengthy seminar.”

“As luck would have it.”

“Of course.”

“When I get to my own story, will I be permitted to use some of this material?”

“We would have to vet parts of the book. Science is routinely vulgarized today. We generally publish only what is verifiable and what we deem culturally affirmational.”

Catherine wanted to draw Eve into a conversation about the *Wunderkinder* of recent German infamy — Muerner’s taint — but decided she would likely be impressed with the woman’s prudence, knowledge, adroitness and dry affability. She had seen enough. She had been an item of special interest — which had now lapsed. She had to get on with the rest of her life. As her twin had, with amazing pluck. As for the enigmatic Anastasiya, she must be patient. All she might do. At least at present.

Time would decide. ‘The nurse and breeder of all good’, Shakespeare said about Time.

TWENTY-SIX

The second call Catherine made when her sojourn with Muerner et al ended was to her old mentor David Willardson. The first call was to her anxious mother, which she realized could only be satisfactorily concluded when she visited her, the tears almost obliterating her mother’s words. Only a palpable physical presence would do. Willardson proved less plaintive and answered almost at once. She imagined the phone nearby and he well into the scotch.

“Catherine! How irredeemably splendid!”

“Hi. Yes me. The ‘sabbatical’ is over.”

“Congratulations.”

“Yes, I can now be myself. And a book is underway. About recent things. An editor at Viking has been listening. Yes. A very modern epos. The ostensible reanimation of eugenics.”

“Ah. You know about Margaret of course.”

“Margaret? No, I haven’t been in touch for ages. As far as I know she’s in Rio on a sports wear shoot. Or was. What’s the latest?”

He paused to indulge an in-house smile — so she imagined. “Überhaupt Führ has surfaced once more. Some recent works are now on tour. Recently at the Kunsthalle Bern no less. A Margaret Burke figures — literally — in several of them. And will likely attend the showing.”

The words were a startling revelation. “Good lord, Margaret and the ‘Führer’. Small world.”

“There’s more. A Russian lass we know, one Zoya Stolbanov, has had a face lift. One of Muerner’s surgeons undertook the work at the Bern Clinic. She’s been in the Bernese Oberland most of the time since her flight. A late revelation from peripatetic Alex Ifraimov. No longer a visual ‘twin’ I’m told. A new legend too. This is confidential information of course, and I needn’t be identified as your source for it.”

It took a long moment for the words to settle in. “My word. You wouldn’t be kidding of course. Glad I called. In and around Bern you say. I’ll see you at the gallery? A must see I assume.”

“Only Attila at the gates would thwart a visit.

“Any chance of meeting my new ‘improved’ birth angel there?”

“A likelihood I would readily give good odds on. I understand she’s been in the vicinity, and would likely know of Führ’s showing.”

“David you’re a rare collection.”

“Old and musty. The lapsed charm of antiquity.”

That Zoya may have been a patient at the clinic all along added to the wonderment. So. Was she there when Catherine met Muerner? Did she know then of her ‘Yankee’ twin? Muerner and Eve all but affirmed it, the two histories no longer parted. Gervase too had hinted at the likelihood. So, an

odds on reunion. It took her a while to adjust to what she deemed a numinous prospect. Well, they had been keen on a 'double-blind' study. Was that keenness slow to...evanesce?

When Catherine entered the reception area in the designated Kunshalle gallery, she spied the being she believed to be her 'new' twin angel in animated conversation with a fondly gesticulating Willardson. So at last: her 'self' in a new aspect. A late long-awaited chapter in the ongoing saga, their Russian past a hoary retrospective. That day's memory would linger always: the inaugural face-to-face sighting of Zoya, whose face was now recast by a Muerner aesthete. A frank impenitent face, wary, very pretty in a somewhat austere sense. She turned to stare at Catherine with an odd if not droll composure. Perhaps seeing herself as she once looked rekindled incendiary times. But ready alacritous hugs and tears followed, accomplished behind a Marine Venus statue, Zoya's strong arms nearly a permanent embrace. "Angel moy, Angel moy," she kept saying. And: "I dream this day. Dream!" Though words were soon supernumerary. For some time they resembled fond, nearly speechless Siamese twins fastly joined at the waist. Willardson winsomely smiled and stole away.

It was then Catherine reminded herself that *she* was the 'embedded' child, that Margaret would not know Zoya and must remain ignorant of her, at least for now, to protect Catherine's loving, innocent mother.

When she and Zoya parted to again fondly gaze at one another, she told Zoya of her love for her 'ordained' parent and her wish to keep her Russian origin secret. She might reveal her background one day but must put that day off for some time. She was in tears when she told Zoya she now had a stepsister — Margaret, a model — who should also remain ignorant of their twin status — to protect Catherine's devoted mother.

Zoya beatifically smiled, so Catherine thought, as she touched her sister's tears. "I know you 'Americanized'. How you left womb. Our secret."

Catherine again ardently hugged her twin, then said she planned to introduce her as a favorite copywriter she met in Russia. "We no longer resemble one another — though your blood lives in my veins. Best we remain fast friends in public, for now."

Again Zoya's response was cathartic. "Child needs caring mother, mother devoted child."

They hugged again, then began again fingering one another's tears.

The gallery's showing of Louis Führ's new work was itself a wonder. Zoya had begrudged attending yet was keen to test a new identity. The ongoing curiosity was that Führ's model for several of his pictures was none other than Catherine's elusive step-sister Margaret, who was seen joking with him when Zoya and Catherine entered the main salon. It was then Catherine realized how tentative Zoya was on seeing Führ, and surmised an exacting chapter in her dealing with the prodigal artist. Such that they stood some distance from the photographer and his select model. They agreed to speak English here, for Zoya also sought to eschew a Russian identity. "New jig saw. Understand, yes. Ques-

tions *we* ask, yes?”

Catherine stifled a laugh. “I didn’t know Führ had an artificial limb.”

Führ then held an elegant leather satchel in one hand’s artificial pincer.

“Always hand in pocket. ‘One arm bandit’ MVD call him.”

“He spent time in Russia?” When Zoya didn’t answer Catherine added, “I didn’t know.”

“Long story.” Again Zoya’s quiet prompted Catherine to move on.

“My stepsister Margaret and I — we rarely see one another.”

“Her friend is dyke — I read in Zhenskie Strasi.”

After a double take Catherine smiled, knowing all too well her step-sister’s impulsive nature. ”

“Must be here. Together often. Rich hot-doggie dyke.”

Catherine had recently brushed up on her step-sister’s recent past, including her late fashion agent and *regular* companion, the theatrical Madame Abricias, whom they discovered with a rather tipsy Margaret in tow at the reception. The commanding Madame greeted Catherine and Zoya with a showcase smile, fondling a lock of Margaret’s hair the while. The gesture reminded Catherine of Hitler’s limp wrist wave to his adoring crowds. If the presumption had been that Margaret was not gay, the favor of an influential agent was a benefit few models slighted. “I’m so pleased to meet you at last,” Mme. Abricias remarked. The intros proceeded apace, the smiles fulsome. As planned, Catherine introduced Zoya as a copywriter she met in Russia. “Very good at her job.” “A most elegant belletrist,” responded the siren, extending a hand which an aloof Zoya almost didn’t take. The extravagant Albricias continued: “It is a stellar evening. Several of Louis’ prodigious paintings you may not have seen. Margaret is ineffably featured in several of them. The collection tours seven European capitals in the coming months. We particularly like Endangered Species and Horsepower.” Said a wryly amused Margaret, “I trust my sister is no longer in hock to ABN.” She looked in turn at Zoya with an amused smile. Said Catherine, “Not in hock, no.” She decided Margaret was sufficiently tipsy to contort or slight personal matters, and said assuringly, “We’ll certainly look for Endangered Species and Horsepower.” “You are in for a talismanic treat,” Mme. Albricias suavely added, her tone of voice sufficiently affected to prompt Margaret to lid her eyes. Said Zoya later, to no one in particular, “Albricias is bitch and hard ass lesbiyana. You know I mean.”

When they ventured to view Louis’s work, Catherine was a little disappointed Willardson had left. He didn’t look that well, she thought. But she knew that photoshopped art was not his cup of tea, and he obviously did not want to abridge her time with Zoya.

“So, what do you think?” Catherine asked when they faced Horsepower, a pretty picture of a leggy rider in sleek riding gear *carrying* a horse through a rough feral forest. “Horse maybe not ‘veggie’, as you say,” Zoya replied. Endangered Species pictured Margaret wearing an ensemble made from such animals and birds, defiantly standing on a mountain top — the one place one might pose in such attire. Führ’s sense of whimsy was apparent in several other pictures, but it was the arresting nudes of

Margaret that gave Catherine pause. One in particular was as seductively elegant as Catherine had seen and certainly the most telling, especially given Fuhr's surprising title, 'Terror, the Human Form Divine' (a quote from William Blake), a terse comment which rather summed up Catherine's own regard of human perfection and hence the conundrum of Muerner and the Bern Clinic. That Führ might elect such a title was a surprise. Was provocation now a must, she wondered?

That weekend the twins left for the United States, specifically Catherine's hill top condo in East Hemet, to further savor an uninterrupted respite. Often they sunbathed in the solarium with its pink and blue hydrangeas. Zoya sought the sun, which she rarely saw, Catherine to cull some more details — their older half sister a dunning priority. Yes, Zoya said, they had an older half sister. Very smart, cool. She was called Anastasiya — 'Zia — and left Zoya's home for a foster family when Zoya was eight. "You've no idea what happened to her?"

Zoya all but winced. "I tell you GRU recruit her — you believe me?"

"Of course, if that's what you think happened."

One of Zoya's new delights was beholding the wondrous fervent curiosity of her Yankee twin — at least around her. Zoya had never been close to 'cool' Anastasiya, and contended with sharpies and hustlers all her life. Something her twin soon accepted as a given. Being suddenly free of such harassment would take some 'fiddling' Zoya quietly said. "Patient, please. I am resetting modem."

Despite all, Catherine continued to ask about Anastasiya — about 'Zia. "You can appreciate my interest."

With some impatience Zoya said, "Guy who visit often...not boyfriend. I get info one day from reliable source. Not surprise. 'Zia very bright. In 'much approved way'."

"How so?"

"Bright! Mathematics, physics — 'Zia Einstein."

"A business, government or intelligence agent then — this chap you mentioned?"

Zoya squinted at her twin then exclaimed with dry amusement, "My sister Catherine great friend of siloviki!"

That she might be characterized as a pal of a security official made Catherine laugh. "It's been a long time, living only with suspicions. Do tell. Please."

"No names. Best now...for now."

"Is he, this chap, still around?"

"No comment please. Apartment is great place. Sun! Special gift. I live here while, yes? Be your writer copy."

"Copywriter. Of course. As long as you like. I told you I may have to move though. I've got a couple of options, but they don't pay as well as my last job."

"Russian 'bear hug'. Never same after. I stay brief time, after week I go. Friend of friend know about film. I go for casting. Find new name. Yevgenia Yerokhin. Act like cat. Maybe McCavity.

“Ah. The mystery cat. Apt for you. I hope it works out. The film. I’ll be all ears. And eyes.”

Despite Zoya’s constraint, Catherine’s curiosity kept egging her on.

“You must know how curious I am to know if you met either Borozov. A question that’s been stewing long before we met.”

“What’s ‘stewing’, please?”

“Badly wanting to know — if you met either Kissy or Bossy.”

Wanly Zoya responded. “Kissy head Apsaras. Nice man mostly. See him very little. Big brother swine. What you say— asshole. Tell you one day. Too nice here to visit past. Little sunlight there.”

“The sheer joy in seeing you makes *not* visiting the past hard. I am so hoping you’ll tell me something about Kissy...one B. I likely misjudged.”

With mock earnestness Zoya asked, “You in love with ‘Maenad’?”

“You know? No. Certainly not.”

Dryly Zoya said. “Style geek. Kissy. Music, art. Dance too. Sometime poet. Maenad they name him: hysterical cunt sometime. So say bratski. In Canada for time. Maybe not happy.” More pliantly she added, “He look, yes.”

“How so — ‘look’? You went out together?”

Zoya broke into brisk laughter and squinted at her sister. “After tub stay with Yankee Warren, he ask about knitting.” Her laughter resumed, but was soon spent. Then, as placation: “Shy man. Everyone at club say he nice fellow.”

“You liked him?”

“Not now. Later. Time for think — dream. Drink. *Na zdorov’ye!*”

“Out of vodka I’m afraid.”

“Ha! Vodka swimming pool in new big Siberia.”

The unease in some of Zoya’s remarks framed a lingering anxiety — so Catherine guessed, and decided her twin’s old and new musings would emerge in their own good time. She would ask about notorious Chuckie Warren another day.

In the coming week they visited one of Catherine’s favorite wilderness haunts — the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. In a stony hollow filled with gaunt Ironwood and Tamarind trees they discovered an unexpected and solitary stork. Catherine mentioned a recent news story about some storks that had escaped an aviary in San Diego. “Nice bird for me,” Zoya answered. “Flew coop, you say.” For a time they quietly studied the bird, who seemed as interested in them. “I think we call someone,” Catherine said at last. “I think so too. Bird unhappy, no perch,” replied Zoya. On her cell phone Catherine briskly talked to a park ranger.

That same day they went to a grassy knoll high off the park’s coast. A late afternoon sun cast long shadows. In the distance a naked couple strolled holding hands. “Ruskie double headers,” Zoya said with a dry smile. That evening they visited the grotto pool that Catherine and Michael explored a

month earlier. “You come here with boy?” Zoya asked when they were chest deep in the cool still water. “Sometimes,” Catherine answered. “With girl?” Zoya continued. The question surprised Catherine. “No. Why would you ask?” “Rumour about you and friend in ‘Merica.” Catherine briefly smiled. “A long story that.” Zoya shrugged. “Happens. Nice here. Clean.” Catherine later learned that Chuckie Warren was ‘big shit’ as Zoya put it. I carry hash and coke for him. In ancient pot. I balance on head and walk ‘round pool. He look mainly. He and camera, and tub people.” Catherine smiled. And decided that soliciting more details that day might be impertinent.

The new film Zoya mentioned Catherine got an update on from a film critic at ABN. It was to be directed by none other than Louis Führ, whose prodigal career the critic had followed with some amazement, aspects of this film only adding to his racy reputation.

Catherine and the film critic met in the coffee bar of an older independent book store. If Zoya had been short on details about the film, the critic seemed keen to bring her former colleague up to date. It was then an arresting tale de jour.

“Louis’s wish to make a historic film — a first for him — about the visionary Saint Joan of Arc, literally set the stage for what he touted a peerless part. One Russian’s audition stood out, apparently. A newcomer. Yevgenia Yerokhin. That name mean anything?” Catherine amiably shrugged. “There is a rumor a name change was in the works, for the credits. Understandable. Führ I understand was impressed by her ‘hungry English’. Apparently, she’d spent a while in England, enough to read her English lines with ‘yummy vowels’ — Führ’s phrase. She must have been initially flattered, the proposed film was amply budgeted and Führ himself would direct. I saw the script. Very period, finicky, as would be expected, but also starkly lurid — which ruffled some feathers apparently, according to one breakdown artist — the guy who specializes in making sets and clothing look faded and worn.

“For instance, the smooth plastic armor this Yevgenia would wear in the film was beautifully crafted but translucent. And she was to be nude underneath. Said the prodigal Führ to an English stringer, ‘She’ll be seen as a luminous aura — an Ester, Judith, Deborah.’ The creative team also devoted a lot of time to the *auto-da-fé*, specifically the parting of the flames to show-case the burnt figure — to assure the executioners that the apostate had not escaped and was in fact female. An airbrush artist was retained to render St. Joan as partly charred tenderloin. A telling historic incident, Führ claimed. He told one reporter, ‘Her gown was rubbed with saltpeter. It would have gone up in an instant.’”

Said Catherine, “Sounds like the Louis Führ I’ve read about.”

The journalist nodded. “He can be obdurate. No question. But his Joan I’m told wanted a body double for the scene. Führ insisted on, well, the real thing. He’s quoted in a tabloid saying: ‘The look will be stark, galvanizing after seeing the maid so amazingly alive in the armor, then stiffly paraded at

the trial.’ His sense of historic veracity is decidedly flexible, as you likely know.

“Well, even the airbrush artist was dismayed when he saw the proposed rendering, which was to be the first scene to be filmed. The day she was to be ‘burned’ — painted in burnt umber and charcoal pigments — she was peeved to find some extra onlookers, in addition to the film crew, awaiting her appearance. Anyway, she split then and there. She may have been, I suspect, simply pissed off with the whole venture by then and needed little excuse to leave. As a prized newcomer she may have felt she need not start with this.

“When she told Führ she was leaving, I’m told he looked as if he’d fallen pray to an April Fool’s joke — I get steady copy from a costume mistress in this company by the way. His cute select star simply didn’t like the film, she said. But it’s historic, he supposedly said. A tale for all ages. The opportunity of a lifetime. She must have smiled for he mumbled something about a contract — which she still had not signed apparently, a fact she duly reminded him of, a lapse he was apparently ignorant of, so rapped up was he in the production. It was one of those encounters insiders treasure. Ballsy for a new actress. There’s a rumor she had some plastic surgery done at that awesome Bern Clinic. Hard to verify of course, given the clinic’s mastery and security regimen. She’s led a hectic life I understand.”

Catherine fondly smiled but gave nothing away.

What neither the film critic nor Catherine knew about, was the cache of gems and two ikons Zoya had nicked, estimating they would keep her nicely flush for a year or two. Another heist was a beautiful small ceramic bust of a young woman which adorned a side table in Zoys’s rented cliff house near Solana Beach. The day Catherine visited the house, she was surprised to find the jewelled bust much like a larger version she’d seen before — at Hārun’s grey market sale on the loading bay of the villa! Zoya’s small ceramic model was a beautiful facsimile. Zoya only belatedly understood her twin’s rare, solicitous expression.

“I forget. You never see her. Anastasiya. ‘Zia. Dark sister.”

After a second careful look at the beautiful miniature Catherine said, “A friend showed me some photos a while back. This bust, the face, does seem a little like one photo I was shown. It is a fine curiosity. Is it really anything like her — like Anastasiya? I’d really like to know.”

“Yes, ‘like’ her.”

“How in the world did you find it?”

Zoya coolly eyed her sister. “‘Find?’ How you think I ‘find’? I go to SVR...”

Catherine fondly smiled. “It does evoke the face I was shown. It’s very existence is a fine puzzle. She vanished early on I understand.”

“She leave when I am eight. Nice bust. Saw it, wanted it. In fancy store in Frisco. ‘Like’ ‘Zia — maybe yes, maybe no. She disappear in Cheka mist. Maybe like ‘Sweet Fanny Adams’ — expression someone use in London bar. I ask for translation. Means ‘sweat nothing,’ one man say. ‘Fuck em all,’ says another.” This statement ended with a practiced shrug.

“A fine puzzle. Including how you got it — which I won’t ask. It is beautifully crafted.”

Zoya brightened. “It bring memory.”

“It does resemble the picture I was shown.”

“We find ‘us’. Maybe we find her. Maybe. You think so?”

“A fine story. Waiting to be told.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Catherine, more or less reconciled to the new alluvial flow of her life, happily arranged an overdue visit with her mother. Only after a very tearful reunion followed by many gleeful, treasured updates, did Eileen fetch the enigmatic parcel. The unstamped package had arrived in her mail box lacking a return address and was addressed simply ‘To Catherine’ — who looked at the parcel askance, and immediately phoned 911, to her mother’s sudden and protracted alarm. Catherine did her best to allay both hers and her mother’s anxiety when the parcel was placed in a sturdy container and taken away for examination. “It’s likely nothing...best to check it out though. I’m still persona non grata in some quarters. A precaution only, we’ll be fine I’m sure.” They held hands as Catherine briefed her mother on late events, stressing how she still dealt with some ‘very practical jokers’, as she put it. “Best to eschew the hijinks. When you can.”

Catherine was doing her best to reassure.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Eileen promptly and emphatically said, brushing aside ready tears. “I pray such ‘jokers’ go elsewhere.”

Later they watched the classic film *Casablanca* on a PBS channel, and savored a late night hot toddy — vodka with honey and lemon —before bed.

The following day the parcel was returned, the wrapping paper perfunctorily restored, with assurances from two plainclothesmen that the package was innocuous, did not house an explosive device or embedded poison — information Catherine decided not to share with her mother. Its innocuous presence was solace enough, she thought. The fact the package housed a rare first edition book of Chekov short stories and plays at first perplexed, then teased a heads up Catherine.

“It was a surprise, coming as it did,” Eileen explained. “I don’t think it came in the regular mail. It was just in the mail box one morning. No postage either, or return address. But a lovely hand addressed it. It’s a fine gift is it not? From someone special?”

A cautious, mindful Catherine explained that she’d met people in Russia who prized their literature and were sometimes impulsive in championing it. She chose her words carefully, slighting her continued confusion and consternation. “I’m sure I’ll find out who sent it soon enough.” She even managed a dismissive shrug. Her mother nodded, patted her daughter’s knee. “Well you’re here now, and you promised me a good thorough reminisce.”

Catherine stayed a long week end with Eileen and chronicled her stay in Russia, including the vicissitudes here in the U.S. on her return, with a detail she felt certain Eileen would not remember,

though she listened with the avidity of a lynx at the telling. Catherine mentioned nothing about her Russian origins, eschewing the story of her ‘interpolation’ here in America, especially being an identical twin! She easily smiled at her mother when she removed the wrapping to the enigmatic parcel following its return from the forensic lab. The discovery of a Chekov first edition — in Russian — floored her. It was both a very costly gift and a possible threat. Messages among the *vor* in Russia were sometimes delivered in abstruse ways. She was dumfounded. Her mother, though, misread her surprise, thinking it a gift from someone very special, and watched with a balmy smile as her daughter carefully examined the book, fondly fingering its beautiful soft leather binding — a thoughtful act that prompted her mother to say: “It is such a lovely book, so beautifully bound. Like the Folio Society that keeps sending me things. Margaret gave me a Christmas voucher one year and they’ve never let up sending me offers.”

“No, mum, it’s not from the Folio Society.”

“But you are happy with it?”

Her mother had been such a devoted fan, as well as a vigilantly conscientious parent over the years, that Catherine could only grin and give her a tight hug. “Yes, momsy, it’s a fine gift. And I trust the person placing it in your mail box got the ‘right’ address.”

Her mother dismissed the imputation of a ‘wrong’ address with a prompt wave of her hand, as if shooing a stray fly.

Eileen’s caregiver Molly stayed that day to sup with them. Catherine listened to the topical neighborhood chatter as one stuck in a time warp. ‘Momsy’ was living in the past, savoring every minute of it apparently — at least that night. She made no mention of her absent husband, who had abruptly left one morning and never returned, though a check arrived each month from a bank in Glendale. They had not be on speaking terms for some time apparently. One of the durable hovering facts. A matter Catherine would broach at the right time, if ever such a time might materialize, given the toll it might take on her mother’s new equanimity — a joy she would not want to crimp. Still that ‘father’s’ regard of *her* remained a latent curiosity.

Later that night Catherine’s rabid curiosity kept her leafing through the book’s pages. Her limited Russian helped with some passages but her quest for ‘something else’ kept her examining the book itself. She was about to shelve it for the night when a folded paper slipped out from an inner page. She looked at it on the floor askance. Such poisonous devices were nearly a commonplace. She was on the verge of dialing 911 again when she suddenly picked it up and unfolded it with a stoic grimace. The lab would surely have noticed...her wonder at the book was a relentless goad at the time, and Eileen far enough away not to be in jeopardy.

The sheet turned out to be simple but elegant note paper, a letter written in the same beautiful round hand that addressed the envelope. In English — in fluent idiomatic English. From an source she never imagined hearing from!

Dear Catherine,

I have some hope that Providence will put this posthumous note into your hand without stipulation.. The person I entrusted it to is discreet but must remain anonymous. Such a parcel delivered normally would invite too many snoops.

I have of course no way of knowing whether you will ever receive the book, let alone this belated letter. But only Armageddon would prevent me from writing it now and consigning it to this tome — a late lone solace in a sorry protracted life. I believe you will never be able to scold me for writing it. The dye has been cast, my death long ordained I suspect. An imminent overdue departure. Such words. Sorry — as they often say in Canada, my late and pretty domicile. I had at one time entertained the lovely fanciful notion of actually meeting you...so I must content myself with this prosaic note.

The Chekov book is somewhat dog eared, as the English say. Indeed, my finger prints are on every page. Prints that will never be compared to my set on file with the Cheka. Please be assured I tried to keep Bossy's minders addled as long as I could. 'The Sale' bewildered for a time. The mural gave me a further 'time out' with your persona serenely handsomely alive in the public square. There is another matter. The security officer at the terminal you departed from is now being questioned. I tell you this not to win any kudos but to point out how fate deals with stolid minds. The guard owed me a favor and was to allow a Finn a boarding pass. He was busy with a luggage issue and thought you were the Finn. He is in no trouble but the timing of your leave taking is now under review. Providentially, I won't be around to 'fill in the blanks'. You could be questioned about it in due course by some State Department employee. My one solace is that Bossy's reputation is now so bathetic, so soiled, that he may spend the rest of his life in a permanent limbo. And with me out of the way his wary enemies — and yours by proxy — can now stand down. Even Sergei has left. It was your courage and resource in disclosing one of Bossy's scams that revived in me a nostalgia about trust decency and the gift of grace. The Beast in The Beauty and the Beast is a fine epigram.

I hope you meet your twin one day. Free of all contingency. I wish you well, and will leave it to Chekov to plead my case. Pushkin is too idealistic I think. Please think of me sometimes with an attitude more wry than sardonic.

You filled my last days in Canada with an allégresse I'd never imagined. God bless.

Ever after,

Konstantin

If her Russian leave taking seemed at the time routine, she did consider that someone may have wanted to question her — at length. That supposition now returned with haunting vividness. She had been told of the revocation of her work visa and, at the time, left the American embassy with some disappointment but no real anxiety. Did the boarding pass somehow upstage, confound a waiting airport agent? Indeed, given what she had uncovered...yet, at the time, her departure seemed unevent-

ful. The letter's advisement would haunt her for some time.

One of the phrases in the Chekov book that had an asterisk beside it took a while for her to translate. In the end she came up with the following: 'I would like to be a free artist and nothing else, and I regret God has not given me the strength to be one.' One day she would get someone in the Slavic Department at UCLA to confirm her wording. In the meantime she would consult a public library's English translation. That Kissy must have anticipated his untimely end was a disengagement, a haunting postlude she could barely fathom. That it could inspire as much disbelief as disappointment also amazed.

The revelation — as she later thought of it — defied the odds: her enemy's brother a secret paramour! Right out of Tolstoy she thought. Though whether it might rank as tragedy she would be a while deciding. It was almost too bizarre to be true, yet the words in the note defied sarcasm. She could barely remember what he looked like. Not a twin, of course. No, not a twin. It was the only unsought love letter she received from a boyfriend, then or now. That fact must be taken under advisement.

She spent the next few days in a kind of limbo. Too stunned to mourn, too stymied to move on. Her retrieval of one picture of Margaret she bought at the gift shop in the Kunsthalle salon brought a brief reckoning. A beautiful back-lit nude of her step-sister walking down a grim stone-lined channel into a stark obliterating white light. Again she doubted Margaret had ever been more splendidly exhibited. But it was the unexpected caption that had caught her eye, a quote from William Blake that invoked her own regard of human splendor — 'Terror, the Human Form Devine'. The curiosity for her was that the whimsical Führ might choose such a phrase. Suggesting to her how some humans coveted their singularity.

It seemed dreaming, reflecting, was about all she might resort to then. The diorama of getting old.

TWENTY-EIGHT

The barge port at Shlisselburg, just North East of St. Petersburg was exceptionally busy and humid that day. The island fortress on Lake Ladoga near the Neva reservoir stood proud in a morning sun, the grass about its ancient dun stone towers an emerald green. The lazy town itself was full of young tourists doing the Neva on the cheap. For two days Zoya had reconnoitered the departure bays, her new papers in hand. The Yezhov, a small propane tanker, was the newest of the ships then at anchor, also the sleekest. Dressing as a common laborer that morning, she followed a group of crane operators who walked to their positions complaining about life in scrappy tones. One of these was less discordant. He was also the oldest. And, if she was not mistaken, likely the most heedful — at least in her pressed mind. She approached him just as he was about to climb the ladder to his airy operator's perch. "I need to get to Svirstroy, to see a friend who's dying." When he curtly told her to apply to the passenger terminal, she added, "I need to depart soon. I may not have long. The few cruise ships this

time of year have waiting lists and there is no public air service to Svirstroy.” He studied her sleek smooth face candidly for a moment or two, then shrugged. “I can’t help.”

“I can pay. Well. A two payment offer. The second on departure.”

The man looked about him as if someone was trying to pinch his lunch box or steal ahead of him in a lineup. For several seconds he said nothing, then, in a lower apathetic voice said, “See Anatoly in the timber office. Say Dimitri sent you. Show him what you have.” Again he looked at her, his expression nearly hospitable. “A friend...best I can do. He’s there until six.”

Her new papers established a credible safe identity for observant Anatoly, who examined them with a patient smile. A couple of small diamonds lay in one of the folds. He retreated to a back room where a muffled conversation ensued. He returned smiling. It could just be accomplished. The ‘other’ would not be needed he said, returning the diamonds. He added, “A relative, an aunt, is a nurse. She’s also going to Svirstroy, and will welcome a companion. You can board anytime. Should be in Svirstroy tomorrow afternoon. You have my condolences. My own sainted mother died a month ago”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Look after yourself.”

That night as she lay on the hard bunk of a forward cabin, she dreamt again about arriving in America in a crate of caviar — a dream that, in its way, had come true, though Providence ruled out the caviar. A limitation she would accept. But this day, before heading back to the land of her dreams, she must see Yuri one last time, the procurator’s investigator who had returned to his place of birth to die, the remote storybook Svirstroy whose lush large vegetable gardens were a crucial summer undertaking for its inhabitants, given the village’s frozen isolation in winter. If her troubled life had limited their unions, she was determined not to neglect him this time. He had terminal brain cancer, and was sometimes despondent. He claimed that bathing in the cold fresh waters of nearby Lake Ladoga had cleared his mind once before. He would, must try again. The thought of seeing him again was eclipsed by the reality of their inevitable final parting. He claimed he was still an object of scrutiny and didn’t want her singled out again. They would be, must be, discreet this one last time...secretly meeting by a wide clear tranquil lake. His Valhalla. Every Natalya has an Alyosha, he claimed — somewhere.

She had forgotten how smooth a river barge could be. Sometimes only the further bank attested movement. A small boy walked alone along a path near the embankment. Looking at him, his stark solitary presence, she wondered how her recent smiling fortune might reduce her to tears.

A grimacing Hejaz looked over the new windy camp with an enforced calm. A large bird he did not recognize flew out from a Tamarind tree and scooped up a small crab in the sand. The crab had

come some distance from the water. And was covered in sand.

How old the wish to be reborn, renewed, transformed — on discovering that ‘mythic’ epiphany lacks real drama, incontrovertible climax, the boring never ending sideshow — the only failsafe drama being the one imperfect credulous mortals might star in.

From the preample to Musing the Maenad