

What Made Thee

A Sobering Tally

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PART ONE: HOME FIRES

BODIES

It was a dour item in David Willardson's memory archive: the aging comedian known as The Gryphon, a former school friend, sullenly performing in the Aten Show Lounge in Vancouver's East Side Alexandria hotel which, in the musings of local chroniclers, had seen better days. The lounge's once vivid wallpaper murals, featuring ancient Egypt's Amenhotep IV, the prodigious Akhenaten, his enigmatic Best Wife Nefertiti and their children, had faded to a pale fusty sienna. The Gryphon himself was showing signs of wear, of time travail, which his partly inebriated state did little to mask. A small, largely working-class audience, anticipating hilarity, slowly began to disengage, tune out, look to their own chums and drinks for distraction or solace, for the Gryphon this night was on a righteous crabby bender, due perhaps to his own deteriorating health and late disgust with life in general. Though sometimes amusing, his cranky commentary dogged an audience seeking escape. If some patrons occasionally nodded or smiled, it was more from a lingering fondness for a once welcomed comedian. Indeed, the fulsomeness of his tirade seemed to provoke as much bewilderment as nostalgia. He'd began thus:

“Has anyone in this crowd thought much about — What made thee? What Made Thee? Not who you slept with last or why you put that chalk dust up your nose but — What made thee? Where did you, babe, dude or specialist come from? Why and how? Stuff like that. What made thee?...” A few cursory nods.

“You probably think...like most of the plaintiffs here tonight...that environment is omnipotent. Right? Context and nurture are the biggies, the whole enchilada. Happily feed everybody king burgers and out pop jelly-bellies. Bear with me. What made thee?

“We got this science today called genetics. Chirpy stuff that's up there in your face. Your airedale nose, cabbage patch dollies, your puny dangling participle. Maybe even the fact you can't carry a tune without the Vienna Philharmonic backing you up. Genes. What your stoic parents imagined you wouldn't hold against them. Man were they slow.

Despite a few nods, a pervasive silence filled the room.

The Gryphon looks at an overweight lad in the front row.

“Got a great bod, kid. Something you’ve known for a while, right?” The lad wryly smiles. “Hang in there. A lifetime awaits. What made thee...*what made thee?*...”

“ — Sneaky Pete,” a tipsy codger calls out, freshly awake, glancing about expectantly, prompting ready nods from nearby patrons and a few patronizing laughs.

“I hear you, buddy. I hear you. Haven’t a clue have you?”

A further sullen silence followed this comment.

“Yes. Think about it. Genes. Not Calvin Klein panties. Genes. Your make-up team. The biggies who allot you your special you, from bone and sinew articulation to vulnerabilities to disease and prodigal folly. No reprieve here. Genes. No innocent bystanders. They’re wasp accomplices to an arbitrary arrest!”

The tepid audience response seemed to animate the Gryphon’s urgency, prompting a stumble as he sought a central position on the stage. The club manager quietly emerged from his office, grimaced, and beckoned to one of the waiters as the Gryphon continued.

“Lets face it — genes are ancient copecks more often than Swiss dollars. Something people can get pissed off with. The hoary cartoon you cannot rub out. Not being career stoics, folks get mad! Then spooked. Then wacko: for crissake, something oughta be done about a Creator who may be both Miser and Thug — something, surely bloody something before the Second Bloody Coming. Before the Great Futures’ Peddler comes back to judge his Mays’ and Macs’ fannies! Fannies being the main act for some folks.”

The same codger readily drones ‘ —Fuck’em all,’ which prompts sporadic laughter. The Gryphon looks momentarily undecided, then:

“I hear you man — it’s a mega scandal, right? You look and sound better than your neighbour, you’re just a high-toned smeg-head, right? Everybody knows that. And the smegs get away with it, right? Having two good kidneys, say, or 20/20 vision, or a memory that can recall Paradise Lost verbatim — that’s hardly legit but rather something you didn’t really deserve, hadn’t earned, and maybe should be taxed for having. A lucky sonofabitch oughta pay through the nose, right? You got capital that’s earning interest and holy Hannah you get to keep it!”

“You tell ‘em Santa,” a new someone staidly says to muted laughter.

“So nice to have another good-old-boy here. What a bloody mess. Think about it. To be healthy and pretty, let alone wealthy or smart, is cause for reprisal, right? Only the poorest, ugliest, dumbest, most disease ridden should be allowed to reproduce without apology. They don’t know any better and they’ve been at it for eons, right?” He looks about his then mainly

older, silent, disengaged audience. “Yeah! Life, a lot of crap, a lot, right? Think about it. All that life crap. Mountains of it. Ugly sickening polluting crap. Silly old farts spreading all over like cat litter. While research labs make drugs to keep them hanging around! Can you imagine? Naturally the devoted do-gooders have a solution — Death with Dignity! Don’t embarrass yourself. Get out now before you really mess up. Yes. Death with dignity. Which means not being there when it happens, right — Woody Allen’s plea bargain. Euthanasia could well be an environmental necessity one day, so the social advisement for it can’t be far off.”

Again the Gryphon looks at the older generally apathetic crowd with blood shot eyes, shaky aspen limbs, his nose nearly a roadway marker, to stare at a couple of boozers in a front row. One of these offers a quizzical toast. The other jovially gives him the finger. He shuffles toward them, the manager and a waiter at last approaching the stage.

“So. All gummy relics, time to peg out. Time to shuck the gooey stare. Get the pills down the pie hole. Trust me. You can’t expect us to clean your backside forever, lessen the historic stink. We won’t hold it against you if you do it now. Before you really mess up. You owe it to yourself to peg out. Now.”

A grubby looking workman suddenly loudly burps, to some token applause.

“Hear you man. Ninety-year-olds now, eighty-year-olds next. Every Dick and Jane over seventy-five should be chloroformed. Think of the time and bother we’ll all save. Think of the toffy pathos we’ll avoid. A planet nearly alive again! You owe it to yourself and the many-too-many. Be a salvation pioneer.”

By then the Gryphon appeared very unsteady and ready for a fall. The manager and a waiter approach him. An antic pause followed as the manager quietly talks to his comic, who wryly listens before loudly saying, “I know...bloody inconvenient us fucking seers.”

As the manager and waiter gingerly take hold of the Gryphon, the Gryphon continues with his spiel while sidling off.

“You can hardly bloody move anymore. Everywhere you look another moonscape Freddy. Death with Dignity. Dignity in Death. Oblivion is looking good, right?”

Sporadic, limp applause was punctuated by some desultory hisses as the Gryphon was finally escorted off the stage, though not before exclaiming, “One last jerk off, lads. Time’s a-ticking.”

From the start the Gryphon had a reputation for being a smart ass and rather hard on earth bound creatures, though not as morbid as he became. In the myths of history the mythical Gryphon’s large claws were said to change colour in the presence of poison, which is why they made great drinking vessels for suspicious potentates. Sadly, this earth bound Gryphon was becoming

immune to his own poisonous tongue and, of late, his frequent crapulous states. His genes weren't airborne any more.

He professed to be a Greek foundling, but was actually christened and baptized Richard Julian Wagner, son of the late Dr. Carl Wagner who had graduated from McGill in 1923 with David's father Lucius. That much David was certain of. He had gone to school with and been patronized by the wiseacre. Seeing his old, once prodigious friend reduced to a bitter wino, despite the occasional flourish, was a keen reminder of his own late consternation, his growing suspicion that he'd been in many ways so heedless, inattentive.

Thus, to a shy introvert like David Abercrombie Willardson, the late convulsions of his era, particularly those to do with normality, well-being, privilege, antipathy, dissolution — humans ravishing and revolting — had undermined his once serviceable equanimity, which he had imagined would ease his twilight years. But just when his few maxims and apothegms began to tango, the orchestra folded; mystery, wonder and fondness packed their instruments and left by a rear exit. What remained on the floor was raw, naked and decidedly rank. He simply had too many insinuations on his hands. The reason his generation went from enchantment over a first kiss to blithely hankering after pot and ready sex, or from the ethos of temperance to abrasive Marxism, radical chic and the late brazen taunt of the traditional normality, ever eluded him. 'Improvement too, the idol of the age, is fed with many a victim!' Imagine! An 18th Century poet said that. One William Cowper. Release from historic exaction can leave one a little narcissistic, a corollary of peacetime boredom perhaps, everyone imagining their own plenum. Unstinting fortuity and satisfaction for all. The Come Kingdom. The spoiler being the recognition of unrelenting reality. Such that of late, even his parents had come under renewed scrutiny. Had he taken so little note of their sobriety, stoicism, piety? Their apparent content? And where were these rank insinuations coming from — if not a desire to take the sting out of the late recognition of his own insular, trivial, abeyant existence — the dour 'what made thee' imputations.

Thus, it was in this spirit of forensic pique, of warming condolent nostalgia denied or revoked, that he began to look into his past, how he might have been so inherently heedless. That he had become a poseur, a dilettante as his practical father might have said, was perhaps understandable if not indictable. But why so many of his neighbours should want to follow suit was a curiosity. Now that both his parents were long gone, he might do a little diligent remorseless digging, try to fill in the haunting, gaping blanks. A labor, he must undertake with exceptional care. For it was all too easy in that self-obsessed age to misread, misinterpret, get sidetracked. If he had little enough to work with, he was determined to tell a credible tale.

OSCAR

The cadaver his father worked on in medical school was named Oscar. Where the name came from David never learned. Whoever Oscar was — most cadavers were unclaimed bodies then — he served to instruct if not enlighten a group of earnest, doughty medical students in the McGill class of 1923. Not aesthetically of course. To be heartlessly candid, Oscar was a very ugly buzzard, looking decidedly indignant with one distinct eyeball glowering at the ceiling. The fact that his name would eventually captivate billions of zealous movie goers was sadly burlesqued by his prone remains.

David's father, Lucius Milton Willardson, 'Doc' to his ever questing colleagues, was perhaps the most artless of these students, but also the most conscientious. If his 'confederates' read the medical compendiums (those abridged summaries designed to obviate the tomes) once or twice, Doc would read them at least twice. A toil that cut down on the hours he might appropriate to steal off to a vaudeville show, which he relished. Bitter derisive career voices in the public domain were a relative rarity then. And bodies still an idle curiosity, more or less, in as much as one knew the female leg did indeed extend beyond the ankle and knee, the hard evidence not yet broadcast. Apropos the time and waning era, fashion still flirted with décolletage, not the smug audacity that would deprecate most remnants of Nineteenth Century chic and decorum. The brazenness of advertising's later arrant exhibitionism seemed a spur to the burgeoning, craven self-esteeming philosophy.

The single extant picture of Oscar was a far cry from the early painterly renderings of the anatomy lab. A grubby, partially unwrapped hulk already lacking many muscles and ligaments, stretched out before a group of smocked med students. Wally Whyte, a dark-haired pundit they called the gypsy, usually handled the salutations. Said Wally about Oscar, "Poor chap likely didn't survive initiation" — a memory all students retained a certain poignancy for after the initiation ritual, especially the sting of the paddles on their backsides as they were herded, shackled and blindfolded through the senior's trench, or experienced the high when hurled, again blindfolded, up and up in the air from a token fireman's blanket, the blanket returning ever closer to the ground, such that they would not cavil at sharing the experience with the next crop of milksop juniors. Carl Wagner, a blond sometimes sardonic maestro — unique among his fellows for not only coming to McGill on a scholarship but being heir to a fortune as well — was unconvinced of Oscar's premature demise. "He did too survive, the swine. For a time." They all grimaced at this, thinking perhaps of the senior fellow they might gladly be working on now. "Look at his weepee. Then look at his hands. What else could he do?" Oscar's hands were enormous, his penis minuscule — a career paddler! — their senior ogre in aspic! Dr. Perlmutter,

the anatomy professor, had to keep an eye on this one group of apostates. He brooked no disrespect of his 'bodies', and four of his students, Willardson, Wagner, Wilde and Whyte, were always a concern. Two dilettantes and two nincompoops to help ameliorate the shortage of medics after the war. Above all, no one in this class was going to be found using intestines as skipping ropes — a rumour he had verified first hand. His lab would be as tranquil and sober as a library, his students at least reverent if not accomplished. Reverence begins at home.

In their second year, the aforementioned quartet felt sufficient amour proper for themselves to have a group photographic portrait taken. Wagner sat in front and presented a shock of blond hair, almost a fly whisk, with several moles cavorting about a Hapsburg chin. Despite his torpid gaze, the insinuation of frenzy prevailed. For all his wit, he was proud of his Teutonic background — at a time when it was often handily despised — and he had suffered the worst of the initiation barbarity — which merely confirmed his superiority. Provincial savages, he would say. *Mitlaeufers und hochstaplers*. As if to certify his transcendence, he sometimes played an old battered trombone, as Sherlock might have touched his violin in the late afternoon, though not as hopelessly flat nor deliriously impenitent. His brilliance, despite his tin ear, the others had long since begrudged as genuine. He sat in the center, cross legged and somewhat amused.

Wally Whyte, standing behind left, always seemed to be leaning forward, as if ready to pounce or flee. By turns ingratiating or dismissive, there seemed little middle ground in his discourse. He had thick black hair neatly slicked back with a fruity smelling pomade, while his neatly trimmed moustache often yielded a rich contagion of stale butter and breakfast honey.

Frank Wilde, center back, was the best hidden of the four. A portly fellow with small raisin eyes in a glazed bun face. A chuckle always seemed imminent but never yielded to, as if humour were a subversive thing, not to be trusted. In actuality the most generous and deferential, he had a natural aptitude for discretion and reflective thought. His reticence was sometimes construed as prudery. Eventually they would call him the Hermit. Though as much from uncertainty perhaps as derision.

Lucius Willardson, right, David's father, was the smallest of the lot. A balding, nearly good looking man with deep set eyes that sometimes looked slightly misaligned. Not as bad as Hollywood comedian Ben Turpin's, but near enough. A thin but prominent upper lip umbered by a long full nose, above an Il Duce chin, served to intimate a tantrum-in-waiting, the temper of a Jake LaMotta, which his customary placidity all but masked. David's otherwise demure maiden aunts attested to the hardier disposition. Between the lines David concluded his father to be a hotspur, willing to take on the entire block, the lads therein apparently obliging from time to time. He lost it only once at McGill, according to the evidence in the few extant letters, but the

aftermath lived on in his residence like the cosmic background noise from the Big Bang. Fortunately the target of his anger had been a snooty visitor to their rooms no one much cared for. The two ended up in an aromatic shrub near the female student residence. “I can’t stand someone giving himself airs,” Lucius was rumoured to have said in a rare moment of phlegm. “We are blessed with an optimist!” — the verdict of Carl Wagner, meaning Lucius was conditionally forgiven. Carl added, “When Lucius’s Methodist ancestors rise to their feet, all hell breaks loose.”

Otherwise, the four always seemed to be doffing their hats — supposedly a choice maiden or welcome acquaintance had been pressed into taking the picture. In the frequent baseball games, especially when Wilde was at bat, the others seemed to be yelling in concert to let the pitch go by or swing, you idiot, swing. Only Willardson was seen swinging with credible intent. At other amusements they might stand stiffly in pork pie hats as if waiting to get into a urinal in a muddy fairground. Frequently they wore overcoats. The women in the pictures appeared surprisingly stylish except for those wearing a type of hat that suggested a dull half-closed eye. Mostly they appeared well fed.

But what intervened in virtually all the pictures was the dirt and mud. Decent, sturdy buildings of durable granite or brick might rise up in the background, but the foreground was often dusty, muddy, muddy-snowy and slippery, or spiked with patchy, prickly weeds and grass. Even the boardwalks sometimes looked treacherous. The innate hideousness ascribed to concrete and asphalt was, too obviously, decades away. The shoes and boots often looked scuffed, smutted, stained. A contemporary naturalist’s near paradise.

In their residence, the four lounged in vests and shirts beneath team pennants affixed to one wall, smoking, comporting themselves as a coterie of toffs, Willardson with a pipe. They practiced examining one another with grave countenances. And had laboured study sessions on how they might conduct their first vaginal exam with the lights on. “No problem at all,” said the impervious Wagner. “She’ll be ugly as sin and dumb as an ox. You’ll swear off concupiscence for a fortnight at least. Hot-to-trot Lucius may never take a cold dip in the lily pond again.” A natural antagonist, Lucius had been chucked into the pond twice during initiation, the second time taking two of the seniors with him. “What in tarnation is concupiscence?”

“A labour of love.”

The Varsity Tuck Shop seemed to be a favourite vista for the ‘candid’, especially the Earl Jansen Confectionary with its ‘Refreshments, Fruits and Tobaccos’. Special girlfriends, often in pinafores, stood against nearby forested or garden backgrounds, hat, gloves and coat in hand, or lounged on the limb of a tree in white serving uniforms. They smiled with ineluctable good

humour. In a couple of pictures, Lucius and a lady friend approached the camera, she in high laced boots, he in pants too short, doffing his hat to an undisclosed passerby.

Summers were less formal. With sleeves rolled up Lucius played tennis or took a friend for an outing in a punt or row boat. He also once stood cradling a violin case before a building covered in ivy, as if undecided whether a serenade was risky or mandatory. One unidentified couple posed before the Minnedosa, an elegant capacious ocean liner. The few cars about looked dinged and archeologically speculative as the mud.

The album ended abruptly with a photo of a cricket pitch before a stately resort hotel. Everyone was photographed at a distance. The buildings stood out. It was the last of the ‘snaps’ that had been consigned to a dusty leather album — the earliest David could find, suggestively abandoned or misplaced. The final thick dark pages were blank, smelling of what seemed like thyme. He could imagine several floral specimens being once impressed there.

His mother kept many if not all of Lucius’s early letters. Neatly tied in a scarlet ribbon. A late discovery among her belongings, which dated to her teens. She would outlive Lucius by almost three decades. The bundle would stay with her until her death.

They eloped January 1, 1925 but did not publicly acknowledge the marriage for five months, due to the demands of his post-graduate studies and her deploy as a district teacher. His letters, the ones she kept, were addressed to Miss Elspeth Peters. They began in June 1920 and ended in September 1924. The handwriting was not as crimped as it would be later on. Nor as laconic. He worked a lot at night and was a bit of a gambler. He served after graduation as a resident at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. She taught school in Parkbeg, Saskatchewan, in a single room school house that served eight grades. The lone picture of the class that survived was filled with dual desks and motley children, their stark faces filled with a fixed despair. A penal colony, junior division. Only their healthy limbs and cherub-like faces begged off a Holocaust setting. His mother looked at the camera with an ironic stoicism she would come to perfect. She looked faintly happier that day, perhaps on receipt of a letter from her buccaneer.

“By the way, old dear, would you like to put 2 bucks on Dempsey for Thursday’s fight? If so, I have five iron men that say he will knock Willard so cold he’ll float home on ice.” She apparently didn’t have two dollars or she declined. The matter was not mentioned again. At least in the extant letters.

Then, apropos the ubiquitous mud and Lucius’s Klondike humour: “Have a real nice story to tell you. Thursday night Wally Whyte and I started out for Waterloo, where Wally has an uncle, the day it rained so hard. We only got out 5 miles when we got stuck and decided to enjoy

the downpour and walk home. We haven't been able to play golf or tennis much because of the mosquitoes, so decided we needed the exercise. Before starting home we spent half-an-hour digging out gumbo with our hands from around the wheels and fenders. We managed then to turn the car around only to land in a ditch beside the road. After looking over the situation, we decided to leave the car and waded out, as the 5 miles home made for a good refreshing stroll. The only thing of note on the way in, was when Wally decided to kick the trunk of a lone poplar, injuring his foot, slowing our progress somewhat. Reminded me of our Central Bute trip. Except that if you had been there I know a Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost would have turned up."

Despite his many imbroglios with nature, man and beast over the years, Lucius rarely raised his voice. Though when he did, as the Hun remarked, all hell usually broke loose.

Following his residency in Toronto he took up a conditional position at the Warren Clinic in Cambridge, Ontario, a clinic where they wore high studded collars, bowler hats and kept their shoes spick and span. By then he and Elspeth were married and inseparable. The clinic posting was but a brief sojourn, however. Elspeth perhaps first sensed the unease in her own recognition of her husband's inverted snobbery. The clinic's head, Dr. Kenneth Warren, an aging gaunt Victorian type with a keen sensitivity to slight and innuendo, had personally shown them what he believed to be a suitable flat. It was humbler than Elspeth imagined. She had mutely stared at the two hot plates in the kitchen lacking an oven, a silent look that may have slighted the obeisance expected. She had glanced at Lucius and not immediately noted Dr. Warren's impatience. They laughed buoyantly if intermittently that night, the night David's older brother was conceived. So David chose to imagine. He liked to think she may have said something like — "I guess this means we make our own meals" — but, as we've intimated, he was ransacking his past not chronicling it, though many memories and a few artefacts did enhance the pilgrimage.

The next morning Dr. Warren called Lucius into his ample tidy office, the adjoining walls decorated with landscape prints of Turner and Constable and his own degrees, all gilt framed. A box of hand puppets aligned his large desk which was bare but for an appointment blotter, a typed Resumé of Clinic Protocol for Applicants, and pictures of his six children. A certified pediatrician and lay Presbyterian minister, with a durable pride in his matinée idol image, he was not unmindful of looking a little like the suave British heir to the throne, and admirably comported himself when his partner, Alfred Dickerson, a small wheezing quipster, sometimes called him Eddie. This morning he wished to certify the care of some patients before he went on holiday. He did not inquire about the Willardson's flat — which had been augmented with an oven.

"As you know, being an associate of a clinic draws the line rather strictly between supporters

and non-supporters. Practices are earned not corralled. When a man leaves here the contract stipulates that he shall not practice within a radius of 50 miles for five years. I mention this today because a former member of the clinic has opened a practice near Waterloo, and although we shan't file a formal complaint with the Board, we do expect our staff to steer clear of any dealing with the rash Dr. Baldwin. I shall be away a fortnight, and believe my patients can be adequately served by yourself and my partner, Dr. Dickerson. You will handle the children and some newly pregnant mothers, including young Lucie Montgomery, none of whom should come to term before I return. Naturally, you will call me if any complication arises." He paused to glance down at the list of protocols on his blotter, then nodded. "Ah yes, I notice one omission on my secretary's list of the clinic's rules of comportment, which you would have received, though I'm sure by now you must know that we will not employ a physician who uses liquor."

Dr. Willardson wished Dr. Warren a satisfying holiday and pledged his assurance that Dr. Warren's patients would be served with due care and diligence. Dr. Warren anticipated a smile saying, "You may, of course avail yourself of my careful selection of hand puppets, which I have found over the years to be efficacious in calming young Barrymores. Each is sterilized afterward, of course."

The following afternoon, about the time Dr. Willardson was examining a child with symptomatic torticollis or 'wry neck', farmer Elias Semple was getting impatient with the time it was taking for his wife to deliver their forth child. He had been through this before and there was usually nothing to it, other than the customary bellyaching. Elias, a heavy bald lumbering man, his once powerful shoulders stooped by years of backbreaking toil and family feuds, was noted among his neighbours for his facility in repairing dated farm machinery and neglected fences. If he spent many hours repairing his walking gang, lever and disc harrows, Cockshutt shoe drill, scrub-breaker and McCormick mower, all of which he bought at auction, it was because he prided himself on being self-sufficient. He got a Massey Harris four-foot binder to do five feet and again rued the slyness if not perfidy of the managerial class. His red-faced wife, Ethel, usually an able homemaker, supplementary farm hand, and devoted mother, had this time round rather lost it though. For at least a couple of months she imagined something was amiss, and not just her frequent dizzy spells and sickness — these she had had before, yet still managed to oil the twin-team harness, tend the one Percheron's lacerated leg, milk their five cows, feed the geese, chickens and pigs, empty the trash, pick and wash the ready carrots, dills and tomatoes, even scald the jars in season — mostly before lunch. Now she barely got to the poultry when she would have to lean on her second child, a thin boy who had a problem with his bowels — something called intussusception, as it was eventually diagnosed, a kind of involution. Mrs.

Penner, her closest neighbour, and the area midwife, urged her to take Tim to the hospital in Cambridge. Their older boy, Ryan, left home after an argument with his father — an episode expunged from the family almanac. Cheerful Tim rarely complained, though his occasional retching worried Ethel that he wasn't getting the right food. He'd finally been treated in the outpatient clinic in Cambridge with limited success, and been home a fortnight when her birthing pains began.

At the outset of Ethel's confinement Mrs. Penner, the area midwife, realized she might not manage by herself and called Dr. Baldwin, who had recently opened a practice in the area. But Dr. Baldwin had been called away on an urgent matter and would likely be away for some time. By the time Mrs. Penner reached the Waterloo dispensary and Out Patient Clinic, the presiding nurse had closed the office and gone home. In desperation, she called an operator in Kitchener. Could she be connected with a doctor near Waterloo? The operator found a couple of names, the second of which answered after several rings. Dr. Lucius Willardson was in his pyjamas, following a late hot-chicken sandwich — his first time out in weeks. He had just climbed into bed when the hallway phone jingled. Could he come out to a confinement on a farm just east of Waterloo at Dundee? The woman at the other end, a midwife, was distraught, the baby long overdue and the position she guessed a perilous breech. She had never seen such a protracted labor and would do her best until he arrived. Lucius looked at his cold feet when he hung up. "Tout fini," he said, his phrase of choice for curtailed respite. He was not encouraged by the added request, on behalf of the husband, who was loath to leave, to pick up some needed groceries on the way out — at a juncture called Five Corners which Lucius must pass on his way. Elspeth barely sighed.

"Don't wait up, old chum." A stolid advisement that would become a standard refrain.

To a youngster such phrases come out of the blue, but come they do, 'old chum' and 'sis' being the mainstays. Such banter had all but disappeared by the time his memory took such words to heart — words he put down to affable familiarity not indifference.

About the time Lucius fetched Elias' groceries, Lucie Montgomery, the pretty niece of the reeve of Cambridge, was suddenly incapacitated by an excruciating pain and taken to bed. She was still five weeks to term and formed part of Dr. Warren's coterie of primiparae. The Montgomerys had been going to Dr. Warren and before him the clinic's founder, Dr. Halbert, all their lives. Elspeth answered the ring from Lucie's anxious husband Edgar, and explained that Lucius had been called out of town on an urgent matter. She doubted her husband would be available in any case, given the distance he had to travel. Edgar then phoned Dr. Dickerson, who had been liberal with the sherry that night at a home gathering of his sulky-racing cronies.

Learning of Willardson's unexpected absence, Dr. Dickerson felt Dr. Carnegie, who'd just finished a residency in paediatrics, could handle the matter and phoned him. Dr. Carnegie, having just got to bed, climbed out onto a cold linoleum floor and fetched his homburg. When he reached the hospital and examined Lucie, he phoned Dr. Dickerson saying he would need some help. Dickerson, who was then reminiscing in wheezing tones about a virtuosic skill in Notting Hill, was miffed. For a time he thought he'd better not go, having started, as they had, on the rye. Then, ruefully, he changed his mind and sought a fresh cucumber and the Vogeler mouthwash. Dr. Warren, himself, spent the evening playing bridge in a cottage at the Briars. He won first prize, two tickets to the play, *Peg O My Heart*, and enjoyed a second glass of ginger beer.

When Lucius arrived at the Semple farm house, Elias said his wife was not in a hurry this time, poor woman, and happily gathered up the groceries which he had apparently waited patiently for, especially the Smucker's rice pudding. His wife, he noted, had not made pudding for over a month, an impulsive remark that prompted him to draw the doctor's attention to Tim's tetchy stomach — a ruse that only addled his regard of the sweet confection when removed from the bag. He offered some to Tim but Tim shook his head. Tim still imagined his mother's repeated wails unusual, his few glimpses of the scene in the kitchen from the sitting room suggestive of someone stuck in a snow drift. He was dumfounded. "Come away Tim, she's done it before now." Though from his father's sidelong glance at his mother propped up on the kitchen table, Tim was far from sure.

The following morning, the senior Mrs. Montgomery sat by her daughter-in-law whom she rarely commiserated with. "It's hideous," Lucie said again, still smarting and roiling from the premature birth the night before. Her husband tended to agree. The object that prompted the edgy dismayed stares was a suggestively frost-bitten female baby with a hair lip who's head, left arm and leg, twitched. Dr. Carnegie had problems with the tucked leg breach presentation of the babe and possibly damaged the baby's head and neck, as was apparent to Dr. Dickerson when he belatedly arrived, an ominous swelling that suggested a brachial plexus injury. Mrs. Montgomery had asked if there was any hope. Dr. Dickerson, against his better judgement, remarked that babies were astonishingly resilient, and with time...Lucie, whom he remembered to be a bright if fanciful child, looked like a hoyden then, someone aiming a rock at your windscreen. He found Dr. Carnegie in the dispensary, unshaven, bad-breathed, bloodshot, yawning in spite of himself, a blood stain on his thigh, cup of coffee in hand.

After a summary of the adverse protracted labor, Dickerson turned abruptly and headed back into the hall. That fellow Willardson was preparing for his certification was he not? And

was he not the best obstetrician they had outside of Dr. Warren. So where the devil was he at the time? His anger at himself for not diligently hunting him down was displaced by a dislike of young Turpin eyes that quite shocked him when he later thought about it.

Elsbeth was up and reading when Lucius returned from the Semple farm house. The sun had already cleared the horizon. It had been a long night. He explained how both the Semple child and mother had survived, the mother only just, and that he urged Elias to have no more children. Apparently not the first such recommendation. He also examined Tim, at Mrs. Penner's request, and made allowance for him to come into the Burdock hospital as a patient of lesser means. The initial outpatient treatment had left needless complications Willardson felt.

Dr. Dickerson, in turn, when he contacted Willardson, displayed none of his engaging bonhomie. Yes, Willardson remembered Lucie, a good looking and impetuous youngster, not too thrilled about her condition perhaps, more impatient he thought than diffident, but normal in all respects regarding her pregnancy he believed, though he only examined her once. Dickerson was for a time nearly speechless when he learned where Lucius had been. "You went where? To assist a, a midwife...near where? Dundee? Oh God." With each question the incendiary incredulity rose. "Are you worried about Tim's coming to our hospital, Dr. Dickerson?" Lucius managed to ask during one of Dr. Dickerson's glottal-stop pauses. Lucius was by then, as he would tell Elspeth, "fed up with a conceited ass doing a good impression of himself." As with many sly drinkers, Dr. Dickerson shied away from the dirty work in times of stress. Dr. Carnegie was hovering nearby in the office. Dr. Dickerson handed him the phone. "I have to go and pee." Dr. Carnegie's guileless and sobering narrative to Lucius ended with, "You and Dr. Warren were unavailable." He apologized for the hoarseness in his voice; he was coming down with a sinus cold. The 'territorial issue' wasn't broached.

At the censorship hearing, Lucius was at first miffed then incredulous and perhaps a little surprised for finding himself at a loss. Being so fluently and unctuously condescended to he was denied that moment of action, that summary defensive fervour that peeks early. Protracted stilted discourse foils pique. He listened in numbed silence. Dr. Warren's self-dramatic posturing took time to unfold and was seamless, words too ornate and fluent to leave an entry — without one becoming the rash imprudent simpleton Dr. Warren was alluding to. "...I can only but remind myself that I too was young, and sometimes impetuous, yet that never behooved my seniors and betters to consider it anything but folly to..." By the time Dr. Warren had finished all Lucius felt was a slight pity for himself. It seemed an inchoate sense of disengagement was all he might now draw on. Resort to distemper here, among these seasoned windjammers, would beg the question. He had wanted to say that he had attended a very ill woman and her baby

daughter; the fact that she was 'out of bounds' he deemed irrelevant. All he said was that his resignation would be on Dr. Warren's desk the following morning. Overdue, he would belatedly determine. Though it came as a surprise to Dr. Warren, who intended a formal reprimand, to be appended to the clinic record, for he could not imagine a young MD relinquishing a position at the prestigious Warren Clinic. The others in attendance were as amazed at the apparent peremptoriness. But they didn't know the junior member's deep ingrained dislike of preciousness and stuffiness. If he had needed an excuse to leave, as he thought later, Providence — in allowing the incident — provided one. It was not, Elspeth believed, the time to tell him that he would be a father in about seven months. Dr. Wilkie had phoned to confirm the test when Lucius went before the hastily convened stewards of the Warren Clinic. In a private afterword Dr. Dickerson offered his best wishes. And condolences — "On the other matter."

When Lucius entered their flat Elspeth had long since pieced the scenario together. Mrs. Semple was out of bounds, a patient of limited means that another had undertaken to provide for in a cavalier manner. Worst still, Lucius had ostensibly slighted a patient he was under contract to attend. Under the circumstances, the question of assisting a busky midwife in another's practice might not be connived at.

Lucius said he needed a night out. Old Chum agreed. They went to a vaudeville show and later ate a hot-turkey sandwich. She noticed that he was occasionally shaking. He was much too fond of her then to settle the anger on anyone but himself. This she knew, and cherished him and her child the more for it. It would be the beginning of the quiet communications. He would write on a vacant page in his diary about a boxer who only saw red and got clobbered when his opponent wore white trunks.

Lucius completed his service to the Warren clinic within the month. Mainly office work. Dickerson gave him a reference, leaving out only the regret in the departure of their conscientious newcomer. He asked Doc not to hang it in a new office. Lucius was grateful for the personable farewell.

In his final week at the clinic Lucius mentioned to Elspeth a reply from the council in a district whose population center was a mining town in Alberta. The council needed a family physician. Elspeth was soon packed and ready, her pretty face already touched by the campaign patience that would over the years change to a more impassive and habitual compunction. The obligatory finesse. In Alexo she would give birth to her first child, the happy faced lad who would survive a bout of influenza but not a freak accident years later in the cab of a creosote tanker truck. A new beginning then, from the bottom up. The why and wherefore his father acted as he did, David never had the heart to look for a more fulsome contretemps or egregious

lapse. That an ambitious yet conscientious professional would descend from a posh city clinic to little more than a rural mining town begged the question. The eventual move to Burdock, Saskatchewan, coincided with the new unique Health Region No. 1 in the province's South West corner that Premier Tommy Douglas devised (which became Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson's template for the durable Canadian government-funded medical plan). The move augured an ingrained idealism in his father David would always cling to. His own guarded tenet.

But, with his memories of that period largely exhausted, it was time for David to stand down, to let the later stories develop their own dynamic. His own recollections, spare notes and a few pithy letters, some from the Gryphon himself, and late book on a notable medical clinic in Bern, Switzerland, inspired the following chapters in this patchy picaresque tale. Memory he imagined, in his late pantaloons days, to resemble the progress of his eyebrows from precise lucidity, the sleekness of a tide-rinsed algae, to the higgledy-piggledy bosque of late maturity, with its wayward 'antlers'. He sometimes pictured himself as a boreal moose pondering its image in a glacial lake, where many other reflections vied for his attention, ever changing, yielding both dismay and wonder. The Gryphon's discourse on inequality and his own late reckoning with happenstance cast a pall on the question of What Made Thee. Still, the spare stories he knew begged a fuller realistic accounting. If he had to fill in some blanks, so be it. No one wanted the story more 'whole' than he.

PART TWO: LONERS

PIANO

Vida Semple seemed once again lost to her popish demons, so her apostate-minded father Elias thought. His wife Ethel had intended to name her last live child Violet, after her great grandmother, but couldn't frame her words very well toward the end, her death being as excruciating as Vida's birth, Elias thought. Anyway, 'Vida' stuck, so too the child's late self-absorption, the rocking back and forth while strangely humming and raptly fiddling with a ball of string. A rapt abstraction that seemed both ancient and perdurable. Usually after the tears. She could have been, in her fussy form, absorption, red hair, lavish freckles and blue dress, a popish gravestone, Elias thought; you would need a plow to budge her someday. It was surely all that stuff and nonsense that Mother Scholastica England put into the girl's head. He was mindful of Romish influences. He was no fool. Such a pother the nun made over the loss of the old piano in the cellar when it was finally taken out and sold. And him almost forgetting it was there. How glad he was when Ted Dyck came and took the old instrument away. The sight of

Vida touching, fingering its keys had dismayed, appalled him. She was in the grip of some demon. No abnormally slow child does that on her own, smites the keys so readily without a poltergeist spreading the fingers. The nun who taught music appreciation had noted that Vida could pick out tunes on the school piano. She had trouble reading music but could readily play a song the school choir performed. Sadly, the busy school day permitted no time for private lessons. The nun urged Elias to consider enrolling Vida in some. Elias managed a grim mute smile, for the noise Vida had made the one evening he actually heard her thumping away on the old piano, he wouldn't want in a graveyard let alone a cellar. It was plain the girl needed somedays more than a good shaking. Which the new housekeeper, Mrs. no-neck Caruthers, an old battle-ax would not stand for. Thank god he had managed to put his boys beyond the snares of Catholic bunk. Though the older boy was now in league with Elias's younger brother, the whipper snapper who buttered up the old lady into giving him the upper acreage when he, Elias, had been the one who broke, tilled and cultivated it. Such that the nostrums of his late devout wife now sorely chaffed: *He who has little, shall have less; and even that shall be taken from him.* Mutely he now looked into his knurled arthritic fingers, twisted in pressing, turning the plow in that quarter section, in reining out the remaining tree trunks, and laying the foundations of the barn and tool shed. Two fingers he may have broken and not attended. By himself he had done it all! But because he had not been enrolled in the army in '39 — he had not passed the physical due to his deformed hand — and had not confirmed his boys — for these lapses he was punished. So it seemed. Young Tim he still might have relied on, but Tim was very frail. His trip to the hospital did little good. And young pale Sarah he rarely thought of any more. She died years before. A cut on her thumb triggered a nasty infection that spread throughout her small frail body.

After Ethel gave birth to Vida, his arthritis became acute and his asthma worse, and he no longer had the strength to do alone what he and Ethel had managed before. So when Ethel died of a stroke, after battling a stubborn peritonitis that followed a still birth, he moved to Saskatchewan, to Burdock, where he knew the Klassen family, friends of his mother's, and got a job delivering coal. He still could not bear to think of how the farm had been. Or Ethel, for that matter, and her dying wish that Vida be enrolled in the convent school. One doctor, long before thoughtful doc Willardson arrived to attend to Ethel, told him to lay off, even suggested he wash more. Easy if you never get your hands dirty. Now he waited for his supper in the age-old stone cottage he rented from old Andy Aiken, one of Burdock's first residents.

For a decade this solitary dwelling stood on the bald prairie as a megalith at the northern edge of the coulee. Recently a few homes and a new school encroached. Further West an older

residential district included the home of the recently arrived doc Willardson, who had attended Ethel when she gave birth to Vida back East. Willardson at least took the time to listen to your many complaints, and in doing so provided some amelioration, while advising against too much medication.

A retired school janitor named Andy Aiken lived then in Burdock's Riverdeen district, near the Kiwanis park which bordered the Burdock Creek. The old, nearly toothless gent always brought presents for Vida. Elias had been annoyed how she would jabber so to the old ninny and not to him, burbling sometimes like a cloth salesman. Andy had a vicious unsightly goat who whistled and once bit Elias. Andy claimed the goat could sing. The goat was a familiar as sure as a Magpie had a tail. Against his express instructions, Vida visited Andy's hovel in Riverdeen. One day he saw her patting the goat! He'd soundly scolded her that night.

A week later he uncovered the old pianoforte with the cracked sound-board in the cellar, a casualty of the trip from Bremerhaven by his great grandmother. Elias needed more room for Mrs. Caruthers and the piano had to go. That 'uncovering' a hovering Vida had taken note of and spent a while fingering the keys, a venture he brusquely discouraged. Thus was it a terrible shock to wake up in the middle of the night, just before the piano was removed, and hear the eerie noise coming from it, a descant to Mrs. Caruthers' organ rumble snoring! Like nothing you would expect from a piano. Strange, uncanny tinkling. Chilling because it was so bizarre. No real music, no tune. Like the child's head, cluttered by perverse, idolatrous confusion. Senseless clatter. The kind of notes one must hear in the crannies of hell. The illumination was the giveaway. Mrs. Carruthers must have placed the finicky lamp, taken Vida's wish to visit the piano again to heart. Well, the old piano was removed the next day.

At last Mrs. Caruthers brought the stew. She was skimping on the sausage again. Yet he was too distraught that night to further scold or inquire. Why was he always so close to tears these days? He had endured the rising fire in his joints before. The gripping jarring pain. Like the thought of his mother, his own dear mother, giving the upper acreage to Lamda. She had always favoured him. She was ill when she made her will. Or Lamda had done some fiddling. Such was the suspicion he could not put from his mind — that Lamda may have. I smote him in my anger...but he ran wild and went his willful way. Lamda. Hadn't Lamda said that once in the army you learned a thing or two? Of late, Elias had never felt so deceived, so cheated, so bitter, so alone. With a boy who could barely heft his school bag, and a daughter who dribbled and played with a tangle of string, humming birdlike as she rocked back and forth. A daughter mature before her time and dense as oak. Who'd have to be taken from school. It did her little good and she cried less at home.

But what might he do with her, with little big Vida? Leave her home to dangle her knot of string? Well at least he wouldn't have to buy the crayons she was said to chew in school. She often put bright things in her mouth, bright things her mother had worn or given her. When it started, Ethel was too sick to get the child to stop. He had no idea. Such terrible sounds and hollerings the child must hear. The work of a tireless and merciless spirit. Now she sat looking into her soup. Even the bright coloured pasta Mrs. Caruthers had tempted her with before, seemed to have run its course. He could feel the tears on his cheeks, tears all would see. He must look a sight, and make a better effort to get the coal dust from around his eyes. He sensed he was on trial here, the eyes of Vida's demon upon him.

RECORDS

Andy Aiken, the aging nearly toothless former janitor who lived in the tiny cottage at the edge of the Riverdeen section of Burdock, decided the sample introductory records to the Columbia Records Rare Masters Series were best given to Thelma, the school teacher. He had given the records a hearing, but they didn't improve with listening. Like his gaffer honey-wagon father, Andy liked best a traditional slip jig or reel. He spent a great deal on the gramophone, and looked about for bargains in the record department of the Co-op. The introductory collection was free, he now sadly concluded, because so few people must be buying it. He had made application to the Rare Master's Series thinking this would be a special treat. But such fare as Debussy's Bergamasque Suite, and his Estampes — Pagodes, Soirée Dans Grenade and Jardins Sous La Pluie, 'images' for piano — and Stravinsky's Les Noces and Concerto for Woodwinds and Piano, were definitely over-stocked items in Andy's estimation. Some folk might appreciate them, perhaps Thelma might be one of them. Though that too seemed improbable. Years ago he asked her to marry him, but she said no. With a kindness and sensibility he always knew she had in abundance. Somehow Les Noces didn't fit in with his idea of her, but he didn't want to throw the records out. The oddest thing was the keenness, indeed almost mesmerization, chubby little Vida displayed listening to his new gramophone — to these very records! He assumed it might be the first gramophone she'd heard. The novelty of it. Her rambling chatter stopped completely; she sat on his one good chair, hands folded, head inclined, quiet and still as a cat, but for her quiet humming. When one record finished she begged him to play another with an urgency that astonished. Andy had no idea then of a rare musical savant, and would be dead when Vida's icon piano playing was showcased for another rare eccentric, the enigmatic European medical genius Felix Muerner. That Vida should retain a surprisingly faithful rendering of La Soirée Dans Grenade, not note perfect perhaps, but breathtakingly faithful and

apt — one of Andy's piano offerings — after hearing it only twice, was something poor Elias imagined the night he heard her play to be the machination of a terrible and relentless demon that seized the girl's mind by way of the ubiquitous goat, the danger when one got too close to the rigmarole of popish superstition and idolatry, Vida's fate at that first convent school Ethel enrolled her in. Practically out of her arms they took her. All his life as far back as Elias remembered, perhaps beginning with his great grandfather, the papacy had been deemed the curse of civilization, with all its spiritual hoodoo, its poisonous incense, dour litany and numbing liturgy from which there seemed no entrance or exit, its full fledged dogma laying waste all independence or else. From the earliest popes on, humanity had been sandbagged, condemned to live in maze-like servitude. A true man made his own salvation, discounting how one might have a brother like Lamda. His poor dear mother was totally taken in, whom he had been too busy to care for at the last — how could he, doing all the work? He could not help but see himself now reduced to his often downcast Vida, humming, drooling, faintly rocking...awaiting a further scolding or caning. Though it seemed he was nearly beyond caring. Only his tears might remind him of his folly and weakness. His inability to breathe, to feel anything but the fire in his joints. Even Mrs. Caruthers was beginning to notice. Semple. That he was. Elias. Crybaby. Reduced now to delivering coal for a shyster. Often of such poor quality that only half of it might burn. The rich dark loam of the farm, with its rolling hills of Poplar, Birch and Aspen, divided among his enemies. A fate Vida's infernal music had vivified!

FIELDMAN

Yuri Sergeevich Vlasov, a Soviet KGB field agent, took note of the dark clouds growing in the North East. It would be his last night on the open prairie. His mission was nearly finished. A sampling of the new winter wheat varieties, and information about their trash covers and companion crops that had been developed at the Experimental Farm just outside Burdock, would be gleaned the following night. This last minute heist was in response to his friend Nechayev — St. Nevskiy they called him — who asked him to assess the grain program at the farm. Yuri's original mandate, codenamed Cedar, was to find places in the Cypress Hills for arms' caches in anticipation of the coming war with America, while keeping an eye open for the wily Igor Gouzenko, the cypher clerk who had disappeared. Nechayev, then working out of the Ottawa Residency, abruptly prioritized Yuri's assignment. Before Yuri's posting in the West, in Burdock, Saskatchewan, Nechayev emphatically instructed him to secure a packet of the new rust-resistant wheat seeds from the Experimental Farm at Burdock. The deposition of the seeds would be given in a letter placed by a cutout in the CPR station in Waldeck. The door to a toilet

stall in the CPR station would be chalked on the door jamb. If unmarked Yuri would leave and await further directions. If marked, the seed delivery instructions would be pasted on the back of the toilet tank. The Ottawa Rezidency, Yuri knew, would be in turmoil after Gouzenko's flight. Everyone would be suspect. He would be in a limbo himself for a time. He and Nechayev had discussed the farm matter earlier, before Yuri's infiltration. The seeds and cultivation data, so discursive to his original mandate, would help begin a seed culture in the academy near Kharkov without the waste of at least another year or two. Given the chaos in Soviet agriculture under the Lysenkoists, time was as scarce as a viable seed culture. Nechayev had assumed a risk in requesting such a supplementary deed — a risk for both of them, and the cutout who awaited the seed package! Yuri could hardly believe things were as bad as Nechayev inferred, yet he would follow through with the request. He was determined, even though he might never hear from Nechayev again if a Lysenko loyalist or shill learned of the order.

Yuri worked then part time as a caretaker at the Experimental Farm. His papers identified him as George Horlick, a recently demobilized veteran. This cover job in Burdock astonished him the more he reconnoitered the seed development sheds, learned of the late research into one exceptional rust free seed's cultivation and the farm machinery needed for it. He was also amazed how similar the land here was to his birthplace around Omsk. The open mother of pearl sky, the smoothly waving fields of wheat in late summer. He often wondered if his resourceful and fearless case officer would in fact survive the invigilation now underway. But what else could he do? Could they do? Nechayev had convinced him in their last face to face exchange that the late Stalinist agrarians under the tutelage of the wily Lysenko were hopelessly mired in ideology, their science an utter fraud, and someone would have to offer or retrieve a supply of hardy untainted seeds to begin anew when these charlatans miserably failed yet again. With the existing viable stocks perilously low, and mostly attenuated, Nechayev did not think the purges could last — one could end up ruining the entire Ukrainian harvest if the maniacs and their flunkies kept on. Already there were many rumours at the farm, among some Mennonite workers, of shortages, of confiscated grain, and Ukrainian children with scurvy and distended bellies, though whether from the failed agrarians or some other cause was not yet clear. In any case, his stealing of this unique and, for a time, irreplaceable packet of seeds could mean life or death for hundreds of thousands in the decade to come. So the courageous and daring Nechayev had assured him, even as he spelled out the ongoing operation to 'seed' the countryside near the foothill oil pipeline with arms and explosives, in anticipation of the coming war with America. The Rezidency heads believed the overlords in the Kremlin thought a war more or less imminent, Nechayev claimed.

What served to hearten his current resolve, indeed keenness, to accomplish these dual demands came the night before last when he hiked a short distance from the Semple cottage. A light shone through the slit in the coal bin doors. He was about to increase his pace when the sound of a piano touched his ears. The sounds came and went on the fresh, swelling breeze. Despite the sad state of the instrument, he recognized some music his sister played the last and final time he was allowed to visit with her. His induction into the KGB had necessitated a truncation from his family until he was retired, an unlikely event he belatedly realized now that he had undertaken this wayward heist for an old and trusted friend. He might be a ghost to the end of his life, possessed of a knowledge only death could release. To question the Lysenko purists then was the guarantee of a summary demotion or even a boxcar to nowhere. But now, in this new land, to actually hear such acutely haunting music, played as well as the piano might allow, the touch surprisingly deft, purposeful and emotive! He had to see, his well conditioned cautionary instincts shrill in his ears as an arctic gale.

He must not be seen in this area of Burdock — not now. Not this night. Yet he could not hold back. Be still you hecklers. No one is about. It's nearly dark.

Quietly he traversed the distance to the cellar and listened, craning an ear near the heavy cellar door. He could barely believe what he was hearing. The piece, *La Soirée Dans Grenade*, one of Debussy's most famous pieces, softly played as if by the wind itself, leaving out only the inessentials, if such there were...a piece his sister played that last time he saw her...he could almost hear a groan, his voice clearing itself of disbelief, of the terrible homesickness that often reduced him to a quavering reminiscer.

What a fool he might be, to tarry and be observed, connected, remembered here...he had seen the town's eccentric hermit, Hoddy Swinton, steal food from the Semple housekeeper's satchel, recently a garlic ring and loaf of bread, and Hoddy he knew was very good at 'displacing' criticism...thus to risk being seen there, supposedly listening to a rapt playing of his sister's favourite composer!

At last he peered into the locked cellar, through the orange slit that would be a clear giveaway were he seen. In the dim interior lit only by a coal oil lamp, he glimpsed a young girl, a mere child, a fruit mite, red hair alight, cheeks pink, freckled, mouth open, saliva flagging a lower lip, rocking slightly as she played by memory, her fingers moving as if by decree! He was dumfounded, dumbstruck! He stayed much too long. She played another, Debussy piece, the wistful pensive *Pagoes*, another piece his sister fondly played. Again the child's hands moved as if by dispensation, by ethereal command. Then as descant her own voice, singing as a tight echo, a strange sweet voice, pure, ineffable, what one heard or imagined in the finer choirs. He

must be losing his marbles. He was going haywire, berserk. Imagining, dreaming like this during the crucial final hours of a major operation. He too could end up in an impromptu grave. Or worse.

Then a rowdy commotion in the cellar, which promptly stilled the piano, caused him to pull away, the risk was too great, someone would surely see his form against the old cellar doors. His stealth and secrecy were paramount now that the final assay and packaging of the exceptional rust resistant seeds had been made. There must be no suspicion of himself. He had given his notice that week, saying he was returning East. The cultivation techniques he had long since copied and would place in a dead letter drop along with the seed packet. He must not, would not fail here. During his last work day he would carefully take note of the special packaging labels above the pigeon holes in the field office, to readily identify the one he'd steal that evening, the office door lock an easy breach. He couldn't risk a flashlight, and must be sure in the dark, and three or four packets instead of the latest veridical one, marked DARx4A, would make for prolonged and unmitigated extra toil. It would be a cold night. But he must not return to his housekeeping room. He would instead seek out one of the sheds in the Riverdeen area of Burdock that night. One by the creek. A better stealth cover to and from the farm. He must rid his consciousness of all distractions — including even this wondrous, rare, dumfounding child and her awesome mesmerizing gift.

He left the farm that day via the coulee, skirting the old dump at the bottom. Children played there in the afternoons, one young boy in particular, an absorbed, solitary child, much as he was long long ago — in a similar old glacial ditch, which instead of mud and a rusting auto had been filled with grain the collective did not want falling into the hands of the state bailiffs. The sound now, in this otherwise empty coulee dump, of a loose car fender rattling in a gust of wind, triggered a sudden foreboding. The wind, he noted, had grown much stronger and the sky had darkened. The rusting engineless car to which the fender belonged served as a novel distraction for several youngsters, including the loner child.

On the brow of the coulee a sharp full-bodied wind struck him head on. In its howl several strident voices demanded the fullest explanation of his delay. He looked for some familiar landmark to descry the straightest direction to the Riverdeen area. A dark briar of spindly bushes ended in an unrecognized clump of willows. Long bereft of leaves the nearest branches thrummed like swiftly wielded switches, the kind sometimes used in a punishment cell to defer to the injunction not to break bones. A lone campfire-charred poplar loomed on the other side, moaning softly as he approached, 'arthritic' branches bared to the wind. In the open prairie several whirls of what Canadians called Russian Thistle tumbled by, unicycling with aimless fury

into the mushrooming night, a shroud of grit and dust cauling the near witness. But an hour before syrupy Indian summer sunshine spilled over a few odd stray fragments of china, the leftovers of a broken picnic utensil perhaps. Nearby a small carcass, fur lined the day before, now crawled with long orange beetles. The carcass itself heralded the bluffs that curtained the downward slope to the creek. He felt certain the lone child would have noted all of this. The 'other' spy.

The gate to the old cemetery appeared on his right and signalled the shortest descent to the Riverdeen area. Stark cat tails by the verge slyly beckoned. Here the Pragmatist, as he thought of the boy's dog, a coal black retriever, might have been waiting, surfeited and panting, not it seemed disappointed to see a large stranger — a resolute human the mutt might slipstream behind to get to those areas his sleek black form would otherwise be suspect in. Many times Yuri had watched the dark smudge darting about the horizon, emerging then blending into the blackness. He thought he did see something, something not unlike the Pragmatist, running up the further brow of the coulee. Instead it was the boy, running, skirting like a coyote. He too may have overstayed a rendezvous, a curfew perhaps, played truant from his supper, his homework. So alike had he been. So visually consequent in his habit of movement, and perhaps thought. Another Canadian he must be on his guard to eschew, circumvent...nearly a mirror image he fondly thought. The overlooked observer. Briefly the boy glanced his way, an unexpected mutual sighting that lingered for a time, as if they had once known one another.

On seeing the strange figure, young David Willardson sensed anew a reprimand at school that day, a recollection that hastened his pace by the old gravel pit on his homeward trek from a visit to the coulee dump. The evenings of fall seemed spitefully short.

At first he thought the shadowy figure he glimpsed in the coulee to be old man Semple. The Semple's stone cottage lay just back of the cemetery. But why would he be going the other way? It reminded him of another stranger, the day before, the one who brought their dog Ali home in the back of a pickup. Ali had been sick and put down. The coal black retriever lay as an oddly haggard form, bizarrely awry, unbelievably still. It was the frozen stillness, an inaptness that puzzled and cautioned. Like a stuffed replica of an animal knocked on its side. 'Dead dog' he could not then assimilate. His mother's face he did not fully comprehend, though at the time, as now, he sensed a sheepishness for not yielding to tears as she had. He imagined shouting the retriever's name and even hear the responsive bark which, to the uninitiated, could evoke impiety. Ali too loved the coulee, this gash in an otherwise imperturbable landscape left by a feral glacial might. He would have given the stranger a fright this night. Heavens, he would

have taken after him like a coyote flushing a rabbit. Or maybe not. He could be selective sometimes — sensing whom he might follow into the Riverdeen area, with its numerous small chicken coops. Several prairie chicken suddenly flapped awkwardly out of David's way, haggling, squawking, bickering. The streetlights of the new residential district nearest the coulee had just come on, igniting an aurora against a dusky horizon. Most buildings were remarkably alike, rivalling the cleverness with which bees duplicated cells. Soon the coulee would be partly filled to accommodate more, and the imagined metropolis he knew so well, embedded in the soft mire at the bottom, sentenced to memory. He looked behind but the man had disappeared. Perhaps he had to go to the bathroom suddenly. People sometimes relieved themselves in the ditch at the bottom of the coulee. His own block, next the new subdivision, came into view with the Stanley-Crossfield mansion, a perimeter fortress that filled the chasm between the smaller jack-o'-lantern squares winking at him from the other end — his end. Patches of the first snow still lay on the Crossfield lawn, vivifying jets of light from the bay windows. He tried to picture amidst the wisp-like Crossfield girls their huge, slobbering, golden Lab, those scrawny tidy inklings who wore their halos in church and who, most painful of all, were instructed to shun scummy chaps like him. Particularly rankling were the memories of the two occasions when the Crossfield matron herself, a tall thick-ankled Nordic fury, came to life with a broom she wielded with wanton skill, after catching Ali and himself, a budding pyromaniac, beneath the Crossfield veranda in the dirt and cob-webbed filth of a quarter century— with the youngest of her daughters! An opening at the opposite end of the veranda prevented a flagrant scene. But the second time this exit was feverishly sought out it wasn't reached in time, and the turmoil that ensued unprecedented. He now sent a stone ricocheting off the approaching curb. He and Ali's escape talent was insufficient to elude Mrs. Crossfield and her large Golden lab, who came late to the fracas. Ali suffered the most, a drubbing from a rival canine he never really recovered from, but was considered the least: for one rare minute of his life he had endured, most disagreeably, the fabled life of a dog. Later, as David got a gonzo scolding from his own mother, Ali's jet black form hid underneath the stilted warming cabinet next their stove, a refuge in acute periods of distress, where he would not be stepped upon or stumbled over. The self-same kitchen David noted was now in partial darkness. On this, the second time he'd returned home inexcusably late.

As he approached the orange squares of his home's glassed-in porch he rehearsed the scolding he might get, perhaps a repeat of the one Guy Fysh got earlier that afternoon which was still acute in his memory. The recollection invoked the school drawing period when it was discovered that chubby, red-haired, red faced, blue eyed Vida Semple had, again, smudged her drawing and sucked one of her crayons. Orange marks strafed her lips, for those willing to stare,

something the teacher discouraged. But Guy Fysh had looked, needing that day a distraction from his own aura of urine and Macintosh toffee. Miss Capel was noticeably upset, and the class more than willing to share her disappointment. “Vida, Vida!” The girl was then in tears, for perhaps the second or third time that day, the first when Miss Capel, the dedicated Miss Capel, stalking the aisles with due diligence, tried once more to get the red hen to write right handed, her southpaw lettering sufficiently louche to prompt yet a further attempt. Only lanky Arnold Johanssen might inspire a remotely similar concern, coming to school as he often did with manure on his boots. Arnold had chores before school and was not impressed by a lot of fancy cream puffs. If memory served, he simply clammed up when Vida upstaged his stoic aura that afternoon.

Small David Willardson, who had been embarrassed moments before for not recognizing his name when written, rather than printed, was relieved that no one noticed. Vida was his cover that afternoon. Guy Fysh had looked across at her with feral disgust. How could one be so dumb? Licking crayons. Eyuck! (That such moisture might in fact lessen a crayon’s bold mark wasn’t then acknowledged.) Sadly, sensitive observant Vida had become the before-and-after-school target that year, her fat legs and thick torso fated to be poked and prodded. Fatty fatty four by eight, couldn’t get through the garden gate. Guy was up there with the vanguard, showing the world he knew a laughingstock when he saw one, that he was ready as any to let the cry baby have it. The harder she bawled, the greater his resolve it seemed. “How dumb you are. Licking crayons!” These very words an edgy furtive David heard later that day on his way home from school, Vida some distance off, hobbling, crying. It was then he saw a man approach guy, a man who’d emerged suddenly, mysteriously from a side street — a stranger David didn’t know, tall and stern, whose demeanour he could not then comprehend, especially when he took hold of Guy’s by the arm with a ferocity that would leave a bruise. Drawing his deeply lined face near to Guy’s face, he demanded in a strong bass voice that Guy never never, ever do that again — tease Vida so! Guy had looked at the man as if he were a kook. “Why me?” he exclaimed. “She sucks crayons, bawls all the time, smudges her scribbler — and — and writes left handed! She can barely tie her shoes!” The man, David vividly remembered, glanced about the street before forcefully slapping Guy, sending him also off home bawling. Immediately the man seemed undecided about his action, so David thought, particularly when he spied David peeking around a telephone pole. As usual, David stood clear of such encounters. He wasn’t strong nor big, and many things he timorously strove to avoid. Did the man offer up a sorry look? David wasn’t sure as he hurried off, thankful it wasn’t him being rebuked.

He would trundle home thinking the world an unhappy place, that it maybe was a maze,

whatever that meant, as his father sometimes suggested to his mother in the evening hours, when the problem with a particular patient demanded exemplary patience in finding a way forward. Apropos Guy Fysh's singular scolding that day, the angry face of the stranger continued to haunt the margins of David's mind. Not unlike the face you saw glaring at you if you squirmed too much in church or played when and where you shouldn't, the disapproving presence ever hovering somewhere. He looked about the yard. Perhaps somewhere in that forest of lilac, honeysuckle, caragana, poplar, ash, crab apple, gooseberry and sand cherry — their home had been owned and landscaped by a horticulturist from the Experimental Farm — perhaps near the empty pear-shaped fish pond — there could be found a bristling spine-arched cat, deathly still, and a few feet away the black form of Ali, also motionless, savouring the delicate feline smells that would soon molest him to a point where his seething energy must force the blood pressure of the cat soaring, until it could flit up the trunk of a tallish tree and temporarily force a stalemate. But no such scene presented itself on this cold fall evening. Even the otherwise satisfying sight of bushes no longer sprouting the prolific suckers which, along with the grass, yellow now after the first snow had all but melted, had to be cut far too often — even this visual respite was not indulged. David merely noted that the back gate was latched, an impossible condition for it to be in were Ali about.

CAT'S EYES

When Vida saw that the piano was indeed gone — she had looked twice that afternoon — she picked up her tangle of string, its fine tentacles ever a lure, trudged back upstairs and began to rock and hum on the old sofa. Mrs. Caruthers sat at the kitchen table mending a pair of Elias' coveralls and mumbled something about not being too active — being active so might 'worry' the sofa. Tim sat by the hot-air grate near the doorway to the dining room playing with an old watch he'd found that afternoon in a trash can. Once more he managed to separate the intricate layers. He had seen nothing like it, so many, many intricate parts. It seemed the layers just might go back together in a variety of ingenious ways. His father said it was broken but Tim remained inquisitive.

That evening Elias went outside with a lantern to tighten the hinges on the coal shuttle doors. In the stronger fall winds the doors were beginning to rattle once again. When Mrs. Caruthers took out some cocoa to him, Vida wondered into the back yard, noting it was much too dark to head for the swings in the school yard, one option to not worry the sofa. Elias had finished the repairs and was flashing his torch on a pair of marbles that glowed against the dark. Vida had seen nothing like it. Beautiful bright marbles that burned like coals in the light and, more surprising, moved with the torch. In going forward and trying to catch them she felt the

electric whisk of the Simpson cat pass between her legs. The Simpsons were their closest neighbours. The eyes had disappeared, but emerged again on the other side of the porch. She giggled. They extinguished themselves again as the cat slipped by, too elusive to catch in the near dark. For a few seconds Elias had managed to corner the cat, taking note of Vida's unusual gleeful amusement. Then the cat disappeared. Despite the movement of the light, the marbles had vanished. Somehow you needed a cat to fetch the marbles with the torch. This she would remember.

Inside the house, Vida squinted at the torch. She hadn't perceived its power before. She would, must take it with her to the schoolyard swings the following evening. There should be many eyes by the swings — the feel good eyes, of this she felt certain, for a couple of cats lived near the school. One she'd often played with, watched it move and glide. Moreover, the fluent back and forth on the school swing in a light breeze did wonders to spell the sofa, and the swings were usually vacant in the evening. She knew and treasured that fluent up-back movement. You swung into the early evening sky, a soft caress on your calves when you returned, the thrill in your stomach like a pitched fall that always reliably reversed. You might one day fly away if you wished hard enough — even land on a fat downy moon. Of late it had seemed just possible, so high up had she gone. Up and back, up and back, higher up and back each time, rising as a kite, the bright marbles she'd so recently seen not unlike some stars on clear nights. Was that it? The cat's eyes friendly stars come down to visit? Once again she basked in the memory of the caressing wind swirl at the back of her head, legs and neck, a soothing stroke, better even than the gentle hands of the nurse who had salved her impetigo, leaving one free as the wind, for a time.

The following evening, when Elias began to converse with Mrs. Caruthers about the mysterious disappearances in the kitchen, thinking perhaps Vida or Tim were feeding somebody's pet — both had done this before — Vida feared there would be another commotion, so she snatched the torch just before slipping out the back door, closing it gently as she could. Immediately she went to the swings. As she couldn't hold the torch and swing at the same time, she decided to swing first, then she would cast about for the shiny bright marbles, the quiet visiting stars that could also sway and swing. She saw them as never before that night when she left the idled swing. At least two sets. Which meandered about the thick bushes that edged the schoolyard, then slipped into the open prairie itself, where a soft wind might betimes caress. Shortly thereafter she could hear Mrs. Caruthers fervently calling her name. She shouldn't be out too long then.

It was the passing sight of the child in his car lights, the very one who played the piano, sit-

ting on a school swing that so alerted Yuri the night he must deliver the seed packet to a dead letter drop just outside Waldeck. As expected, the Willardson car in the hospital parking lot was unlocked, as it invariably was, and nearly full of gas. He had no trouble starting it. It would easily get him to Waldeck and back. He must not be observed this last crucial night.

He slowed and was almost by the girl when he heard the few snatches of her faint singing in the light breeze. That she might be out on such an evening surprised. He stopped the car and lingered by the school's perimeter scrub, the untended blackberry and caragana, to listen one last time to the remarkable voice, the astonishing lucidity of its descant timbre, rising up and back, up and back on the swing. If the faint singing seemed the affirmation of a special language, the melody soon registered, the lyric tune of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, the chubby legs flexing to the sweep and glide, animated in their gyro positioning almost as a veteran dancer's.

If he was again alerted to the child's odd presence, by someone calling out her name, on this cloud lifting evening, no one was going to tarry or belabour him now! The seeds would be placed in their dead drop within the hour. The rest was simply the routine, however exacting, of exfiltration. After the drop he would finalize his leave-taking. First a bus to the West coast, thence a freighter to Sapporo, followed by one to Vladivostok. He was, at long long last, going home — using Nechayev's advised route. If that home was not as it was, it remained the familiar he had been so close to in this wide, untrammelled place, where two children had parlayed his memory into its old raw discourse of uncertainty and belief, of knowing much yet not nearly enough.

It was shortly after he left the school that he again spotted the child, this time in his rear-view mirror, a distant waif, her torch scanning the night, ambling away from the discernible and familiar street lighting into a teething prairie wilderness. His sudden dismay beggared the senses — taken aback by sorry recollections, cares he had not felt for decades. He, a top drawer field operative, now taken in by a child, a batty loner leaving her familiar vistas, the light of the weak torch playing before her as a faint will-o'-the-wisp in an area not far from the Cypress Hills tree line, where a cougar may have recently killed a couple of calves, and the odd coyote prowled with canny grace. Out into the prairie she appeared to be headed, well beyond the school fence, or the sinuous highway, hoary bright at that hour by the light from a gibbous moon. Where the devil were her parents, her guardians? He watched her in the rear-view mirror, her light the merest spindle fading to a sable blackness. The assignment of his career, his life, awaited on by a courageous cutout, the precious minutes slipping by as the car's headlights limned the winding roadway, the moment that would never be as pure, ineffable...that in such elation he might be baited by a witless youngster passing as a wraith, a hand or finger fixed to her mouth, exhibiting

a slight limp he'd not noticed before. He felt suddenly acutely resentful seeing the coalescing blackness behind. He couldn't speak for the orphans of the world. He was surely one himself, his current responsibility the onerous one. In the Soviet Union she would have thousands of sibling cyphers. Few as lucky. If she or her guardians couldn't manage any better in this comparative Shangri-La, the more fool them, as the superb English thespian would say. He often felt Canadians didn't deserve their good fortune. This merely confirmed it. To hell with her and her rakish flickering light. After the seed pack delivery he was going home, at long last!

He drove for a mile or two, the breeze seeding his imagination with whiffs of a richly scented grassland, and the redolent Moscow Hills full of wild mushroom medallions, the wind fluting his hair, the Willardson car a whisper of motion, his field kit lolling on the back seat like a drunk, the silver grey of the bonnet speculating with the intermittently clouded moonlight. Then some eyes peered at him from the dark, the headlamps limning the shape of a dog or coyote. Yet he drove on, the image in his mind reeling as another pair nearly defied his car, this pair larger, molten for an instant. He hadn't seen a cougar but assumed the recent sightings not imagined given the reported missing calves. Then a further weft of fur, running, spurting across. His foot, almost independent of his will, jammed on the brakes. What was he doing? This was absurd. Only an idiot. Despite his growing consternation he turned the car around, briskly changed gears and retraced its coming. The world repeats as tragedy then as farce...he would never see in this dark. If attacked she would surely be dead by now...five, six minutes back. He swore for not noting the odometer reading earlier and glanced at his watch, swearing for once in Russian. The language that sounded to him now particularly accusatory. A couple of times the car faltered but kept on its retreat, its humanitarian travesty. He had been too long in the West. His sister played some other piece. He only imagined. They never really got on.

But soon he was scanning the moon touched landscape as only a veteran of his skill, self-reliance and honed instinct can. He stopped the car, listened. Stopped again. Then drove on swiftly, his inner ear deciphering, decoding as he went. Another fluid form briefly margined the headlight beam. He swerved trying to hit it, baring, hissing his anger. On the brow of a hill he stopped again, the sounds coming from the slope below unmistakable, the snarl of at least two competitors.

He drove to the verge, fetched from his kit the knife, revolver and gas torch, one of his own devising, and hurried to the bottom. The torch, extended to its maximum, its hiss comparable to the snarl of bared fangs he glimpsed, proved enough to scatter the creatures, the last, what he deemed a large cat, leaving off dragging its prey. But the relief was short lived. The bloody, lacerated, torn, quivering limbs he saw in the bright margin of torch light were patents of a rank

battlefield. He had seen worse but not by much. One shin revealed a skein of bone. One side of the head and neck had been clawed but no major artery that he could detect severed. A bloody pulpy arm was raised about the face, the hand jammed into the mouth. He barely detected a pulse. Fortunately the child was unconscious. For several excruciating seconds he ransacked his chances, even as he fetched the rawhide strips he kept for more belligerent encounters, now to stanch the serious woundings. When he believed he had found and stopped the major bleeding, he felt again for a pulse and was relieved to find it somewhat stronger. Not much but enough to scoop up the soaked mess in his arms and begin to anticipate how long before such injury would plunge the body into fatal shock, if such reflexes were not already working in concert to release all crucial systems. He paused once to open his emergency kit and plunge a tetanus shot into the one nearly whole arm. He knew Willardson left his grip in the car but decided that making use of it would delay the plan he had assembled in his turmoiled mind.

The relatively short ride back to the town was perhaps the longest distance he would traverse in his life, baring a future train ride into the GULAG or lorry to an execution ground, images of which passed as the shades of night before his eyes. Yet he kept on until he noted the heat gauge rising to a dangerous level.

With the radiator slightly hissing he pulled into the alley behind a large dark house, caddy corner to the hospital entrance which, he decided, was much too well lit, too expansive to avoid being witnessed, identified, the doctor's car conspicuous...again he felt for a pulse, now barely detectable, then scooped up the sticky bundle, and — newly ardently grimacing — rushed across the street into the emergency wing off the entrance which at that hour proved to be deserted. A single reception desk was situated a short distance from the front door, a night nurse diligently knitting and talking to another person out of sight in an adjacent room. A hospital gurney was positioned near the door. So far so good. He pulled his cap brim down over his eyes after placing his charge on the gurney. By then the night nurse looked up and belatedly robustly swore — just as he fled, keeping close to the building's brick facade. In no time he was across the street behind a box hedge that skirted the dark house. Loud fraught exclamations inside the hospital entrance were encouraging. Satisfied the child's fate was now out of his hands, beyond what he might live to tell, he stole to the car and drove away praying the delay would not prove fatal, both for the girl and himself.

CHARTS

Dr. Lucius Milton Willardson, 'Luke' to his Burdock colleagues, sat at the dining room table doing his 'charts'. The sight of his father completing these medical affidavits — that detailed

treatments and thus the recompense only doctors in the Saskatchewan Health Region No.1 might log — was a picture David would take to his grave. His placid, smoking, sleeve-banded, pen-poised pater who, but for one slightly in turned eye, looked a little like the Aga Kahn. The ‘venerated lodger’ they sometimes waited up for, who often sat, as now, gazing into the middle distance — on a night his better half was attending a meeting of the Orpheus Club, or was it the Rebecca Lodge, a routine that often necessitated her early evening departure. A place setting for David had been left at the far end of the table, a cold repast of poached egg on toast, limp string beans and mushy syrupy pears. His mother was noted in the kitchen for dispatch and a sweet tooth, a sometimes deadly combination. Her love of sweets, which he likely inherited, and the late wartime rationing that often over compensated with sugar, he would one day correlate with a mouth full of amalgam. But for the dental plan in Saskatchewan’s Health Region No.1, he might well have had full uppers and lowers — if he could have afforded them!

His father took another puff, slowly inhaled, imperceptibly exhaled, then returned to his ‘charts’, glancing impassively at his son. He had not counted the stitches he and Dr. Cunningham used to close the innumerable slashes, several score at least in Vida’s partly scalped head alone. Perhaps a hundred more in the neck shoulder and one leg. He had to posit a figure. He had to improvise for the one dangling ear they had sewn back on. Nearly as frantic had been the search for a vein in the one well-fleshed leg, to tie in the gold needle and get Mrs. Satherthwaite, the night nurse, calmed and comfortable enough to distend an arm. Miraculously, Vida shared the nurse’s blood. She had attended Vida earlier on when the child was diagnosed as anemic. They decided now on 20ccs for each pound of the child. Then upped it to 30. What a bewildering mess. Amazing she was alive. He was told the child was subnormal. He glanced at his son. *What Child Is This...?* He couldn’t remember the remainder of the carol — on a record from his son’s piano teacher which seemed unduly poignant that night. Dr. Cunningham thought the one attack animal a cougar, the piercing teeth marks in the one shoulder, seemed to bear this out. Miraculously neither the carotid nor any major artery were severed. Coyotes left rougher jagged lines apparently, the one leg suggestive of such serrated lesions. Curiously, his own car was found in a ditch outside Waldeck, the motor burned out, the hood covered with mud. Blood stains dotted the back seats. If the facts dismayed and confused they also mightily intrigued. A puzzle within a puzzle. David had not seen his father quite like this, and imagined him reminiscing, thinking of some other time and place, the occasional grimace on his face a puzzle. A father who rarely scolded, and then curtly, succinctly. If his brief pique over a wet toilet seat was exceptional, his authority loomed pervasive as the smoke, which sometimes bathed the room in a thin valley mist. Only when David finally left

home did he discover the unappetizing scent of smoke-dinged clothes and the chroniclers of poisonous air. Still, this picture of his stalwart pater became a kind of icon, sitting as he did at the heavy, round-legged dining room table — into the accommodating angle of its stretcher base their mutt so often fit his back after slowly descending like a flagging top. That three-sided angle this night was bare of course. David might easily sit down with room to swing his feet.

He took his time. And ate everything. Silence might be treasured when discreetly shared. He liked his father like this. The man the world awaited. Lucius affably nodded. “Think you’ll ever see over the hill?...” he asked while butting a second Winchester in the ancient crystal ashtray — the odd but favoured question one of their familiar exchanges (the ‘vocational challenge’), another being the gentle tugging of one of his son’s oversize ears when he lolled too long in the rocking chair. David, being late as he was, was liable for a lecture that night. Instead his father looked on with stoic equanimity, the abstracted face David knew all too well, the shapely head inclined, the haircut severe, the eyes stilled but focused, the look of one who still had two or three or four house calls to make, yet managed to find in this supplementary clerical exaction a moment of ease and clarity, a rare time out, the ‘charts’ before him the merest tether to reality. “Better not be too late,” he finally advised, meaning David should complete his homework and get to bed. His mother would return, her displeasure at his late return, if discovered, like the snow that night, fine but replete, silent, pervasive. How watchful and absorbed he had been, in this modest comfortable salon, the one valuable fixture an old Heintzman he was bribed, cajoled, wheedled, suborned, intimidated to practice, his heedful mother hoping, praying for something respected and defined, not unlike the scene before him, its vividness lapsing as the time allowance dwindled. The man before him, the one and only father who would be dead a decade later after a year’s sick leave. The father who began in a snooty clinic in the East where they wore studded collars and bowler hats, and guarded their turf like a liege lord; where his wife conceived a potential hero, a Jason perhaps, who would have inspired many companions but for a gruesome accident. Thence to a prairie tundra medical practice and second babe, a spindly thing resembling an aging codger his mother once said, with some nostalgia, later on — her second child scowling a lot in the earliest photos, holding a dandelion flower in one hand as a ghetto waif, in another a curmudgeon in a carriage, glowering as if aggrieved by piles. A face that only a willing mother might countenance. The mother he ever after keenly regretted not knowing better.

And so he headed up the winding staircase after a tilt with fractional equations and compound sentences, aware that at least he was not by himself that night. For years he went to bed alone, his acute fear of the dark an aberration that seemed immutable. The genesis of

which was not a mystery, and one he never learned to eschew. One Sunday evening the family had listened to a CBC radio dramatization of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. When it began he ate a dish of ice cream; when it finished he dumbly, 'stupently' stared into a melted puddle of white. The horrific creature's pathetic attempts at language could still be heard in their winding hollow staircase, as the moon limned leafy dark shadows on the wall. The number of nights in as many years he came home to an empty house seemed now legion, scared out of his wits, almost too rigid to undress, the move to stay above the covers ever a measured, calculated act. Better not be surprised by the arrival of the coming ogre! Even a monster is company in a vast lone dark.

He never really exhausted his retinue of phantoms and his speechless escape from them — remaining literally still as a mouse, the covers hiding all but his eyes, for he had long since decided that being surprised would be worse — before his taciturn brother or pressed mother would return, her words with pater — when he was there — a kind of benediction. Mrs. Eisler's name was often mentioned. Mrs. Eisler had nothing wrong with her apparently but was a practiced doubter. His father he knew was good at listening to and reassuring people. "It may snow tonight." Elspeth's voice always had a husky finality in the evening. Like his laconic brother, she was not a talker. On the many other nights when he was starkly alone he vigilantly awaited the sound of the front door opening and closing, followed by the chill of the night wafting up the channeled stairs. He or she was home, in the house, with, near him. He might sleep. Even dream. Dreams that became themselves a recurrent history. Ones he might linger in:

He swept across a smooth near virginal expanse of ice — no one near him — and crossed the racing finish line before the sound of the crowd caught him up. On the same pearly surface he swept with a puck past two of the indisputable jocks in his school, drew the 'mostest' goalie out of his net with the grace and verve of a greyhound and slipped the puck over the crease, returning to his own end before the breathless crowd might comprehend and assimilate his mastery. Later, at his first prom, he stood for his solo in the school orchestra, an ad lib delivery such that he was again touted as Benny Willardson. The only confusion was that he behaved in the dreams very much like his late fleet brother who, at six years his senior, loomed as an invincible Immortal.

He later told his mother she had two only children. He was twelve when his brother, six years his senior, was killed. A gifted athletic and talented musician who also seemed an intermittent lodger when he began attending their distant high school. It was important that grade school David retain a sibling, something. This he might take as gospel.

It was just after high school graduation that his brother began working in Rag Johnson's crew putting up high tension power lines for rural electrification, parts of his hands and face sometimes raw with creosote, work that only the most intrepid of high school grads took on, not like the soft Petrie twins who went off to the Banff Springs Hotel to 'lay out the maid service and any newly holidaying divorcee' — a commentary from one of his brother's showoff pals that David wasn't conversant with then but had little doubt about its authenticity.

As a hurler in Rag's baseball team his brother pitched several no hitters, the outfield complaining they were getting cramps. He often drove a tanker truck full of creosote for the raw pines. On a cool rain drenched August morning he drove a member of the crew who'd broken a wrist to the nearest hospital. In a narrow stretch he had to pass a semi-trailer whose wheels began to skid in a corner, then yaw on a mud slurry. Soon the rig was fishtailing. His brother tried to hug the shoulder, twisting as only a naturally astute driver might maneuver, slowing with great care while fanning the brakes. Not enough though — he had to finally jam on the brakes. He perhaps delayed too long in hopes of avoiding a head-on collision. The creosote cylinder broke free its rusted moorings and slammed into the cab, the steering post skewering his brother's muscular torso. His injured charge survived...

David awoke that night with a start, rubbing his eyes and gasping for breath. He had witnessed the aftermath of the collision. Seen the wreck, the blood stained dash. It was a dream dreamed before, though not with as much preamble as tonight's. As he often did when upset, he went to the wicker rocker on the enclosed porch and rocked. Squat squat, squat squat. But this night it offered little respite. He thought of his ecent fray with Billy Sinclair. He'd lent Billy his bike which Billy didn't return. David's brother went and fetched it. Try as he might David could not appease the inconvenienced bully. For an entire winter, on most school-day afternoons, Billy sometimes left David stuck head first in a snow drift. (Tim's brother was then in high school and rarely around.) For at least a month David had stolen home from school without once noticing Vida. With guilt and desperation he went to his mother. She listened gravely in silence then succinctly rendered the facts. "David, you were wrong to give Billy the bike. But I can hardly intervene, can I?" It was one of the few times he sensed her acumen. Going to the principal, or getting his his brother again involved, would certify him ever after a snitch and coward. His already lowly standing would be written in stone. He would have to deal with Billy Sinclair on his own, a conclusion he had anticipated; it was a different age, an era before the ubiquity of knives and guns and detailed sensational accounts of their use. Elspeth concluded: "I'll tell your father. Do your best, for the time being. I know you can. We'll talk again."

Later, pater would write in his diary.

‘Called at 3 A.M. to go up to Mortlach to see Mrs. Nodge. E. went with me. Gave Mrs. N. another hypo. Asked her again to come to the hospital. Briefly did the rounds. The Semple child slightly better. Awake now most days. She was a bit of a daydreamer apparently — ha! Mrs. Friesen said she asked about Andy the gardener. Got back about 6. Road’s slippery. Nearly got stuck. Before bed, worked a bit on charts. David’s having a tiff with a neighbourhood kid. I’ll give him a day or two, then speak to the father, whose badly crushed hand I tended to a week back will need a new dressing.’

On a supplementary diary page facing a historic précis of Hippocrates and an ad for Agarol, he wrote the following: ‘A criminal snitch met his Nemesis. Three options he might choose from: a ditch, a car mangler or Saskatchewan.’ At first, David imagined it an allusion to a generic vaudeville joke.

His mother in the pictures of this period seemed undaunted, her finely contoured Scarlet O’Hara face — which once, in her schoolmarm days, trod the boards as the lead in such romances as *My Wild Irish Rose* — smiled with a poise that slowly turned over the years to the visage of a plaintiff up for parole, the look of one resolved to make the grade, to look presentable, able and affable, to serve as a fitting member of the Hospital and Church Auxiliary, the Monday Club, the Book Club, the Bridge Club, the Curling Club, the Orpheus Club, the Fortnightly Club, the special Rebecca Lodge, the IODE and the Home and School Association — leaving her few idle evenings. An achievement he would stand in awe of in his own jaded and distracted middle age. A community virtuoso, the respect she garnered more precious than rubies, so his self-pity sometimes affirmed, who would marry an up-and-coming physician, a certified specialist who did the inconceivable early in a professional career — leave a handsome, prestigious practice in the East to go West to become the medic in a hamlet that served a coal mine, then, after moving to Burdock, become a tyro in a new ambitious prepaid medical scheme, like no other in North America, all services paid by a government corporation including dentistry up to the age of eighteen. At the outset, in the late forties, the doctors were paid sixty percent of the regular schedule of fees; by 1958 it was nearly eighty percent, about the time the directors began to impose what was called, without apparent demur, ‘deterrent fees’ to discourage too frequent office visits. (The notion of ‘spin’ would take another few decades to evolve.)

For a time the system had been a quiescent success. The inauguration of a historic covenant that all Canadians, under Lester B. Pearson’s Liberal government, would eventually invoke as a right and entitlement. Initially the original plan had a domestic focus, the well being of the Saskatchewan farmers and their community that sustained consensus after a devastating war.

The age of the devout selfless toiler and ready volunteer. Confident, assured, resolute, stoic. Most days. Long before the advent of political correctness, undeserved privilege and cultural oppression, when complaint became the chosen style of address.

HEAD CHEESE

“Your head cheese is just delicious Elspeth,” Mrs. Stirrit complimented Mrs. Willardson shortly after lunch had been served at the Burdock Monday Club, on a day David was home from school with a cold, a monotonous time for him when overheard words, their gist at least, lingered.

“Mrs. Stirrit, it’s not head cheese at all, it’s jellied chicken,” announced Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield.

Mrs. Stirrit was not at first deterred and cheerfully replied, “Oh I know head cheese when I see it, Mrs. Crossfield. Isn’t it so, Elspeth?”

Unwittingly, Mrs. Stirrit had, as she sometimes did, fingered a delicate nerve. Mrs. Crossfield served as a kind of duenna to the ladies assembled that bright October afternoon, to stitch as an adjunct to their Monday Club volunteer deeds, another quilt for the Red Cross, a large coverlet that all but hid the Willardson’s extended dining room table. Mrs. Crossfield would not serve a confection like head cheese, and neither would Elspeth for that matter. In general, delicatessen fare was for exigent, displaced and intransigent Europeans. Garlic sausage Elspeth might serve at a fund raising picnic or in a pinch — which was surprisingly often. But having grown up on a farm and lived, while at normal school in a seedy boarding house, she felt herself conversant with the effects of worms, weevils, grubs, bed bugs, lice, mold, rust and infectious bacteria. And so tended to believe, like Mrs. Crossfield and her constituency, that the concoctions sold in Sach’s Delicatessen were sly, counterfeit, motley, greasy and smelly as well as foreign and hence alien and possibly infectious. If she was wise enough not to bring up the matter of kosher and non-kosher meats, and what the Sachs’s might sell to the great unwashed, she was genteel enough to know that she ought to serve, in her own home at least, only that which could be identified as lean meat, fowl or fish.

“No, Mrs. Stirrit, I’m afraid it’s only — ” Elspeth began, the ‘only’ for the benefit of Mrs. Goldman “ — jellied breast meat, from a fryer that was in Saturday’s church sale.”

“Oh please do call me Violet,” Mrs. Stirrit warmly enjoined, tapping Elspeth on the knee.

Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield faintly inclined her head. Elspeth was a sensible woman if sometimes unnecessarily patronizing.

“Do you serve head cheese often, Mrs. Stirrit?” Mrs. Crossfield queried, peering at Mrs. Stir-

rit with faint commiseration. The question provoked several glances in her direction, and she became suddenly flummoxed over the realization that the confusion of the two dishes might be unseemly here. This was, after all, the Monday Club, not a Ukrainian picnic. She suddenly had the premonition that of the women seated here, few would presume to serve head cheese to a guest, nor break bread with one who did. Surely she was not one of these? And yet her instinctive largess told her that something here was amiss, that Mrs. Stanley-Crossfield could be a bully, and was not all that well liked. Mrs. Stirrit may not have fully realized the impropriety of sometimes rolling nylons down to the ankle, but some things the wife of the only Presbyterian clergyman should not slight at the Monday Club. Abetting the sale of questionable meats was apparently one.

“Oh not often,” Mrs. Stirrit said finally.

“Who can afford it?” said Mrs. Engler, a sturdy matron from the Riverdeen section of town, an area David liked most, with its smooth summer paths along a lazy stretch of creek laced with confessional cat tails, where one might study and observe the amorous couples who gathered there and on the swing bridge near by. Mrs. Engler’s son was a stocky minion who boxed at Don Dennis’s gym at the back of the Piccadilly Cafe. Built like a miniature Heracles, Max kept the school’s playground largely impersonal. David was one of his secret if daunted admirers. Max had taken on and soundly thrashed the egregious Billy Sinclair.

Following Mrs. Engler’s apt curt summation, lunch was resumed. The ladies agreed that the leftovers of the lunch they each contributed to would go to Mrs. Caruthers, who was helping the Semples after Ethel died. Agnes Thierman, the United Church deaconess, kept a benevolent eye on the family.

“Is little Vida still poorly, Agnes?” enquired Mrs. Rushworth, who was one to focus on human plight, her own husband a recovering alcoholic. Vida’s calamity was then well known.

“The matron, Mrs. Friesen, told me she’s opened her eyes, eaten some soup, and briefly spoken. Though I understand, from Mr. Lewis, the principal at Central School, that she was often shy around strangers. I’m told she has had some awful nightmares. Has Lucius said anything, Elspeth?”

“No, not much. Her high white blood count has come down a bit. A fairly good sign. I think he’s amazed she survived at all.”

Mrs. Autry, the new wife of the municipal engineer, was confused how such an incident could have transpired. “It’s almost beyond comprehension.”

Said Mrs. Engler, “Mrs. Caruthers did say Vida wandered off sometimes — into the school yard and beyond.”

“But to be dropped off — as she was?” Mrs. Little, the wife of a new doctor in Burdock, was also saddled with wonder.

The others, mindful of the ominous words, appeared to concentrate on their stitching. Elspeth knew, from Lucius’s brief summation of the police report and his own examination, that an animal or animals had attacked the child, but decided that detailing such wounding was sensational here. As for her ‘retrieval’, that puzzling act begged explanation.

Said Mrs. Rushworth, “You would think the rescuer would come forward. Well a someone who knows something about what happened.”

“She was such a pretty baby,” said Mrs. Stirrit, her words barely out of her mouth before she sensed the pathos, the memory of Vida and her apparent simplemindedness all too vivid in the minds of the otherwise conscientious stitchers.

Stated Mrs. Crossfield, to get beyond the unspeakable nub, “Mrs. Caruthers has her hands full with Elias.” She eyed Mrs. Stirrit when she spoke.

A further pause ensued, while the others nodded with conditional assent, thinking of the often surly, smelly and unkempt Elias, and how Mrs. Crossfield was the seer they willingly bore, her good head for figures and clout with the reeve’s office in part compensating for her condescending manner. Moreover, she had scored her point: Mrs. Stirrit’s chatter sometimes delayed her section of the quilt, as was noted again when she once more set aside her portion of its harlequin squares and tapped Elspeth on the knee to exclaim how she remembered, oh how she remembered Ali! the late Willardson dog. “Such a gadabout when you got to know him. He once fell asleep under this very table.” The sudden recollection brought tears to her cheeks, her nostalgia a boon to her sudden precipitous mirth.

The others faintly smiled, recalling how Ali had been discovered soundly asleep beneath the extended table upon which an earlier quilt lay, hiding him from sight. A sudden stray sound had alerted the others.. The greatest amount of acceptable expressions of alarm had ensued, with at least two anxious faces eyeing a neighbour, until a second ambiguous stertor drew the rapt expressions of one and all beneath the large quilt to stare with wonder upon Ali’s dark hulk asleep and apparently dreaming, as Ali sometimes did, his dramatic sighs usually somewhere between a whimper and a woof.

“‘You! Out!’ That’s what you said Elspeth.” Again Mrs. Stirrit was immersed in heady laughter.

To be caught on the dining-room rug, beneath one of the dining table’s extensions, was alone cause for reprimand, but to suddenly find oneself sprawled out indecently — “So impecunious he could be,” Mrs. Stirrit said now in her own rapt retelling. Thus was Ali able to

move with lightening speed out of the room, through the screen door in the kitchen, and into the alley at the back, before his alien presence materialized, his faint but ‘impecunious’ scent, the clue to his materiality. David’s intermittent washing of the dog had, it seemed, merely guaranteed his flight to the creek and its soft redolent ooze. Only when the house carpets were cleaned, obliterating his tracery in the house, did he neglect for a time his usual domestic haunts, sometimes wandering about like an itinerant sponger.

“Oh how I remember.” Mrs. Stirrit continued, after daubing her eyes.

“He could be the darndest pussyfoot,” Mrs. Harlo, the urbane wife of a Health Region dentist, added, relieved perhaps the ominous unsavoury tale of little Vida was shelved for a time. “Remember when he absconded with your fur-lined galoshes, Hatty?”

The smiles were immediately wistful. Elspeth suspected the list was long, including her own theft itinerary of: a swath of freshly churned butter just after the war, an entire steer’s head, horns and all, several yards of felt, a straw hat, a length of chain that turned out to belong to the dog catcher, and a gopher the agile tracker had actually cornered in the garage and knew not what to do with. She was grateful that no one mentioned the missing chickens the Englers once attributed to the dark poacher, or that Rhea (Mrs. Crossfield) should hold back her own special conversational entry: a beef heart that sat on her pantry counter, nearly thawed, which Ali filched with his usual aplomb after finding the back door open, a heist wondrously glimpsed by the oldest of the Crossfield girls.

“Is it true that his mother was killed by coyotes shortly after his birth?” Mrs. Rushworth had always treasured the earlier story.

Elspeth was grateful for the distracting reminder. “With most of her pups. I tried my best to keep track — of his capers. Were it not for David we would have had him put down some time ago. Actually, Dr. Wolan thought he had cancer.”

“He did have a bark,” said Mrs. Crossfield.

All the ladies nodded.

“Oh that reminds me!...” Mrs. Stirrit blurted, her memory again a merry-go-round. But unluckily she hesitated with a coy “If I may.” The ensuing silence she hadn’t anticipated and was a time recollecting what exactly she wanted to say.

“This is a doggy story is it?” Mrs. Crossfield asked with unusual caution, within her, unknown to the others, a suspicion that Mrs. Stirrit came perilously close to being a mockery of herself, her stories sufficiently vulgar and insinuating to be entertaining.

“Don’t you like doggy stories, Mrs. Crossfield?”

Mrs. Crossfield was far from certain how to interpret the querulous tone of voice.

“No, I’m not opposed to ‘doggy’ stories. Tales of alleged heroism and loyalty are always heart felt. Though the embellishments sometimes chafe the mindful.”

Such words were of little help to Mrs. Stirrit.

“I remember,” Elspeth began, more to fill the cavity than entertain, “when he followed my mother to church. He always knew she would be a soft touch. As you know my late mother loved to bake, and said that David and Ali were her tasters.” Elspeth’s mother, Isidore, had been a regular at the morning service of the new amalgamated United Church. Despite her stealth in leaving the house, she was sometimes uproariously discovered by Ali in her congregation after a careful sniffing out of each pew. Finding her at last, he would fall back on his haunches to survey the brethren, his large pink tongue worn like a neckerchief flopping behind — the prelude to his fugue with the ushers. Sometimes, if Vida was in a pew, he might escape and lay beneath her, the near worshippers grateful at least for the sudden silence. By then the ushers would usually break off, not wanting to cause a further disturbance, especially if Mrs. Caruthers might be nodding. Vida would pat the dog and touch her lips to keep quiet. Astonishingly, the mutt would lick her ankle once or twice then park his snout on a paw. He was home free and perhaps not a little tired of the scramble. Members of the congregation might nod knowingly to a neighbour, yet were largely unaware of the long-standing connivance of the two. Vida often had an extra cracker. Near the verdant edge of the coulee, amidst the mazy quilts of clover, sage, milkweed, astors, bergamot, goldenrod and butterflies, he might be seen furiously digging into a gopher hole, his fore paws trundling dirt back through hind legs spread-eagled above, oblivious to the second or third hole nearby and its observant gopher resident. Vida, her basket full of black eyed susans or goldenrod, was a frequent witness. He would pause to greet her, lick her hand or face, accept a pat and cracker, before continuing with the geyser. An affable and timely work break. Vida would look on, betraying her concern for the gopher. Ali was like her father sometimes, always in a rush. She especially liked the sensitive patch of white just beneath Ali’s chin.

“Peeyoo!” would come the greeting at the end of such a day, Elspeth framed by the orange glow of the kitchen doorway. Ali may have rolled lustily in the murky goulash by the creek, mixing in a rotted fish or two to add that extra something. He kept up a deathbed rattle the while, glancing with strained benevolence and arched silken eyebrows at Elspeth, then at David, then back at Elspeth. She held out an old towel and turned to go in.

The open door signalled a halt to the senseless delay and he often bolted through the door. Seconds later he would be dragged out by his collar, his limbs and expression stiffly incredulous, to fall again on his haunches, wipe the foam about his lips with a deft slurp of his neckerchief,

and resume the desperate breathing. When the door finally closed he all but choked and anticipated a few sharp indignities. A brother's keeper to a studiously unkept brother was David's later deliberation on the matter. At the time they regarded one another with some disapproval. Well, near enough. By then Vida would be eyeing her wild flowers, some of whom had wilted on her bedroom's narrow window shelf in the afternoon sun. They too seemed somedays disappointed in her when kept too long. She began to rock on the edge of her cot. Not too heartily of course.

It was about this time David realized he'd not seen the coulee stranger recently, and wondered what he must be up to. Belatedly he had reckoned the man to be the one who slapped Guy Fish that day after school. Had the man's stern lined face not altered, become circumspect when he saw David, as if he recognized another spy, another fugitive? If such words were a later rendering, the man's look that day David never forgot.

PART THREE: MORE SOBERING MEMORIES

FUGITIVE

It was one of those discoveries that came to David without warning and demanded an accounting. Why hadn't he taken it all in before? This sudden unheralded break with his past was jarring. Yet the reality appeared incontrovertible: his image framed in the upstairs landing mirror newly riled him. He was unsightly, if not ugly, in a way he'd not noticed before. How could that be? He seemed suddenly, dramatically, neither a child nor an offspring of his parents. His neck had a distinct bend, exaggerated by a jutting Adam's apple, his head seemed minuscule, his shoulders bony and narrow, lacking any promise of a 'build'. The face was as galling. Eyes small and crowded together, ears large and poised for flight. The latest haircut would needle, in both senses, for a fortnight at least. Yet it was a true novelty how the totality should gang up on him now, on this otherwise unremarkable morning! He had survived Monday doldrums before this. But the air this day seemed full of allergens; one remained submerged, pinched, stir crazed; there was apparently no surfacing after this. Again he centered himself in the mirror. How could the recognition be so ominous now, so raw and unforeseen? The unmitigated whole, greater here than its lovelorn parts, formed a specter chilling as a stray Frankenstein. The alien in the broad mirror took his breath away, as the nearby furnace floor grate trundled breaths of mephitic air. The long school day would soon begin with a quiz on the particularity of deflected and refracted light — which acutely rendered his ungainly form. The phrase angular convolution kept intruding. A day fixed in amber. Like the stains on his timeless desk —

seemingly immutable. The one slight respite would be a homeward rush in a rare chinook gloaming, the school day finally over, platinum roadways packed puck smooth, snowballs swift as atoms, words blistery, barmy, edged with misty shouts...then home to a noisy ice-caked mutt, silent only as the paws are towelled dry. The start of an evening that might eclipse the day.

A supper of sardines on toast, lima beans and canned peaches, as preamble to his weekly evening trudge to the mid-town brownstone and slow climb up the dimly lit staircase to a celebrated piano teacher, an Immortal whose musical voice seemed then tuned to a minor key.

“ — You might as well be slinging hash!” In a greasy spoon — the topical presumption.

This comment, on his arrival before the loose-paned door, was delivered inside to a singer of talent, whose promise was ethereal compared to him. So, Miss Berg hadn't been practicing either. He knew it would be a rout then for himself, but waded in after removing dripping galoshes, the warmth of Mrs. Lang's rooms laden with womanly aromas and fading potpourri. The assault on Miss Berg continued, a register higher he imagined. Madame Lang was addressing the careless Olympians. “I have other things to do.” She glanced at him with a token smile. Being so near a lambasting before his actual lesson left him oddly alert. Just how awful could it get? But soon he would realize that once expended, the Immortal's disappointment merely nestled in silence before a sluggard like him, or took up considerations of other things to do. And yet how he wanted to please this lone stranded goddess whose endowment, both musical and personal, was gospel. “Mrs. Lang, remarkable woman. We are so fortunate.” No one disputed it. Especially the gnomish adjudicators who came to town for the Kiwanis Music Festival. “How musical are her senior students! Always amazing.” If she walked with a limp — David knew little then about acute anterior poliomyelitis — it was to ease the divinity of her presence. Only the jewelled snow, moon pearled, might foil his later tears, freeze into wonder melancholy itself, the loneliness that mesmerized with grandeur, made one sense the depth of space, the silent vastness of solitude, as the icy air cauterized your nostrils.

Thus it was, before that goading mirror, in the upstairs landing, the heat grate nearby adding a furnace hiss, that he sensed a new, nettled grasping of the facts. One couldn't go on like this. Something had to be done to mask the dismay, something quite remarkable. It was one of those moments when escape itself becomes a vocation. He plainly needed a mesmerizing distraction which, on some further adventitious reckoning, had in effect been there all along — his notice of it only just dawning on him! This placatory recognition, coming late but so assertively, was as momentous in its way as the late raw discovery of his own unsightliness. Yes, in his world, there *was* another being who just might leave him happily distracted and uncomplaining, and that sovereign She appeared then as never before, cued now by a photograph of a splendid gracile

nude, one of many, he'd recently 'noticed' as never before! William Blake's 'Terror, the Human Form Divine' would be a future reckoning for him. To the extent his new vision might be construed as prurient, it came with no warning signs. As desirable as fondness and affection are to most people, looking and finding the svelte 'nothing in excess' paragon, would become his life's sustaining search and reprieve. His very own absorbing 'solitaire'.

The sense that he'd been hitherto so unobservant came, in that blinkered era, with the improper Sunbathing Magazines he and his bravos in the fifth and sixth grades discovered in their reconnoitering of a moldy store run by a Chinese gent, who loved tobacco and giving Caucasians uneven hair cuts. The magazine stand in Mr. Wong's barber shop and confectionary became as exciting and challenging then as any Mayan tomb for a modern archaeologist. What the sophisticated art photographers were up to in the rest of the two or three books designed for studious gawpers, sniffy cranks, compensating lothsarios, studioius snobs and budding fiends (a later short list), he barely noted then. For he had discovered a tenant of the durably seductive. The full figure doing nothing in particular — meaning you might impute a variety of situations — was the apprehensible object of desire. For the figure to accommodate a multitude of prospects, it couldn't be too engaged in deed or task or pose. And it had to be entire, all there. What he later believed the Italians termed *interra* — unabbreviated, undiminished, unexpurgated, and certainly uncropped. Better still, what the Calabrians refer to as *sana* — again, with some thoughtful license — the idea of healthy, sane, implicit totality. It had been a time of heady anticipation for him. The exactions of life just might be derailed, upstaged after all, at least for a time, especially when so many of the Sunbathing creatures actually enthralled! He was still, of course, a decade away from the advent of the slick porno mags and their acutely rendered tenderloin and secondary papillae, and the vividly saturated colour that merely heightened the invidiousness with glaring specificity, also the posed, retouched and often cropped pics that left him always in doubt about the actual unedited being. The ubiquitous turkey umbered skin was a further vexation. What delighted about the early guileless wood nymphs was that you could really tell which ones were worth keeping under the mattress. Natural legs, arms, chests, haunches, hair, latent smiles — everything was there, as unassuming and lucid as the boy's shower. The installation of his own Olympian roster was rarely in doubt, the proof in prosaic black and white, long before pristine monochrome achieved archival eminence. The part that wasn't there, giving airbrush art a shank debut, you really weren't that interested in just then. You vaguely knew women didn't have any, at least to speak of. Indeed, he was assured by some of his fifth grade mavens that there was indeed 'not much to speak of'. Thus would he pause throughout his life to reconsider the pilgrimage — from that early rapt, salvational discovery of

slender female beauty, to his later consternation over the insinuation of aesthetic anarchy — especially the assertion that beauty, particularly that ascribed to female allure, was a culpable myth! Well, he would stay in his ‘mythical’ world and its timeless paragons. His reliable escape. The modern critics could make of him what they liked. The later reigning film stars, and the media that touted them, simply verified his adjudication of the matter. Marilyn Monroe, for instance, vivified for him the notion of banal (the jeers from the hoi polloi a confirmation): flaccid, fat-knee’d, uninspiring bones, ill-defined musculature etc. — while the latest pelvic moaner-crooner looked slattern if not demented. When much later he would read the interminable editorials by Hugh Hefner, he fancied writing *The Runt Book*, the history of ‘modern’ man, who gave up a wife and lingering double standard, as well as being the generally honoured Princeps of his family, for endless female — inevitably feminist! — ‘tongue’. Fools, dolts, nincompoops! When the silicon retreads began appearing he all but despaired. Making all breasts look alike is just what that numbskull Michelangelo did with his mud pie bosoms, and he longed for a rested Apollo to come back from the Hyperboreans to say his peace. Well, something. In short, the ‘nothing in excess’ mantra of the Fifth Century Athenians he would cling to as the shipwrecked cling to Lagan. In the new progressive era that early mantra was reversed to read, ‘without excess nothing’. Luckily, the music of the classics also helped out here. The canon, from Handel and Scarlatti to Stravinsky, kept much of the clamour at bay. Something the sainted Mrs. Lang had a hand in sustaining. Bless her. Indeed, such music would become an additional reliable sanctuary.

He had just started university when the slighting of earlier standards and conventions intruded. Cultural inequalities, gender norms, particularly the role of women in society, needed tending to, leaving him more stranded than ever, for, as a male, particularly a white male, he was cited as a possible instigator of the whole godawful mess! If his fondness for his idyllic female had saved him from himself on that early, awful Monday morning reckoning — that being, who might have sojourned his journey to aging and death had, it seemed, metamorphosed into one or another of the acidic execrators! Such that when he would later leaf through his high school yearbook, minding the girls both pretty and plain who shunned him, his pariah status surfaced. It was then the stark, all but forgotten memory of Vida Semple, resurfaced with unanticipated pathos, the sorry Vida of ancient vista, who was not in any of the high school class portraits. Had she even finished grade school? He thought not. What happened after her awful accident he’d never been sure of. She’d been taken somewhere to recuperate, a chapter his adolescent preoccupations had slighted, overlooked. Another troubled fellow creature vanished into the mist. Or perhaps another Monday Club. Why such things should return to haunt him

suggested that his insular aesthetic mindset — his life shield — might, like Athena's aegis, be lined with snakes or, like her benighted owl, spreading its learned wings only at dusk.

BEHEMOTH

A small suite in the early Burdock home occupied a portion of the basement adjacent the coal furnace and shuttle, which in turn faced a mangle washer, and a cement-floored utility room with its shopworn workbench, a holdover from the previous owner. The suite itself consisted of a narrow bed-sitting room — “my stateroom” one boarder called it — with narrow windows just above ground level, plus a shower bathroom and kitchenette, all accessed by a descending staircase off the attached garage. One of the boarders, a gentle soul who sold farm machinery, was a great patron of Ali. Mr. Oleander appreciated company at mealtime, human or canine, in his tiny windowless kitchen with dual hotplate, sink, and oil cloth table. Indeed, the canine drop-in may have been a favourite among his infrequent visitors. “A watch dog...who watches bowls and pans,” he would say as Ali waited with the smidgen of patience he might muster around strangers. “A watchdog who doesn't always eat his vegetables.”

David was just four when his parents moved into the stately house, and he was urged to keep out of the basement, partly he knew because of the suite, but also because there was something else down there that was inimical to small adventurous boys. He might steal a glimpse when his mother took down the washing, to look on soberly at the large blackened monstrosity with its heavy arms, a veritable Grendel or Kraken — names he would unearth later — which his parents didn't want him provoking, with its glowering eye through the lidded grate, a flare of intense heat and flame when open. It required constant tending, numerous placations from the coal shuttle and removal of the remains, clinkers of varying sizes, depending on the quality of the offerings, followed by many shovels full of ash. All in all the presence of this poorly tethered blast breather was a worry. His mother might never complain, but she became pursed and stern when off to the basement with a load of washing. It seemed the proximity of the brute provided things like warmth and hot water, never plentiful mind you, but then you could hardly expect such a groaner to be generous in captivity. Often David would help Elspeth carry the remains of the constant coal offerings, the clinkers, up the stairs and out to the garbage cans in the ally. A grisly sight, no question, full of razor-edged worm holes that adventurers like him might get lost in, the frequent forlornness of his mother during these moments of heft and heave a further caution. Sensibly his father went immediately off to the office or hospital, whereas his mother had been on a farm and knew about feral creatures. Thus, before this subterranean monstrosity, the right amount of offering at the most propitious time was crucial. Through fatigue or

carelessness Elspeth sometimes neglected to keep her young son apart, and the tongues of flame and searing breath inched closer and closer over time. He never presumed the beast reconciled to its new masters, and thought a beauty like his mother always in jeopardy. Despite all, the creature seemed incapable of movement — a late discovery. Nor could it feed itself. You even had to fill the eerie dark lakes in two of its branching arms with water by yourself, dark stygian pools only the most seasoned and intrepid of sailors might traverse. Somedays, rare to be sure, its fiery belly went cold. Most unsettling and incommoding, though the creature stood then helpless, innocuous, strangely frigid. It might always mark one with black pitch, but a daring adventurer could utilize his mother's impervious gloves. So that even the back of the beast was eventually reconnoitered, delineated, partly demystified. It would prove — in due course — to be an antithesis of his later slender pearly nimble paragon. Indeed, an enormous ugly spider there had obviously imbued some sinister essence from the sweaty monstrosity.

Within the decade, David's limpid imagination would be fleshing out a dramatic physical world that teamed with the lithe idealized bodies of the ancient Olympians, so beautifully pictured in the headers of the elegant advertising mailers the pharmaceutical companies sent to his father; a menagerie that would take a lifetime to explore, the Behemoth coming to represent a nether Stygian realm.

An ancillary revelation was what many solitary, histrionic adventurers find sooner or later: the protean wonder of Clean Clay, available in most dime stores and affordable with his allowance! Thus his trips to Wong's magazine stand became excursions to that preserve for detailed observation mainly, given the cost of the magazines. The dramas remained much the same, though his paragons took on a new haunting realism — he might actually *fashion* them himself! His svelte huntresses acquired a personal nuance unfathomed before; indeed he rendered one day a surprisingly realistic Dale Arden as presented in his Big Little Books. If he was not yet a critically accomplished sculptor, he was pleased with the nimble creatures in his developing sagas, who animated many pithy scenarios. Thus did the escapades of his dramatis personae, circa grade seven, come freely, sovereignly alive as never before. If the progress in his own mind was exhilarating, the reaction of his parents, particularly his mother, was anything but reassuring. Elspeth was promptly alarmed, her one comment — 'David, everyone has a body and there's nothing wrong with it!' — proved more pithy than she imagined. Mainly slender nude girls made entirely of dun-white Clean Clay were sobering examples of her young son's preoccupation, despite the fact he had already been given a good book on the subject of sex. His mother's obvious disapproval was about all David needed to convince him that compensating consuming adventures thrived best underground, that toiling by stealth in private would relive

much parental anxiety. Thus the newly cleaned dark corners of the basement nearest the rumbling behemoth often became the staging areas for his burgeoning partisans, after being privately rolled out, sculpted and contoured on the basement bench. The very recourse to such hugger mugger added to the haunt of the recondite. The darkened corner ignites the imagination, many scenes imaginable. How alive and intriguing the arcane, the looming swart and monstrous! A secret reality that demanded ever more stealth to fashion the real and pristine, such that his players were now complete from their peplos and chlamys to their genitalia, their costumes a layer rolled first to stiff paper thinness...though such costumes were becoming redundant, for by then he was living among the largely nude immortals and gods of ancient Greece — as depicted in the elegant headers of the pharmaceutical advertisements his father received. More important, the suite next the behemoth became vacant, the last occupant returning to Ontario and a former sweetheart. Being full of deep empty cupboards, David's *dramatis personae* might be discreetly cosseted, the suite itself a landscape imagination inciting to his own. Not that all evidence of his 'unfolding' was unknown above stairs. He had learned early on how tracing paper might be used to remove a costume from the outline of a catalogue model. Thus was he, having pretty much abandoned two dimensional distractions, at least for the time being, not a little chagrined his mother should find two very old examples of the more sensational; perhaps he had overdone the pubic hair. She offered a dour smile and further iteration of her dictum about bodies, leaving the pics to be disposed of as he felt best, meaning the maw of the behemoth sooner than later. The 'nothing wrong with it' was the bogymen. "Bodies establish, encapsulate invidiousness — a most troublesome attribute," he much later would write to his friend Peter, a mathematician specializing in elliptic modular functions who had been retained by Paleomena — the corporation David would one day work for as its art salon curator. "Bodies, manifolds! if you like, can at times be nearly sublime, nothing freakish — the acute problem. For the greater the sensitivity to the subtleties of the rarer wonderworks, the more one may be tempted to intervene, to make over the humble image of the lesser — the compact between hubris and invidiousness that humans seem innately prey to. The 'concinny' that incites envy, spite." By then words too were becoming his nubile consorts.

His later career in advertising and art criticism, leading to his placement with the Paleomena Corporation as its salon curator, would merely verify what he discovered in those days below stairs, on the workbench by the behemoth where he rolled out and made his soft clay *dramatis personae*, with their later collar bones and shoulder blades, ribs and dimpled haunches — resulting in the numinous revelation that elegance might indeed be apprehended, and was not in fact mythical, surreptitious. However much a society's taste might vary, the durable paragon was

never far off, the nature of which, in its symmetry eurythmy — concinnity — tended to work cross-culturally with amazing clarity. Shape not colour being the clincher. Would not most advertising be impossible otherwise? He would discover and treasure the word consonance. He would be accused of being a fascist, but the accusations came mainly from totalitarians, for whom equality must rescind hierarchy, those fanatics who would turn humans into essences, pure figments of the imagination. Bodies had splendour and intelligence and discreteness — which entailed stratification. The human problem and celebration. Because without hierarchy there *is* no drama, and what are humans without their passion plays, their wonderful remonstrances, their fathomless resentments, which could become dense as a black hole. Something the Olympian gods, who might drearily live forever, found the omnipotent entertainment! *Mortal* pain kept the *immortal* audience alert and entertained. The more excruciating the more galvanizing. Why humans were so fascinating!

He would remember always the days the latest of his numinous forms materialized from his own hands, his ostensible, parian marble Aphrodite realized as never before — though here his critics would have some latitude, for his paragon was slighter, more lithe than the Aphrodite of Knidos. A point that would daunt his mature years. Perhaps at that stage he yearned for a playmate, and the more gamin form filled the pubescent niche, someone akin to Johanna Wagner down the lane, a newcomer — incomparably alive! — who was to cause him nearly as much anguish as Guy Fysh had Vida Semple, though in far less attributable ways. Anyway, the gracile form was suddenly, astonishingly galvanically ‘there’, an incarnate example of his ineffable female, in his very own neighbourhood! The magic of recognition and witness was truly awesome; he might fashion his own eidolon from an actual living being! He had surely glimpsed the Pnuma. Never, ever after, having to look in from the outside, his nose pressed against the glass at closing time. The serpentine Johanna, his first live intimation of a universal kore, often glimpsed in a swimsuit, might be finally rendered and staged in a credible human drama. His talent was not inconsiderable, as he could come away from a movie — one about the Great Barrier Reef with Gilbert Roland, say — and recreate the characters with a satisfying verisimilitude, especially the gamin swimmer played by Terry Moore. A talent that was of course problematic for the moral rectitude of his parents when the occasional factual and finely detailed example emerged from the netherworld. “It’s a phase,” said pater, with his complaisant regard of frailty. “Fair anatomically. But, as you say, intemperate and time-consuming. He should be out scrumming with the kids across town. And he may need a math tutor this year.” Elspeth kept her eyes open, and David had to be ever more secretive and resourceful. Especially in planning the stealthy incursions into her purse to pay for the growing allotments of clay! A

circumstance that would add the drama of the thief to his endeavours, a life truly voluptuously lived on an edge. What one does not accomplish in the white heat of dissimulation, in the seized, stolen interval. An interval that can furnish both an Echo — and a Johanna!

But then near disaster. The basement suite was again rented, despite earlier advisements to the contrary. “If I ever do that again I need my head examined.” So Elspeth once declared with uncharacteristic candour after weeks of enduring the early boarder who drank, teased Ali, and snored with a resonance that sometimes rivalled the rumble of the furnace on winter nights. The new boarder could not have been more accommodating though, or satisfactorily ingratiating — or sensationally enlightening to a wanton young Donatello like David! A newly graduated dentist the boarder had impeccable personal habits, and a taste for the lubricious in books and magazines, both of which he managed to leave laying about behind his ever open door. (It is instructive to remember that at one time in the fifties many communities locked their doors only when they went on holidays. Thieves were as rare then as career bellyachers and civil libertarians.) “With entitlement and empowerment comes remorseless demand and diminished responsibility,” David would write in his later years, plagiarizing his eventual fastidious friend Julian — Johanna’s lordly brother. A late sapient companion, destined to become the Gryphon.

On eyeing the new boarder’s taste in literature, David was newly agog. Most of the dentist’s offerings came from Europe, where the American Playboy ‘philosophy’ had long been upstaged. So it seemed. The biographies were poignant and lusty — one of Toulouse Lautrec he revisited many times. A publication called *For Men Only* featured illustrations of an elegant cosmopolitan and/or bohemian life, emphasis on the Parisienne, that he was only beginning to comprehend — another universe his young mind discerned with mesmeric fascination. Those French knew a thing or two. Some sensational illustrations from Flaubert’s *Hérodias* were part of the dentist’s wall art and became a touchstone. The anatomical quirks and subtleties alone were spellbinding. This was about the time David began to mimic the voices of his denizens, how they addressed one another in a given dialogue, plying their apposite and opportune expressions...as well as realize the correct placement and contour of trochanter, patella and so forth. The muscles would take a little longer but followed with commendable or at least excusable leeway when he began consulting those medical tomes in his father’s library. The *Diseases of Women* by Crossen and Crossen might be a trifle obtuse for a twelve-year-old, but *Gray’s Anatomy* became and remained a kind of bible, such that the later clean clay ‘parian’ masterworks were never painted or otherwise shaped beyond what his perceptions deemed anatomically harmonious and affectively apt, given the character they represented. Which meant that ankles could not be thin as sparrows, like his mother’s, nor legs short and bowed as

his aunts, nor smiles and scowls forced as Gilbert Roland's. Polyclitus and Michelangelo had, he believed, initiated the essential elegant standard, at least for the males, which transcended extemporization. David's critics could make of him what they liked. Some things you just know.

Apropos our story, in light of the new renter, David had to return, with a nostalgic frisson, to the sooty crannies about and behind the behemoth, until the dentist took himself off with a dietician from the hospital. Thereafter David inherited the suite, and suffered through the days of high school with few scenes, the suite's reach-in closets sufficiently remote and entirely spacious to rest his perfected players. But by then his parents, he belatedly and sadly came to realize, were exhausted. Their own moral code and unrelenting assiduousness through a depression and two world wars had simply worn them out. So he perceived and came to believe. Like most privileged epicures, he tended to cavil at their dedicated toil, discounting the comfort and surety he would otherwise have been oblivious of. His wondrous Eurydice may never have come to inhabit his enchanted dreamscape otherwise. But that vexing realization was still a decade off. What helped with the engagement at this stage was his discovery that the three-dimensional plastic form might be as realistically rendered on paper — a two dimensional realm he now resurrected, the paraphernalia and space necessary for a full-fledged three dimensional *mise-en-scène* too inconvenient for a burgeoning dilettante lacking a Hollywood production facility. After all, seeing was seeing, and the perfected frame essentially a series of stills. He had always been deft with pencil and tempera, one facet of his creative ability his parents warmly applauded — including the painting of a barn dance that toured Canada in a federally adjudicated juvenile art salon! Now he realized that the problems compounded by a three dimensional scene might be resolved by converting it to two. Which he proceeded to do with dispatch, realizing also that one feature that had thus far eluded him, the fashioning of realistic skin, goose bumps and freckles, to say nothing of a subtle moue or pout — a difficulty with a head the size of a walnut — was expressly realizable. He could now look at illustrations and marqueees with a new acquisitiveness. Terry Moore's fetching complexion and elliptical grin might elude the pallid surface of Clean Clay, yet be fully captured with pencil and tempera.

Curiously, it was about this time he found another escape which actually abetted his artistic assimilations and productions — his mother's late susceptibility to the idea of attending an early movie on a weeknight! If his first success at suggesting such a travesty surprised him, he soon learned to scan the movie page for those romances, even those with an 'adult' rating, that he might reliably tempt her with. "You've finished your homework?..." Well, not entirely, but like so many things he was discovering at that time, people were often hospitable to the idea of finding an excusable alibi, especially when impromptu, the toll on the civic paragon not

insubstantial. Pater being particularly late for supper was often the clincher. “Kid, can you eat out tonight? David and I may go to a movie.” He never overheard the tone of pater’s voice in response to this request, yet pater always complied...coming to sit with his usual patience and composure at one of the three cafés in Burdock, reading a paper while masticating his breaded pork cutlet and drinking his tenth or eleventh cup of coffee that day. A cigarette or two or three would follow with the ice cream, and the inevitable visitation to the café by Hoddy Swinton, the local putative village idiot — a prickly bent-nosed eccentric who occasionally flashed his discharge papers from the insane asylum at Weyburn with the exclamation — “So prove you’re not, eh?” Hoddy was Burdock’s only resident with no fixed address — he usually had two or three — who sold papers and collected pennies thrown at him in the downtown two beer parlours. He would see Doc Willardson as soon as he entered the café, and in a shrill nasal voice shout out Doc Willardson’s name as he approached with a day old newspaper and a summation of his days woes. “As you can see Doc, I need a new pair of mitts. I try my best but I had to tote some old leaky batteries last week for Soo Security.” Would Doc Willardson be willing to assist a humble fellow mortal? As many of the café’s patrons watched with attentive caution, Doc Willardson would reach into his pocket to fetch a dollar — a not inconsiderable heist for Hoddy in 1958. It was perhaps the guarantee that Doc might be permitted to read his own paper without further interruption. Thus would pater in the last years of his practice eat several late suppers in the Modern, Venus or Elite cafés, where he would be deferred to by the Chinese proprietors with a solicitude that comes from immigrants whose exactions are manifold, and whose decorum and patience seem fathomless, one in particular whose handle was also ‘Doc’, a thin skeletal gent with a stoop and kindly if not venerable aspect, who often cooked Doc Willardson’s untimely supper himself.

It was a scene Yuri Sergeevich — known thereabout as George Horlick — glimpsed for the third or fourth time as he slipped along the slushy sidewalk outside, the cast to the interior fixtures behind the hoar frosted window bleached to an ivory patina, the persons inside so many figurines in a soap carving. How the city reminded him of his own home town, with its pervasive snow and riddled ice, the tar smell and thrum of tires on slippery hard pack, the coalescing group of labourers and field hands, here including roughnecks, seeking escape in demon vodka — rather, the three or four beers that would make one more or less immune to a seedy home and pervasive overnight cold. With Doc Willardson putting out, Hoddy might look forward to a moderate take that night, coming from the Elite Café while replacing his old eaten mitts with a bright blue pair he likely fetched that day from the United Church jumble. Yuri assumed the hermit retained a quite spectacular array of ‘failed’ clothing, though his boots were invariably

whole and shiny in this kind of weather. He seemed to be wary of Yuri — as if he detected a denizen cagy and wary as himself, a someone he may have maligned or implicated in the course of his misadventures. “Not me — maybe that other chap who’s been around.” Though he would invariably doff his toque and smile to all and sundry, displaying a limited number of sharp snagged teeth. But another of the humans Yuri imagined the Creator made when He was nodding, or impetuous while temporarily lacking crucial materials.

That evening Yuri headed across the street skirting the Paradise beer parlour, off across the CPR tracks to the growing dark beyond the dimly lit roundhouse, swiftly continuing until he reached the sudden steep side of the coulee, which he followed to the bottom where the wind was less chilling. A new light snowfall also afforded a measure of quiet seclusion as he moved. He was cautious and leery that night, the night his assignment would end with a confirmation of his escape route in a dead letter drop just outside Burdock — the old gopher hole triangulated from the corner of the cemetery above. But as he knelt and removed the cold earth of the stoppered hole, to retrieve the sought water-tight envelope and its awaited instruction, left by Nechayev’s cutout, he felt something else in the envelope, which proved to be a tiny pawn chess piece from a set like one he had seen gents playing with in the Kiwanis park on Sundays. His pen light revealed its smooth patina. The note was as revealing: gone was the wry undertone of his handler. The instruction to meet an operation captain in Burdock’s north gravel pit to affirm an exit route was transcribed by a cypher — words his secret anonymous friend Nechayev would use only under duress. In secreting the pawn, his friend had made a considerable sacrifice on Yuri’s behalf — chancing so poignant a warning! A warning with a far greater chill than the wind.

The shiver barely passed through his body when he knew, resolved, what he must do, even before the onerous presence of the pawn fully confirmed the bleak vista in his mind — that ‘leaving’ for him could be lethal.

So. Someone suspected or invented a travesty. Sometimes one and the same. Perhaps the requisition of the seed packets had compromised his handler, alarmed the current edgy Center chiefs. It seemed he was indeed decreed a ghost, a forfeited piece. A mere pawn. To likely fill a trench by the old gravel pit. He had often suspected that no unreliable players might be left...a suspicion that enjoined his late assignment to find locales for the caches of arms and explosives that later spetznaz teams would use to cripple hydro and electric utilities, in the anticipated cold war turning hot, particularly the main gas line above the Cypress Hills that would soon connect with the main conduit to the East. The suspicion never abated that the ever lingering paranoia might one day affect even the field players...who just might decide to wait out a struggle, doubt

the evil attributed to ‘greedy bourgeois jackals’ and ‘decadent cosmopolitan idlers’, as the elusive Gouzenko might have done. Moreover, the current Soviet agricultural ‘experts’ could indeed be discovered to be wrong if not obtuse, and their cadres were taking no chances. An able dissenter discovered by a live compliant other can be a grave embarrassment. A pawn indeed. His anxiety had been valid all along.

Yet escape, flight — the immediate impulse — was forfeited because someone had taken a considerable chance on his behalf. He must see the official matter done and ended. He grimly smiled. He must follow the instructions in the note to the letter — not reveal by a sudden or impetuous act the concerted daring of his friend, this sentinel, who would leave such a clue, risk such an intrepid tip-off. Yuri might be killed regardless, yet he would now go to the appointed rendezvous prepared. With luck he could survive. His resolve to stay alive, even in the face of a protracted hunt for his whereabouts, was the dare that nerved his sense of order and truth and nobility. He would return. The maniacs must perish. The patient, mindful, competent and steadfast survive. So he believed and now must honour. He had been a fugitive before. Caesar was not God. Someone had in fact retrieved the singular seeds! God willing, that person was on his side. For now.

He fetched his kit, repacked its contents, and fitted the clip into his Grach pistol. There would be two sitters, one concealed. As he sat on the shared toilet in his housekeeping unit he worked out the scenario he would devise to facilitate such a murder. The sniper would be close at hand, less than a hundred feet; they would not risk a chase. As he pictured the scene, apropos the note, his plan slowly materialized — even where he might bury the bodies in the gravel pit by the cemetery. Thank god he had substituted similar looking seed packages for the select offering he’d taken. The researchers at the Experimental Farm would not miss that particular package for a day or two. Nechayev also said in one letter that the Ottawa Resident had been disappointed Yuri had not recruited anyone on the farm’s agronomy team. The suggestion struck Yuri as provisional; recruitment took time which they didn’t have, given the urgency in securing the seeds. Indeed, time was of the essence now, to have the hybrid seeds he’d garnered planted in the soils of the Soviet Union, to form a prospectus as early as possible, along with the pertinent fertilizers and ground covers — his embedded, ineluctable hope. A single season can mean the difference between survival and slow death to a large rural population, given the confiscatory methods of the agricultural commissars — who filled their quotas regardless! How bathetic that his own KGB service might then be riddled with such a layering of factions, one servicing the ignorance, neglect, or vengeance of another. The involutions and convolutions sometimes seemed to defy comprehension let alone unravelling. Paranoia was a kind of pornography he

often mused. The game to strip your opponent or rival of any semblance of respectability, even viability. The vindictive mindset that often tainted the Cheka. You show me yours, I'll show you someone else's. At times he felt the weight of survival. Yet the vision remained — of a new man, freed from the invidiousness of the past. Shit heads was the name career thugs gave to idealistic beings, even as they ratted on one another in the latest terror, often to secure their own wretched end. What fools, dolts, nincompoops, his stolid English instructor was fond of saying. The singular teacher who remarked that French sounded like a woman teasing a cat, Italian a Casanova propositioning a madonna, Spanish a patriot chastising a nonpartisan, German a stable hand screwing a mule, and Russian, a drunk dreaming aloud? Such rendering could have you demoted, even jailed on a bad day, cause you to miss a well-rehearsed goose step around the Lenin Mausoleum.

He *would* return. And more than this new current handler would come to know about it. Caesar's limited take. His pact with himself.

PART THREE: FLESH OF MY FLESH

PLAYMATES

In the fall of 1958, on the first day of school which coincided with his fourteenth birthday and entry into grade eight, David sensed a new dynamic in the schoolyard with the arrival of new students Julian and Johanna Wagner who, from the start, readily amazed, especially Johanna. That such a looker might actually be in his own neighbourhood dumfounded, at least at first. Though he readily decided that the adventitious Johanna was the genuine article. Seeing was his being. The central sylphic muse had come to Burdock in a credible, human three-dimensional soma, a form confirmed in his first glimpse of her in a swimsuit — a recognition startling as that of his own ungainliness! If the peerless Johanna became the incarnation of his central iconic muse, her brother, the witty, often droll Julian, proved to be a patron who would hone, in his own inimical way, David's sense of the ideal. The coming of the Wagner duo ushered in a seismic change to David's life. Which animated a detailed telling.

Julian Wagner was the apposite son of his father Carl, the maestro in David's father's class at McGill, who was now onto his third wife, entrusting his second, Bibi, with his two children: Johanna, Bibi's child, and Julian, the child of his first wife. After giving birth to Julian, his first wife drowned in a boating accident in which Carl was reprimanded at the inquest for neglecting the deployment of suitable life-jackets. Bibi in turn, after Carl took up with a UN translator, came to Burdock with an agrolologist from Minnesota on loan to the Experimental Farm. Unlike

Julian's father, Carl, who was somewhat homely, preciously unkempt, and believed his German ancestry largely virtuosic if banal (too reliably transcendent he would fondly say), Julian was almost handsome, neat, and possessed a considerable musical talent. But his father's satiric debonair manner had rubbed off, devolving into a blithe candour where witticisms abounded, including droll impersonations of himself as a mythological hero. He fancied the nickname Jule, something akin to a Koh-i-noor 'gem' or, as he fancifully put it, a 'Siegfried who slays the dwarf and keeps the loot' — much of this levity ingrained by the time he came to the eight grade class at Burdock Central School, Johanna to grade seven. When the teacher roll-called "Julian Wagner," Julian responded by saying "Julian Siegfried Parsifal". The teacher, Miss Browne, was at first amused. "You mean Julian Carl Wagner." Said Julian, "It's the old dwarf deal, where I must contend with the little people." Gangling Julian was at least a foot higher than most students. Some in the class giggled. Miss Browne demanded order, and declared that Julian would be called Julian in class.

Julian's twin in all but birth, Johanna, was Carl's child by Bibi, a Swedish ballet understudy, who conceived Johanna when Julian was a year old. Bibi became the consequential irritant in the first marriage, which was more or less over by the time of the drowning. Bibi in turn grew to resent Carl's habitual infidelity — her own mother had endured an adulterous husband — and left shortly after Johanna was born. By then Carl had taken up with an EEC economist, and accepted a position as medical director for a chain of spas in the Austrian Alps. Bibi interrupted her ballet career to become an exemplary mother to both children, whom Carl wrote to once a month, took on art junkets in Europe during the early summer, and provided an ample annuity for which Bibi served as interim trustee.

Nearly as tall as Julian, Johanna was a near proportionate replica of the svelte elongated figures David had begun to abandon in clay. Her sudden arresting presence made him decide that decision was maybe premature, for trochanters, patellas, raised acromials and deltoids seemed more distinct, evident in clay. Unlike the dark bold Julian, her face seemed ever beclouded in loose sandy curls above a long Greek nose and freckled cheek. Her oval, wide, often half-lidded eyes intimated that David's rendering of one Artemis in his collection might be a bit fey. Already postured as a promising dancer like her mother, she seemed to exist at one remove from her days at school. Her lips frequently formed a moue or snide smile, especially when facing homely boys like him. She would prove to be the second brightest and least companionable of the girls in the class — next to quiet plain Emma Goldman — and she would soon be called 'Miss March' and 'Stuck Up' by the girls and 'Hubba Hubba' by some boys who usually ended up standing behind her in the combined grade Seven and Eight calisthenics

classes. Miss Browne could not make up her mind whether to make an issue of the shorts Johanna wore, being of regulation length but sufficiently wide to reveal an expanse of thigh that could be sensational during the bends and stretches. A boy named Cyril claimed he could see her briefs and bragged about the ‘feels’ he copped during recess in the school commons — implicating the various tag team japes where a lad might ‘accidentally’ veer into a nearby sororal coterie and brush against a select denizen to determine how flat her chest was. Johanna was said to be nearly a handful, which most lads irascibly and peevishly doubted, while remaining envious of Cyril’s enterprise. The bustling consequential playground was also the dusty agora where mogul Julian sometimes peddled his supply of rare delicious gummy bears his father sent, somewhat cheaper and neater than those sold in the Kimble confectionary across the street. By late fall he would be peddling a supply of Sunbathing Magazines, flashing the covers to the especially mesmerized fifth and sixth graders, who had an amazing talent for pooling their cash to actually acquire contraband, however exorbitant. It was a time of reckoning for heedful witnesses like David. People in general hungered after many things, yet put up with stuff on the sly or QT that seemed at times craven. For instance, he and his one neighbourhood pal Cyril, had been shepherds in the Christmas Concert that year and, not being in the front line of rehearsal, often lolled about the stage, at one point lying down to gaze up at the high ceiling, some vivid water stains about the corners taking on a novel perspective from their lie, not unlike the umbered clouds they might unravel while lying on the loamy beach off the creek’s designated swimming hole. Miss Browne briefly sauntered by, moving to summon and position a waiting group of sopranos. In doing so she allowed David and Cyril a glimpse of her underwear — the holiest set of woolies David ever saw or would see. The disagreeable aspect of it Cyril seemed to bear better than he, and left for the lavatory to indulge his soon convulsive giggling. For David it had come as a shock and a blow. Miss Browne was obviously in some kind of pickle. He was familiar with the destructive power of moths and the like, yet what self-respecting woman would wear such disgusting apparel? The matter quite bamboozled him. Women, at least as he attired them, did not look bereft, certainly not indigent. He simply couldn’t figure it out. Cyril’s mundane acumen easily bested David’s dismay. “So she’s saving up to buy something. Maybe a new thicker switch to hit us with.” The last had actually broken over the shoulder of sturdy Max Engler. Who was later sent off to the Principal’s office for a proper strapping. One of a series that month. From which he returned manifesting his usual impregnable phlegm. Though he stayed out of trouble the remainder of that week.

“Maybe she’s buying dictionary?”

“She has a dictionary.”

David mulled the matter over. “A much smaller one, maybe. Like Miss Laybourne once had.”

“She’s already got one. The switch is more handy I think.”

Miss Browne had indeed on occasion carried a moderately sized dictionary in her patrol of the aisles, and could heft and despatch its weight on the head of a scapegrace or malingerer with lightening speed. Whereas Miss Laybourne, an older less agile schoolmarm, was a substitute teacher who came once a week while Miss Browne prepared the Christmas concert, and tended to favour a fly swatter over a dictionary. Thus far both David and Cyril had escaped the fly swatter. Shortly after the laden discovery of Miss Browne’s woolies, David found Julian hawking a new Sunbathing Magazine in the bosky scrub behind the school. David was disappointed with this issue, a rarity, and said so aloud. “Kinda heavy the ones here; no real, well, sylphs.” His vocabulary was broadening.

The comment surfaced during a studious quiet and alerted several lads in the throng, who looked at David with a mixture of distrust and disfavour. Sylph for them sounded corny. Then another lad, more esteemed in the group, added, “Some are like this. Just old mainly.” Julian’s prompt, suave touting of Peter Paul Rubens’ models, via a late postcard from his father, which he fetched from an inner coat pocket, merely exacerbated David’s diffidence. Still, David suspected smart Julian may have a point — about some period artists. Julian’s word was ever a kind of summons. They spoke to one another shortly after, Julian leading the way.

“Lookit, cousin, we’re not selling in Sunbathing mags D’Antinos or Lemckes or von Adolphs,” he said to David when the others had left. (Julian’s artist list David would comprehend only years later.) Julian resumed with, “‘Sylph’ is a specialty creature. Know what it means?” “I make them almost every day,” David said with some resolution. Julian regarded David with rare sobriety. He was not to be put off this time, and with some adroit prodding asked, “So they’re what — spindly fairies, nonce? Denizens from a toadstool kingdom?”

In consequence Julian was the first outsider to be shown, furtively, a late coterie in David’s Clean Clay gallery, along with his late drawings. His amazement on seeing this arcane pantheon was not held back.

“This one — holy crow — is Gilbert Roland. And this, crimmeny, Terry Moore. Both bloody here. Congratulations. But you got the thing of the babe’s all wrong — they don’t have any. Even that small.”

David was stunned.

“What do you mean?”

Women don’t have pricks, even modest ones, you silly cunt. Well, none that you could see

from ten paces, unless she's a she-male."

David was momentarily aghast. "That's bullshit." It was perhaps the first time he ventured to use a generic putdown.

"No, cunt, gospel. They got a hole that looks like the eye of the Cyclops Odysseus put out, at least when they mature. Up until then it's barely a coin machine slot lacking a coin." Both Julian and David shared an interest in believable flesh, but Julian obviously had better retainers. "Johanna's got a little slit, and a few fuzzy wuzzies. Which she won't let me count. She's a late bloomer mother says. The best kind apparently."

"How the christly fuck do you know that?" David had continued with the debut of his new bracing lexicon. If he hadn't mastered it yet, the determination surfaced as never before.

Julian looked at his less worldly friend, who could sculpt like an Alexander Oppler, draw like an Albert Sterner, beings he had to inform David of — artists his Rabelaisian father had a special fondness for.

"You really don't know, do you simp?"

It was a moment when David would ever after regret his lapse into earnestness. "Lookit, I know what you told me about how, well, how it's done — this in-out stuff — but honest, I've looked through all the doctor books in my dad's library and never came across anything like that."

"A scholar and a gentleman, I must presume."

David scowled.

"Well at least we can get your tit out of the wringer. Fetch ye old Gray's Anatomy, cousin. The tome."

On Julian's dare David stealthily fetched the heavy bulky Gray's Anatomy from the upstairs study library. Promptly Julian flipped to the back pages where the genitalia were rendered. "See, that's it, nonce. The heart of the matter. Which I think pater apprised me of before I could walk."

"Yeah okay, but it grows. Doesn't it?..."

Julian, forthrightly accepting the manifest aesthetic gifts of this new approximate Botticelli, patiently recapitulated for him the act of coitus and the 'pertinent appurtenances needed for it' while quoting liberally from his father's argot. "And that's that. That's how we came to be you and me. Father thinks the creator has a dry sense of humour. But say, dumbbell, why do you hide everything down here in this dungeon? Why not put it on the mantle upstairs?"

It was time for David to exhibit a pointed incredulity.

"Are you nuts? My parents...jees."

To say that Julian was amazed would be to give handsome astonishment less than its due.

“Tell me — they think it’s what — impious, pagan? Or just ignorant?” He pointed again to the model of Terry Moore.

Lamely David said, “They think, I guess, it’s a waste of time.”

“Let’s see the rest. Especially the clay figures. Didn’t know you could sculpt so.”

“That’s the best.”

Julian looked into the deep cupboard and nodded at the many other characters lining the narrow shelves. For a moment it looked as though David would balk. So Julian reached in and grabbed a couple.

“Be careful, you can squeeze them.”

“I’ll handle them like coddling moths, pecker head.”

David was doing his best not to look embarrassed.

“Hey, simp, these are looking kinda shopworn, I’d say.”

“Well, they’ve been around a while.”

“Ah ha. The rest, the paragons I imagine, just kind of sit about like Caesar’s wife while you carry on the show with the other desperadoes, right? The old masturbate skirmish — in the flesh.”

David was livid.

“Okay, okay, simp, just looking.” He held two of the roughed up figures away from his stung playmate. And look he did.

“My god have these been in some adventures, all the dints, scrapes: the ones that get into the real skirmishes, not just look on, eh? Skinny legs this one and a tiny head. And this faun almost no prick at all.”

“Well, I ran out of clay someday,” David tried to say matter-of-factly.

“Makes sense. Makes a lot of sense. The Creator ran out of leg stuff, head stuff and pecker stuff. Really. Why we are like we are, right? The clay ran out the day we were made. Indeed. Like Mozart, the Creator was a lazy ass. Couldn’t be bothered. Or maybe just broke.” He cannily eyed David.

David was by then mute and nearly fuming.

“And, holy Hannah this one — a Centaur, a fine horsey man. Whereas this other guy is a real patootie! This one too. The shoulders! Know where that guy’s head went into. Looks like both have been in the wars.”

David sullenly looked on.

“So these are the cats that actually see some action, right? Get to perform in the daily rig-

marole. Perform in the drama vortex. The creatures lacking the perfected bodies. Or maybe getting on with repairs. The Centaur excepted.” By then he had taken notice of the many lesions suffered by many in this coterie, including some sullied molls. David’s rancid silence confirmed the conclusion. Julian smiled, not ungratefully.

“Tell you what, simp — we need to talk.”

Julian, who had been taken to the continent several summers on tours of the grand salons, especially those in Italy — the favourite destinations of his well-travelled father — simply smiled at his school fellow’s plain unease. Such wariness and timidity seemed daft to him, who had been from an early age exposed to the best and worst of the masters, including his father’s rogue collection of what he called ‘the venerable trouvé’, which included several nude photos of Bibi her own father had taken. It was part of Carl’s accord with his son: imparting the ‘durable quintessences’. Bibi, a leggy ballet dancer with a brief professional career, was a Scandinavian free spirit, a sun worshipper with great ‘empathy for the Indian Jainist sect of sky-clad devotion’, as Carl put it. He too had been swept off his feet to discover so svelte a form — ‘slender, tender and tall’ — that might exist in live flesh. Splendour, he told Julian, was nothing less than the upstaging of cupidity and envy. The harmonious transcendence. In due course Carl felt doubly blessed, for Johanna promised to be a perfected double of her mother!

Once Bibi had taken over the family after Carl’s first wife accepted Carl’s liberal settlement package (then promptly drowned), Julian and Johanna played together as edenic waifs once removed from a dour, often abject world. That David might manifest both pride and chagrin at displaying his soft clay wares and later drawings, struck Julian as the genuine article. Pater had told him many stories of both the artist and the public’s confusion over original ‘unameliorated talent’. ‘It is the aesthetic sense that makes of us man or beast. Where that sense is in crisis — where dogmatism or anarchy makes us slight the worth of studious selfless art — the cannibals take over.’ Given Julian’s estimate of the denizens in Burdock, certainly their school, ‘cannibals’ seemed about right. Though as Julian said later, his pater could be a bit of a droner. On seeing David’s near marvels he, at fourteen, was disposed to exercise his growing image of himself as connoisseur and indispensable patron. Taking David in hand he collected some of the drawings and clay wares, insuring that they were well and safely concealed in his valise when they left David’s house. Directly they went to Terpsichore Bibi, though David did not anticipate this. She was wearing jeans and a sloppy joe when they arrived. After being apprized of the visit, she, Julian and David moved to a long, sunny, open ended room where a dance bar and mirror had been installed. “Johanna’s doing dance warmups,” Julian remarked as Bibi sat to inspect David’s offerings. David was slow in accepting, accommodating Bibi’s observation of his work, and

missed the wink at Julian when she took up the Terry Moore oceanic Naiad character — for emphatically, fantastically, miraculously, newcomer Johanna was there in the ‘quintessential’ flesh, the winter sun radiant through two skylights. Her finely boned face, sleek neck and svelte figure astonished a newly cognizant David, hers the ethereal form he’d struggled to realize. An ormolu shaft of sunlight livened the nimble flexing figure, her sandy sun-gold hair alive in sleek ringlets, her faintly sweat-marked leotard sensational, for the time, with its revelation of scarcely concealed marvels. If Cyril had glimpsed white shorts, he surely never saw the bum as escaped as it was here. And when she stood with crossed feet in what David would later identify as the basic Fifth Position, her front indeed limned a likely coin machine. David was mesmerized. That he should be so moved by it would later and ever after confound his notion of prurience — whether he was, and had been all his life, little more than a shy sly voyeur! But that day the very heavens beckoned. The face her helmet of hair framed was neatly dimpled, enhanced by a regal chin and long ethereal neck, her wide set eyes no longer showcasing the half-lidded tedium she seemed to cultivate, but absorbed, focused on her stance. She was performing for a god, and knew the god was paying attention, ornate words he would later write with easily conceded desperation. The question of the ‘beauty myth’ was then but an NFT — Non-Fungible Token — a concept he believed only the blind might conceive.

So...on that lovely December day, the snow through the kitchen door a late afternoon auric gloaming, the sheen of wood polish on the hardwood almost mirror-like, the deft image of the sylph at the golden bar, regnant, committed as an Ariadne to lead one out of the distracting maze...he couldn’t have been happier. He surely had arrived, beheld the Pneuma, the animating force of life! If she shunned shy homely chaps like him, well, so much the better; he wouldn’t have to contend with a rude, truculent dismissal. His nonsuch would be, in body and mind, sovereign.

Bibi was finally quite earnest. “David these fauns and sirens, both the sketches and models, are wonderful; you must go to a good art school, the one in Toronto at least.” Then after a second visual communication with her son, added less assertively, “Have you ever approached your father?”

Julian sighed, looking drolly at his mother. Such things take time. But the leading invitation was irresistible for smitten David, and the Willardson’s Methodist ways, as stolidly outlined then by himself, were soon as comparatively revelatory as the nymph at the bar. At the time his explanation seemed but an alibi before this too kind adult. Bibi could only smile. She was prudent enough to know the ground rules for living and staying in a small town, and got more information that day than she bargained for. Though she couldn’t help but feel Elspeth, whom

she knew, might not be up to date on her son's efforts 'downstairs' as Julian had wryly termed it. Bibi was also not a little apprehensive that David might expand to others as he had to her. She had broken up one family; she did not want to be an agent, however indirect, to distemper another. Something she too had barely a glimmering of in her own youth: that once begun, openness, candour, freedom can also mightily vex. Like her belated discovery as a latitudinarian that freedom beggared equality, for one was never free of form, of circumstance or more pertinently here, bodies in the round. Finally she said, "David, they're really quite lovely, especially the Centaur. How you got that lovely blend of horse and man is quite amazing I think. Not at all slattern like they generally are depicted." David didn't know what slattern meant but sensed a caution here, as the silence thereafter implied. Had he maybe said too much? His lonely existence didn't abet speeches, explanations. His recollection of the otherwise splendid gift-bearing magi seeking the *other way* on their return, was again revived in his hectic adolescent brain. "Over some things you simply have to draw a curtain," he would hear his father say a fortnight later when Elspeth ventured to clean out one of the suite's closets. She had been disturbed by the detailing. She hadn't reckoned how a youngster's play world need be that carnal, detailed to be credible, enjoyable. Reality had not fragmented into nuance for her. Christian salubrity was paramount, and piety always a nose ahead of charity. As was her wont, she decided to say nothing to David. If only she could encourage him to play more sports and have more friends. Words, deeds should be seemly, decorous, useful. Never sly, furtive, let alone obscene. As ever, her fraught disapproving silence affirmed David's inner private sanctum, the only place his imagination might run freely, proudly. He had been left on his own recognizance on many, many terrifying through-a-glass-darkly nights. A legacy he would amend in his own discrete way.

Julian of course was a mine of information. As he too had few friends 'among the dwarfs,' and prided himself on being an astute and selfless patron, he happily put up with David's gaucheries. Johanna remained similarly aloof among her age peers, except the handful of inductees whose mothers also championed things like rhythmic gymnastics, which the town of Burdock generally felt to be exhibitionistic. Hoddy Swinton you might find stealing a look through the stopped doors of the school auditorium on a warm spring evening, but few others. David could rarely think of an excuse to be there, yet sometimes stood behind Hoddy in the breezeway confessional — feasting on the spectacle as the supple Johanna and her sylphs bent themselves double and effortlessly arched while fluently dandling ribbons, balls and small clubs. It was apparent at the outset that rhythmic gymnastics attracted the prettiest girls. Only a gracile form might perform, align herself like a steeple, lunette or crosier. Always trouble. Years later

he would learn that the male imagination was impugned as a sorry obsessed thing which enlightened progressives were always lamenting, despairing of, even as their splendid social Utopias loomed Athena-like in their minds.

Curiously, insular Johanna also seemed especially fond of Julian, and would affect a sometimes voluptuous disgust of him that seemed to entertain them both. Ofttimes they sought out a section of a sandbar in the creek that formed a small but discreet and pristine beach. The path to it followed a bend in the creek that facilitated placement of a weir pump which served to irrigate Burdock's Riverdeen area. The faint hum of the generators could be felt through that area's sun-baked soil, which pretty naked feet might hone into a fine sandy patina in the dry hot summer. The vast open prairie above the creek embankment was all but obscured by a tangle of chokecherry, morning glory, honeysuckle, soldiering cat tails, tall plume and pony grasses, some shoulder high. Delicate Bluebottles and durable Dragonflies hovered and hazed in profusion by the moist verge of the water. Then a running race — fluid and timely along the one pathway, where the scraggly scratchy briar and bindweed thinned, leaving one free of their spiny teeth. They had condescended to take David along one day to their select sand bar. "Cousin, Johanna wants to go for a swim," Julian had informed him. Ordinarily they would have been by themselves, David assumed. When you are Paris and Helen or Cadmus and Harmony, beings awaiting David's discovery, you flee when you can. Yet David felt a few things should be got out of the way, if he was to share an adventure with this often dismaying duo.

"How come you never salute the flag; I thought only Jehovah's Witnesses did that."

"The war's over."

"But what about O Canada, you sing that."

"Canada didn't know any better."

Julian's words often bewildered. "Do be alarmed, old simp, I tend to agree with pater here. The war was fought dangerously late for the wrong reasons and thus the more tragic for it."

"I've not heard that." David had little idea what Julian meant and indulged a scowl.

"And we should have been in Russia rebuking Uncle Joe a lot sooner."

David was more confused. "Is that your mother's Uncle?"

Johanna sniggered. But did not expand. She was leading the expedition then, happy to be free of the razor tangle.

"It's like this simp, the Nazis need never have come to power if we hadn't been so gutless early on. Yet it wasn't all a disaster you know."

David, still largely green about the war, listlessly shrugged.

"They did put a lot of people back to work, simp. Around the world. Ended a world-wide

depression some think, and fostered a host of passionate seemly wartime romances — the like of which we may never see again pater believes. Unarticled romance today is pretty well dead he says.”

“But they killed a lot of people.”

“They didn’t have you and me to advise them, did they.”

“You turn things around.”

“The way of the clear-witted witness. You notice the essence, the paradigms, free of bosh, poppycock.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, consider that thing wiggling about in your swimsuit. Barely keep the filthy little worm inside. Smells to high heaven someday.”

With some chagrin David quietly announced, “I can’t always help that.”

“Well there you are. Add that to the rotten unclean food you eat and you’re a poisonous, stinking pariah, one of the great unwashed. A natural target for the vigilant hoity-toity. What do you think about that?”

“We don’t eat rotten food.”

“Try to imagine yourself married to Emma Goldman and you have it. Even if you were that keen, ha, ha, you would never get near the Schnauzer. She’s untouchable goods to the likes of us. Go to her father and ask for her hand and you’re a shyster upstart. As pater says, ‘Auntie Semite sometimes knows best’, simp,” Julian concluded with a suave smile.

It was all plain as the creek’s murky waters to David, which he noticed with some relief were slowly widening to reveal the white luminous sand on the shingle of that sought, closeted beach, a miracle of sun-leavened brightness that afternoon. Only a few footprints dotted its margin, Robinson Crusoe he imagined, still ignorant of Friday.

Johanna, after suddenly doffing her shorts and blouse, revealing a trim one piece swimsuit, let out a whoop and plunged into the water. Julian followed. David took his time to take off his T-shirt. He was punier than Julian, who had begun a water fight with Johanna. Yet, to his surprise, he was a better swimmer — in fact he was exceptional for his age, his mother having patiently taken him at an early age to the creek’s swimming hole, which they called a ‘pool’, for instruction, sitting quietly with a neighbour as he stoically joined in. Yet the year before, in the specified time, he’d become a fluent, proficient swimmer both above and under water. By the afternoon of this dome blue day, he more or less proved he had his Red Cross Intermediate Certificate. Julian stood mutely rubbing his eyes as simp submerged for a longish underwater reconnoitre, to see the arabesques Johanna’s legs made in the sun-laced, faun-coloured water.

She was a better swimmer than Julian but not as good as David. Soon they were playing tag, David the elusive minnow and prowling muskrat, Johanna a siren given to stealth and attack. David felt he could hold his breath forever. Johanna looked as good or better below water as she did above, her swimsuit a barely covering film.

She brought a lunch basket her mother put together. Turkey and egg salad sandwiches, tomato juice and grapes. They sat on the sand, the bank theirs alone that afternoon, the sun filtering through a clump of stout poplars further down, one of which had a long thick branch that arched toward the creek stopping a couple of feet above the water. For a time they sat on the thick curve of the branch and watched some water skaters, the delicate long-legged bug you detected mainly by its tracery in the water. “Like an electron,” Julian said, before launching into a dissertation on atomic evidences. Then in grade nine, in a special accelerated class, he was studying physics. “How to jump the orbit, break the shell, simp. The least little breeze will do it here.” A school of pike hovered in a shaded area just beyond the branch. Eyeing the pike, Johanna said with savoury disgust, “Just like boy wonder, the same grody eyes.” Julian pushed her off and the pike vanished before she hit the water. A new game of water tag resumed.

The afternoon was sweltry when they finished. A minute on the hot clay-mottled sand prompted a third and fourth dip. Julian was into the sandwiches when they returned a last time, seated in an odd pose on a cooler section of beach near some Chokecherry trees. Said Johanna, “He thinks he’s meditating, in the lotus pose.”

“Think shmink,” said Julian. “One bears the heathen and bed wetters with grace.”

Johanna snarled in spite of herself, whereas David remained happy as a robust lark.

“Come sit by the master, cousin. And think not of the cock who couldn’t lay.”

Said Johanna as she helped herself to a sandwich. “We’ve got to watch him eat and drool. He’s a great drooler. J. Drooler.”

“Such, simp, is the curl of feminine lip.”

If David would later suspect he got many of the words wrong, and missed many a nuance, he distinctly remembered feeling newly keenly alive on the sandbank’s warm naked sand. Just in looking, observing, he sensed a belated frisson that was all the consolation he needed then, Johanna’s water slicked skin another wondrous revelation.

A little later, a small cuke in hand, Julian noted how “our cook today neglected peanut butter and dill pickle sandwiches, full of probiotics and antioxidants the canny insect population generally cottons to.”

Said an amused Johanna, “Our busy naturalist.”

“Mustn’t slight simp’s nutritious education, Prunehilda. The cognitive function.”

By then Julian was standing, surveying some hovering insects in the shoreline flora. “One must not neglect the pristine Bluebottles, who have the courtesy to linger a while, despite our spartan menu.”

Johanna had up to that time been active too in reconnoitering the insect population about the edges of the sand bar, offering a portion of sandwich here, a celery stalk garnish there. She had a Ladybird Beetle on the back of her hand when she squatted as Julian had earlier, cross-legged, transporting the beetle from one hand to the other as she nibbled her sandwich and daubed an iota of the garnish nearer the insect. If one took flight another would replace it, wings aquiver, to sample the treat on her wrist. As if to augment the food chain, Julian plopped down beside her and extended a matching wrist...while his free hand alighted on the cowl front of Joanna’s damp swimsuit to release the selvage and peer down her chest. For a time he gamely studied the revealed contents. The shocking daring-do David did his best to ignore. Blithely smiling, Julian looked up at David. “Lady in waiting.” Then, in a stagy gesture, Johanna newly attuned to her lady bugs, he undid the shoulder straps to her swimsuit and began lowering the top with a deliberation that astonished his callow and sore-eyed school fellow. “Boy wonder works his imagination pretty hard I think, Jo.” Johanna suddenly released her beetles and cocked her head at their flight as if watching a film upside down while the slow descending curtain of her swim suit revealed one then the other half of her faintly cambered chest. Julian was not uncritical. “You’ll note, simp, how the nippies sort of begin the whole business, like a new party balloon.” With the back of his hand he lightly traced the opal of a shoulder, then a distinct nipple and camber of one breast. “Like when the cocktail wieners come out.” Stroking her thus left David dumbly trying to assess the display before him. Louche was not yet in his vocabulary. Soon Julian maneuvered Johanna’s indigo one piece almost to her navel, being hindered from going further by her sudden deft maneuvering to make a fresh sandwich from the picnic hamper, a confection with a well-garnished lettuce leaf and tomato slice edging loose above a slice of turkey. Nibbling the confection in alternate hands, she pulled her suit back up leaving the straps unattended. Then, to reassert herself, adopted the lotus asana after a seemingly effortless try, something Julian could not do. After wryly smiling at him, she straightened her legs with fluent ease, the sandwich in her mouth, and clasped her toes in a languorous stretch, then reconfigured her lotus asana and resumed eating, fixing again a droll look on her brother.

For a time Julian obliged the physical finesse. “Such fine mastication.” Then, after studying her balance as she finished her sandwich, he surprised her and David by pushing on her sternum with one finger, tipping the shoulder and head-heavy form onto its back. As she sought to release bent entwined legs — less easily accomplished when inverted — Julian began to displace the

exposed delta of her damp suit, starting them both raptly giggling, such that before she disentangled her legs, pushed him away, he was able to pull aside the damp weft-knit fabric of the gusset and afford David his inaugural if brief glimpse of over half a limpid pristine labia. Both sister and brother indulged a spate of brisk sniggering as Johanna tugged to restore the gusset. Gravely Julian said, just before he released the selvage, “Note simp, a teased eyebrow center stage, the...the ‘tormenter’.” Again David sensed a raw dismay. ‘Stupefy’ another concept in the wings. Julian resumed in a dramatic silence, “Think of the immortal cloven hoof.” He and Johanna exchanged silent droll looks. She then drew a couple of brownies from the lunch box and crushed them over her brother’s head, a cascade of tiny particles. “Such nice brown bedbugs,” she said. “J Fecal Bedbug.”

In the lengthening, purpling shadows Johanna rose to fully restore her suit, her eyes lidded, her lips playing with a smile. Julian was rallying, brushing the brownie crumbs from his head. As he tasted a few bits, he said, “Well, simp, I said you had to keep your wits about you. Can’t go through life eyes always to the right, quick march. Got to take the time to eye the marvels.”

Despite the alien nature of the interval wide-eyed David was awash in wonder. How often do you glimpse the core of the universe? Finally Julian said, “I think simp wants to make you immortal. Put you on a lofty pedestal. He’s seen the lesser Olympians.”

Johanna fetched a second brownie as she took another draught from her cup of tomato juice. She blankly looked at David — “Your older brother died in a truck accident, right?” She curtly smiled and gave Julian a dismissive shrug.

“Well he’s hardly thrilled about it,” Julian piped in.

David was not unmindful of the dramatic comment. “He was crushed. In a van. A tanker,” he quietly said into the conversational void, belatedly thinking it was a strange subject here. Did it have to do with being shy, slow, inobservant he wondered? Being normal? Johanna might have smiled, he thought. For perhaps the first time she looked directly at him, at his slicked hair, red eyes, plumping form. Then his nervous hands. “What sort of a royalty do I get?” she asked. David grimaced and thought very hard. Said Julian, “Royalty, shmoyalty. You get your bum immortalized. Your clam, well I can’t say. He’s a fusspot.” David silently smarted. “A clam bake?” Johanna mused. “Well, it goes into an oven doesn’t it?” she asked of her attentive, proximate audience.

“Does the clay get baked, simp? No, it likely stays fresh, just sits around simp’s Olympus sweating in the heat,” Julian replied with a distant smile.

By then Johanna began collecting the picnic ware and lunch wrappings. David, badly needing a distraction then, noted how the evening shadows had that lovely mallow density that

eluded painterly rendering — a fleeting recognition, for he was soon walking with renewed wonder behind his new Terpsichore in a late redolent sun-rich gloaming, concluding that if the static human figure might be apprehensible, the moving ensemble was almost imponderable. His figures had never before struck him as dead, as frozen, petrified. Again he decided she wasn't, couldn't be real. Simply more incidental evidence of an Immortal in transit, a transcendent Other inadvertently coming and going. Another superfluous reminder; look on at your peril. Julian was his usual confounding help as he trundled along behind observing the environmental detritus. “You'll note the fuzz on the elder elderberries, like a boar's snout after a sneeze. And on the far bank do note the gastronomical egesta from last year's grad dance.” In calmer sections, the creek bottom sometimes yielded up a dark green algaecide sludge that looked like badly digested fruitcake. “How the slime keeps humping the sand. Can you believe it?” Several times Johanna released the bum selvedge of her damp swimsuit. A too lush reminder. Soon she was cursing some blackberry brambles. A couple of pink scratches laced one knee when they emerged into the open walkway that led to the swing bridge. He walked beside her then, Julian still ransacking the possibilities behind. “Did you see that horse floating down the creek? Looked as if he'd really tied one on.” Said Johanna, her azure eyes half lidded, “He always sees horses about now. He never likes walking very far.” Said Julian, “I'm a performer not a hooper.” David knew that hooper could be a dancer, whereas Julian played the violin — one of the ‘genius’ pupils who got two adjudication marks in the upper nineties at the last Kiwanis Music Festival. They paused and threw some of the cat tails they collected by the path onto the now sun-scintillated water, watching them define the currents. He noted Johanna and Julian making lurid faces at one another, inventing all sorts of wizardry with their hands. They both ended up lightly laughing with that maniacal edge that alerted and dumfounded. After an abrupt turn in the path, the loose swing bridge emerged off the rising embankment path. Said Julian, taking note of David's observant witness, “‘To bare a soul string...then leave it swinging, tsk, tsk...hey ho bardolatry.’ A favourite pater line.” Johanna continued on ahead of them, her hands soon aligned to the railings. Taking note Julian dryly said, “One day the thing's gonna come tumbling down, you can bet your padudallywoodally on it.” No sooner were they on the plank walkway than Julian began swaying side to side. The quavering always spurred David on to the other side. Said suave Julian, “I give you — Indomitable's upper gun deck in a squall.”

They parted as they sometimes did just beyond the hospital park, below the steep hill at the back of the main building where David often played, one day falling through a grass and earth stoppered hole into a strange chamber, reminiscent of a stable. Or so he recollected. An unpleasant odour always issued from one small depression in the hill which that day slowly caved

in, depositing him in a space with much straw and an array of crude boxes, which housed in the dust filtered light the most alarming and unusual objects — packages of syringes, stained dressings, portions of casts, dinged jars. An old hospital dump it seemed, forlorn and unpleasantly odorous, its earth covering slowly eroded by the heavy snows of the late forties and early fifties...an area he shunned ever after, thinking he may have conjured it in a dream, in the raw open wound of his imagination. Indeed, it was a time when escape superseded most everything, its precious moments masking all else. Being immersed in a storybook realm foils, upstages insipid reality. How wistful he felt later on when that recognition surfaced. As daunting as that day by the creek when Julian led him to an arcane place and sought to immortalize his sister — one of the lush suppurating memories that knocked David galley west. Would he ever be certain about what really happened, what he may have in fact imagined? Stranded memories lingered like pets left tethered by a front door, eyes ever searching.

It was a bewildering time for one given to a recondite and provisional life looking in, on, never entered into as a consequent player. One problem was parenthetically indexed in his memory the afternoon he discovered in the mail on his father's desk a marriage manual, still in its monogrammed mailing envelope from a drug company, a notable item either mislaid or left to alert the doggedly curious. The fact it had arrived on the eve of All Saints Day seemed uncanny. Perhaps the earlier book he'd been consigned was not deemed effective, for the new book's discovery followed hard on Julian's rather brutal summation of the 'bare facts' of sex. Now glancing through this latest 'trove' with its many benedictions about respect, patience and consideration, David could not assimilate the small elegant line drawings of the basic coital positions, despite his envy of the fluid nimble hand that created them. His disbelief at that moment, as keen as his wonder at first beholding his own marvelled creations, would tease him ever after. No, people did not do this...! Was he a freak then from the word go? The likelihood that people actually willfully enjoined one another in such clinches seemed absurd, farfetched, a tribulation beyond reckoning. A conclusion that would not much soften with time. "We don't call them animals for nothing," Julian or someone like him would say later on. It was this very subject a mature Julian, as a comedian called the Gryphon, would take up years later with a renewed resonance that seemed prophetic to David's lingering anxiety about the 'human' condition. If he was older then, life was nearly as bewildering as it was early on. He would remember best perhaps the Gryphon's dissertation on God and Man. Indeed he imagined the Gryphon's audience a little bemused when he launched into his Creator schtick. Haunting words that hang around.

"There's a lot of yammering these days about humping — no longer so pure and simple!

The feminists tell this every day. Some of the world's once great religions are getting called on the carpet. Too much beefcake. Islam, of course, but especially the two modern pariahs, Judaism and Christianity. So many 'enlightened' wary believers thinking they've been suckered and stiffed — less the growing number scrounging for 'sense and sensibility' to avoid the abyss. I quote a fellow pariah. Yet the religion that's getting the most licks these days was begun by a chap who didn't get his grand start in the usual barbarous way by clobbering his doubters and rivals into submission, or letting them in on the fact that being mortal and peculiar was a fail-safe drama, a reliably captivating passion play. Why humans were and are so fascinating. One reason old Zeusy killed off the Heroes and their Daimones was they were becoming banal, familiar; they had shucked the dread of their own demise; they were becoming too godlike. An ample warning I should think. Immortals seemed destined to die of boredom — except they can't. Humans keep such Immortal's eyes aglow, lethal method assault a captivating Passion Play for bored gods. The history of everything.”

A few half-hearted sniggers usually followed David recalled.

“Hang in there — this isn't rocket science. There's a poem by a wiseacre named De Vries that begins so: 'He — the Creator, the big cheese — makes a world where one thing eats another, then sends His only son to be our brother. Why oh why would He leave us in this lurch, I doubt he says His prayers or even goes to church.' So what do we have on the table after the Holy Father comes to suggest we rethink pillage, bloodletting and rapine — the basic preoccupations of the historic beings all created in the Father's image? Then comes a Love Child to perform a few miracles, bad mouth some money changers, tool about on an ass to con the neighbourhood, get himself crucified in a fairly convincing manner to forgive us for Not Knowing What We Do — killing and maiming for several millenniums, while — in doing so — keeping our arteries unclogged, our joints limber, our minds alert, our snogging forthright, our numbers serviceably culled, leaving the planet beautifully Green as a result. The injunction to 'be fruitful and multiply' simply abets the caterwauling, pussywhipping, dongfloggin' yowling, caterwauling et cetera humans excel at — supposedly Not Knowing What They Do. Could have fooled me.”

The last time David heard this jeremiad, the Gryphon had paused, as if he'd forgotten a line. A few sniggers surfaced in the audience. David even sensed an inaugural hesitation about what the Gryphon intended to say — which the forthcoming words seemed, in their adopted earnestness, to ratify, as if the Gryphon had somehow lost his nerve. Indeed, some in the audience looked non-plussed, as if they had missed something, while others duly waited for the recognizable screwer, the deadly sucker punch.

“Ever think that Hell may be filled with some very compassionate folk? The legacy of pain.

Duly sharing it with your neighbour. Solzhenitsyn took note. All that pain over time. Humbling no? Lets you in on the lyric of renunciation. Makes you, in the annals of time, acutely aware...”

Again a pause and a grimace that suggested the show was over. Some lagging piecemeal applause. The Gryphon himself looked a little spent, redundant, supernumerary. Not pleased someone might applaud. So David thought, before he resumed: “You ever think that maybe all God wanted was a few lyric wonders like Beethoven and their gold-standard Odes to Joy? Then stashed these poetic aces in the deck — the stellar cards needed to think the pathos game winnable — His *real* interest being an unrelenting human Passion Play, to ease His boredom. Angry *earthy* pissed-off rappers simply underline the rankness. The premier hog callers...fear not, it only gets more complicated hereon in.”

A new silence continued largely unbroken.

“The Al Qaeda and ISIL hog callers — yeah. In Islam they let you in on a few fetching details, not many mind you. After all, the available houris, the Celestial Virgins, are rather limited for an eternity — I mean you could lay the lot in a long weekend, right? The Great Virgin Gamekeeper knows all about that, if we’re talking infinity here — trillions and trillions and trillions of years. Seventy two or three handmaids won’t go very far. But there’s maybe just enough for a sober chap to bury his face in the carpet, which sounds about right when you think of it. The one time you might sell butt fitting Levis in Mecca, eh? Still, the Islamist may have the right idea: kill everyone who asks too many bloody questions.”

Finally some half-hearted whistles and mumpish groans, including a couple of mock threatening gestures. An animated argument begins between two patrons in a far corner. They only desist when aware of the hissing they’ve evoked. The Gryphon takes note of the momentary quiet and concludes, as he usually did: “Oblivion is looking good, right?...”

Spare applause and some jeers from the erstwhile critics.

It was an evening when David discovered for the third or fourth time that he had no head for drink, and was barfing in the bog shortly after the Gryphon finished up...school fellow Julian’s newly lurid spiel adding to his wooziness. He was disappointed but worried too, in keeping with the ongoing message, that the promised paradise was, at best, maybe just another retirement home, a close, detailed description of it in the Bible left off for good reason! It was a complex matter. Humans free of sin might no longer be ‘human’ and thus identifiable or recognizable, even to themselves most like. Take away appetite, pride, credulity and you sleep. So how can you be reborn and be aware of it? As the Gryphon invariably said at closing time, ‘Oblivion is looking good, right?’ Later he would add: “If you come to recognize yourself in an afterlife, you’re maybe in big trouble.”

To belatedly discover his former school fellow this despondent and acrimonious came as a shock to David. He wryly wondered if such discontent might be the result of an incestuous entrapment that offered no accommodation in a basically staid conventional society and, as a result, little durable respite? It was a question David put to himself as the Gryphon wallowed in his precious diatribe. The obsessive aspect convening its own Nemesis? David suspected there would always be a nimble witted fiend somewhere tinkering with things, giving the screw another turn; that even oblivion may be finally a forlorn hope — a sub-junction of O'Toole's Law (which rendered Murphy's Law optimistic). It seemed there would always be a godlike adventurer, investigator, devilish 'savant' who wanted to know what another tweak might accomplish; who could never leave well enough alone. Considering how body and minds were so different, often invidiously so, cosmic wonders like black holes may be nothing more than the density of accumulated human resentment! Al Qaeda in the round.

The clues in David's past were 'congregating'. It was shortly after a mid-teen All Hallows' Eve when he gleaned some of his early evidence of the mazy human condition. Or so he imagined. It came with a rare 'adult' party at the Willardson's on the evening of the first snow. He'd just turned thirteen. The moon was full and the prairie tundra sparkling. As the celebrants arrived, many children, including David, could be seen upon the brow of the coulee slowly returning home, umbered forms moving about in a pale blue incandescence savouring the extra time allotted by an extended curfew. Early that afternoon David had attended a humbling school fête. Why he didn't find bobbing for apples a 'lark' was a question he put to his own 'board of elders' on the way home from school. He acknowledged it was supposed to be fun, but when you repeatedly made an ass of yourself in a highly convincing manner...he had yet to consider the many byways of egocentrism, and the words that coin it.

Shortly after the late guests arrived at his parent's party, David returned home from the coulee uniquely worried about Ali, whose hind legs had conked out during the last ride down the hill; barely did they lift him back to the top. Even now as the two approached the noisy, well-lit house he barely up with David, who was then too cold and wet himself to be of much comfort, other than logging the dog's new handicap. The din of the festivities allowed Ali to slink up the darkened staircase and settle beneath David's bed — a rare coup on this forgiving night. In turn David stole glances from the landing at the festivities below, in particular the voices and acts of the more formidable adults of the community: a secondary school principal, an elderly spinster across the lane, the town's main mortician, and a druggist who made and sold tombstones as a sideline. Their stories and pieces of inflated gossip spanned hours of high spirited twitters, sniggers and guffaws. Particularly astonishing were the explosions caused by the mortician, a

stern, taut, little skeleton of a man who owned half the real estate of the town, and wore the same two suits his industrious wife repeatedly patched and mended until he had, almost literally, two tailor-made suits. He neither smoked nor drank, nor engaged in anything that might foil his image of self-discipline, yet there he was, his high-pitched nasal voice telling Mrs. Stirrit that she was a mother-kin to winter pansies, and that she shouldn't give a second thought about putting on her woolies that night for he rarely took off his long johns — even in summer! Her laughter, the most raucous and boisterous of all, continued uninterrupted throughout the evening, a deluge of wheezes and rasps punctuated by drink ice sometimes shuffled as dice, and dishes fondly fetched from, and dispatched to, table tops. What David delighted in were crystal flutes and shot glasses saluting the ceiling and reflecting the sparkle of the fire, and the overdecorated 'girls' alighting near this table and that chair, but always moving off, damselflies molested by the riot and smell of a delicatessen. So he surmised.

The gradual decrescendo of noise and hubbub was almost complete when a blithe commotion took place next door where the ladies were getting into their coats. It was incited by the discovery that Mrs. Stirrit had absently put on a second pair of woolies belonging to another. After each guest had regained her breath and wiped away the laugh tears, they began to talk seriously of severe winters past and how they were endured. Vida's name surfaced, convening words too dolorous for David to assimilate. Ali's name was mentioned a couple of times, with unusual concern. If David was on the verge of sensing a lack of empathy, he soon fell asleep dreaming of the feral coulee.

RECKONING

Yuri approached the distant car with the blustery wind to his back, the gusts of dirt and loosened thistle dust occasionally blurring sight. A dusky sun was setting to his right, barely revealing the north edge of the gravel pit, the proposed meeting place, where he would supposedly be assigned his exfiltration route. He walked at his normal pace, knowing he must get to within about fifty feet to make his first shot count. He kept his hands outside his pockets and pretended calm. He knew it would be easier all round if they could garrotte him unsuspectedly in the front seat of the soon discernible car, though a shooting would likely be as amenable. Only once, and for a second, did he imagine his fate other than it was. The driver, the lone body visible, stood by the hood hunched to the wind. When Yuri still had an estimated fifty or sixty feet to go the rifle crack sounded. His left shoulder shuddered in a crimping blow. He rolled on the ground, having little difficulty simulating a grave injury. The bullet came from his left, from the pit's upper grader level. A phantom briefly smudged the horizon. The dusty wind may have fudged the

shooter's sight. Mutely he strained to forestall the pain as he rolled away, fetched the Grach pistol from his breast pocket and shot twice at the driver who, then blinded by a forceful gust of wind, had remained huddled by the rear door. Yuri saw him suddenly fall after the second shot. Another rifle shot broke the silence, nicking Yuri's belt as he rolled into the heady dirty wind before rising, running, dipping and turning as a further shot buzzed his ears. He kept running into the wind, yawing, zig zagging, almost as he once maneuvered his tank in the training tundra of Siberia. Abruptly the shots ceased and he assumed the second man had taken after him. The trip wire he had extended across an apposite section of the prairie two nights before was, he noted, still taut and largely indistinct in the gusty wind. With luck... then a sixth shot knocked his cap off. He kept on, then abruptly turned and knelt when he'd reached the allotted measure he allowed for a swift runner, as the hit man would certainly be. In five seconds it was all over...flagrant cursing erupting from the newly sprawled form Yuri fired at without pause, the rifle landing several paces from the twitching form, the form soon lying still in a slow ooze of blood from a head wound that small bits of thistle settled in and could not escape. Approaching the car in a new cloud of dust Yuri saw the driver slumped down by the running board, the side of his head also covered in blood, his limbs askew. Yuri felt for a non-existent pulse. That man too was dead. He always was a lucky bastard Nechayev had said. His shoulder was a mess but not, he now knew, a gusher. The bullet skimmed his shoulder likely grazing the bone. A swiftly applied dressing stopped the main bleeding. With exquisite agony he could lift the elbow and move his fingers. The strong dusty wind had clinched the matter he decided; without it he mayn't have prevailed. He swallowed the last of his sulfa pills, then grappled with getting the two bodies into the car trunk, using the rifle and some rawhide strips in the trunk as a crab winch. He weighted their clothing with rocks from the gravel pit. He was beyond trying to bury them. He would have to ditch the 'package' somewhere as it was.

And so, that night, just beyond the Saskatchewan River Landing, he drove the car near the water and, with preternatural effort, dumped the bodies, wading in and pushing them to a concealing depth. The current was slack but sufficient to carry the bodies further out. They submerged almost at once. His own jeopardy was now a duel with time. Another team would be dispatched in due course. He believed he had seventy-two hours to disappear without trace as he drove back, leaving that department car, its car handles and steering wheel clean, on an empty street at the edge of town, before seeking a safe quiet snug place to sleep.

Early the following morning he awoke in the shelter of a chicken shed, the chickens roosted and newly mute. The pain in his shoulder was he concluded not exceptional. He had been wounded before and bargained with contingency. He would survive. Must. To foil the pain he

strove to recall the few choice moments in his exiguous stay here — bathing in the sleepy condolent creek, gorging himself on chokecherries, hunting the ducks that stayed late in a wet fall to graze on swathed but unharvested wheat fields — grain fed fowl! Lastly he thought of the child playing so masterfully in the cellar. His ‘Evening in Granados’ perhaps his last real night out. Her young life an open mystery. Had he imagined it all, so edgy and impatient was he the past few days? Yet he had provided as his one warrant as specified, his only lapse his failure to recruit some of the dedicated professionals at the Farm as potential agents. Wary Fabian idealists much like himself. Even some war veterans. But not enough time to recruit and steal he believed. The chief agrolologist, Bruce Armstrong, generous and sturdy, was blessed with a pretty blithe wife named Bibi. A dancer someone said.

In this reverie, he imagined dancing with Bibi Armstrong on a stylish palazzo. Why is it you invariably find the inimitable beauties in such remote relatively harsh locales? Beauty not specifically marshalled to molest....

That very night Vida Semple first spoke to Mrs. Hammond, the redeye nurse, while a keen wind rattled the windows in the hospital, such that Vida’s weak voice nearly went unheard. Vida wanted a drink. She was bewildered. After bringing a glass of water, Mrs. Hammond took Vida’s free hand and calmly said, “You’ve suffered an accident, Vida, but you are healing. Your right hand is improving.” An exaggeration, but it was one hope they might then invoke. The left hand, the one stuck in the mouth apparently, was the least harmed. Only the one leg, elbow and shoulder were badly injured in the attack. Then the newly vocal patient wanted to know if Andy was close by. Mrs. Hammond was a time recalling who Andy might be. “He’s the Riverdeen gardener,” Vida said between sips. “He wont be angry as my dad.”

“We’ll do our best to find him dear; I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Earlier that day Elias had been to the hospital to sign the papers that would put Vida, if she continued to progress, into the long-term care wing at the Weyburn mental asylum. There was no sense in leaving her in school and she would get the care she needed there. Dr. Layton, the new expert on the scene, a psychologist, was most reassuring. The only other alternative was keeping her at home, a prospect that brought a new vale of tears to Elias’s face as he gazed into his arthritic hands. Dr. Layton and Mrs. Crisp, the Matron of the hospital, noted Elias’s distress and exchanged glances. Weyburn would likely be best, given the options. Vida could be visited when she was settled.

Dr. Layton, the first psychologist in Burdock, and a brisk resolute talker, had described a progressive catatonic state, still perhaps sub-clinical but possibly imminent, words Lucius Willardson found precious and largely inapt but kept his mouth shut. He was subject of late to

an exhaustion he'd not experienced before and was debating the necessity of some clinical tests. The Benzedrine he sometimes wrote a false prescription for was becoming a habit. Had they not been so acutely busy during and after the war he might have left off such a stimulant. But that early chronic tiredness had left him barely functionable. "It's a great world if you don't weaken," he 'overheard' himself say to nurse in the hospital one busy night. His inability to do much for Elias Semple and his ill-starred daughter perhaps contributed to his current enervation he felt. Rarely had he contended with patients so forlorn, so immune to decisive medical treatment, at least that he might devise. Apathetic fate would decide. For a second time he returned the unopened cigarette package to his shirt pocket. The two-pack-a-day man was near to opening a third...the memory of Mrs. Klassen's confinement, a week before, another case that cued heartache. When his own car wouldn't start, he had to get old Sampson, the hospital taxi man, out of bed to drive him to the Klassen farm. Only to find that the baby had been born hours before. The father wanted instead an abortion for his fifteen-year-old, who was at least three months into her pregnancy! "Thought you'd appreciate me covering up for you, doc." Boozy, belligerent threats ensued when Lucius refused. If sturdy Sampson hadn't been there he didn't know what might have happened. The local midwife, an older Mennonite lady he knew and sometimes worked with, had also vehemently balked at the request. Proper Sampson too felt the idea monstrous when he heard the heated words coming from the kitchen, and come forward to settle the matter; he phoned the RCMP when they returned to Burdock. Lucius suspected it might all end badly. Especially for the piteous child. The clinic would advise the Regional Health Board.

Vida too he thought pitiful, but not, he'd long ago concluded, mad nor catatonic. Providence he hoped hadn't been nodding this time, that the girl would survive and somehow avoid Weyburn. Earlier, before the attack, he'd been particularly touched by a fresh spring flower collection the housekeeper, Mrs. Caruthers, brought to the hospital as a decoration gift. The quaint but legible labels that Vida had apparently fashioned herself for each variety surprised him; she could in fact ably print, when motivated. Elspeth knew from Vida's current teacher that there had been a deterioration in her condition before the attack, possibly connected the teacher felt with trouble in her home. She and Lucius mulled the plight of the girl over a late-night cocoa. He was still diffident about the psychological diagnosis of 'anxiety disorder and progressing catatonia', and doubted Weyburn would do her much good. He'd detected no improvement in Hoddy since his stay there. But then he had been told more than once, that he was a philistine when it came to 'mental disorders'.

Lucius was in bed and nodding when Elspeth at last turned out the light. Ever a good look-

ing woman he thought. Though she hadn't had much of a husband the year past. He fell asleep thinking of the early amorous times...the smiles of many rapt summer nights!

When Yuri awoke a second time that morning, prompted by the crowing of an operatic cock, he was not a little surprised to find himself still alive. A wide cloud free blue sky beckoned. The coolness rather foiled the acuteness of the pain he thought, and perhaps allowed him some intermittent shuteye, for he *was* exhausted the night before. At first he could barely move. It seemed indeed a miracle, was a miracle, that he should awake to another day, that he was alive and might slowly stand, even walk. He sensed a slight fever, which would lessen an ongoing quest for food.

He debated going to the hospital. Until the onset of a stubborn infection, he decided he would hope to return to his homeland on his own. Somehow. He thought again of the disciplined yet compassionate Premier Tommy Douglas, a Canadian Christian socialist who might share his vision: Caesar his due, God his, with a concordance for the two. He saw little conflict in this expedient maxim, which afforded a trust that once nearly curtailed his enlistment in 'the service'. As for now, three possibilities loomed. He might languish in a septic ward in the West, return to Holy Rodina with his health and hope more or less intact, or end as a fugitive in the land of his birth, perhaps as a prisoner, an *uznik*.

As he slowly stood, some new menacing shadows fudged his own.

"I wouldn't try anything, if I were you. No insult intended, old boy."

Two mounties in breeks, parkas and astrakhans stood back of him, one with his holster unsnapped.

"Come without a fuss and we'll do the same."

It seemed an irrefutable offer. He had overslept, must have been seen in the dawn by an area resident who called the local constabulary. He smiled when he thought of the dark retriever he had seen in the prairie, his restless 'pragmatist' — a consummate chicken thief he had no doubt. He strove to imagine that was all there was to it. Hoddy maybe talking again out of turn.

But such reasoning had been far from Mrs. Engler's frame of mind when she looked across her breakfast table to spy the tramp dozing by the McCarthy chicken shed. The man's presence was troublesome. She sided with the world's have nots, but did not like the look of this one. There was something not quite right about his appearance, what she could see of it. He seemed too robust for one thing, his profile reminding her of a teacher she once had a crush on. Moreover, his kit though grimy and worn, looked too sturdy and well designed to belong to an idler or listless drifter. Moreover, there were simply too many coincidences that month in

Burdock, beginning with the Semple tragedy, the doctor's stolen car, to say nothing of Mrs. McCarthy's two Rhode Island layers that disappeared — weeks after the Willardson's dog had been put down. There were also some stories about the Semple housekeeper, which suggested she was either a thief herself or conniving with one. Finally, giving vent to a sigh, Mrs. Engler phoned the RCMP, saying, in summary, "He may be sunning himself I know, but it doesn't look right. And it looks as if there's some blood."

Constable Ian Frazer had answered the call. He was the kind of man in uniform some women swoon over. Handsome, a fine athlete, crack shot, avid swimmer, canoeist and camper, natty dresser, also a resident trainer and examiner for the Royal Life Saving Society, in which capacity he was anxious to return that morning to the Moose Jaw Natatorium, just outside Burdock, where the latest round of instruction was underway. The call from Mrs. Engler thus distracted him from the satisfying image of himself showing the students the various strategies in rescuing a troubled swimmer or ill-fated boater. Dedication and self-esteem often go hand in hand. The fact that three female candidates were accepted this year, all of whom shaved their legs, made the exhibition of himself a most welcome duty. That they might resemble biddies in their bathing caps and wool suits did not distract at all from the pinched cleaved chests and ever escaping nates one glimpsed poolside. In light of all this, a mere tramp, and possible chicken thief, might be readily disposed of.

It was before this impetuous officer that Yuri was first questioned in the hospital annex while being treated for his wound. The preliminary queries revealed George Horlick (Yuri's alias), to be a veteran stranded after demob, a little disoriented perhaps from the sudden freedom and release, not being expressly told any more what to do and when, who had gone on a binge, and shot himself in a clumsy attempt to shoot a rabbit. He'd accidentally stepped into a hole, perhaps that of a badger, and fallen forward when the gun went off. For Constable Fraser, the likelihood of the owner of such a weapon being so maladroit would wait an investigation of the man's papers and effects, including his possession of a select hand gun reputedly taken off a German officer. Since no other persons in that region had recently been treated for gunshot wounds, uppermost in Ian's mind was the salient plan that he would use to postpone releasing the man. The idea presented itself as he conducted the interview.

"I want you to remain in hospital for a day or two — yes I know you feel not too bad — but I have another issue to sort out. You'll learn what I mean in due course. Sargent Harkness will keep an eye on the ward while you're here. We'll talk tomorrow. Questions?"

Yuri decided he'd been blessed. Escape from the hospital would be a breeze, and the food they were then serving looked like a gourmet spread given what he was used to. Vigilantly he

must look for the coming of a ‘too innocuous’ stranger — someone sent to confront him or finish him off. Other than that — bon appetite. He smiled at Constable Fraser.

“I’ve no place special to go.”

“Excellent. See you.”

If Ian Frazer accepted himself as a young Apollo, he also prided himself on being blessed with an adroitness that kept him alert to the nuanced complexities in his caseload. The interrelation of recent events in his district had been reviewed while he was waist deep in the Moose Jaw Natatorium’s sparkling chlorine blue pool, its humidity the breath of an idled leviathan. Yes, Horlick was linked to Vida Semple! He had little doubt. The savvy inference returned as he assisted limpid, genteel Amy Holmes with her scissor kick. Amy floated on her side-back, arms forward, hands braced to the spill rim. She all but despaired of her weak leg kick and cooperated with a selfless resolve that flattered him as he took up her ankles, and after getting her to relax her legs, maneuvered them into the sequence of tuck, spread and close that would give one the capability to exercise select muscles and pull an ailing but cooperative swimmer out of harm’s way, a not always feasible prospectus. “You should feel a distinct surge against the sides of the knees,” he said, trying to overlook the few pubic curlicues issuing from the gusset of her swimsuit. Tuck, spread and close. After several hands-on manipulations she seemed to get the hang of it. With practiced ease he hefted himself onto the deck, to gauge the pressure her hands exerted on the side tiles. “Better, but you need some practice.” “The understatement of the year,” Amy promptly said in response, her hands firmly fixed against the tiles. Watching the sucking surges, he noted anew the slender sinew of her form.

It was the remaining pieces of the Semple child puzzle that were slowly coming together as Ian rose to check the exertions of the other swimmers, thinking anew of Vida Semple’s curious plight: Horlick could well have been the one who found and took the child to the hospital, in Doc Willardson’s stolen bloodied car. He must have contended with injury before. What other player was there? The man’s smart medical kit alone invited speculation. The probability seemed valid as he knelt on the pool deck, to again test the hand pressure exerted from the scissor kicks, belatedly averting his eyes from the eddies then swirling about the littoral of Amy’s young chest, coincident with her own needy laughter as she shunted her legs. Horlick! My god, the man could be up to any number of things! Yet the bugger must have a conscience. The clinic doctors were in no doubt that the child had been attacked by an animal, likely a cougar, and almost didn’t make it. Yet what would Horlick be doing out in the prairie where he must have found her, supposedly with the Willardson car? As compensation for this insight, Ian decided to try Amy out in the deep end. With a little coaxing she waded with him to the deeper end, grasped

his chin, pulled him onto his back, affixed the cross chest hold and began to pull her cooperative victim to the shallow end. Their progress was slow, her breathing laboured, her one knee sometimes bouncing off his bum, yet she coursed the length of the pool without pause. They grinned while idling in the shallow end and she released some water from her cap. He assured her it was a good start, that he was heavier than most drowning people, while duly reminding her that such rescues should only be deployed as a last resort — if, and only if, the rescuer felt confident of the attempt, and the cooperation of the person in distress seemed assured, as often as not a rare likelihood. He also managed to carefully look at, nod to, and assist some late swimmers as they struggled in, feeling then some chagrin for Amy in her older woollen costume as she rose from the pool looking like a partly dissolved gumdrop, the suit's very pretence of modesty an untoward revelation when wet. But by then he had worked up a satisfying plan.

When the class ended, Amy stood dripping at the pool's edge, arms shouldering a towel. She seemed at times to be a bit of a simpleton, making his fascination with her strangely companionable. Goosebumps needled her arms, which she soon held in front like an observant gopher, he thought, looking about the pool with her large rather bruised, tracery eyes, eyes that were beginning to haunt. She, like the others, awaited some kind of formal dismissal, a hiatus that aided his coalescing plan.

After dismissing the others, Ian Fraser affected a curt grimace as he began his spiel before the newly beguiling Amy Holmes he'd asked to remain for a time.

“Look, I've got an unusual police case I need some help with. If I sound kinda bold, I sometimes am, but not without cause, I hope. You're under no obligation of course, nor any responsibility. But I sometimes find an alert outsider's opinion a help in coming to a decision. And I could use such a one now.”

The line rarely failed. Amy faintly blushed. “Well, I don't know about ‘alert’.”

“The coffee in the canteen isn't too bad this time of day — usually the second or third urn. We could meet there in say twenty minutes? Shouldn't take long for me to explain what I need.”

Amy seemed agreeable but incredulous. “Just me?” For a baleful moment it seemed he was on his own.

“Well, it's sometimes easier to stay focused one on one. I tend to rely on my hunches. You've a noticeable regard for others that will be especially helpful I think. In this case.” He waited on tenterhooks, suddenly fresh out of further excuses.

“All right.” She nimbly smiled. “I have to make a call first though. Say, half-an-hour?” She squinted more water from her eyes, and looked briefly as if she were newly near sighted.

By the time they met and tabled their backgrounds — she a student teacher in Moose Jaw,

her father a farm implement salesman, he a farm boy from Cadillac and newly proposed inspector — he was sufficiently versed on the mysterious George Horlick to impress a listener with an absorbing delineation of the case: that the stray Horlick, a war veteran possibly gone AWOL, may indeed have known and helped young ill-fated Vita Semple — whose horror story was a media feature then. He said he needed, in this case, a perceptive outside observer of Horlick and Vida, their words, behaviour in the hospital in Burdock. Could she manage a brief expense paid sojourn there? Amy took note of his carefully ironed service shirt, his strong active hands, his innate assurance and feigned self-effacement, his winsome dimpled chin, and listened in heedful silence, her gaze darting between his lidded sleuth's eyes and the vague middle space on the table between them. When she deemed it appropriate to speak they had reached the celebrated time of Vida's recovery of her voice in the hospital and, except for the one leg, marginal use of her limbs. Amy's adroit thoughtful response belatedly took Ian's breath away, words he listened to with growing wonder.

“Could you not arrange for them to be in the same ward? And together at mealtime? Some hospital staff alerted. He could hardly not be partial to her if he did as you think?” Ian barely nodded, freshly pensive. Fluently Amy added, “As for Horlick's presumed AWOL status — perhaps he left before demob and feared being identified. Not unheard of.” She apathetically smiled, as much to herself he thought, then added, “From what you've told me, it's assumed someone interrupted the attack, something a veteran might well undertake — staving off another's peril. There's some new literature on such empathic acts. As for my actual 'observation', please remember I'm a layperson not a psychologist. The words of the two together would surely be a plain-enough key here — before an alerted hospital staff.”

She had avoided his face as she voiced these savvy observations, perhaps he thought because of his reputed doggedness. He had been warned of this obduracy before. Suaveness he was still perfecting. Her thick dark helmet of hair with its wet fringes and fenced bangs seemed then a distracting foil for her quiet reconnoitering eyes and unexpectedly pithy words. “Words for thought, for sure,” he belatedly said, nodding while the heedful ploy sunk in. His liking for her had suddenly, handily intensified. If he could only reconcile such acumen with the homely limp look of the bathing suit...surely one of the other girls would have suggested a less penitential costume. Looking at her now, at a frayed seam on her blouse, he imagined her a modest but smart, independent soul, and decided that his overt attention in the pool could be seen as obvious and excessive given her finely-drawn loveliness. No doubt about it — she was becoming a first order of business! He ventured as conclusion, “That might just be a very good start, getting them close, often together. Especially Vida's reaction if, as you say, she might recall

something. Having several witnesses, as you suggest, may be particularly apt.” Her light smile that greeted these words settled the matter. They sipped their coffee in a mutually thoughtful silence thereafter. Amy noted several of the candidate life-savers looking their way and sensed with some amusement their possible imputation that she sought favour sitting with Ian Fraser so. In parting he said, “I’ll keep you posted. It’s an interesting case.” She responded, after a brief consideration, “I’d like that.”

When Yuri, as Horlick, took his noon meal with Constable Ian Fraser, two days later, a disarmingly placid Vida Semple was seated opposite, the child he remembered now with such acute solicitude, the freckled blue-eyed waif who played the piano with an angel’s serenity, and survived an attack by at least one animal, likely a cougar (the forensic guesstimate). Despite all, she had exhibited a gratifying improvement. She was still oblivious of the severe nature of her ‘accident’ apparently, but could walk then, slowly. Even her one dressed hand, the right, seemed on the mend despite a myriad of protruding stitches. From the natural way she handled her fork, Yuri assumed she was left handed. Amazingly, that hand was nearly unmarked, whereas the elbow was knitted with a myriad of scrapes and intersecting seams of stitches. The right leg had been saved, but was set in a splint below the knee. It was then, as he watched her eat, that he realized how unusually long her fingers were, and could imagine her spanning at least an octave with thumb and second finger. Her neck, scalp, forehead and one ear were also badly scarred. The ugly lesions on her partly bare scalp, a veritable railroad of stitches in the round, freed that hour of most bandages to promote healing, gave her the look of an unfinished ghoulish or Frankenstein mate. She *was* preternaturally lucky, given the prognosis when he first saw her in the prairie. He sensed a companionable smile as she glanced his way. She faintly hummed as she ate, her Dresden blue eyes livid against a pink freckled complexion and the tufts of carotene hair on the one side of her head. An old young face on a small too early maturing body, which she now seemed to inhabit like a hand-me-down...as the nurses talked to her, as Rev. Betthauer, the Lutheran minister, talked to her, and Sergeant Harkness, a towering hulk with bushy eyebrows, talked to her. Even the busy Willardson paused for a timely chat. Yuri too joined in — how she was doing so well, would make a great recovery. Vida listened with an equanimity or acceptance reserved for an Easter sermon he thought. The drooling had ceased. She had been told of the attack but apparently had yet to remember or countenance it, according to Dr. Layton. The occasional nightmare was still a worry, and the advent of opportunistic infection.

She sometimes spoke as if among old acquaintances. “My father is not well. Since mother’s death. I have a cat named Spider. Spider keeps to himself.” He would later learn the cat was in fact the neighbour’s.

Yuri envisaged the ruse, as defined by Fraser's observational presence, and felt an inaugural demonstration was in order. He had discovered a record player and piano in the nurse's lounge. Vida seemed well enough to at least give it a try. At least. He seemed mandated to do so.

“Would she like to go for a stroll?”

The one good hand came up without coaxing, an act Fraser silently, alertly noted.

They slowly ‘made the rounds’ saying hello to several patients on their way to the nearby lounge. There he took her into the alcove where the record player sat, found a chair for her and put a twelve-inch 78 record on the gramophone. Songs from South Pacific by Morton Gould and his orchestra. His strategy was abetted by the fact the piano could not be seen from the nook which housed the turntable. He had deliberately placed the chair so Vida faced the turntable and speaker not the distant piano. Vida listened with an intensity the few staff and mobile patients who noticed found entertaining, as they glanced at the child and her newfound friend. When the record finished, Yuri resumed the walk, passing the keyboard, which Vida veered toward with his feigned puzzled approval. Promptly she fetched herself onto the piano bench with his help and began immediately playing the opening overture on the record, an avid fluent rendering, using the more or less untouched fingers available on her left hand as the accompanying line, the lyric tunes performed by the two workable fingers on the right, with occasional help from the left, thus imparting a wonderful lucid rendition that stopped cold all activity in the chamber! When she paused to flex one hand, one could hear for a moment a leaky faucet in the lounge kitchen before the first applause erupted, nay exploded. Yuri had managed an astonishment vivid and lucid as the others. The evening was young and certainly enchanted. If he gestured that he doubted his ears, he knew he was not alone. Then a further reality dawned on him. She never had a fingering technique to contend with. Her musicality was as pure and naturally configured and ‘syntonized’ as they come: she was merely utilizing what nature allowed at the time, less than before, but enough to keep the instrument sonorous and lyrical, her left hand, the nearly whole hand, finding both many apt chords while occasionally aiding the tune-ready, two fingered right hand, a third finger there newly, wondrously poised to join in. He sensed a very rare tear in his own eye. The other half of his equation: Unto God, the things that are manifestly His.

Vida happened to be into the poignant *This Nearly Was Mine*, another of the Morton Gould offerings, when Dr. Peter Layton, the new Burdock psychologist, arrived to check up on a couple of patients. He was immediately directed downstairs by the reception secretary and would soon sit with a cleaning lady by the stairwell, craning, listening. When he first emerged into the lounge, he came forward almost as if he was eavesdropping, arms not quite crossed, chin

palmed in his hand. Vida was then playing, it was soon pointed out, many selections on the record. “I never,” said Mrs. Carey, the station matron, joining in the ubiquitous head shaking. When Vida paused to flex a right hand third finger, the nearly riotous applause erupted again, which prompted her to leave the piano, go and put her arms about Yuri’s waist — a gesture that further melted her audience. Yuri himself struggled to remain conversant with his neighbours and their unconstrained expressions. “But how in the world?” “It’s surely miraculous.” “I’ve heard about such feats, but I’ve forgotten the name for it.”

Dr. Layton beamed his beneficent approval even as he shook his head. “A very, *very* special savant I should think.”

Yuri acknowledged the many amiable expressions by rising, taking Vida’s good hand, going to the turntable nook and putting on another 78. He hummed along with it, a tic Vida promptly took up, singing in her surprisingly soft clear soprano. Morton Gould again, this time excerpts from Oklahoma. Everyone joined in. When it was finished he took the warm palm to the keyboard again and reset the bench. By then Dr. Layton knelt by the piano, watching the performance as a vigilant if not galvanized adjudicator. Again a recapitulation of songs on one side of the twelve-inch 78, ending with Many a New Day, the lyric picked out by the right hand with help from the left in a cross hand position, allowing for an artful chord progression. When Vida finished Yuri asked if she remembered Debussy’s An Evening in Granados, humming as best he could its main theme. After a moment’s reflection Vida played a spare but surprisingly credible rendering. If Dr. Layton was nearly speechless before, he now took out a notebook and began to write swiftly, expending the occasional unrehearsed sigh. He had the early recording of the Estampes played by Walter Gieseking! Decades later he would wryly recall how the condescending tolerance of the ‘Western canon’ was then an unknown, and virtuosic endowment not yet slighted when inspired by and allied to dead European males. The mantra, Hey Hey Ho Ho Western Culture’s Got To Go, would have been as alien then as a snuff film.

The rest of the evening was, Layton concluded, “An inimical miracle mystery, what can one say?” Vida was finally stopped only when it was determined that one of her fingers on the right hand had broken a scab and bled. The hand was immediately dressed and she returned to a happy incredulous coterie of admirers, which she charmed by being both shy yet conscientious in her spare sometimes slurred comments, while always deferring to the newcomer with the immobilized shoulder. To an outsider they seemed to be inseparable. At one point she wanted to know why Andy the gardener, couldn’t come. Dr. Layton said he would get after Andy. Vida nodded and glumly pursed her lips. Andy was getting on and was sometimes forgetful. Later she would ask Mr. Horlick if Elias, her father was okay. “He’s a coal-man.” Fraser then informed

Horlick that they'd be "busting his ass but for the kid; so don't over do it chump." Only later did they notice that Mrs. Wharton, a terminally ill diabetic, had slipped peacefully away while Vida played.

That night Dr. Layton phoned Dr. Francis 'Frank' Wilde, a former colleague, who worked then with the renowned Swiss endocrinologist Felix Zveno Muerner, who in turn was being rehabilitated among his peers after a nebulous period in which he was said to have pandered to certain unsavoury aspects of Nazi medical practice. Wilde, who'd been in school with David's father, specialized in developmental psychology and then headed a research team at the Muerner Clinic in Bern. Like Muerner, he had a special interest in anomalous, rarified ability. Unlike Muerner, he was not then much interested in trying to enhance genetic endowment. He listened now intently to Peter Layton's words about ineffable Vida Semple.

"Really Frank, she is superb. Probably a social retard in a non-sympathetic environment, but far from the golem I originally thought. She suffers from a mild form of childhood apraxia, and a deformed palette doesn't help. The widowed father appears to be a manic depressive and an arthritic ogre. She's had a hard a time at school, apparently — she's not deaf, as I earlier thought, but she's had teachers often scolding her for inattention and trying to get her to write right handed. She got through grade four, a repeat apparently, with some accommodation. Yes, four. I've changed my mind about Weyburn, of course, and I think you really ought to have a look at her file. I'll also send a tape. She's small but physically mature for her age and has a soft soprano voice, possibly even pure pitch, something I only learned at the hospital." He paused, nodding several times as the conversation solicitously progressed, then had no trouble manifesting surprise at Wilde's final suggestion.

"What? Actually bring her over there? To Bern?" His hesitation was barely perceptible. "You think that's possible? I'm sure father Semple would give his blessing. Well fairly sure. I've seen a couple of savants while I was in graduate work, but this girl is in an exemplary class of her own. I doubt you'd be disappointed. She is a wonder Frank."

Frank Wilde's further words were both encouraging and cautioning.

"From what you've told me, Peter, Muerner himself might be interested. He has an abiding interest in genetics — well, recruiting eggs from exemplars. Not my bag of course. Always a devilish conundrum, genetics. My own team will be keenly interested in her talent and affective state of course, and the clinic would pay all ongoing travel and residential expenses here."

"That's most encouraging, though I'm not sure about the genetic thing." Despite being on a roll, Peter didn't want to perplex or incommode his distinguished friend. "She may be close to menstruation — she's mature for her age. But her musical gift is surely the ne plus ultra here.

Despite her misfortune, she's on the mend and remains attentive. I'll promptly send you a detailed history and a tape." The phone conversation ended with Peter saying, "Yes, my pleasure, Frank. I sincerely hope a trip to Bern is in the cards."

In his excitement Peter Layton completely forgot Amy Homes' birthday. Amy had been in his senior psychology class, and was one of a group of exceptional students he sometimes invited to his home for convivial, interactive words and a meal. He had been keenly attracted to her. She was, after all, only eleven years younger than he. But she had turned down his proposal of marriage with seductive kindness. "I am flattered, but I'm far from ready to make a lifetime commitment. Still finding my way, I guess. Sorry." They did enjoy a few companionable outings together though. On learning of her birthday, he'd always given her select presents, until now.

He phoned her at her hotel in Moose Jaw the following morning to extend his very best belated wishes. "Your twenty-second I believe. Well into our consequential decade!" She was out of breath. "Thank you, Peter. I had to come back in, I was in the hall. I've got to run. You're still in Burdock, yes? I've read about the attack on the Semple girl. Our instructor, an RCMP constable, filled in some details. She's an exceptional savant, I understand. You must be ecstatic. I'm sorry, but I need to confirm a ride home with a friend; the swim classes are over. I should be here for supper, though. They'll page me. I'd like to know more, but really must go now. Thanks again."

He felt a trifle miffed and, had he known, would not have approved of the swank Constable Fraser rivalling his regard of thoughtful and alert Amy Holmes, though he would have been sympathetic to Fraser's wish to recruit Amy in a study of Vida and her mysterious friend, Amy being a student of what would later be called Special Ed, something of an untapped reservoir then, which she had considered at Peter's own prompting: "In our schools, particularly the rural ones, many of the children have latent physical and perceptual handicaps. Some may have a medical problem like Phenylketonuria, but others have varying ocular confusions, attention complications, and the like, that require reorientation and a great deal of patience. I really think you should ply professor Lothar, your graduate sponsor, with the idea of an area survey. He will have a stake in it sooner or later. Sure as thunder." Amy, a natural philanthropist, put the question to the generous Dr. Lothar who agreed to a limited survey. Amy might use some of her teaching periods to administer the newly assembled tests, which she was now refining. The problem was Peter had become sorely enamoured of her. Making disengagement a bummer.

As for the suave busy Constable Fraser, Amy realized he was interested in his 'man', and possibly her, but not the child. Her ingrained reticence and politeness had spared him her disappointment. The matter was resolved when Constable Fraser's superintendent informed him

that George Horlick, given Peter Layton's favourable assessment of him and the Muerner clinic's invitation, would accompany Vida to the clinic, expenses to be borne by the clinic, thus shelving the forlorn and likely now thankless chore of investigating the man, whose papers identified him as a recently demobilized soldier, apparently addled by his newly free, unconstrained state — ever so slyly enacted, so Fraser guessed. He suspected Horlick had somehow bamboozled know-it-all Layton. Earnestness was a most adaptable ruse. Well good riddance. He knew Layton to be an ambitious fancy stepper — twisting even the ear of his RCMP superintendent, who, it seemed, approved of the benign drifter Vida had taken such a keen liking to...well they could have him. Out of their, his hands. Ian learned of the decision by phone shortly after the final proficiency swimming tests he'd gone back to the Natatorium to judge. Amy, one of the last to finish, he'd found sitting quietly on a pool bench fingering her partly damp hair after removing her cap, her legs shapely as they come, her immaculate toes precisely modulated as a babe's, harbingers of the essential being — the overall subtle perfection one notices in rapt stages.

Later, solemnly, he silently repeated her unexpected last words. "Thank you for asking for my input. But placing Horlick and Vida together at mealtime was surely a godsend — the best resolution overall, for both of them I think. Truly. Peter Layton filled me in. Must go now, to catch my bus. Thank you for your able instruction. A benefit overall. All the best. Goodbye."

Her parting smile that day would haunt him ever after. One you remember.

In watching her leave the stately Natatorium entrance on that heavily overcast day, as a wraith might fade into a mist, he was nearly overwhelmed by a novel self-pity. A feeling immune to self-counsel. He imagined himself overboard at sea; good swimmer that he was, he could drown. Her serenity, singular comeliness and placid astuteness seemed to him then preternatural — though he might never use such a word. In any case, she seemed now as remote and inscrutable as the presence of young Vida Semple. Despite his diffidence, psychology seemed destined to question all strong conviction, mesmeric affection itself relegated a stray obsession — as he read between the lines of late social prognosticators like Peter Layton. The imputations in modern psychology were surely a minefield.

"What do you think of that fancy psychologist fellow who lectured us last week? Not Layton but that other guy. You think the day will ever dawn when criminals can actually plead 'diminished responsibility'? Use things like cultural bias, institutional bigotry, and crap like it, to minimize culpability — as the guy inferred when talking about future conventions?"

Ian and his superintendent were wolfing burgers in the canteen. Ian shook his head in disbelief at the thought. He had just corrected the written tests for the silver and bronze stars. Amy had earned a bronze. The superintendent merely grunted. Without interrupting his meal

he said, “Not a notion I’ll lose any sleep over — such fancy talk.”

Ian nodded, with unusual resignation.

PART FIVE: SVENGALI

DRUMMER

Felix Muerner, the ageless doctor who had survived the Nazi era, his reputation as a ranking physician unsullied, had been silent and unusually pensive for some time. At first the others in the room imagined him distracted or vexed by something in the ornamental shrub garden which the Chinese Drawing Room overlooked — the new, relaxed setting for a seminar with a hand-picked team that included a physiologist, neurologist, endocrinologist, geneticist and two orthopedists, all assembled to assess the health of the exceptional savant Vida Semple, who’d come to Bern with her close companion George Horlick. The exemplary medical team was one of several that gave the preeminent Muerner Clinic in Bern an aura the match of its Edenic setting. Gradually, however, the silence in the room began to confuse. Muerner’s attention seemed attuned elsewhere. Even long-winded Avery Muth, Muerner’s chief orthopedist, sensed the void as he continued to recommend, in the case of Vida Semple, continued observation, thus postponing medical intervention, which the junior member of his team, Mark Amelin, thought peremptory, if the skeleton of the girl was to survive the onset of a bone deterioration — Gorham’s disease was the late diagnosis — which had been detected in her cervical vertebra, and the one femur mauled in her encounter with a cougar. Muerner had initially sided with Mark Amelin, believing some surgery and cobalt therapy might be beneficial. Though he was not optimistic. He knew of cases of spontaneous remission, but these were exceedingly rare. As keenly as he wished to see Vida’s music ability blossom, the eventual pain and debilitation the disease would inflict — with or without treatment — might be more than she or they could cope with. Poignantly, the more he conferred and listened to her, the more he was convinced her genius singularly transcendent. To lose such a prodigy to this bone-wasting disease would be a tragedy. Muerner was rarely at peace with the heedless Fates. Yet something else seemed to be distracting him now.

No one in the room slighted the importance of the study of Vida Semple — parenthetically her skeletal shape and accelerated rate of maturation — to better understand and detail the nature of the hale individual, the being Muerner envisaged, given the future promise of tissue

culturing and genetic modification — eventual sequencing even replacement. One of the clinic's mandates was to assess select clinic patients and in so doing better conceptualize a veritable 'exemplar', a salubrious and physically adept human, which the promise of medical science and genetic engineering presumed one day likely if not inevitable. Bones, the basic foundation, tended to upstage much else — for without a good skeleton the onset of senescence often accelerated. Bones and sinews were a Muerner obsession which the others in the room abided, for it afforded them research venues and opportunities they would rarely find in other clinics nor in academe, where conventional precepts were very hard to accept because notions like the 'beauty myth' tended to slight any presumption of idyllic form. Health was deemed to be independent of looks, though a sound skeleton usually enhanced both balance and pain free ability. In short, Muerner was a successful medical guru, the reputation of his clinic among most researchers, at least enviable. The curiosity for the critics of such flinty utopians, was that the clinic, in its exemplary treatment of persons with disabling physical deformities, had elaborated the debate. As for Muerner's concept of the ideal, the image of the Doryphoros, the Spearbearer by Polyclitus served as a male exemplar in his gross anatomy seminars, his idea of symmetria, literal concinnity, being paramount. Bodies were unavoidably vulnerable in the problematic world he inhabited. Because the majority of humans were disappointed with what happenstance allotted them, their shared perceptions were an authentication of reality he believed, and thus a confirmation of his own sense of splendour and salubrity — advertising's cross cultural *sina qua non* (shape not colour), as he thought of it. Cultural and physical normlessness was still a ways off.

Adding to the sobriety now was the ornate room itself. The usual seminar had been moved to the Drawing Room to permit repair of the oval boardroom off Muerner's study, where these fortnightly meetings took place. A recent fire there prompted the renovation. It was concluded that a faulty bugging device in a wall, planted perhaps by a clever info hustler, had caused the fire!

“ — As I was saying and have said.” Avery flashed a professional smile. The others appeared attentive but for sidelong estimations of Muerner's unusual ongoing quiet. Finally Eve Kielice, the clinic archivist, spoke with her characteristic deliberation, which everyone present paid heed to.

“It's the drummer.”

An overall silence followed this pronouncement. Eve continued: “The faint syncopated bump in the background. Comes from a residence across the garden. Someone started up a week ago. A hopeful jazz or rock drummer it would seem.” The assembled group of specialists

then nodded as if suddenly conscious of a perfectly self-evident explanation for their patron's abstraction. It was indeed a kind of impertinence — in a neighbourhood like that! Muerner smiled at Eve. Her wistful candour he cherished, especially the lucidity of her overview of daily events. He turned now in his swivel chair, to ponder the import of Avery's words. "You did indeed, Avery. Intervention in such a complex disease is always chancy." The drummer had suddenly vanished from the face of the earth. Muerner smiled, momentarily aware, given his return to the forum, that several specialists here would find Avery's words sound. These seminars, as we've inferred, were expressly designed to anticipate and assess the prospects inherent in the study of developmental maturation, Vida Semple being one example of a much accelerated growth rate. Muerner had, as intimated, his own idealistic preserve, his own 'hermeneutics', gross anatomy being his 'bag', sinew and muscles the 'interveners' in dealing with faulty skeletons and thus early senescence. And in sinew and muscles, like in bones, symmetry, physical concinnity, remained a paramount consideration. Salubrity was rarely notional, anomalous. Vida Semple's long term health and welfare hung in the balance this day. Her innate endowment, beyond her musical ability, had some serious flaws. A tragedy that only someone like a seasoned Shakespeare might portray, according to the gospel of Felix Muerner.

Avery Muth continued after a bracing intake of breath. "I would say in general Miss Semple's disease has not thus far incapacitated the maturation of the long bones and gross musculature. She may be a borderline case, as she is now thirteen, but the laissez-faire approach I've advised is entirely compatible with her current state. All we need now is to pace the speed of her unusual maturation. The progress of Gorham's could be worse if we attempt a significant intervention at this stage. The history of the disease bears this out."

"I still think we may wait too long," Mark Amelin primly remarked.

"Well, yes. But we've time enough, I think."

The question was germane for Muerner. When he first began to consider experiments in both transformational surgery and the prospect of genetic intervention in the maturing processes, he believed his work must honour venerable aesthetic norms, when possible. If the transformational modern tools would be slow in coming, the standards should not be in doubt. Hence his inclination, in such a fraught therapy seminar as this one, to defer to caution. So he said, in conclusion, "Avery, your assessment of Miss Semple is duly noted. For now." A geniality seemed to reassert itself with Mark's condolent nod. With the seminar thus adjourned, the participants shuffled out in relieved twos and threes. Only Eve remained behind, wearing her uncommitted smile.

"Wilde wants an audience."

“Does he indeed.”

Frank Wilde headed the clinic’s psychological group, the smallest of the medical teams Muerner retained to evaluate the criteria for intervention by the clinic.

Eve continued, “Friday next would suit me best. He feels your assessment of Methodological Behaviourism, as of last Friday in your talk to the Academie des Sciences, was ‘callously indifferent’. Incidentally, some of my day notes he’s not returned.”

“Yes, alright — book him.” Muerner imagined the unctuous Wilde somehow incapable of being ‘scheduled’. A close friend of Muerner’s, a former English intelligence officer and a witness at the Nuremberg trials, would add apropos resolute behaviourist Wilde, ‘The bright man’s burden.’ Muerner tended to agree. He added, smiling, “I will see Wilde returns your notes.”

“Thank you.”

Eve placed a folder on the table before Muerner. “The late file — on our savant, Vida Semple. The latest biopsy confirms Gorham’s. She and her companion have been installed in the Villa Gruenberg for the time being. A stereo digital recorder is being set up by the piano. Wilde hopes to arrive and do some recording this evening. Both her hands are improved. Though he too is concerned about her current state.”

While speaking Eve was not surprised to see Muerner once more gazing out upon the garden, the faintly audible sounds of the drummer, his syncopation echoing in the lofty chamber. It was a time before Muerner responded. “Yes, Horlick and the wondrous pixie. A seemly duo.”

Gervase Caen, Muerner’s private secretary, was sufficiently deaf not to hear the distant relentless drummer practicing, despite his office being near the Chinese Drawing Room. During the earlier seminar next door he spoke on the phone to the clinic’s security head, Hermann Still, while staring at the lush terraced gardens. Only the lake, now littered with fallen cherry blossoms, was absent his view. His grey flinty face hardened as Still further detailed an issue that was becoming intractable. Like Gervase, Herr Hermann was inured to understatement, a manner that tended, in this instant, to make the matter at hand incendiary.

“There is now a film, in addition to the photos.”

“Taken in a camp, which our blackmailer claims Felix worked in with a medial team. ”

“Jah.”

Gervase did not immediately respond. Hermann, stolidly pleased to be the messenger of grave tidings, promptly continued.

“First, a package of camp photos, likely copies. Now yes we cannot discount it — a film —

later Wehrmacht issue, also copy, sent to clinic by furtive courier as before, with ongoing extortion demand. Curiously, wrapping paper itself contains small address label apparently overlooked or perhaps placed by the sender. It identifies one Rudi Herzl in Zurich, who may or may not be extortionist. One of the puzzles. Now, about the film itself, the scenes are somewhat dim.”

“How so dim?”

“Dim.”

“But not dim enough.”

“Jah. Some cadres in some frames could include Felix.”

“The identity you’ve concluded to be verifiable and inculpatory — from early photos of Felix.”

“Jah. The freezing experiment undertaken in the film, shows one nearly frozen victim immersed in lukewarm water, the least lethal recovery treatment, apparently. ”

“And the recognition is credible. Muerner among the medics.”

“Jah.”

“You personally and alone opened the parcel?”

“Jah.”

“With the usual precautions.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t think the film a fake, a digital exploit?”

“Is well done if fake.”

A meeting was arranged forthwith. Hermann dismissed his gossipy secretary early that day and had the projector set up in his own office when Gervase arrived. The chief clinic legal advisor, Alexis Kopf, a dimpled balding insurance specialist, made notes and requested several segments of the film be replayed, some a frame at a time. He’d seen some of the photos and portions of the film. He was the son of a school friend of Muerner’s who went into hiding with Muerner’s aunt’s assistance after the events that perpetrated Kristallnacht, November 9-10, 1938. Muerner’s friend joined an underground French team, was caught, imprisoned, but escaped and fled to Switzerland, where he became one of the first fugitives to arrive there after passage in the Swiss parliament of the Sanctuary Law, that allowed such folk to stay rather than be ‘repatriated’ to Germany. Alexis had no doubt of Muerner’s loathing for the Nazis, but knew his older, long standing client had been suborned when, at one stage, as a very young, promising medical graduate, he had to choose between the welfare of his family and a few friends, and the scientific maundering of the Third Reich. Had he not made such a fated accommodation,

Alexis's father may not have survived. He also knew that Muerner's case remained one of the 'at large' examples that might have been pursued had the war crime tribunals not run out of steam by the mid fifties. Just what aspects of Muerner's interest in endowment and intelligence that coincided with the Nazis mania for them, remained a secret the discreet Muerner rarely spoke of. Now, however, forty-three years later, some documents and photographs — most recently this unusual camp medical film — had surfaced from an apparently knowledgeable extortionist, a very puzzling latecomer, who demanded a lavish income for life, payable in half-yearly instalments. His evidence, not conjectural, could embarrass both Muerner and his celebrated clinic, long since part of the modern recovery miracle in Europe and the illustrious promise of a near utopian future with its state-of-the-art research into fetal tissue cultures and feasible genetic manipulation. Were the camp documents to land in the hands of a private prosecutor, one of the leftover purists, it might be sufficient to reopen a clouded past. That much Alexis was convinced of with this late bow shot from an extortionist's arsenal — the unprecedented film of a ghoulish experiment conducted in an unidentified concentration camp pavilion, possibly Dachau: the deliberate freezing and attempted revival of mainly Russian prisoners to learn how shipwrecked German sailors and soldiers in Russia might be treated for hypothermia. The film revived an historic nightmare, which was watched this afternoon in an uninterrupted silence.

When the three men finished screening the film, Alexis felt impelled to make a short statement, which the others might fine tune as he proceeded. He had ample opportunity, the silence following the viewing being more or less interminable.

“It is, I think, a hard luck case any way we brook it. The film appears to be veridical, and could cue many critics. So. A comprehensive review is in order. Please feel free to add any editorial comment you think useful. So, into the breach. God bless. I'll begin with the wider implication of the photos and film.”

Alexis, an articulate lover of things baroque, was a small man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache, a large head often covered by a trilby, nervous eyes and hands, whom Muerner fancifully imagined a leprechaun. Ordinarily given to a droll conversational style of address, his manner this day rather belied the sprightliness that attended his usual explication of complex matters. Moreover, his own family past had flown in his face with the coming of the film, the import of which initially knocked the wind out of him. Hermann and Gervase listened in a sober silence, Hermann occasionally picking his nose and shunting air through his nostrils.

“Gentlemen, well. It is now a commonplace that the Nuremberg and regional tribunals were all hampered by exigency, impetuosity and, to some extent, at the behest of the Soviets for perhaps understandable if not excusable reasons, a seemingly unslakable thirst for swift justice.

‘A truncation of justice,’ one writer in summation put it. Thus the extent and digressions of the Nazi horror may never be known in their entirety, but documents will come to light from time to time which will and sometimes should embarrass and indict. I must admit that what I’ve learned over the past few days, and especially today, has profound implications, both for myself and for my friend, the clinic, and your own good selves.”

‘Friend’ was not pronounced with Alexis’s usual affection, Gervase thought.

Alexis then sought a glass of water from the carafe on the grog tray. Gervase and Hermann followed suit, Alexis accepting as well a finger of Glenmorganie scotch Gervase added to his glass. He seemed to relax a bit after downing this drink in one go. Gervase hesitated then fixed him another. Alexis faintly smiled. His commentary rather necessitated a stiff drink. Best get on with it. Three merry boys.

“Leaving aside, for a time, the resolution of our blackmailer, and the stray address label he provided, we should remember that details of the hypothermia experiments have long since been documented by several authors of course. Purportedly undertaken to learn how German sailors plucked from icy North Atlantic waters, or frozen infantrymen on the Russian front, might be revived, they serve as testimony to the ruthless and often heartless nature of Nazi medical experiment. To wit, mainly Russian POWs were placed in frigid waters, large tubs filled with ice, for long periods then revived, at least the survivors were, by various means, the most effective being immediate immersion in a lukewarm bath that was rapidly heated apparently. The film also imputes that female inmates were part of one revival team — one inmate in the present film could be construed to be Eve Kielice, Felix’s longstanding partner, archivist and chief assistant administrator. I understand a preliminary examination of the film, a competent copy, has all but ruled out any fake alteration to the film itself, other than its editing, though the examination of it by my expert is ongoing. Some early pictures that make up Eve’s resume when she sought work at the Bern Clinic, then the Hofstee Clinic for the Victims of Naziism — what I’ve seen — are possibly suggestive of a match. We must not discount, of course, the likelihood of a separate, unrelated individual who looks much like a young Eve. In none of the frames is her face explicit.”

Alexis paused here, wanting to add a personal encomium, but ready words eluded him, even as the break silently affirmed the joint consternation among them all. He stared for a time at his second, half-finished drink, before continuing.

“Some of the detail has a pertinence that we should not slight, I think. I trust your patience is exemplary. As this film shows, some female detainees, who otherwise appear well — are not at least malnourished — were used to dry and massage some of the prisoners arms and legs. The

imputation in the film, I believe, is that the latter resort was often successful, though no more efficacious than the incrementally heated bath, apparently. Parenthetically, such staff would not be available on a warship or field hospital, I presume. The fact that some such experiments were done with female participation is absent in the extant evidence, suggests the film may be unique — both its location and the fact that the team conducting the experiments included some women.”

Gervase and Hermann solemnly nodded. Alexis offered a shrug and a dismissive spreading of the hands. Despite his wish to be impartial, perhaps because of it, the atmosphere was becoming strained, for he too was aware of Felix’s thesis that stipulated the galvanic competition of male sexuality, exhibitionism being a fixed variable, a spur to vigour and better documentation of sperm — one of the old debates that would colour the future of endocrine research (up to and into the 90’s with the contentious book Human Sperm Competition by biologists Robin Baker and Mark Bellis). The imputation that Felix had been part of the team that documented the freezing experiments, was now suggestively verified by some frames in the film in which a group of ‘observers’, possibly including Felix, are seen making notes in the background. In a separate segment of the film, in which Felix is absent, a putative Eve is seen in a medical smock kneeling near a prisoner huddled on a cot by the edge of the warming tub, from which his still rigid form had been hoisted a minute or so before. The orderlies revisited the victim’s vital signs as she massaged his legs. It took a few minutes before the victim flicked his eyelids — to spontaneous nods from the witnesses. A success. The man could live to be frozen another day. Or, more likely, given a shot of phenol into the heart. So might a frigid U-boat sailor find himself benefitted and succoured in the minds of some of the experimenters. Some data on what appeared to be the changes in epidermal temperatures and blood pressure were itemized on a blackboard seen in the film.

Hermann, glancing at the dour Gervase, remarked as he cupped his monogrammed handkerchief, “Taxing points, the imputations, jah.” As he sometimes did, Hermann might kick down an open door in his will to be incisive and discerning. The possibility that a young woman, that this young woman, little more than a child when the film was made, could be anything but a hideously aggrieved victim herself, was momentarily stultifying. Yet, if one slighted the likelihood of a drugged or terrorized stripling, the gross reality affirmed its black and white warrant: she could, like Muerner, have been part of a team! Could — for they were never seen together in any of the film’s discrete frames. The girl seemed relaxed enough, and her demeanour throughout the lurid presentation was apparently apathetic — to a cynic. That the one figure among the orderlies was a credible image of Felix himself, as attested by the early

family and university photographs in Felix's historic album, was a preternatural shock. The ramifications loomed in that culpable, sensationally forensic age.

Still, the squalid imputations the others were loath to broach. Especially Alexis. Felix was in line for a Nobel Laureate, and timeless Eve one of the guardian angels of the illustrious clinic, one of its Lares Familiares. She oversaw almost all the work Felix undertook, even refereed some of the disputes. That she had been Felix's friend and confidante since joining the clinic in the early 50's all but doubled the jeopardy. Her still fetching looks, patient dry wit, care with detail, sense of fairness and awareness of personal and professional vulnerability, had become proverbial, enhancing her presence. Just speculating on she and Felix's mutual expediency, connivance, cooperation — acceptance of such a ghoulish experiment! — took one's breath away.

In conclusion, Alexis sought to resurrect his characteristic sobriety. "I will of course play the film as soon as Felix returns from the villa, where he's gone to meet and hear again the young savant that Dr. Wilde has become concerned about. Her last performance went poorly, and she went nearly dry at one time — apparently she's contending with a lot of pain these days. I regret having to confront Felix holos-bolus, so to speak, but it cannot be helped." It was about what the others expected from the mindful attorney. He and Felix would talk at length on the morrow, else his retainer must be forfeit.

What later assuaged the new acute sense of dismay as the limo whisked Alexis home, was how Eve's clear heedful face grew on you — indeed a face that might launch many ships. The visage that might render loveliness a patient witness not an idling or bemused siren — a being composed, sure, reconciled, equanimous, a heroine out of a classic period where character mattered and beauty not yet a mannered myth.

While the nights of the city rallied before him, Alexis was again quite overtaken by the mind-numbing historic perversion, given his own sense of honour and amity, of a sophisticated German culture lapsing into such pitiless barbarity! He detected a clammy perspiration on his hands. A dread schrecklich embarrassment he was now situated to see, encounter in detail again! He had to harken back to his idealistic graduate student days to recall the 'burn' — the Nazi legacy distilled into its clinical matter-of-fact pornography, its insular 'documentation' films. The recollection of such blatant inhumanity burned like an acid now, took the varnish off all pretence of understanding. Would humanity ever survive its current renewed obsession, its love-hate infatuation with peerless bodies? The graphic abuse of them now a bloody video entertainment! Would man ever lay off the acutely visual, recognize instead things like a Pachelbel Canon, a vehicle for reflective thought and transport that would allow one to turn off

the goddam lights! Felix, you cool daring observant swine, you saved my father and indentured my life. But what handsome deviltry are you up to now?

He was not pleased with himself — as a wordy wisenheimer. So make a pun of it you pin head. What else can the practicing survivor do? The other does not bare thinking of.

That night as Eve readied for bed, she thought of the amazing Canadian waif, the ‘Pixie’ Felix called her, her smooth pink skin a nearly transparent skein of freckles, whose generally cheerful demeanour had for a time been sustained in her new placid surround with the mysterious yet seemingly devoted Horlick. The chalet they occupied was furnished as a simple but comfy domicile. Vida’s example remained the sturdy miraculous in human affairs, the genius that upstages science and addles reason. If the recent diagnosis of Gorhams was disheartening, Eve had been a stoic witness to misfortune much more grievous, as had Felix. The recent extortion packages revived an awfully sick historic past, memories that might disable as pervasively as any bone deterioration. She had thought she and Felix might get through their final years without much chagrin or embarrassment — even go tango dancing twice a week — but such buoyant expectation seemed again on hold. Indeed, the closer one came to a haven the more illusive it often became.

They had been charmed, of course, by the shy but attentive girl, and the revelation of her rare awesome talent, though Eve found herself at times as focused on the companion befrienders, thinking him other than the ready humanitarian he appeared to be. But what matter? Such waifs rarely find anyone so alertly concerned, if indeed the discovery of her singular talent was a late revelation. She wondered if a poignant, perhaps familial reminiscence prompted Horlick’s action? He played the part of a devoted benefactor well, if he was simply biding his time before fleeing.

The sparely creamed face staring back at her from her dresser mirror was unusually alert that evening to some austere night reflections, especially those on a further window that outlooked a darkened leafy street — a street reminiscent of one where uniformed golems had once wantonly prowled, the implacable foot falls growing louder in the echo chamber of her memory. So poignantly she remembered the many herded citizens destined to become skeletal, stilled forms frozen against barbed wire. The understanding of suffering comes only through pain and the maturity that obviates all shortcuts, all resort to stagy pathos, so said her life partner Felix, in trying to find his way. That she had not suffered in the acutely physical sense, not been starved, beaten, branded, was due in large measure to the life partner she now awaited, who facilitated her escape from the voyeuristic camp doctor who had engaged her as a domestic ser-

vant and erstwhile soft core model for his Leica, the same doctor who found and employed an unusual and gifted statistician, a boy wonder, whom he may have patronized as much for the boy's fresh effeminate looks.

That thought was arrested by a distant siren, two, penetrating the partly curtain-baffled window. The police arrived plainly these days, in most cases. A carnival of lights and colours. No silent sloe-black Mariah or Daimler. Or very rarely. Why was she dwelling on such aberrations now? When the clinic and her finely gifted champion seemed a transcendent authority of the age: their enterprise the cared-for future of hope, optimism itself — the heady prospect where one might escape a cruelly deficient soma. A prospect the otherwise pathetic Vida rekindled. How ironic her grievous mishap should have led to a showcasing of her talent and the escape from a deadening asylum!

When Eve had cleaned her face and creamed her hands, she felt the composure returning as she donned the hyacinth blue silk kimono, its broad lapels yielding a look serene and sumptuous, the sliver of flesh also defying the dim light.

The bedroom phone, noisy at that hour, was not a good sign. It could only be Felix, calling from somewhere near.

“Yes Felix.”

There was an uncharacteristic pause, slight but fractious, then the measured articulate voice, that of a fussy conductor Eve always imagined. “Alexis called. Bless him. I'll have to make a statement — well something. He's had a chance to study in detail the photos and film our blackmailer sent. He's particularly upset — by some frames in the film. You've seen some of the photos and been told of the film. He wants a meeting. Tonight. We should talk at length I think — first.”

“You think I can help — with such a discussion,” she placidly stated when he entered the expansive bedroom.

“At first I thought not, but I think you'd better get dressed. It's best Alexis hears some details from us both, at the outset. That you can verify some events will reassure him. He trusts you above us all I think. He suggested an executive office in the new Paleomena Corporation Tower — in an hour. As you know, he's now on the corporation's board of directors.”

“Can we do it without avid Gervase?”

“Said and done.”

“We should, perhaps, eschew the corporate limo.”

“Of course.”

The Paleomena penthouse executive offices were situated in a simulated manicured flower-

rich park. The new head of the European section, an avid golfer, one day decided that practicing chipping and putting in the sterile broadloom, glass/chromium/leather environs, was part of his problem and presto — a credible sky and flora in one section that might line a signature hole on Pebble Beach in springtime. Alexis had just set up the projector in an office fringed with *potentilla fruticosa*, and softened the lighting, when he heard the night guard announce the arrival of Felix and Eve. With dispatch he gratefully greeted them in the elevator rotunda. Eve elected to keep her coat on. If Alexis was surprised to find both of his favourite people in attendance he did not let on. The presence of the older projector in the small but verdant office brought a droll smile to Eve's face. Alexis took Felix's coat with a durable smile and was about to explicate the need for the meeting when Felix beat him to it.

“It's self-evident the jeopardy the photos and film invoke. I've seen some of the pics and a portion of the film. We can look at them later if you wish, but it may be redundant after what I plan to say first. Parts of the film, I understand, likely have some interpolated frames. Thus several historic facts need airing. You've ever been patient and loyal, and here we are. Strangely I'm rather hungry, and brought a tuck box. I had Marianne make it up when I got back from the clinic, expecting to work late.” He smiled at Eve, who affected a grimace, then surprised them both by spreading a paisley tablecloth on a section of the luxuriant broadloom turf picnic style, prompting Felix to say, “Can you not get the meadow sound effects going, Alexis? Maybe not as high as your august golfer sometimes has them. And two or three of his back-only ‘wayzgoose chairs’, I think you've call them — for his sometimes less formal board meetings.”

After a brief scramble, Eve soon nestled beside Felix with a couple of cushions fetched from a sofa for her elbow, tucking her legs, looking somewhat cajoled. After a false booming start on the secreted speakers, the just perceptible sounds of water falling amidst well-tempered bird song filled the air. Alexis returned from the sound panel looking a little miffed as he surveyed the picnickers.

“Felix, this is a meeting.”

“Of course.”

When the first flutes of Champagne had been poured, largely in a gestured silence, Felix leaned back and dabbed at his lips before acknowledging the attentive audience.

“Let us begin. There's not a lot to tell. A few inexorable months. I've identified a couple of the medics in the one film segment. If our blackmailer knows of them, they too could be implicated if they're still alive. Yet given the age difference, identities may not be that easily affirmed in a current court of law. Now I did make an early egregious decision to assist a stolid and unlikeable medic in the one camp. Had I not participated, I'd have been questioned, my

family newly scrutinized, thus imperilling the lives of several people who survived the war, including some relatives who remained unstinting in their assistance and care of especially British SAS personnel during the war — such that, post-war, the SAS has been particularly studious in its effort to track down the ogres who tortured and killed some SAS personnel.”

Alexis nodded, both he and Eve quietly contending with memories the ominous words invoked.

“I was seconded in forty-two to an irascible maniac who recognized my interest in the endocrine system and my low standing in the SS. He didn’t buy my diffidence about some presumptions in the current orthodoxy — ‘weak knees’ he called it. Basically, he was an insecure lout — that’s an oversimplification, but it’ll do for now — who needed someone to lord it over, and a very young brilliant recent graduate was just the ticket. He took me under his tutelage and never, I think, imagined how awful it was. I’m talking mainly of his general medical acumen. His prurient taste in art was one heady distraction from his own mediocrity I tend to think now, a fairly common compensation. What you may not know is that he was early on part of the T4 euthanasia teams that spent several weeks gassing children like Vida — lives unworthy of life — a memory that does not mellow with time, before being transferred to a hypothermia team.”

After a silent deferential query of the others, he filled his flute with more Champagne and settled against the back rest.

“Now why did I not simply slit the guy’s throat and attempt to escape to the West? It is a question I put to myself from time to time — even laying aside the improbability of escape — and as always I decide, that by doing so, I would have endangered several persons who were dear to me, and likely compromised a pipeline that my family, particularly my aunt, used for several friends of friends throughout the war — lucky folk, some of whom I think can be dug up if absolutely necessary. Had the war continued another year I would likely have been shot or guillotined — ammunition being a precious commodity then — along with my aunt and my grandmother who at eighty-six was still a resourceful late night signaller. As you know my father died on the RMS Empress of Ireland in May of 1914. He was visiting a dying uncle in Canada and came back to Germany, yes, to join the army of the Great Dukedom of Hesse. I was an unwelcome illegitimate child and raised by my aunt. She was instrumental in getting me into Heidelberg medical school.” After smiling at Eve and fondly reassessing his surroundings he continued: “Now, about my part in the war. Very early on I knew my medical assistance would entail considerable unpleasantness, which would be perpetrated with or without my participation and advisement. Not to belabour the point, I did sometimes ameliorate some experimentation by suggesting flaws in the procedures, which I did, when the opportunity arose. The fact that I

stayed alert and kept records of medical procedures that often maimed and killed inmates is true. The later freezing experiments, which my doctor abetted — if that's the word — are now a controversial issue for current research into hypothermia, one concern being whether or not the data the Nazi's collected can be used. I can amplify the interests and dilemmas here later, if you like. What lingers now is my ongoing wonder at the keenness some humans can muster when inflicting and observing excruciating pain — on many humans not unlike themselves. I realize it gets difficult here but the reality keeps reasserting itself. If one rules out the likelihood of a devil incarnate, as the cold-blooded Nazi scientist certainly rivalled, we are left with a forensic, possibly hormonal explanation for the cruelty, which might have been further annotated if we could have experimented on some of these self-same monsters instead of hanging them. But that is considered callous if not perverse." He paused and looked into the distance. "If I sound a little precious tonight, a trifle obdurate, it is because this speech has always taken too long in rehearsal." He then set down the flute, re-crossed his legs. "Parenthetically, in answering the question of being a witness or murdered corpse — the Primo Levi conundrum — I chose to be a witness. At the time. And do so to this day. Suicide, the third option, doesn't really succour any survivors. I can say I did not initiate any of the experiments myself. But I did keep records for the one impervious medic I served. I was a good statistician, which he vaguely appreciated but never paid much attention to, otherwise he would have realized that many of his hypotheses, especially the assumptions that initiated them, were exceedingly limited. I doubt he ever really distinguished between a fixed and intervening variable. I shall furnish you with a list of such trials, should you wish, but they aren't I think pertinent tonight.

"Now at the one camp that conducted some hypothermia experiments, Russian prisoners were the main guinea pigs. And their sufferings unfathomable. I chose to live, to observe and, through my own data, remember the aberrations and compulsions that ostensibly clinically sane men harbour. I hope to learn more about that 'sanity' in due course. Yes."

Alexis nodded but without assertion. Then put his head in his hands as Felix continued.

"Now Eve was one of several youngsters taken from a village in Western Poland after it had been devastated by Luftwaffe bombing. She had the misfortune of scratching the eye of a Rottenführer, in a dispute over a gold locket."

"An Unterscharführer."

"I stand corrected." Felix was about to relay an anecdote but decided against it.

"When I first saw her she had been pressed into a group that might end up as domestic labourers — or field whores, likely in the officer ranks. Age was less a caveat then. Her assessors were a time making up their minds, I think." His voice trailed off then returned. "It might be

helpful to mention that the use of some analgesics likely helped Eve and other detainees accept a rather stolid hair stylist...among other things.” Eve took this quip without notice. “She always was a forward child, and a little flighty, prone to ‘elopement’ as they say in today’s rest homes. For good reason. At eleven — or was it twelve? Yes, a beguiling twelve, she was not only the daughter of a rich and resourceful land owner, a sore point with the fierce, neighbouring and chastely dogmatic Soviets — in effect a kulak — but also a Pole, and thus a subhuman according to Nazi stratification. After a while you stop counting your blessings. Actually, it was my supervisor who retained her as a domestic. I think he was actually taken with her — but as a voyeur not a rapist I think. He took several pictures of her.” Felix glanced at Eve. “Yes?”

Eve faintly nodded without looking up.

“Now one day when she was tending my supervisor’s garden, I filched the uniform from a wounded SS officer and took her for a ride on a bicycle I used to get about the camp. I informed my super that I was regrettably a closet pedophile — the kind of confession an SS medic can make allowances for, being a sly practitioner himself. I suspect he was keenly interested to learn how I made out. Later that day I informed him that the agile creature had resisted my clutches during our outing and ran off — after bashing me with a rock. I made out I was not one of her favourites, as I first thought.” This quip Eve faintly smiled at as Felix continued. “In short, my peerless Eve left, at my behest, several distinct scratches on my face and neck, plus a credible hematoma from a rock, timely lesions that may have saved my life. She bashed me with the rock with considerable dispatch I recall.” Again Eve faintly smiled. “An army team was dispatched to find her; my supervisor wanted his gardener and model back. I was interrogated and given a warning to stick to my statistics. I wasn’t demoted though. My supervisor likely helped out here. The pervert fraternity looks after its own after all. Just so.”

Felix handily smiled as Eve finally, nimbly sought her own Champagne refill as Felix continued.

“Now some of my critics accuse me of being a toffy German apologist, culturally mutilated by his Bund, but one tries to overlook the apple heads. Too often in vain. I later learned that ‘the escaped domestic garden waif’, the coveted Eve, actually joined an underground courier team and, eventually, the Maquis. A paternal cousin of hers lived in Zielona Góra in Western Poland — also a resourceful partisan. Eve even received a notable citation, but keeps it to herself. I can say with emphatic assurance that she did not participate in any of the experiments pictured in the photos or this film. She was simply elsewhere, as noted. Another youngster served the team I was later part of. I’m sure that when both the pictures and film are adroitly examined the pertinent frames will disclose another. Over time many extras fleshed out that

tawdry cast. Indeed, one doctor, a sly pervert who's name I've forgotten, did a clinical epidermal study of one very pretty girl. Essentially, a protracted ogling I expect. Exceptionally beautiful skin she had. Some pictures in the collection our blackmailer sent us affirm the presence of that girl."

As Felix proceeded, Alexis was equally aware of Eve's quiet fond regard of Felix while listening to the tale. He had little doubt what it represented. One reads occasionally about such esteem, but rarely if ever comes across the genuine article. Indeed, he felt a little sheepish being in such proximity to it that night, and sensed a professional compunction chiding him for enviously taking note. She was indeed a well-preserved, understated beauty he decided, a veritable redefinition of a timeless aesthetic. An ineffable life partner both gracious and smart. The thought hit home as Felix continued with his stark narration.

"As for the clinic here, and my contribution to it. Yes, it is true I owe something to the fantasies of Alfred Rosenberg. Symmetry, proportionality is often a fundamental of science. Knowing thyself is inextricably bound with the precept of Nothing in Excess — the elegance of the concise, clear and succinct in all things. Beauty, salubrity, are not figmental in my judgement. Humans are not as electively constructed as BMWs or even tapestries, and much less ephemeral. Vida Semple herself exemplifies the want of a healthy, well-articulated skeleton. Her specific predicament begs for a restoration. Bones particularly reveal a telling prospectus." Again Felix and Eve's eyes briefly met, this time with a dimpled candour, as if a select entertainment was fostered by the mere regard of one another. "I really only have one thing left to say, before I begin answering your questions. It may strike you as overly dramatic yet the drama it portends must not I think be neglected. Just after being stationed at the one camp, I passed through a small village that was about to be torched by the SS. I was sent to fetch and log a cache of medical supplies. In passing a farm house I saw the brutalized corpse of a young, once handsome man. The humans who engage in such acts do so in part because they have the hormonal momentum to do so; where this aberrant maniacal energy comes from is not obvious in clinical research. If there is a genetic endocrine component, and I suspect there is, the time is long overdue to sustain a serious quest for it. We manufacture many drugs within ourselves, and some of us do it far more sensationally than others. Conditioning does not account for the willful savagery. For in some cases the perpetrators themselves lived comfortable, even enviable lives. I think you will agree it is a pressing and pertinent question. Not to be dismissed as fantasy or obsession. Oscar Wilde was on to something I think when he penned, 'There is no hell but this: a body without a soul, or a soul without a body' Either way we can't avoid the obvious. Culture and ideology too often distort perception and motivation."

If he had been prepared to say more he stopped. The tuck box was nearly empty but for some apricots.

“I think I’ve said about enough. It’s now up to my solicitor and Providence, who I trust may be one and the same.”

Alexis waved away the imputation. “Now, now. Well, yes, I do have some questions. And feel some urgency to place them. And not what you may think.”

Eve dourly smiled, as if at last impatient herself to proceed. Alexis began with a frog in his throat, which he had to clear.

“As regards the immediate dilemma, I would say that our extortionist, presuming he believes he has an exclusive, will revise his terms over time, if some payments are made. By making some, we allow time to maneuver, to look for mistakes he’s bound to make. I presume you do not know who the perpetrator is, or who Rudi Herzl is, the name on the small address label haplessly left or ‘placed’ inside one parcel’s wrapping paper — suggestive of either an oversight or a ploy.” He briefly smiled at Eve.

Said Felix, “I’ve already confessed to a certain detachment at the time — professional and personal. A few of the medics I remember, and a few of the orderlies. Someone named Herzl is a mystery. He could have been one of the orderlies or camp guards I suppose. I can of course think of any number of ‘Adolfs’ who would jump at the prospect of expedient blackmail, one in particular, a fellow called Wurzel, the ‘root’. Last name Müller. A camp orderly. A fellow I’ve mentioned to Eve. Though, as I’ve said, the extreme age difference tends work in my favour, unless another witness comes forward.”

Eve solemnly nodded. As chance would have it, both Felix and Alexis glanced her way as Felix began again.

“It is only a hunch, a remote possibility, but the role fits the character I think. Some recollections have returned with this blackmail and do seem germane. Best to connect the dots we now have.” Again he and Eve exchanged knowing glances as he began.

“Wurzel, yes. A consummate skimmer of the prison rations. I first saw him showing some photographs to a group of men, including my supervisor. He had pictures of the one girl with the pure light skin. A couple are in the collection sent to us. ‘Mein angel,’ he’s reputedly to have said. A voyeur and resourceful sadist. Shrewdly vindictive. He had a reputation. I heard him often mutter how he would get back at so and so. He would say things like ‘He won’t be smiling forever.’ He had it in for a lot of people, yet presented himself as a friend of the prisoners, despite the fact he was contributing to their overall wretchedness. I saw his name written on daily log-in boards. I recall a faint inscription on the corner of one picture in the collection —

the only one. Could it be his hand? Possible. He appears in some photos, also some frames in the film — both with the regular camp staff and his erstwhile ‘angel’. In the few pictures I’ve seen of her she looks terrified. They only hint at what she must have endured. Wurzel may have killed one the camp guards — got him drunk and tumbled him down a scar, a vista lookout. He had the run of the camp. I remember him reporting the disappearance. Did he find me especially repugnant? I don’t know.”

Said Eve, “He hated favoured people you said.”

“Enough to devise and initiate a threat like this?” Alexis asked, now fully alert. “Belatedly learning of your renown here, say?...”

Felix faintly nodded. “If he’s alive and managed to glean these pics and film, which he could have, a sensational collection to be sure, then my presence in some of the frames, if he knew my name then, would be a welcome find for him. The name on the address label in the wrapping paper — Rudi Herzl — is an unknown. Though being usually a Jewish name it is a curiosity. A name we will try to trace of course.”

“Well, it’s a start,” Alexis said into the pause that followed, both Eve and Felix newly absorbed in thought, a mutual silence Alexis duly noted. “I do have one question. Really only one.” Felix but not Eve looked up. “Not really germane in one sense, and yet it is pertinent. How cold-blooded is this specialty of yours going to become, Felix? Are you going to be a new revived Alfred Rosenberg? It is a question that will be on a jury’s mind... if it comes to that.”

“Alexis, I am a scientist. And, despite all, not a pessimist. Nor a romantic, and certainly not a Fascist. If I have ever appeared insensitive in your eyes, it has escaped my notice. I simply think we can live longer and better — meaning the career cynics and doubters should be kept to a minimum.” He then paused, staring at the apricots. “But then I have been with Eve. That makes me special, don’t you think?”

Once more Alexis felt the lingering chagrin of a too proximate doubt. “It’s an answer a foreman will find terse and enigmatic, but I can live with it. Anything you care to add will not be slighted.”

Felix nodded and resumed after a curt smile. “What today’s researchers studying hypothermia must decide is the cogency of some of the extant Nazi data — whether the graphs depicting the lowering of body temperature well below levels we today consider experimentally acceptable, has pertinence to their work. Since such work is crucial to a better knowledge of survival in cold environs — from rescues at sea, to wilderness and climbing accidents, to careless oversights on the domestic front, to the very utility of cold state surgery — all such knowledge will save lives and ameliorate pain. What researchers must decide first, is if the Russian prisoners

subjected to such agony were sufficiently healthy — i.e. within the normal range of health — to constitute a useful experimental model. The second question, of whether the data is so tainted as to defy use under any circumstance, only the researchers and their colleagues can attempt to gainsay. Yet I can't help thinking it is already a moot point, for I've seen several footnotes in respected scholarly journals alluding to evidence from possible Nazi experiments. Utility is a human excuse in most things."

Alexis nodded and sighed, whether from relief or dismay he seemed himself undecided.

That night, as they lay in bed inverted to one another — Felix eyeing pages in a folder set on Eve's lower bum, she a slim book propped in the arches of his crossed, slippers feet, her own toes tucked under his shoulder — an intruder may have been struck by the apparent 'fluency' of the inversion, as if a pervasive humour prevailed regardless. Felix was in cream silk pyjamas, Eve a lemon-yellow kimono with pale-blue Hyacinths, some of which he fondly traced. The fact they could so thoughtfully, reflectively speak to one another so, intimated a long standing accord.

Felix's sudden question — "Why do you think Horlick's exceptional?" — was only belatedly answered. He still had not fully assimilated Eve's earlier assessment of the man who befriended Vida early on in the Burdock hospital, and exhibited such fondness for her on her arrival at the clinic.

"He seemed at times a bit too complaisant, fawning even; so I thought, think...for a rank and file soldier. He also noticed things you'd not expect."

This merely teased the analyst and formalist in Felix; he had little doubt about her perception, her unassuming vigilance.

"'Noticed' how, exactly?"

"Well, it was his heed of some artifacts — your Rublev icons in the one salon, and the flint pistols. He promptly smiled when he saw them and picked one up, in a manner that suggested the gun inspired a fond memory rather than a martial curiosity. He also dwelt about your pristine trunk table — I think he recognized the back stencil, the stamp of the state arsenal that made it. Though he didn't mention it. But I saw the knowing inflection."

"'Inflection'. Hmm. Anything else?"

"Well, he mentioned to Professor Hindel, the music professor who's taken a keen interest in Vida, some selections Vida was familiar with. He'd heard her play some Debussy early on apparently. His French sounded pretty good to me."

"He doesn't have the look of a lucky comfy connoisseur."

"Hardly with a sinewy physique like that. That takes years of punishment, n'est-ce pas?"

Felix was silent and had left off his gentle caressing tracteries, which she sometimes found tentative.

“He was in the war,” Felix stated.

“Paymaster corps.”

“How did you learn that?”

“I asked him. Not just rank and serial number. Basic training. Where he served, under whom. Theaters of operation. And did he do a turn when he suspected he was being, well, ‘attentively’ assessed.”

“‘Attentively.’ So how did he react?”

Eve closed her book, curtly smiled. “Quite suddenly he got interested in Vida. And took no further notice of the salon artifacts, which had obviously interested if not charmed him. A nostalgic treat, one night think, not a rube’s curiosity. A hunch of course. Also, there’s a slight cadence to his English that I’ve yet to place.”

“Interesting. And what about Vida herself? Any late observations there?” By then he too had closed his folder and slipped into a reflective state. Eve had no trouble answering.

“Astonishing, captivating. Terribly unlucky. The nightmares have ceased. She’s been told of the attack but still seems unable to assimilate it. I think she lives in the present, with considerable pain. Complaint for her is, has been, a risky business, I think. A fact she learned early on I suspect.”

Eve paused for a moment as if to reconsider a comment, then added, “Hard judging her innate intelligence; the tests still only scratch the surface I think. Unlike some savants she definitely has a strong affective nature: she obviously adores her benefactor, and plays her music with a feeling, perhaps even a rapture, that many savants don’t always exhibit — at least at her age. A wonder all round. And a heartbreak of course.”

“Her father petitioned to have her back after her appearance on the European Rare Gifts program.”

“‘Daddy’.”

“She was in a quandary then, no?”

“I doubt it. She’s really only had this one boon fellow, that was and is fairly obvious to me. Though his real reason for being so attentive remains speculative. Perhaps he was, is, looking for a kind of sabbatical himself.” She fondly looked back at him. “You can’t sleep either.”

“I must admit to thinking about the other matter.”

“How we find the bastard and whether that address label is pertinent?”

“Yes. Our late newly surfaced spook.”

“Well, why not an ad, say, in the personal section of several papers. ‘Affluent English collector-connoisseur seeking unique candid war photos. Will pay well for vintage examples. All ownership identity particulars kept in strict confidence.’

“It does sound inviting — for an extortionist.”

Eve barely smiled.

“Would he be that resourceful though, reading newspapers so?”

“I have a further idea.”

“Yes.” By then he begun to caress her hip, noting she had on the new nightgown.

“It involves Wilde — and Wilde’s mystery man, the enigmatic Horlick. What if we were to engage him in some sleuthing. Follow the unsavoury smell.”

“Really! How so?”

“I think Horlick may find it a challenge — to affirm his sojourn here. Also a release from having to abide Wilde’s formal, sometimes persnickety concerns about Vida.”

“You mean actually looking for the weasel — our opportunistic mud slinger? You’re serious. A kind of furlough for Horlick himself.”

“Unlike Wilde, Horlick has no reputation to honour — that we know about. Wilde’s a dogmatist in his practice. Likely stuck with a pedigree he can hardly question let alone try to subvert.”

“I must admit you’ve lost me.”

With an abruptness that amused him she reversed her position to lie beside him, her lips near his ear, as she continued with some unfeigned fervour, as if revealing a select secret.

“I think Wilde’s a kind of fugitive also. Not unlike Horlick.”

“You do?”

“I suspect he’s gasping for air, poor dear, given the day’s heterodox experimentalists in his field. And I think one of us ought to throw him a buoy. Ask him to assess Horlick, discretely of course, as we sound out Horlick to find our ogre. We get an orthodox assessment from Wilde that paces our own assessment.”

“Why is it you can be so finely perceptive in matters relating to my clinic staff?”

“The easy stuff.”

They regarded one another with amused candour. Said he, “Yes, you’ve said before. Bodies act out the mind.”

“Let me put it to Horlick. Find us the chap possibly named Herzl, and we’ll provide a handsome advance on the undertaking.”

Felix didn’t answer for a time, his hand then not quite negligently traipsing her waist. He

could feel the slight dimpling, the incipient laughter. She was ticklish but held her breath now. That she might still excite him, perhaps even find his attentions tolerable, amazed him. They had long since explicated the matter. He had been seduced very early on — adamantly. Whereas, she had taken her time. Fondly, in due course.

“You feel Horlick’s up to the task?” he finally wryly asked. “And how would you contrive our interest in Herzl? What he means to us?”

“I think that stressing our wish to know the general health and welfare of a difficult patient we once treated would work — a morbidly depressive patient we’ve lost track of. Horlick, I think, will either take the deposit and split or follow through. I give you even odds. He seems to me less guarded these days — placidly evaluating his options.”

“And Wilde too...a fugitive. Interesting.”

“In so many words. The new inductivists in his field must be a trial.”

“But is the enigmatic Horlick our best choice? He does have an empathic nature, but would that be enough, for such an undertaking?”

“I also think he likes me. Horlick. Our proposed request to find our ‘other’ patient is a cue. Sponsors can be partisans yes?” A sly smile touched her face.

“So, you can’t really sleep either.” The invitation quietly prevailed.

As if on cue Eve’s barefoot form alighted on the parquet and approached the doors of the music console. After pressing some switches and toeing a pair of dance pumps she tightened the sash of her kimono.

Seconds later one was aware of a timeless two-headed phantom moving through the night-shadowed room to the beguiling strings and bandoneon music of Astor Piazzolla, the flowing arabesques of her gown moving to Le Grand Tango with the poise of a heading cobra, attuned to the rhythmic nuance — a world that only a special twosome may share, including a last return to the settle of the satinwood four poster. The moment when enchantment prevails.

A variety of that enchantment David Willardson would apprehend in the alluring sureness and daring of the Wagner siblings. Indeed, it was that daring that would daunt his lone staid world, the vision of free animated Johanna defying portrayal. She had the kind of torsion that could seethe an ocean, he imagined. Would full skirts and an acre of petticoats have softened the blow, he would later wonder, harkening back to the Victorian sense of ‘perfect respectable upright form’, a formality he once imagined himself a legatee of. He was ever scrounging for elucidation, and sensed his bungling when Julian proved to be a closet gay! Not unlike Herr Liedhoff, a much respected piano teacher in Saskatoon who David occasionally took lessons

from at the earnest behest of his hometown teacher. Remarked Mrs. Lang after David's inaugural lesson with Herr Liedhoff, "He invited you to his Saturday night student gathering? Even Arlene never got asked that!" Arlene Johnson was another musical wonder, more dedicated than Julian, and prodigious compared to David.

Well, it turned out Herr Liedhoff believed only boys might play the piano. Douglas Smart, one of his senior students, had found David's playing "interesting" — in that boy soprano era before David signed on to his *avoirdufois*. Douglas' last words to him were, "I can see you're tired." David had been yawning for some time in his hotel room after Douglas walked him back in a light December snow fall across the bridge that spanned the Saskatchewan River. Douglas had gotten as far in the hotel room as nudging David's ankle with his foot, but perhaps decided his target's playing sufficiently gauche to reconsider the compensations. David was relieved when he left. He might get back to his delectation of the generic peerless Johanna, in such tales as D.H. Lawrence's *The Woman Who Rode Away*, purchased earlier from the pocketbook stand in the lobby. Johanna, he decided, definitely wanted to put down her homework and take a rarified adventurous walkabout. But then the sudden calamity that reminded one how even phantoms, put there to amaze, if not molest, could be fragile too — in his case the two quintessential players he had such trouble assessing and rendering.

They had been skating on the creek after a snowfall, Julian pretending great mastery despite his heavily snow-dusted apparel. "It's like this, simp" — then kerplop. Looking up, he enquired in his customary condescension. "You got that, the *pas de chat*?" Johanna, the best skater, was giggling then with intent.

"You're a scream," she said. Smiling, Julian responded, "If you insist." He then rose and sailed on, a careening vehicle slowly derailing.

The cracking they first misinterpreted, thinking it the branches of some iced poplars rattling in the breeze. The splash turned them both about, the commentary from Julian — "Holy Hannah!" — not germane. Julian was a clumsy swimmer and briefly disappeared beneath the rilled water that began seeping over the still cracking, depending ice edge. David had little recollection of what happened next, coming around as his hand slowly froze — he pulled off his scarf and cast the end of it to Julian, after laying spreadeagled on the ice, praying the section he was on was sound. He could hear ominous cracking sounds as he skimbled back on his knees holding the scarf which kept slipping out of Julian's grasp. Johanna had by then run off on her skates to fetch help from the nearest neighbour, but had a time getting up the steep bush-thick embankment.

"Oh god, oh piss!" Julian was badly messing his metaphors when a man came down the em-

bankment with a long board and a rope. Setting a slip knot he tossed it to Julian who could not get his wrist into it, his hands all but frozen to the edge of the ice. Lying athwart the board David was pushed nearer, finally close enough to get a loop of rope about Julian's stiff wrist. Then the gent and Johanna heartily pulled the rope but without success. Julian's parka had caught in the serrated edge of the ice. By then a farmer and his wife and young son were letting out a hitch rope down the embankment slope, the young thin son soon slithering across the ice in a pair of oversize snow shoes. Apparently that bend in the creek, beyond which the current stilled and firmly froze, had been a menace most every spring, despite the warning signs, which David could not remember seeing. Later they would learn how impatient the farmer had been with some of the preventable accidents. In due course a lasso settled about Julian's neck, shoulder and one freed arm, the young lad acting with considerable skill, and a tug-of-war team managed to rein in the wet stiff form, an ice channel breaking almost to the shore.

David had watched the rescue in a huddled cold, shoulders hunched, venting steam upward to warm his iced eyebrows and forehead, keenly aware of the parka that kept slipping back into the water. Johanna was irreverently swearing then. She seemed embittered, angry even. With him? he wondered. He tried to think what he might have done but nothing came. All he could see was the wet parka, ajar toque and distraught face. It was about then he realized Johanna was actually crying through her anger, apparent revulsion and disbelief. He noticed she had bruised her knee, as seen through a tear in her slacks. He had the feeling that she, like him, had little experience in mix ups. It was a sobering recognition — the lethargy that numbed him in emergencies, as if actually being there was unreal. What dazed was the image of Johanna occasionally simpering, wiping tears. Pinching herself with the discovery that Julian was not invincible perhaps. David's idol exhibiting an all-too-human grief. Which suggested ever after that he too, David Willardson, might be in over his head some days, without much hope of rescue or redemption except by drastic fortuitous means. He had sensed then in Julian's near demise a recognition of his own craven passion for 'capturing the human form' separate from its circumstance, a form that might stand upright like a god, oblivious of mundane accidental living. His passion for such 'idealistic rendering' in a later drawing class became something of a class amusement. The sensibility that was incurably bourgeois. Only ungainly plodders imagined a comprehensive beauty, and ostensible perverts the finicky detailing of the 'ideal' female body. Mein Kampf he would later think of it, how he and Hitler had little social wherewithal as artists. But he had none of Adolf's rage, cruelty, hubris or rhetorical clout. He might look on from the contingent shadows during his university sojourn, as another supercilious arts' student in his class railed against conformity and hierarchy before being chucked into the library lily pond by an

EUS (Engineering Undergraduate Society) student. Such dunking was said at the time to be akin to a lynching — according to the arts' cognoscenti. But whatever you might think of the young hotspurs in the EUS, they tended to get things done without a lot of palaver. Like sitting a professional Lady Godiva on an old nag once a year to parade around campus. They also smashed up a series of sculptures they had themselves covertly concocted out of cement and chicken wire and placed by stealth in conspicuous venues about the campus, each with an impressive plaque — only to gather them up one day on the library plaza and pulverize the lot with sledgehammers. The outcry was wondrous to behold. Still, no one could identify the works. Only the curator of the fine art gallery in the library might imagine a tear in the eyes of the rain-streaked Kraken as they proceeded. (Another recollection ever vivid in David's recall.)

It was the time when he sometimes fled to the downtown theaters (a respite from his university slog), where he hoped to catch a glimpse of a comparable Johanna — mostly in vain of course, for by then the dream maids, the glazed cup cakes, were on display, players with too much makeup and too much overall fustian, film producers seemingly oblivious of the 'nothing in excess' exemplar. Lacking entirely the poise, detachment, sardonic humour, and finely tuned chassis Johanna showcased with such insouciance. For instance, the popularity of Marilyn Monroe perplexed him. Beyond her celebrated face, little trig definition at all without an abundance of wire and latex. A body that would look ridiculous in an Olympic sprinter's costume. The topical fascination with immense breasts that foiled subtle variation completely eluded him. As did the banal creations of the later plastic surgeons who would specialize in such precious enlargement. Plainly, his one consolation in life was the beauty that encapsulated the law of parsimony: Nothing in Excess. So unlike the age's venal injunction — Without Excess Nothing. But by then a new facet of his pursuit had been incorporated: he had left off the painterly arena, and abandoned sculpture and drawing for the easy complicity of photography. His restitutive 'looking' had graduated to a new and factual realism, for the detail in photography can be clinical, even in soft-focus prints. Thus, as he would later sorely realize, the 'interminable feast' — the tyranny of the sensationally visual — had begun, about the time he also discovered the language of art criticism, which might upstage any pretence, however new or long standing. By the sixties it had transpired that the 'artist' was simply the one who persuaded the community he was an artist. Deconstruction and concept art would sanction many careers. Julian, he felt, would have approved of his new and progressively esoteric language craft, especially the words that would keep David on the cutting edge of thought and deed, and gainfully employed by the gigantic Paleomena Corporation! "I've got to hand it to you, Simp, your words could bamboozle most philistines." *With unanticipated assertiveness, they (the late concept*

mavens) do not posit any wide disambiguation of articulation, rather a deanthropomorphization of reality and blithe misprism of pathos. All David had to do was listen for Julian's snooty voice. But the last images he had of Julian were not promising, lying as he was in an isolation ward to combat the pneumonia he caught in the icy creek water. David had come across Johanna in the hospital several times. Looking a little prim he thought. Sidelined, marooned, as she must have been in a place like Burdock without Julian, her enveloping curls tied back in a tight pony tail, revealing a spade-like chin and eyes attuned elsewhere, their partly aslant precision reminding him then not of an idled sylph but of a sea bird, a cormorant. Julian, he recalled, wolfed down the truffles she brought. The next day David asked to do a photo portrait of her but she pursed her lips, as if he might be a protracted nuisance after all. "We're packing already; I really haven't got the time." She did belatedly say 'sorry'.

Bruce, Bibi, Johanna and Julian, his hand still in a splint, left that fall for New York. (Father Carl had bought a home in the Vineyard and Joanna and Julian were admitted to Hunter College.) Just when the cool weather descended in mid August a note arrived from Julian. "Keep it up sailor; I await your inaugural exhibition. Johanna sends a moue."

It was about then the dour memories of Vida Semple returned to haunt and chastise. The enigmatic she he'd abused by neglect, a late punitive remembrance — her awful foreboding assault a summons — a second life he might apprise only in absentia. His fondness for the ideal uphill ever after.

TOYS IN THE ATTIC

Rudi Herzl, born Stangle, a distant relative of the notorious Nazi police officer, nimbly changed his name after the war in order to attain a 'neighbourly' life in Holland and then Switzerland, his favourite European county. A seamless and seemly mutation it turned out, though this day a rare disappointment intruded with the discovery that the brand new Playboy magazine, given its gamy promotion, lacked the starkness of the pictures his friend Wurzel had shown him in the one camp! He was miffed, as only an idled voyeur can be. Indeed, he'd been victim of a novel despondency these last few weeks, which the Playboy eyewash now intensified.. He might have avoided some dissatisfaction by soliciting a working girl, but his frugality extended to his vices as well as his necessities. A neighbour who had curtly spurned his amorous overtures wryly suggested he learn to play Solitaire.

"Bitch."

His small dowdy second floor apartment near the Zurich City West Hotel, where he worked off and on as a kitchen cleaner, was itself becoming a further 'sty in his eye'. The fading and

peeling paint on the walls of the suite, even the ceiling in the bathroom, were becoming galling vexations. Many times he thought to repaint or wallpaper the entire suite but never had the energy to do it himself, and was peeved by the quotes he'd been given to have it done.

“Shysters.”

His distrust of most humans was amplified when he learned, years after the fact, that the one woman he loved to distraction after the war, the daughter of an English aristocratic, had born his out-of-wedlock child. Rudi even had divorced his then devoutly Catholic wife in order to pursue this pretty aristocrat, a fleeting liaison it turned out, for he hadn't reckoned with the British aristocracy's disapproval of Jews, an irony that scalded when this pariah status dawned. Indeed, the family used the girl's pregnancy to entrap a more suitable consort — as Rudi's illegitimate son Peter discovered in his teens. An unfavored aunt had eventually spilled the beans to Peter. Indeed, Rudi only learned of his patrimony when he received a letter from Peter, then seventeen, that began, “Mon cher papa.” If having a son named Peter Aylesford-Cooper was a tribulation, Rudi was grateful his only son had the backbone to deal with the facts. Not entirely a Peter Rabbit, then. An accompanying picture would all but confirm the matinée idol paternity.

Had his wayward son not written to him in the tone of a gladsome English travelogue announcer, he might have felt some consolation. But his son was, he sadly concluded from the letters, one-hundred and fifty per cent English. The English language itself being the advertiser's — the ultimate swindlers — language par excellence he long ago concluded, in his war against the slick, vainglorious, Western ‘American’ world. Moreover, his son Peter lived in Oxford, was married to an attractive older woman, an English nationalist, who couldn't abide the late-discovered father-in-law and made little attempt to hide the fact. Only a smug English toff would overlook a slight like that. The last birthday money Rudi sent Peter, hoping he might use it to cross the channel and help sort out his father's late trialled life, had been spent on a computer, printer and tuition to Leeds University to study business administration. Purchases that only served, in Rudi's estimation, to lengthen the wordiness of the letters and add to the tedium of the travelogues.

“Windbag!”

That Rudi saw himself as a brutally honest philosopher and shrewd delineator of the human plight merely ordained the insult. Businessmen were by and large accomplished scam artists.

“Arseholes!”

As he pattered about his kitchen to make himself a perfunctory lunch, cupboard doors wobbled on their hinges, drawers caught and halted, crying out for re-tracking and tightening. The dining room carpet, curled at the kitchen end, tried with ingenious craft to trip him up.

When he prepared his favourite fried potatoes and bacon he often neglected to turn down the heat on the frying pan, such that the smell and fumes of current and past burnt offerings filled the tiny kitchen. An electrician, a gal with a keen sense of smell who lived above him, often warned him about overloading the circuitry with prolonged use of high temperatures in his grease encrusted stove and oven. “Aluminum wiring remember?” she had said during her last visit to sort out and remove some high amp fuses in his electric box, which had one day contributed to the fumes and smoke haze of sizzling bratwurst. The wiring itself was a building infraction not yet rectified after the war.

Then there was the ongoing misplacing of eye glasses, two old pairs of which he now needed atop of one another to read the lettering on his electric bill. The proposed resort to laser surgery he kept putting off because he didn't trust the new ophthalmologist in the clinic he often beggared the patience of. Though he was sorely tempted to try the laser surgery, for in addition to his inability to sharply focus on a closeup image, he could no longer reliably repair or consistently re-track the derailed rail cars of the miniature train set he had earlier assembled with such gratification. The many pills he took, both prescribed by his doctor and self-administered from the numerous health food stores he patronized, then filled one half of the dining room table, prompting a stoic neighbour to remark, “Only a healthy person could survive all this.”

The single gamy pursuit that perhaps kept Rudi alive was the ever more flagrant pornographic tapes he might rent, that served to foil his dour surround and corrosive memory — images he could plainly see at a distance. Why he should have found such fare salubrious he would have dismissed as self-evident. His troubles, even his environs, lapsed in the heady high the drugs his system succeeded in manufacturing on their own while he watched such flagrant encounters. What detailed images of the humbled female might accomplish in record time. The deft manhandling that the owners of such sexual mysteria so obviously wanted and deserved.

One progenitor of such images being the snooty little bitch he and Wurzel — then working as camp guards — had failed to rape in the basement of the wire factory during the war. One camp doctor set her aside for clinical study, the purity of her skin worth documenting he claimed. The doc was known to inspect and study many inmate anatomies — his study of ideal pigmentation a specialty apparently. The girl was fourteen years old Rudi learned (a singular female David Willardson would have taken note of, being alert, slender, tall, with seamless milk white skin) whereas Rudi saw mainly a snooty bitch who yearned for a robust fuck, perhaps her first. He and Wurzel briefly glimpsed her smocked form inside the camp photo studio the day the recording session took place, an ‘exhibition’ they speculated about with considerable curiosity. The doctor had mentioned a ‘full epidermal study’ to an aide, which Rudi and Wurzel

knew, given the doctor's known prurient ilk, to be another studious, protracted strip show, which included detailed pics of the sexual organs as part of the 'full' study. Wurzel managed to copy some of the prints and hid them above the elevated toilet tank in the office of the Commandant — the short fat officer who could barely reach the chain. The pictures became a popular peep show for those camp orderlies with pedophilic lusts, a fair number as it turned out. He and Wurzel were later assigned to the team that prepared the freezing hypothermia sessions: ice tubs, heating paraphernalia and rectal inserts. One doctor subsequently elected to see how some nearly frozen prisoners responded to a female presence, an experiment that proved inconclusive apparently. A more mature inmate had been used for that exhibit as well as the young milk-white teen he and Wurzel vainly lusted after, the mädchen who disappeared shortly after her clinical adventure, possibly to the officer whose contingent.

It was his later postwar discovery of the wily Wurzel in the Canton of Bern that came with a wondrous, incomparable, revelatory prize! A loner like himself, Wurzel died, soon after their reunion, of testicular cancer — but not before making him, now Rudi Herzl, his estate beneficiary. Unlike Rudi, resourceful Wurzel had some valued art works, from 'underserving' owners he said, and an exceptional prison camp photo-and-film archive! The collection Wurzel managed to hide just before his internment camp stay — by carefully concealing the items in a wilderness fosse, none of which were found before his release from the camp.

The collection Rudi diligently studied after Wurzel's death, observations that would reveal none other than a young Dr. Felix Muerner in the company of some doctors who headed one hypothermia team! A recognition Wurzel with lifelong ADM had missed or overlooked apparently, inimitable images that could be used to suborn the newly esteemed quack in Bern who'd been recently cited for exceptional genetic research! The find galvanized Rudi's recognition of the snooty Muerner, even his fair wife — so suggestive of the young teen he and Wurzel so lusted after! He felt certain more pictures of the minx awaited his diligent searches of Wurzel's ramshackle apartment, images that might rekindle the fever of a historic past. How intriguing to think Muerner's long standing companion might be the very creature who so beguiled him then; even, in the end, just before she disappeared, getting him demoted to a lowly caretaker's job — a latrine cleaner! — by ratting on his theft of dead inmates' gold teeth!

“Bitch!”

He was destined, it seemed, to deal with lucky Muerner and his tart and live like a king! The Fates had rendered Wurzel's period documentation wondrously invaluable. A special prize for the patient, intrepid and resolute!

While Rudi was refurbishing his memories via Wurzel's picture trove, Felix Muerner and his

timeless companion were also engaged in a conversation about happenstance and Horlick's possible utility in finding the enigmatic Herzl.

It began when Eve recapitulated a late assessment of Vida, and the curiosity of Vida's benefactor, who had mysteriously disappeared for a time when the telex query from the Canadian RCMP arrived to affirm his guest status with the Bern Clinic. Vida had just been settled in an agreeable private room in the clinic and began playing for services in a Lutheran church. As Eve talked, she and her perdurable Felix sat on a dual-backed conversation seat, an *Indiscret*, one of Muerner's prized family possessions.

"I can't help feeling Horlick was an educated lad from Eastern Europe, transplanted before the war. Paymaster corps the tolerable purgatory. A transplanted Slav, say, via emigration to Canada. Much points in that direction, his English articulate in a formal way. Someone whose table manners were versed in deference and finesse, who knew the cachet of Armenian brandy, and gazed at some artworks in your salon as if they were imperial orphans, yes? I could have resorted to a Polish or Ukrainian or Russian phrase or two, but I didn't want to reveal my hand just yet. Using French was a less intimidating option. So I thought."

Felix's thoughtful silence, both reassuring and in its way entertaining, always prompted her to continue.

"His curious subsequent avoidance of French, upon realizing what it must reveal before a heedful witness, was one clue I think. Over all, I can well imagine him a courier or cutout for a furtive organization. Yes, truly. At worst KGB, who have their own elite players — the craft in such institutions demands it — open, pristine Canada being a land of keen interest for them, an ancillary passageway into the United States, especially after the war and renewed hostilities with the Soviet block. His being there, in Burdock, seemed exceptional, but not anomalous. Yet had he been under strict instruction as a field operative, he would never have come here; found an excuse or left immediately on arrival. At first I thought he was simply in transit, waiting a cue. But now I'm not so sure."

She paused to let the import of her late analysis invite comment or suggestion. Instead, Felix forthrightly smiled, saying, "Do please continue."

"Being a Slav, or one such, and knowing the turmoil in the Eastern Block, the possibilities are rife, as his decidedly rugged and sinewy frame intimates. Then his sudden brief disappearance after that late Canadian RCMP query, an investigation that was perhaps thwarted from the start by our intervention. I suspect he wanted to know if we still approved of his presence here. He said he wanted to hear a concert in Zürich. He and Vida apparently did attend a performance there."

Felix nodded, saying, “Yes, it’s a subject, their apparent fondness for one another, that I’ve maybe devoted too little time to.” Eve silently smiled, prompting him to add: “It seemed a little stilted at the time. You infer he may have been some kind of courier or field agent, trying on a new identity, perhaps. In flight even. Which we may have adventitiously helped tailor. The turbulence in the Soviet Union is ongoing, after all, given Khrushchev’s late failed agriculture policies. The ‘union’ definitely in a state of wide-ranging unrest and recrimination. But there the association pales I think. For if he was in the war operating as a career spy, would he abet the life of a waif, see her aptly placed here? Though, as you say, he could very well be ‘in transit’, reassessing his options, minding the changing landscape, not a hardened cadre. As you’ve implied — too circumspect, perceptive, refined, compassionate even, given his care of Vida. You have an engaging measure of the man. Please continue.”

“I recently sought him out in the garden grounds, which he sometimes strolls in, to discuss some long term options for Vida. Matters I swiftly got out of the way, there being only two or three — assessment, sponsorship, placement in the special school for a duration father Semple might agree to. He is aware of her worsening condition.

“But when I suggested he might assist the clinic in another way I sensed dismay, at least at first — the matter we talked, the expedient ruse to identify and find our blackmailer, using Rudi Herzl as a moniker. I mentioned to him that we had lost contact with a former Czech-German patient — a feasible characterization of our blackmailer — a paranoid schizophrenic we’d treated and remained concerned about, and wondered if he could help us locate him. If our blackmailer knew Wurzel, and he could have, he may appear in some of the photos — which we might affirm if Horlick can get a picture of him. If we have to deal with the churl in court, we can exploit a war background — which he may not want, if it’s unsavoury as we think. So, with a name, and photo, he may not be that unassailable.”

“A nice timely tack. I do remember finding it copacetic. Please go on.”

“It was an overcast day and the first blossoms from the cherry trees lay on the lake like confetti. The drummer was still occasionally distracting you. Anyway, facing the wiry often grave Horlick as I did, a topical mystery man if ever, I was partly reassured by the reason for his disappearance from here and the promptness of his return — a concert of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande which he and Vida did attend, facts I verified when I consulted the registry and spoke with the matron. The concert may have abetted a timely reassessment for him, given the RCMP query. You were dealing with two seminars that weekend — one concerning Vida’s bone illness — and we overlooked some household matters. Was Horlick distraught by my request to help us look for a patient? I think not. He can be shrewdly attentive and, on occasion, winsomely

ingratiating.”

“Agreed.”

“Well, in replying, he looked at the blossoms on the lake with a smile. ‘Me? Here?’ he said with that engaging earnestness he can summon from time to time. ‘A missing person hunt?’ Hunt, yes, I said. But only in the reconnoiter sense. I stressed that he was a sad case, our former patient, and could be dangerous if confronted. We simply wanted to know where he was and how and if he was coping, one of our abiding concerns. I assured him that all additional daily expenses would be assumed by the clinic.”

“He seemed sympathetic, then.”

“I think so. Though he watched me with great care thereafter.”

“Perhaps it’s your new hair style — very chic by the way.”

“I doubt he’s into den mothers.”

“Well he is a likely connoisseur — you’ve made that clear enough.” Promptly Felix reached over took up and kissed her hand.

Said she, amused, “Well, he did touch most of the bases. He asked why a clinic staff member couldn’t investigate Hurzl.”

Felix nodded. “I am listening.”

“Well, here on in I decided to be as candid as prudence allowed.”

“Of course.”

“No, I said to him. The fellow could react badly if he felt he was being watched by someone he recognized from here. ‘But me?’ he asked, with some apprehension I think, adding, ‘Surely a private detective would serve you best.’ I replied that you and I felt he might have some time on his hands here and believed he could ably handle the job, especially given his sensitivity and perceptive interplay with Vida. I suggested our patient wouldn’t be wary, apprehensive of an outsider, a tourist say. He smiled and, I suspect, mulled over the suggestion. ‘It’s rather sudden,’ he did say. I smiled, told him both you and I favoured and sanctioned the request. He seemed resolved then, his following words finely reassuring. I remember the gist. He did say his chief concern was Vida’s welfare, and that he would assist the clinic anyway he could while he was here. He said the concert served as a kind of ‘haven’ for her, and that his own life, after the war, remained largely unresolved. He then said, with some cordiality, that our request would afford him an excuse to hang about, reconsider his options. He knew Vida’s condition was serious. And likely terminal. He ended with a wish to be of use, and unless requested, would not willingly leave. He didn’t mention the RCMP investigation of him. All in all, his words revealed an innate practicality to me. More than ever I’m convinced he’s some kind of operative.

Awaiting instructions perhaps, or reconsidering. Whatever. Maybe even Cheka. Near enough. Canada remains, after all, a crucial no-man's-land in the Cold War; Igor Gouzenko wouldn't be a lone sleeper agent. Horlick just may be in a bit of a quandary himself — given the late unrest in the Soviet Union. He's not a thug. I still think he's on the lookout for stray happenings or, shall we say, unscheduled arrivals. If my assessment of him is correct, I'm convinced he will not willingly abandon Vida. And will help out if and when he can. He is a perceptive chap, and if indeed he is a Cheka agent, he has investigative skills.”

“I think you must continue with the recruitment.”

“So do I.”

And with that the two took up where they had left off, reviewing recent clinic files.

A day later Eve faced the cautious Horlick with a sympathetic face. The late RCMP query had been easily, mutually answered in the affirmative: Horlick had agreed to assist the clinic for an indefinite period, being an essential foster companion for Vida Semple, and had no immediate need to return to Canada, but would assist any future RCMP investigation. As for the new proposal, he was attuned to the clinic's concern, and moved by Eve and Felix's trust in him. More and more his commentary confirmed her assessment of him. His concluding words she vividly remembered: “I assume I must go to Zurich by myself — if I'm to work independently. A Rudi Herzl should be easy to find. But, as you say, he may be dismayed or angered by the intrusion of an outsider. Does he have a special interest — that convenes like-minded participants? Is he lucid — in general? I may need a new temporary identity — to leave my record with the Canadian RCMP in tact. No ‘excursions’.”

Eve decided the time was expedient to admit to a want of detail about their blackmailer ‘patient’ and to further refine her and Felix's ruse.

“Yes, you'll have new papers and identity. The clinic will provide them. It is a necessity, and a mutual trust. I can furnish you with a pretty good description of our former patient. Unfortunately we don't have a picture; we had a recent fire in a record bay and some documents were lost. His paranoia seemed to be in check when he suddenly left, but his condition now is anyone's guess. We urged him to seek further treatment, and gave him the name of a psychotherapist in Zurich. He lived alone then; he was treated here only as an outpatient. We learned in the course of his assessment here that he was: an ingrained misogynist and sadist, and an avid pornography collector. He was between 1942 and 1943 a conscripted Nazi concentration camp orderly. We did what we could while he was here.” It was a well-crafted fib of course, but credible given the late blackmail demands.

Responding to his latent smile, she put the crucial question. “You will do it? See what you can turn up — his whereabouts and, if possible, frame of mind?” And for god’s sake don’t take all day to respond, she said to herself.

“I’d like to spend a day or two with Vida first, for I’ll be away for a time.”

“Of course. I can have an expense account and identity papers set up for you within the week, plus the pertinent information we have on our patient.”

Again Eve took note of Horlick’s solicitous heed as he finally, placidly stated, “I do want to see the clinic thrive, and be of use to Vida as long as I can. Two of the givens.”

A rare smile touched her face, making him realize her susceptibility to acne was in fact the lingering effects of frost bite — what he assumed she had already concluded about his own pitted complexion — a mutual recognition that alerted if not reassured them both, though hers were less obvious.

“I think Vida may have got here just in time,” he added.

“I think so too.”

On the return walk along the garden he asked about Vida’s longterm prognosis and was further resigned to the fate of his now precious, even adored charge — who’d ‘rescued’ him from a possibly dire end himself!

Later, Eve and Felix sensed a seismic reprieve in Horlick’s willingness to try to locate Rudi Herzl, should he in fact exist; the name on the address label was after all the only lead they had. Said Eve, “I told Horlick we’d like a current picture, for our files. And any interests the man might have, as well as his overall behaviour, whether he seemed distraught, and how receptive he might be to someone from the clinic approaching him. A tentative, at-a-distance evaluation only, I stressed to Horlick.”

In the forthcoming weeks Yuri as George Horlick frequently debated with himself the option to leave, to vanish without trace. The investigation of him in Canada might uncover a discrepancy if persistent. He could readily find a new identity in the West, fabricate an educational record that would get him into a needy civil engineering department of some municipality, in Holland or Austria say. Such a move would lessen if not curtail the constant imposition of looking over his shoulder, looking for the ‘inadvertent’ stranger or long-lost ‘friend’. It was tempting. Especially as the internecine turmoil in Russia seemed then seismic and ongoing. The last word from Nechayev was that the Ottawa residency was in a mess and its minders under a cloud and largely undecided how to proceed. The fact that Nechayev was now silent, and possibly in trouble himself given the climate, pointed to an unravelling of the command structure. Thus, as a ‘disappeared’ operative Yuri guessed he still had some lead time,

given the likely turmoil in the department. Moreover, one can get used to relative comfort and affluence. But the thought of returning to his homeland, to help restore a sense of order and stability, if not civility — the noble endeavour — had never left. To Caesar...to God. It seemed so self-evident to him, most days. The timing was the only caveat. Was he then a simpleton, an uyobok or ebanat, as idealists sometimes were called? Still, he would live with the imputation. Some things he would not abandon. The gifted, and until then neglected Vida, was a harrowing reminder. His leaving would slight the role he had undertaken with her. Especially now that her health seemed in such unanticipated decline. He had no children and she was becoming a kindred spirit. Moreover, staying on would minimize the RCMP suspicions about him in Canada. He was not important enough to initiate an extradition request, so he thought, and the good offices of the clinic itself would help in the long term.

So, until they kicked him out or Vida suddenly perished, or the ‘other’ apparition appeared, he would in effect ‘spy’ on the clinic’s obsession-vexed patient.

As for that engaging request, to find and assess the clinic’s former patient, the search itself proved inimically easy, shortly after he affirmed the address of an R. Herzl in a Zurich resident directory, which logged four Herzls.

A hunch, given Eve’s assessment of him, led Yuri to a nearby seedy Zurich book and video cassette store, and chary discovery there of a detailed customer registry! Dedicated pornographers too had their sodalities. The man named Rudi Herzl was a regular patron, but another lonely obsessed voyeur.

The first day Rudi Herzl left his flat to board a bus, Yuri took a picture of him by stealth and broke into his flat. The romantic wall art inside the messy smelly flat was a surprise. Beautifully framed 19th Century landscape prints and engravings. Could this really be the patient Felix and his Eve were so anxious about? The question was settled when he discovered a set of pictures from the Nazi era in an easily unlocked lower drawer of an old cluttered desk. The collection testified to the hypothermia experiments conducted toward the end of the war. Dismayingly, among the pictures, was a Russian victim of the hypothermia trials he may have known, a discovery that would prey upon him ever after — a person very like the instructor who taught him the art of encryption! The discovery was a seismic shock. He would remember ‘coming to’ seated in the desk’s seedy chair kneading his brow, while his eyes watered with blinding tears.

The scurrilous collection was a dumbfounding, excruciating find.

He photographed as much of the flat and its contents as he thought crucial and left as unobtrusively as he came. That he spied a man who looked like a younger Herzl among some of

the orderlies in the pics, holding what appeared to be a rectal thermometer, nearly prompted him to kill the swine when he returned!

In due course Eve leafed through the collection with a quiet that stilled even the crickets outside in the garden, or so Yuri imagined. They stood looking down at the photos on a desk in the Chinese drawing room, its beautiful relieve panelling a subtle sylvan arabesque, a fine counter to the stark squalid images that covered the desk top. He waited his turn to speak. Finally Eve spoke, without demure, for she had concluded that the few pictures of a young Felix in this collection would not be recognizable to an outsider.

“I trust the scene in the photos verifiable, if it comes to that. And that you’ve no confusion about our anxiety. Curiously, this lone lurid set could incriminate its owner. You said he looked resolved in his actions, no hint of indecision or abstraction.”

“Yes. He seemed emphatic enough in daily activities, both going and coming.”

She paused, as if continuing on was redundant, yet persisted.

“It was not, initially, one of the better documented programs — the hypothermia experiments. Why Herzl should retain such a collection is a puzzle. Being caught with it at war’s end would have incriminated him. Its intimidation value at the time guesswork surely.”

As they stared down at the awful, consequential pictures, Eve continued, not quite apathetically, “They were Russians, mainly, in the experiments currently documented.”

He sensed a novel apprehension in her he hadn’t anticipated. His recognition of the one Russian an ongoing torment. She resumed after a further silent nod at the pictures.

“I, we, are very grateful for what you’ve accomplished. I hope we may count on your resourcefulness again, should the need arise.” She looked rather forlorn then, he thought, an unusual state. When she looked up at him he must have been abstracted himself for he felt obliged to field an excuse. “I must admit I was thinking of Vida — whether I’m the right companion she needs now. Given her change.” But Eve’s empathic look then rather sidelined his plea. Again, she might have put a question to him but didn’t. Instead she smiled and acknowledged his forbearance. “You must be impatient, the war being over. Of course Vida asks about you when you’re away and greets you like a special brother when you return. She was making headway, until recently of course. Some future benefit appearances may have to be cancelled. The Swiss Reformed Church here has a recorded library of its favourite hymns which Vida’s listened to, enabling her to perform for an appreciative audience Sundays and Fridays, until recently of course.” As if to discount recent disappointments, Eve added, “It’s an older congregation at the church, one familiar with sturdy Methodist hymns that enjoin durable classic form and harmony. The canon Vida seems to gravitate to. Most pop music, particularly rock, is

not her bag, apparently, to date at least. An interesting bent — for a savant. Her father is apparently dying of cancer, and arrangements were being made for her return for an extended visit. Which may be problematic now.”

Yuri promptly joined in. “You wish to continue your care, evaluation and schooling of her here then?” He sounded more anxious than he wished.

“Well, to be helpful as best we can. Her dyslexia is mild but impacted and she seems prone to emphysema. As you know, she is remarkably resilient, given her background. Luckily a late distraction has helped relieve her distress. She’s quite fallen in love with the piano here — an old but nearly mint Chickering Felix bought at auction. One of the best investments he’s made he claims. Providence. Still...” Eve sensed these words slighted her purpose, her need to placate if not suborn, and she returned to the matter at hand.

“You’ve said little about your own feelings on entering and searching Herr Herzl’s flat. We’d be grateful for a candid word or two.”

Again her direct gaze rekindled the fire that edged his soul. How he wanted to tell about his sickening discovery but shunned adding to the poignancy in the room. He wanted an out, not a further detailing of a past that might still cost him his life. Hence his sober tally of the known facts.

“The place was a mess. Particularly the kitchen. He’s been fiddling, amping up the building’s electric input and created many ancillary problems. He’s started at least one fire I think — which prompted my look at the wiring. He had some high amp fuses in the electric panel, not helped by the fact the wiring is aluminum, an infraction there in itself, I believe. The stove is a burnt shell — almost literally. The kitchen table was all but covered with medications — as you can see in the one photo — some prescription, most self administered. He’s an avid health store patron and lover of greasy foods — sausages especially I think. Some fairly good furniture is worn and soiled and needs repair. The surprise for me was the quality of some wall art. Not what you’d expect. The prints of some famous landscape paintings adorned one wall. They point to a romantic’s fondness for 18th Century country life. I’m far from an expert, but the works of Caspar David Friedrich and Camille Pissarro are fairly well known. They seemed here like orphans, something he acquired by chance, wartime ‘takes’ — thefts perhaps. Also some unexpected engravings of early mystical artists. A curiosity, as you infer — given that one bookcase full of seamy books and magazines, as well as the porno cassettes he’d purchased. One book, a stark clinical documentation of Nazi atrocities, had several page markers in it.”

Eve picked up a couple of pics Horlick took of the flat’s interior and promptly asked, “What does the wall art suggest to you again? Not a romantic our Herzl, I would think. Possible thefts,

perhaps, as you infer.”

“The Blake engravings were a surprise: Death and Mysticism and Melancholy, two offerings in the set on one bedroom wall. And this one: Satan Watching the Caresses of Adam and Eve. All exhibited in elite custom frames, some with the name of a Łótz framer on the back. This one too was a surprise. Suggesting a misappropriation.”

Eve’s response was prompt. “The Inner Eye.” She smiled. “Matter-of-fact reason gets short shrift with Blake. Another mystic ‘scourging tradition and custom’, a comment from a colleague. The collection here is a mindful — intimating lucky thievery, as you imply. I can’t imagine him fancying pastoral or mystic art, yet it’s apparent he must value such prized ‘orphans’.”

Yuri smiled, nodded. He empathized with everything Eve said.

After a protracted pause, in which she appeared to rethink a wry comment, she said, “We’re grateful for what you’ve accomplished. Your patronage of Vida is admirable, but you must get impatient some days. At last she displayed a durable smile. “You can, if you so choose, leave of course, with our blessing and thanks.”

While she talked, the image of the one Russian, half frozen, returned with feral savagery to him. The face a startling visage from his own past — the man who well may have been his tutor in the field school, and his sponsor for entry into the First Chief Directorate, the man’s capture an acute measure of Russian loss. The man was likely gay but abusive of the fact. Yuri had had an affair with his wife. Indeed, at one time he thought of asking Yevgenia to divorce Yuri Ivanovich. In two photos found in Rudi’s flat, a nervous girl child in an oversize smock, a remote but tenable Eve, looked on from a side vault waiting instructions. A stoney Herzl could be seen nearby holding a mop. If the girl looked no more than about ten or eleven, her face resembled that of a hanged partisan. Two other pictures of this girl were taken against a barrack wall with other inmates. Two men, one an SS officer, conferred in the foreground. Two pictures showed the same young girl, partly nude and fearful on a camp bench. In one picture, a man, somewhat out of focus, smiled at the camera. He doubted the girl was Eve, but a faint resemblance was disturbing. His final words seemed reassuring to Eve and certainly amenable to himself. “I’m very grateful for what you’ve done for Vida, and will continue to assist you in better assessing this individual, if needbe. I’m in no real hurry to leave.” It was some time since he had enjoyed a kind of ‘trusteeship’, as he thought of it.

Eve and Felix would in due course determine that there were four photos of a feasible teenage Felix in the collection that Horlick found in the flat, one of he and the girl standing some distance apart. One pictured him standing off in the ‘ice’ room, looking down at an open folder in his hands. Others showed him standing by a desk with an unidentified person, presumably

also a doctor. A statistical graph filled the blackboard behind. Felix himself appeared to be deep in thought. The fact the original film remained missing dogged all future considerations. But at least they knew who the blackmailer was. It was a start.

When Eve and Felix relaxed, sherries in hand, at the end of the sobering day Horlick returned from Herzl's flat, Felix promptly summoned the unwelcome imputation.

"I think I come off little better than Herzl himself in his notorious collection. A statistician hasn't a lot of excuses. Those photos not authorized by the medical staff are an odd set. Some orderlies had cameras of course."

"All rather anti-climatic. What Horlick returned with. The identities of persons in the stills and film could be conjectural, given a good lawyer's assessment. If it comes to that. The one hope."

"The original film Horlick didn't find. The salient fact."

"No, the original wasn't in the flat, which Horlick thoroughly searched apparently. He's not a complete dunce our blackmailer."

"The 16 mm film we received was transcribed; the original would be somewhat clearer. The historic camp photos Horlick copied in the flat also in their way impugn the owner of course, his identity in them credible. Only the film really serves his purpose. Though photos that identify him with specific scenes in the film — could incriminate, when carefully studied."

"Possibly."

"Some likely interpolated frames in the film show someone very like me in an unidentified seminar room with two of the medics, smiling as only ghouls can. Are there a few documents too I wonder? To follow perhaps? My name must have been appended to a dozen or more in the one camp. It's amazing how Herzl came to possess this archive. Meaning he may not have acted alone."

"Have you told Alexis of Horlick's find?"

"Not yet. Death certificates with blocked in signatures would be the most egregious. Should they ever come to light. You think Horlick might be suspicious? Think me a participant after all?"

"No. I detected no wariness, misgiving, though I do sense impatience."

"What he is...and where will he go eventually I do wonder. He is a puzzle."

"A complex character dealing with a past perhaps as daunting as our own. He did assure me he would readily continue to assist Vida and the clinic."

"That's some comfort. I guess."

"All things considered. He seems genuinely concerned about Vida's deteriorated condition.

A fondness that seems at times parental.”

“Sadly, she’s probably had Gorham’s for some time. It’s into her shoulder and upper spine now. She’s had to suspend playing. She told me she may have been ‘worrying’ the piano. Where that notion comes from I’m not certain, but I suspect it has a long pedigree...out of her early life perhaps. What makes her case particularly poignant now is the memory of the team that gassed such invalids. Life unworthy of life. My own wish to keep her free of pain will be put to the test when the morphine no longer works. Am I a *mitläufer* after all?”

“Such a one would not pose such a question.”

“Well, not one thinking of publicly murdering the awful Herzl.”

The Herzl matter was, as it transpired, neatly concluded with a sudden, massive, acute and deadly heart attack, which made the obituary section of a local paper placed by Rudi’s son Peter, who arrived from England keen to wind up his father’s affairs, pocket the sole remaining bank funds, and return home. Just before Peter’s arrival, a well disguised Felix, with some of Hermann’s watchdogs, had cleaned out the flat of all the ‘historic’ documents they could find. The supposed secret cupboard or locker housing the original film was not found, and no further blackmail threat intruded.

The search for the original film was diligently ongoing of course.

In due course, Horlick told Vida he had a sick relative of his own to attend to. Not entirely a lie, for he looked upon the troubled Soviet Union as his own ailing paterfamilias. She lay then in a hospital bed as the marble effigy on the lid of a saint’s tomb, her hands folded in front. He suspected she was in pain, which his presence may have ameliorated. Their time together forged a poignant memory saga that would linger forever. He promised to write and visit her one day soon. “Promise?” she said, with a stoic smile. He’d not been much comfort in the past few weeks. “Yes, a promise,” he promptly said, then added, “You’re famous, you know, you’ve left a legacy — an inspiration for many, many people worldwide.” He hoped, trusted her recognition of such an attainment would at least gratify. The tearful hug she gave him nearly foiled his resolution to return. She hadn’t been told she would likely not play the piano again, nor live much longer. He suspected Felix might end her life before it became excruciating — for all of them. Both Eve and Felix seemed resigned to his leaving.

The time was ripe for his return — the solemn promise he would not, must not slight. He had committed unconscionable acts before. And would again. Though he knew he would never assimilate, be at peace with this flight — leaving the one familial bond he’d made in Canada, the Land of the Free, a heroine he’d be linked to forever, her music, her several recordings, a timely

salvation for him. He almost didn't go. Only his laden promise to himself facilitated his departure. A leaving that would daunt him ever after.

"We'll likely never see or hear of him again, of course," Felix remarked with some wistfulness when he and Eve reviewed recent events the night Horlick left. "I wish him well."

"He did tell me he thought you were a decent and civilized man, and he prized the clinic's work."

"Well, he did like you. Proof of his perception, even honour and integrity I think, which we rather doubted — at first."

"You'll miss him I think."

"He was an interesting and timely benefit. An engaging personality. A formidable mystery man. Yes, I will miss him."

Sadly, Vida died before Yuri could manage a return visit.

LAST WORD

David's last commentary from the Gryphon, via a CD, was curious in that Julian was becoming as fervid if not dogmatic as the Old Testament God he was often vilifying. In doing so, he was never far off the gene schtick it seemed. His royal jewels.

He was as impenitent as before, though perhaps less pie- or wall-eyed — his sojourn with AA a modest success or, as he called it, a 'conditional truce', his voice still an acutely poignant refrain.

"I have it on great authority — Aristotle no less — that I was likely born this way. Telling words for the likes of Caligula and Ghengis Kahn, perhaps. Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot were trendy virtuosic complainers, and hence a bit more doctrinaire.

"Now the Great Creator or Pneuma, if you like, the fiery cosmic spirit or great universal fart — both beholden to the Big Bang — gives us these numb nut genes, then puts us into a world full of cataclysmic natural disasters and gamy creatures that bamboozle one another with reliable regularity. The 'real life storybook' few people enjoy experiencing outside of their TV screens. We got booted out of the Edenic mall for pinching an insider game track, an 'Apple' note. Then, late in the game, the great Mugwump or Mufti had some second thoughts and wants to forgive us for taking note maybe — and sends his only son to die in the manner several hundred thousand or more did before Him — all of whom may be dissed for eternity for not getting to the revival bus on time. Though they eventually were promised some kind of transfer.

“Now, a good stolid chap just might think the Kingfish is maybe a little off, maybe room temperature sort of, know what I mean...that in fact the days of ‘whine and neuroses’ began in the beginning — in the first bloody chapters of bloody Genesis! For the specified guidelines He, She, It or Ze, et cetera, duly lays down for our benefit are only a marginal help — the rules of engagement in a thumb index like the Decalogue — the crusty musty Ten Commandments. The Jews, of course, have well over two-hundred commandments or injunctions, whereas Christians generally have difficulty multitasking.”

A few token soundtrack whistles followed.

As David listened to the DVD, he was reminded once more that he was not much interested in polemics. Grieg’s Holberg suite was his current spiritual reverie, one of many masterpieces in the classic canon that tended to elevate, idealize melancholy, the engaging mediatory sobriety that generally foiled sordid mundane anger, envy, covetousness, resentment, even vexing self-pity — for those for whom the classic romantic canon actually heartened. Christopher Hitchens, who also gave the Decalogue a mixed review, bless him, admitted to not being very musical! Yet what was a man without his soul’s music, his one truly ‘unarticled’ gift? Vida’s revelation and transformation. Otherwise, one may well stolidly lament the day he was born.

A short time later David would watch with dazed wonder two planes fly into the Twin Towers, and in stunned disbelief at their belated collapse. The images of couples holding hands in their leap off one building into a mushrooming oblivion would daunt him ever after. Death with dignity. That both Julian and Johanna perished in that epic disaster was the final straw, so to speak — their lost, never to be recovered remains, scattered somewhere in the rubble. Two of his favourite people, his two childhood familiars, had been in Tower Two to vouchsafe and co-sign an annuity Julian’s late father left — as annotated in a note Julian sent him. It was as if a lifeline to David’s own twined, knotted past had broken, leaving him suddenly stranded in a vast bleak tundra. Johanna’s absence was a particular blow, his exclusive Muse silenced and invisible, the few photos he had of her becoming more and more poignant reminders of both his wonder, dismay, and ever hovering ungainliness.

He would get on with his inane mundane life, as stricken people do, going through the motions, lusting after ghostly pretence...well, something...his music becoming more wonderfully soothing, transposing than ever — hearing that enobled one over time. He would become an art critic and eventually find himself in the Paleomena Corporation as its art curator — mainly buying art objets and paintings for the executive princes, his exercise of astute, fawning patronage and clever verbiage earning him a reputation for acuity and resourcefulness. His celibate status was never in jeopardy, as he thought of it, though one actress he saw in his

autumnal years, a former haut couture model who was a near match of the incomparable Johanna, helped enliven, vivify his otherwise largely hermitical life. Indeed, the actress prompted a fond, private, interior monologue he would spend the remainder of his life devising, revising. Like Johanna, her presence released his mindful if lapsed observance, his idled imagination, her many fans as enthusiastic as they come, a peerless, smart, engaging beauty he would apprehend in pictures lovingly taken by others! Beholding was still an incomparable escape for him. Rivalling that of hearing, listening.

God willing, he would live to tell all. Well most. Absence made you aware of elusive things. Some lines from John Donne (or John Hoskyns) emerged here, a legacy of his protracted stint at university, words that elude censure.

ABSENCE, hear thou my protestation
Against thy strength,
Distance, and length;
Do what thou canst for alteration:
For hearts of truest mettle
Absence doth still, and Time doth settle.