

FAIL SAFE

A Seasonal Novel by
Willard Thurston

PART ONE

*If you behave badly enough toward someone,
you can't stand being around that person.*

Shirley Hazzard

ONE

It was the wording on a small stone cairn in his neighbourhood park that kept alive his ailing sense of reverence and trust. The wording on the cairn face above the Periwinkle was assured and tender, a courtly testament to a life well lived, with purpose and affection. So he surmised, his customary pensiveness put on hold.

In Memory of Elam Smith 1932-2015

Dearest Soul Mate, Cup Mate

Craftsman and Poet

My Lion and Unicorn

Ever about in our secret park

Amidst the harmony of leaves

Flushing out the nimbler memories!

C

It was the lone memorial frequently garnished with sprigs of flowers in the quiet dappled park. Some weeks fresh, others, usually late in the season, silk or plastic. Watched over by stately Douglass Firs and Red Cedars, their high mighty branches on bright summer days framing gouts of bright green on the grass. Wasps and bees hung out among the beds of azaleas, borage, honeysuckle and salvia in the summer, as did finches, song sparrows, thrushes and robins. Starlings, crows and bluejays never stayed long, flitting in and out. A meandering stone walkway

hosted benches awaiting reposeful folk, and an immense wide magnolia sequinned each spring with a milky way of snowy stars. He was familiar with notions like ‘ironic tenderness’, a trope that some flinty writers (when deadheading bleeding hearts) find apt, his own laden nature hostage to the idea. Yet when he passed the small stone cairn, the only irony he sensed was his plaintive unease if not chagrin before unabashed endearment. The bird song itself seemed more vocal when he stopped by the cairn. Amidst ‘the harmony of leaves’ — a Yeats nonesuch.

TWO

Mason Bascule sat in his dim house-keeping room eyeing some roaches near a greasy wall vent as he listened to Enescu’s Romanian Rhapsody No. 2 on his small CD player. As the music progressed, he happened to note the roaches going inside the vent, suggesting they didn’t share his musical taste. Such sardonic thinking he was prone to these days. The rhapsody *was* an ennobling pastoral work he venerated, the small cassette player being an indispensable friend in his ongoing endeavour to document, via photographs, life on the East Side of downtown Vancouver, an area reputed to have more dopeniks per capita than any other place on the planet. To undertake such a venture you needed a mind frame that embraced forbearance, clemency even — making the roaches’ disappearance a fine droll tease. Such humour vivified the self-effacement he seemed yoked to these days as he chronicled the lives of the abandoned and forsaken, while living among them as a transient himself. The picture taker with the salmon pink birthmark on his right cheek and detectable limp who could yet keenly see and listen! How ironic that the sturdy music of the symphonic classics, his main life solace, eclipsing even his love of photography, should be but a frail legacy in that new-fangled era, music that most youngsters would never hear, never consider the orchestral scoring, its mellifluous motifs, nor the inspired ingenuity that went into making up the many instruments that came to form a symphony orchestra. Yes, the Enescu ode seemed to conjure him, a bygone creature smitten by once avidly esteemed 19th and early 20th Century symphonic exaltation, music now often considered maudlin, precious, extravagant in the pop-rock era. Another topical ‘birth marked’ presumption. Akin to his vision and dated style of photography. As one critic said, ‘You often give degradation a pastoral patina.’ The ongoing criticism. Though not from the edgy fugitive now glaring at him — a modern artful dodger named Ryan Dyck he had briefly gone to school with only to rediscover among the hopheads, grifters and vagrants in Vancouver’s East End, the very one who had so recently been adrenalized by the promise, the ‘covenant of jihad’, as he called it. Though now that eerie sureness had eluded him as he eyed the CD player in the house-keeping room they shared off East Hasting Street.

“Jees, can’t you take that thing to a pawn shop or something?,” Ryan demanded as he glowered at the CD player, aggravated by the music coming from it, Mason thought. The room itself sported a discoloured sink, tiny refrigerator, single hot plate, open cupboard, two old mattresses, scattered duffle bag contents, a small rickety table and two battered stools. A smelly one piece toilet, shower head and drain, lurked behind a divider. All yesterday hand-me-downs

with no antique potential whatsoever. Mason had not only been photographing the denizens of East Vancouver but stolidly living their life. An *in situ* undertaking.

“It’s not worth much,” Mason replied.

“So what. We’ll be sleeping in the park for crissake.” Ryan meant that keeping the CD player, a moderate cash asset, was an extravagance given his current chill penury. In other words, was Mason a mere uncaring observer, a bystander after all?

Actually, such a sale would make little difference. Ryan was just fitfully scrounging for scape goats. He had sloughed off a payment to his drug dealer, the sum of which seemed then astronomical. He could end up in a landfill. As he listened to the ineffable Enescu, Mason wryly wondered if that might not be a net benefit. At one time he would have scoffed at the presumption that some individuals court turmoil, chaos. But Ryan, this otherwise bright, well-favoured Ryan — a being he could not match to his earlier memory of him — seemed to affirm it, in his habitual resort to indifference, to wink at all who might reprove his obsessive, often wanton behaviour, and ready cynical smirk. So the pensive Mason believed.

“I’m off,” Ryan said, to no one in particular. He had made up his mind, a few last things stuffed into a backpack. His current worldly possessions, those he now hastily fetched, little larger than a couple of six packs.

With some impatience Mason exclaimed, “Not that sweater. Mum knit me that!”

“Piss off.”

“Ryan, for god’s sake.”

“Ask for another, angel face.” After a hesitation more given to vigilance than care, Ryan vacantly mumbled, “See you. Sometime.”

A panned blur as the nomad fled, the rickety screen door banging with resonant cracks. Would he ever see his school fellow again? So the current reckoning was maybe more imminent and consequential than Mason thought — a jeopardy that also shadowed an acquaintance, a ‘bystander’! But where to go? If he went? The toxic Mok brothers — Ryan’s late drug source — did not accommodate asylum seekers. With some sobriety, Mason eyed his own traveling pack: a single change of clothes, a late iPhone, thin wallet with vital cards and allotted cash, musty sleeping bag, camera and camera bag, CD player, some Sibelius, Ravel and the Enescu — which concluded without consternation, so unlike his witness to the deeds Ryan pursued, deeds Mason had learned about incrementally and dismayingly. If the others, Dirk and Paul, were at first entertained, spectators enjoying vicarious drama, they too were beginning to shun Ryan’s awful gang contacts. The ‘ferals’, Dirk called them. A phrase that stuck. Willful Ryan, it turned out, had spent some time selling drugs throughout the Pacific North West, mainly coke and meth, spending now much of his time in California. He was also involved in some other gritty business he had yet to explain. “Not something for country girls like you,” was all he said with his trademark smirk. Mason chummed with all four at the University of British Columbia, Ryan solely in first year, losing contact with him halfway through — Ryan had hastily quit — and only renewed acquaintance when he suddenly, unexpectedly showed up needing a place to stay, actually a hole to hide in — Mason’s current East End roach haven. “A few days, Maze. Chance

to catch up.” A request Mason had honoured, so he thought, by convening a reunion of the four. A week later not much catch up, and now this harried departure.

At the time, Mason was a regular patron of the Nefer club on Richards Street which then hosted a folk singer called Deirdre Corr, a performer he was “warming to” as Dirk put it, adding, “Maze’s having cum dreams over a chick we better check out.” Mason’s romantic streak the others, even reticent Paul, found mainly diverting. Mason had quietly shrugged. He was vexed Dirk learned about Deirdre Corr. Dirk found a signed program in Mason’s back pack while searching for a pen. So he said. Deirdre’s picture graced the program. “Hey Maze, you got an eyeful here.” In Mason’s attempt to retrieve the program it tore in half. Dirk shrugged. Mason tried but failed to snatch back the other half. Said a grinning Dirk, “You got the program half I got the face. Worth a bit. Any offers?” By then Mason was thinking of something craven, spilling something on Dirk’s pants, inconveniencing him for being such a goad. Something like that. His one hope was that Deirdre’s music would bore the others and they wouldn’t hang around. He would get another program that evening. Happily, the trio got distracted on the way by a new Yale Town bistro, though Ryan split as soon as they were inside Mason learned later. “Didn’t plan on seeing some missionary muscle,” Dirk suggested. Dirk called drug dealers “missionaries — always seeking converts.” Thus, as mesmerized as Mason was the week before when he first heard Deirdre sing, he listened to her a second time, imagining a young Beverly Sills singing Irish folk ballads. The band she played with seemed as enamoured of their singer, who also played the lute, reinforcing Mason’s awe. What the farcical Dirk did not know was that Mason’s fascination had less to do with physical infatuation — though she was a sylvan beauty — than the resonance her singing had on his optimism, his sense of well being, his belief that beauty and heed and grace were not illusionary and thrived in early courtly music, which this beguiling Irish troubadour or trobairitz harkened back to. He was aware his love of such expression skewed reality but he was hooked. Reality offered no excuse or benediction. His photographs, given their black and white starkness, told him that every day. His dutiful mother had cautioned him against a photographic career, but went along with his new found enthusiasm in the end — which had upstaged his stay in academe to earn an MA in English Literature (Irish lore in Victorian ‘realism’) which Dirk dismissed as costly mouth wash. Well, the poetry of Ulster came alive in Deirdre’s voice and lute. Even a poem by John Millington Synge, the cameo face striking against fine-spun ashen hair, the voice seemingly serendipitous. He could not find the words. For perhaps the first time in his life he was speechless. His one consolation being that he was not the only charm-bound member of the audience, a coterie of mutually esteemed soul mates. Only the quiet circumspect Paul had seemed diffident about the new Yale Town bistro, so Mason later learned — yet he went, as much out of empathy for Ryan, Mason thought. The three would have been amused to learn that Mason nearly got evicted from the club that night for taking a picture of Deirdre when she paused in her act to consider a request. She actually urged the owner-manager to reconsider the expulsion, which he did reluctantly — while assuring Mason he would be banned from the club if he did such a thing again. In business parlance: buy the CD and booklet of the band you cheapskate! Which Mason had. He tried his best to look

rebuked. None of the pics in the booklet did justice to Deirdre Corr. Whereas his digital take of her when he had a good look at it, one moment her quiet reflective side emerged, was worth a hundred such slick promotional ‘primers’, and became for him a numinous keepsake. Sadly, looking at the picture, only he might hear her sing.

THREE

That memory was vivid in his mind the day he took pictures inside a shelter. Was Providence so careless then...and what stolid witness could alter the dire, unrelenting destitution here? As he discretely captured the denizens and their surround — a gritty adventure one sociopolitical publisher funded — he sensed his own inordinate immunity. Yet he would continue, as the ‘quisling’ bum he imagined he was. He was relieved the other three had gone to the races at Hastings Park that day. He might even get reimbursed for last week’s food tab. Ryan then marinated in some sizeable drug earnings he’d acquired the week before and Dirk and Paul were determined to “bring him back to the boil”, as Dirk put it. The three, including demure Paul, went that night to The Opus Bar on Davie Street, then Brandi’s, a strip club, on Hornby Street. Dirk dryly mentioned the next day how the missionary muscle they met at Brandi’s had, as he put it, even commiserated with newly flush Ryan: “Always a pleasure, asshole.” As Mason sat on a lopsided musty cot in the welfare shelter, camera poised, he softly hummed a Borodin tune from *Kismet*, making the antipathy he then felt for himself less plaintive. A nearby fellow faintly nodded.

But these plaintive thoughts vanished when he returned alone to his bed sit, a new hole on Cordova Street, and put on the CD of Deirdre Corr. The last time he heard her, the ineffable singer had smiled at him, this repeat front-seat patron. Her dulcet pastoral voice, the match of her ethereal lute, revived the presence of a mythic spirit who harkened back — he had revisited his notes on John Millington Synge — to the ancient caste of prophetesses known as dryaden, perhaps the feminine form of druid. A child born to a minstrel’s wife, beautiful beyond reckoning, her fate in the perfidy of great kingly rivals a legendary sorrow for Ulster. If this Deirdre was endowed with lustrous ash blond hair, not the rich brown tresses of embroidered myth, she did have emerald eyes and cheeks of foxglove, and likely howled in the hollow of her mother’s womb until free to touch the souls of men living in the shadow of misfortune. As in ‘*Deireadh an Tuath*’, *The End of the Tribe*. Or the Synge poem ‘*Winter*’, to the tune of *Edudae* (Book of Days). Or, the piece that took his breath away, period Gaelic words to the refrain in Shostakovich’s *Romance* from the *Gadfly*. Though, during her break, Mason was not thinking of romance or ardor, but the brash din of much popular music, incited by the club’s odd interim-act tape — the yowl of the rock guitar, nails scraping a blackboard as backup to a purportedly heart-rending ballade with a horny humping beat — so ‘fly’, ‘savvy’. World’s away from this mythic Deirdre, an Euterpe, her genteel lyric music the measure of heed, warmth, and serenity. An equanimity even the gods must be covetous of. Precious words he would write later that night without embarrassment. He thought of his mother and her cherished photo albums,

where his life loomed large. A mother's devotion, despite all. The son that numbed expectation. His own purgatory. Mason of the Sorrows. He decided this must be his last week among the ghosts of the East End. It was then he remembered his alert mother would not know of Deirdre's gig in Vancouver, nor his fascination with the singer. He decided he'd keep her coming to himself for the time being. His mother was ever anxious about his lone unattached state. Another girl 'out of his league' would only stir her heedfulness. He did mention to her he'd heard a band he liked, but didn't mention the singer's name nor the fact that she was, as his mother might have said, a 'humdinger'.

It was only later, much later, that he learned about the emotional quandary brought on by a taxing, out-of-the-blue request to his mother from her hectic American step sister Millie. At the time, Mason's enterprising and rather finical widowed mother, Hélène, still managed Sea Sent, an exclusive bed and breakfast just off Crescent Beach in Surrey. Had she been more up to date with her son's activities, interests and companions, she mightn't have been so unprepared. His discretion or timidity too often left her unawares. Had she known about Deirdre Corr and her family, for instance, Millie's request mayn't have seemed so brusque, impulsive. Moreover, Hélène was always leery of talking to her estranged sibling, so mindful was she of the wheedling entreaties that prompted such calls in the past. That fated call would leave them all scrambling in a forbidding adventure!

FOUR

"Millie, I was hoping to be in Mexico during Lent."

"Hélène, I wouldn't ask this, but the daughter of a friend badly needs a time out, a safe haven in fact. You have no idea. You must have met her — Tara Quin?"

"I don't think so. The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, to cut to the chase, the man she was with — this Ryan Dyck — is a horror show. His whole gang really. The 'Sickie Dickies' Stephen calls them...what Ryan's into the Feds for...he's gone now, who knows where. North again maybe. He's often up there, the deadhead. Seattle and Vancouver, Tara said. Some goons he hung out with here are now harassing her, as if she would know where the crappo went. They even think she knows where he stashed some cash, can you imagine. He was never around much anyway. A real sightseer. Not so the goons — the Morales tribe. They're always in your face these days. Up your nose. A family of pig farmers near Fresno. One of them even took after Stephen the other day. Though you can imagine he didn't get far with Stephen. No real harm down, apparently. Well none Stephen will own up to."

"Do I know this Ryan?" Even as she asked the question, Hélène recalled that Mason knew a troubled school fellow by that name.

"You might not remember. He's a crappo drug dealer, porno sickie, you name it. The furry adventure here. He was in Canada for a while apparently, then came back. At least for a time. Our busy deadhead."

Hélène then recalled that Mason attended university with someone of that name, an American who may have fudged his application Mason later thought, yet the connection seemed too tenuous — and obliging here! — to pursue. Instead she continued by saying, “I don’t think I ever met Ryan, nor Stephen for that matter. I may have met his stepfather, Tom is it?”

“No that’s Carl. Tom’s a family friend or something...anyway, I can tell you Carl’s at his wit’s end. He’s not well. He did warn Stephen to keep clear of all the Dycks — especially Ryan. You know how protective Stephen is of Tara.”

“No, I didn’t know that.” Hélène was about to add that she could not place this Tara, but Millie preempted her.

“I even think Ryan was responsible for running over and killing Roseanne’s collie Ben. You maybe don’t remember Roseanne — Roseanne Hartley — a friend of Tara’s. Tara is Deirdre’s sister, well half-sister — Deirdre Corr, the folkie. You may remember. Maybe not. Well, she left here a while ago. God knows where. Joined some band. Anyway, Tara, Tara Quin, don’t think you’ve met. She plays chess. Or did. She’s also a dancer, Irish stuff, ballet even, was to be in some college music show here — well, before the threats and at least one confrontation. She wasn’t seriously injured. At least what she said. She’s particularly wary of Nat Schroeder...it’s really too god awful. There’s even some bonnet monkey around now. An ‘A-rab’. Can you imagine!”

“Do I know a Nat Schroeder?”

“Maybe not...god hope you never do. Tara had a doozy when she came over yesterday. Wouldn’t tell. Likely Nat Schroeder again — no, you wouldn’t know him. A-hole Ryan is nowhere of course. Also some neck bruising — on Tara. More elsewhere I expect. Clams up when I ask. Can you not postpone your trip for a time?”

“She’s seen a doctor, this Tara...and can’t the police help?”

“She’s been to emerg, got some things. She thinks the one cop is a Morales’ stooge. Things here are bad here, Hélène. The Morales seem to think she knows where the crappo hid some cash! She told me she had no idea where Ryan kept his money, and doubted he had much to speak of anyway. She doesn’t know where he is and is frightened. She’s got to get away. Stephen’s very worried. Her own father’s away a lot, and usually drunk when he’s around.”

“Oh my. But why here? Is there no other relative? Could she not just go to a larger city, say?” As usual, Hélène had trouble following her sister’s story.

“These Morales are wall to wall. We got to get her outside — someplace they wouldn’t look. Your place in Crescent Beach would be perfect. She’ll help out I’m sure.”

Hélène was by then dismayed, vexed. “This Tara I can’t place. You were obviously close.”

“Yeah, her father’s an uncle of Stephen’s, briefly married to Deirdre’s mum, Kyrna, who ran off with an Irish guy some time ago. Deirde’s a half sister. Tara’s about the age of my daughter Sharon, who just left the Guard for the navy. Can you imagine! As for Stephen, he went to school with Sharon...he and Tara lived common a while back. Or something. Nothing ‘common’ about Tara of course. I really don’t know what she saw in crappo Ryan. An unglued story that. Still don’t know. Sorry, but words have kinda run their course here. Do please give it

a try, Hélène. I'm up a creek here. Ryan dissed Tara before he left — saying she stole stuff from him! Can you imagine. Stephen went over last week to try to sort things out with the pig farmers. He had some kind of dust up and came over last night insisting I not call 911. I took him to emerg, they kept him in a while. He wouldn't press charges. Like Tara, he also thinks the one cop bent. He did tell me they're still hitting on Tara can you believe, as if she'd know where a crappo put stuff he never had. He owes them a bundle of course. Typical. Nat Schroeder's the worst. They call him the 'Scoutmaster'."

"I'm sorry — Stephen is what, Ryan's cousin?"

"No. Half-brother. Stephen Maistre. Same mother different father."

"And this Nat Schroeder — who is he again?"

"Gawd. Lucky you. You must remember the Dycks?"

"No. Should I?"

"Thought you might remember that family. Just as well. Well, maybe not. They're one of the whatzit neighbours — the father was killed in a riot in Folsom State Prison. He was in there for manslaughter. The mother worked at Wall Mart, or did. Ryan buddied up with one of the Morales, an adopted kid, Nat, a young kick-boxer they thought had some promise. He's now one of their enforcers I think. A biker — the 'Scoutmaster'. He has a half-brother, maybe a cousin — Tage. T-A-G-E. Kinda unglued I know. Ryan's no more a high-five buddy with Nat these days of course. Anyway, they're spooking Tara, thinking she knows where the crappo is and where he keeps his do re mi. She's been assaulted at lease once. The stoolie keeps it all 'in house' it seems. There's even talk that says she provoked it. Can you believe? I just know you would do her a world of good, and being with you on the coast there would give her a blow hole — from all this. Stephen agrees. We won't tell anyone. Promise. It seems it's you or an asylum. Or maybe a morgue. She's really in a pickle now with the 'scoutmaster' camping out with this bent cop. As if icky Ryan would lift a finger. Well, you know, these thing's happen. Let me assure you."

Hélène was a time mustering her patience. "I'm flattered you think I might help, but I suspect from what you've told me that this Tara may need more than a stay at a 'trite and true' Canadian bed and breakfast. (She couldn't resist the pun.) I assume she can't afford the daily rate. So if she's to stay as a lodger she'd have to help with the meals and some housekeeping. And walk my dog Bear. It's not a shelter here. Medical care could also be difficult, given that she's a visitor."

"But you have coverage for guests, don't you?"

"Only if they suffer a misfortune while staying here as registered guests."

"Hélène, I'm sure you'll work something out. You always do. Really, I'm in a jam here. Roger's very peeved."

"I don't think I know Roger."

"Oh right. You didn't know Allan left. I should have called or something. Well he did. Another unglued story. Roger and I have been together now, let's see, almost two years. He drives for a drilling rig and doesn't appreciate a lot of piss ass stuff when he returns. As you can

see, I'm having kittens here. Please give it a go. She's actually quite a nice kid, all things considered. You'll get on."

Because Hélène's own few Canadian in-laws were an insular, intermittently troubled group, and she a successful business woman, she had been imposed on before and survived. If her husband had not died so early...but this was different. A girl she did not know, had never met, coming to her in an emotional state with mob tailings and possible physical injuries as well, was beyond the pale. She was about to emphatically say 'no' when her sister added, with unexpected pathos.

“I’d carry on, I would, truly, but I have to go to the UCSF Cancer Centre for more chemo. I got liver cancer. Late stage. My skin’s a mess. I got these awful sores on my fingers. Like paper cuts. From the second round of chemo. The first tanked. So I may not be up to things much longer. I’m by myself much of the time...Roger being away. I know I’ve not been the best of sisters...and if I did not feel so for this girl...”

Millie's voice trailed off into what Hélène imagined a spate of tears. It was indeed a different Millie calling. The bathetic actor had 'dried up'. Or perfected her craft. Why this girl should inspire such care in her gregarious, carefree sister was a further puzzle. Another dismaying particular.

“I am surprised you should take such an interest, Millie. You were close to this Tara?”

“She’s a daughter in a way. Having an antsy child puts you on the spot. Imagine — the navy. A dumb cock teaser — *my* kid. The training center in the ass up part of San Diego. Tells you something.”

“I thought you said the Guard.”

“No the navy. I’ve tried, I have, but my Sharon’s ‘shipped out’ — why I worry about a kid like Tara, I guess. Even Stephen’s edgy these days.”

“And Stephen think it’s a good idea — Tara coming here?”

“I know he wants to see her out of harm’s way for a time. He could deal with the hoggers, and Ryan, more firmly on his own. Our best max hope H  l  ne. Things are totally wacko here.”

The following pause outlived its due. Finally, stoically Hélène asked, “She can and will travel by herself — this Tara?”

Promptly Millie recovered. "I'll put her on a bus tomorrow. No one will know but us she's gone. Or where. You won't be in danger. Promise. About twenty-four hours to Vancouver, direct."

“I may ask the social welfare people in Come Share, our local Kiwanis welfare advisers, to look in. And should she prove to be more than I can handle, I may

ask the RCMP to intervene.”

“She won’t.”

“I truly hope so, but if it doesn’t work out...”

“Hélène, just do your best. All I ask. I’ll give her a small sign with your name on it. I’ll call you later about an arrival time. I’ve got to go, a taxi will be here shortly — more goddam

tests. Well so. Damn blast. Thanks a billion. Bye.”

Hélène scowled when she put down the receiver. She had dealt with odd-balls before in some of her bed and breakfast guests, but they always paid their way, departed more or less as they came, and generally left their pasts behind when they arrived. Moreover, having to postpone her Mexican vacation rankled. She wasn't all that well herself and needed a getaway. Was the cancer even real she churlishly wondered. Millie, she knew, was a natural in a melodramatic part. And what if the girl proved to be aberrant, seismically unstable, a fearsome mental case? Dangerous even. She was about to promptly call Millie back when a young trig couple called from the Sea Sent front gate intercom, her beautifully crafted Ocean Spray Gate. The couple, both sail boarders, had booked that weekend to sample Sea Sent hospitality and Semiahmoo Bay's fresh brisk zephyrs — her last weekend reservation before the planned holiday. The coming two or three days promised a full bodied South Eastern front. Already distinct white caps furrowed the expansive bay. The twosome made a pretty lithesome picture. And, if Hélène was not overcompensating, they seemed to be keenly fond of one another. Their very affection upbraided her vexation. It would be a bracing adventure — having this trialled enigmatic 'lodger'. You've coped before she told herself...while saying an impromptu prayer.

She looked again at the couple before answering. Yes, a matched pair!

FIVE

A lone figure sat in the bus stop lounge when Hélène arrived. Millie likely got this Tara on a bus earlier than intended. Or advised. A small creased cardboard sign with Hélène's name on it lay on an adjacent seat. Hélène apologized for being late. The sorry-looking Tara barely nodded. A more pathetic creature Hélène had rarely seen, at least in living memory. One eye livid and partly closed beneath a worn alpaca cap, one hand bandaged, her clothes bulky and mudlark grubby, a sad sack until Hélène considered that the coat and pants might be purposefully nondescript. The shoes, in turn, were scuffed yet looked to have been stylish and well made. The cap too was dressy despite its age. An unlucky transient was Hélène's belated assessment. The more she looked, the more the girl seemed possessed of a certain poise. She might be quite presentable on another occasion.

Hélène sat down near her and briefly looked about the forlorn station. It was like sitting by a sightless deaf mute. Finally she spoke, mustering a token geniality.

“Tara — I'm Hélène. I manage Sea Sent, a B&B. Millie said you were looking for a 'time out'. A place to stay for a time. I hope we can get on.”

Another faint nod from the wastrel. An abeyant smile followed. Resolved, Hélène continued. “I can offer you a comfortable quiet room on the lower floor. The booked guests stay in the upper floor suites and eat in the dining room off the kitchen. We'll eat in the kitchen. Most of the guests go for a walk along the beach front after breakfast. And return around eleven. The checkout time.”

Again the girl faintly but appreciatively nodded and briefly looked up at Helen, then into

her hands, the wrist of one badly bruised. H  l  ne stoically tried once more.

“I have a dog, a beautiful Grand Pyrenees. Her name is Bear. She’s snow white, a great friend, very well mannered, and always a scout for affection. We get along very well. She’s getting on, but rarely complains.”

The speech sounded piece-meal, spurious even, but the silence was beginning to intimidate. She decided she’d said enough and grimly waited, even thinking it might be appropriate to just leave. When it seemed there might be no communication at all, Tara spoke, her voice surprisingly low, almost a whisper but for its surprising resonance.

“You’re very kind. I almost didn’t come. Being an object of pity is a drag. I am grateful to be here. So unexpected, your words. I have some money — enough for a few days. Millie told me yours was not a mission home. I’ve got some deciding to do. A sabbatical — what I think of it — will be a benefit. Away from the ‘noise’.”

Without further adieu H  l  ne rose and said she could help with the luggage. Tara pulled a small scuffed suitcase from under her seat. “Just the one. I may may buy some things here.” At last she smiled, with a solemnity that nearly took H  l  ne’s breath away — prompting a further ad hoc prayer.

Early the following morning an alerted H  l  ne took note of a quiet Tara standing before the kitchen’s wide bow window looking out at the wind surfers skimming the rilled waters of the bay. She smiled at the steel-cut oatmeal the waif had placed on the gas range. Also the two yogurts and glasses of prune juice on the small kitchen table — morning offerings H  l  ne had suggested. The current guests were finishing up in the bay side dining room, a stately elderly couple eager to sample the fresh morning air. ‘The absolute necessary constitutional,’ the husband stated. Tara had helped with the Apple Babies and French Toast, and taken snow white Bear for a walk. With dispatch H  l  ne fetched the Mud Hen bars her guests had requested for their constitutional.

Tara turned when H  l  ne returned to the kitchen, her face relaxing into an unexpected smile. She had put some makeup on the eye, which didn’t look as dark nor as closed, and the one wrist was covered in a newer neater bandage. Free the concealing cap, grubby attire, and the hair brushed, H  l  ne was surprised how well-favoured the girl was, her mezzo voice too, newly alive.

“— A day for board heads. Wind or sail surfers. Three have moved down close to the mouth of the bay. Some kite boarders are further out.”

H  l  ne returned the smile — as much at the relief she felt hearing Tara’s ready words. “I watch them but know almost nothing about the sport. It must require great skill.”

Tara continued with a promptness that defied their initial meeting. “Some wags compare it to playing chess — keeping track of all the possible moves.”

“Does it take long to master?”

“Forever — to ‘master’. You’re always a kind of rookie in the out-doors. But you improve.”

H  l  ne was heartened by the exchange. “Millie mentioned that you were a dancer. Irish folk and some ballet she said.”

Tara faintly smiled. “I was to audition for a company in San Francisco...before all the

hassle.” She shrugged. “Someone would have seen, followed me.”

It was then that H      , observing Tara for the first time fully erect and outlined against the bright window without her cap, bulky jacket and pants, realized how lithe her guest was. If tight leggings, stretch knits, struck her as immodest, she knew the era was obsessed with physical appearance given the persistent resort to dieting and cosmetic intervention. And with legs like that! She could barely reconcile this young woman to the creature she’d met the day before. But a short time later, as she fed Bear, she was further teased to spy her guest through her porch windows in a simple two piece swim suit briskly skimming the shoreline water on a circular board, a group of youngsters intently looking on. After a couple of passes she released the board to the apparent owner who promptly attempted to imitate what he had just seen. After a couple of tries, he remained upright for a smooth longer pass and immediately undertook a third with a ready smile. Just then one of the incoming wind surfers closed and beached his sail board a short distance away. The youngsters and Tara drew about him. It was then H       noticed the ugly bruise on Tara’s arm, just above the elbow. After an exchange with the surfer, Tara stood on the board as the surfer gave it a push into the leading swells, both her hands gripping the steering arm. The one injury perhaps not as bad then. Soon Tara could be seen beyond the group adroitly maneuvering her swiftly skimming sail, her motions seemingly effortless and, in her diminishing silhouette, almost chimerical. Soon the sail was but a tiny down feather against the distant purple isthmus of Point Roberts. Again the puzzle posed by her guest reasserted itself. The pieces available seemed inapposite, the real if understated beauty especially a surprise.

That evening H       and Tara looked at some family pics Tara had on her iPhone. Tara was making an effort. Sitting beside her, H       was again mindful of the girl’s toned lithe form and, in her T shirt, the bruise on her arm. Looking at one picture of Millie plucking a chicken while smoking a joint, Tara said with a wry smile, “One of her comments to Ryan was: ‘You’re never too old to learn something stupid, are you?’ The laughter was short lived.”

“My sister always was a lively act,” H       added

Two pics, quickly passed over, were of Tara and a friend. H       remarked how elfin the friend looked — how ‘impish’. In a brief rerun of the pics, Tara said, “A school mate — Roseanne. I’ve lost touch. Regret that.”

“You were close.”

“Yes and no.” Tara paused as if reconsidering a comment. “We had different friends. I was considered a wonk early on — a ‘skull’. Not a compliment. She wasn’t that keen on school. At least our school. She wanted to be an actor I recall. She did warn me about Ryan. I kind of ignored her at the time. Didn’t imagine she might be that perceptive. She called him ‘Santa Baby’. Took me a while to realize she didn’t mean it as a compliment.” The dark comment ushered in a moment’s silence, reminding H       that Tara’s earlier enthusiasm for the water sports in the bay languished when she returned. The blithe promise of that morning — in anticipation of a day’s fresh activity, the winds continuing brisk that day — was marked in the evening by the initial languor that cautioned. H       did her best to hide her disappointment. Tara’s simple mention of a remembered joke about Ryan may have vivified her

plight with him, the memory a downer. Images of Stephen, Millie, Roger, Tara's father Mat, and Tara's half sister Deirdre, were viewed with minimal comment though H  l  ne did remark how beautiful Deirdre was. (She didn't of course know then of Mason's fascination with her, or that she was performing then in downtown Vancouver! Tara too, it turned out, was also ignorant of her nomadic half sister's gig on the West Coast, as was Deirdre's knowledge of Tara's furtive flight to Sea Sent — two of the early mischances H  l  ne ever after deplored.) Said a newly thoughtful Tara, "She has a remarkable voice, Deirdre — 'haunting' Stephen says. She sang madrigals with a church group for a time, later folk songs, ballads mainly, sometimes with Irish Gaelic words — which was a surprise. She appeared several times in the Fresno Folklore Society concerts. She plays the lute too. She's been to Ireland. And Germany of all places. She liked a type of popular music there, apparently — 'schlager' they call it. She sang backup for a German singer, one Florian something — Silbereisen — in a show in the Theatre M  nchen. She sent Stephen a program. We haven't heard from her for some time. She lives her own life. She knew before I did I think, how bad things could get with Ryan's zoo. We know she joined one band in LA then quit. Well, she is a nomad. She's putting together another band, apparently. Ryan called her Barbie, a name she loathed. One time her feelings showed. I think she 'wandered off' — as we thought early on — to get away from him."

Then, suddenly pointing to a shelf on a side bookcase Tara remarked, “You must play crib.”

Hélène was about to respond when Tara brightly added, “It looks like a great board. The patina.”

“It’s ages old. You play chess,” Millie said.”

“When I can. Stephen taught me early on. Didi — Deirdre — liked crib. A game I’ve not thought of for a while.”

“Sadly, I don’t play chess. Did you and Deirdre play crib together?”

Again the sudden silence cautioned. Then, “ — Sometimes. She never got on with — my father. Usually off when he was around. A complex guy.”

Hélène smiled. “Aren’t we all? In one way or another.”

Staidly Tara continued. “The ‘watcher’ Stephen used to say — about Deirdre. She could have a cool way of looking at you. More ‘through you’ I think. She did live in her own world. ‘Autistic’ some thought.”

“You were close — you and Stephen?”

“I think he really liked Deirdre. He and my father didn’t get on.”

Hoping to keep the words flowing, H  l  ne asked if her father was ‘over protective’.

Again the chary hesitation. “He seemed cross with Deirdre a lot. Maybe to get at Kyrna, our mum, who wasn’t much interested in being married it turned out. She had Deirdre before she met my dad. She left here when Deirdre was twelve, I was nine. Ryan — I don’t know what went on there. She was a beauty — which I suspect embarrassed her. If you can imagine. People can take you in for the wrong reasons. I don’t think she was autistic, just a rapt ingrained escapist, as soulful romantics sometimes are. That’s Stephen’s idea. As I said, you some-times

thought she was looking at you when she was really absorbed in her own thought, often with a distant smile. I used to kid her. She *could* be surprisingly perceptive though, when least expected.” Tara thought for a moment. “I re-member her saying that ‘obsessive-compulsives are the least perceptive wackos’. A good depiction of Ryan I think. The phrase stuck. That’s how she was — quiet, mindful, her abstraction a reliable retreat I guess. Part coping with Ryan maybe. And my father. Who was a trial when he was drunk. She had an agent early on. Well, with such a rare musical talent.”

“You did say ‘had’?”

“She left home when she was seventeen — over six years ago. I’ve not seen her since she left. She occasionally writes. But hasn’t for a while. If she has an e-mail she’s kept it to herself — disgust with Ryan and my father maybe who peek at mine sometimes. She was to be in a show in the Freight and Salvage Coffee House in San Francisco. It never opened. It was called Nowrouz — a celebration of the Zarathustrian New Year. Some people objected to the cast. Too many anglos. Funding was the main problem, she said.”

“She must have been disappointed.”

“She’s actually a fair planner when she puts her mind to it. So odd, given what they once thought her — some school authorities. When I think of it now, I don’t recall ever seeing her angry or impatient. So very ‘in her own space’. Yet with eyes that often follow you. Easy to misinterpret. She’s a folk purist or traditionalist — her singing style. The ballads on the one CD are a bit too formal for my liking. ‘Elegiac,’ Stephen said. ‘Deirdre of the Sorrows’ — Stephen’s allusion to the classic Irish play — her meme, he said. Not sure what that meant. Stephen has the play. I’ve not had time to read it. Hope to, one day. I didn’t bring any CDs with me, and I don’t know where she is right now. You try to keep in touch, but it doesn’t always work out.”

“You were close.”

“Not really. She lived in her own world — as I’ve lamely said. Do tell me more about your own family.”

“Ah. Little enough to tell. Some distant relatives. My husband died several years ago. Left me enough money to establish Sea Sent — guests as missing family you might say. I have a son — Mason — a good student, attended university and has a graduate degree in English literature. “He’s now a commercial photographer. Didn’t see that coming. He’s on a book assignment these days — photographing the sad derelict population in Vancouver’s East End. He comes by when he can. You may meet him.”

Tara was slow responding. “I’d like that. But maybe not now. Best if I’m more or less invisible here.”

Hélène smiled, nodded. “He lets me know when he can come. How convenient it is.”

Tara looked about, saying, “ — You’ve done well. I am grateful to be here. Truly. Sorry to hear about your husband.”

Hélène had long since decided that her husband Cliff was not a subject for discussion, given his general aloofness, a proud insularity that may have contributed to his death, having

shunned doctors as he did. She managed a demure smile, saying, “Things pass so quickly.”

Tara, sensing a novel unease, changed the subject.

“Does Mason like folk music?”

Hélène genially responded. “If it’s good — meaning traditional I would guess. Most popular music he shuns I think. He’s always loved classical music, even as a youngster. Brahms, Beethoven. Sibelius, Dvorák, Enescu of late. I could hardly believe his fondness at first. When kids were listening to pop singers he was listening to things like Brahms’s Variations on a Theme by Hayden and Beethoven’s Fur Elise. A bit of a loner, as I’ve said. He was an honour student — graduated two years ago with an MA in English literature. I thought he’d continue to the PhD program — then changed his mind. He never did explain — well in words I can understand. Like your Deirdre, he lives an inner life. His music remains a tonic for him I think. His muse.”

“But he took up photography...?”

Hélène smiled. I know he looked over the music programs at UBC and Simon Fraser but found them too modern — twelve tone and minimalist biases he said. I’m not sure what that means but he seemed bent at the time on studying English. Irish literature I know he liked. Swift and Yeats aren’t yet fossils, he claimed. Then, all of a sudden — so it seemed to me — he left off to take up photography. A school in New York. I know one author especially influenced him — Andreas Feininger, an architect who became a photographer. ‘The camera as pen,’ I think he said. I told Mason it would make an excellent hobby — photography. He laughed and gave me a hug. ‘From an impeccable source,’ he said. That I remember. Had no effect of course. And I still don’t really understand why he opted out — well, as I think of it. He reads a lot I know, and he’s as enamoured of his music as ever. ‘The soul of living things,’ he says. He’s got me listening to some of his favourites. One a traditional Kazakh folk song, can you believe.

Something about a butterfly lover.”

“Maybe he’ll meet Deirdre one day.”

“An interesting prospect I should think, given what you’ve told me about her. She seems a rare wonder.”

Tara was slow answering as if she’d thought of something then changed her mind.

“She is. Our mother was a singer. Kyrna Healy-Corr — when she had Deirdre. My father said she was never satisfied. Not a great puzzle. Well, marriage is not for everyone. I’m grateful you’re a good listener. Getting my ducks in a row is a tonic I had’t imagined.”

“Listening is what I often do here. Rarely with as much interest as now.”

Tara Smiled. “A free soul, my dear mother Kyrna, who seemed fond of my father, for a time. They did marry. She had come to California from Ireland with Deirdre. Deirdre was just two. I was born soon after. Kyrna eventually took up with an importer who may have been a courier for the IRA — the late story. What the IRA had to do with it all no one seems to know, or won’t tell. She helps run a pub in Belfast now.” Tara reached over and patted Hélène’s Great Pyrenees dog named Bear who had sauntered into the room and settled at their feet. It was a

felicitous moment. Hélène fetched her camera and, with Tara's ready consent, took a picture. "Always like pics of the special guests. I'll keep it safe for a time."

Tara wryly smiled. "I know I look a little better than when I arrived. It is a sanctuary here."

Hélène smiled. "You live a busy life. Did you like your father?"

"I never really knew him. He did serve time for a fraud conviction. Some insurance scam. Never did learn the details. Deirdre was his favourite — despite all I've said. I was maybe too snippy. Too head up. Jealous maybe. He did belt me a couple of times. Not unusual in such a family I now think. He was good looking. The early pictures...looked a little like Ryan."

Following this comment Tara seemed to slip into another of her private spaces. Sensing a further lull, Hélène managed to say, with a resolve she hadn't anticipated, "I don't like to pry, but if I can help with some issue, please let me know. Millie mentioned little about your parents, but she was clearly worried for you."

Tara smiled, acknowledged the offer. "That's kind. She must have told you about Stephen — Millie. The human factor you might say, given that most human beings are so unpredictable. The discoveries, the later ones were dismaying...for us all. Ryan carried a lot of baggage. He liked me. Well, in his wayward way." The comment prompted a faint grimace. "The bigger problem."

Hélène smiled, rose and fixed them some hot chocolate. In due course they played several convivial games of crib — and avidly talked into the early hours, Tara's newly candid words revealing a spellbinding drama, featuring an incubus Hélène could barely imagine. Indeed, Tara's words aptly 'fleshed out' one of the day's arrant obscenities — lurid metastasizing sadistic pornography, in addition to the opioids that Ryan hawked, most of which Tara had slighted, at least for a time, until the ugly reality of it surfaced. Her words, often episodic, were interrupted with laden feints, a kind of endemic dismay Hélène thought. A tale long overdue it seemed. One you feel obliged to listen to.

"You want to believe in someone, you tend to overlook things. One of the first things....which seemed daft, even risible at the time...an Aztec relief sculpture called the Templo Mayor Stone Disk. You may not know it. (Hélène didn't.) Ryan had a small replica of it. I think I imagined at first he had an interest in Aztec mythology. How trusting I was. The original disk — a large shield-shaped stone relief sculpture — depicts the dismembered body of an Aztec deity. The pronunciation is a trial. I say 'co-hol-shawki' or just small c. It's a gruesome work, showing a nude woman with arms, legs and head hacked off, serpents encircling her limbs. It took me a while to realize how mesmerized, turned on Ryan was by it. In the myth, small c's mother — co-ahltle-kew — big C — gets impregnated by a birdlike mortal — actually a hummingbird feather — and embarrasses her family. The one time I might have laughed I think. Well, small c's siblings urge her to slay the careless mother. Except the feather 'conceives' a ferocious warrior who comes promptly and ready made out of the womb, a chap called — hwet-selo-pok-tlee — big H — who hacks up small c casting her head into the sky as the moon so her mother can be partly comforted in seeing her daughter in the sky every night. The thoughtful son. The myth is connected to the Aztec belief that Mother Earth — big C, the feather birther — is both womb and tomb, Creator and Destroyer. The Life Force itself as manifest courage, daring and sacrifice. Valiant painful birth astride a grave. Hence this Earth Mother has a grisly side — all matter born and dispatched by her. A stoic creed. The disc, with its dismembered

recalcitrant female, was, what can I say, a kind of erotic totem for Ryan — what I think now. Stephen used the word ‘periapt’, a charm or amulet. How obsessed he was with brutality, gore...I still have trouble...he actually wanted me...it was a consummate sexual image for him. ‘Nature’s Nerve’ he called it. Some nerve. His obsession seemed to eclipse everything else.”

Here, Tara paused as if to reassure herself Hélène would not rather retire. Hélène quickly responded by saying that anything pertinent to her sister’s life and friends she’d like to know about. And no, she wasn’t tired — not in the least. This comment seemed to reassure them both.

“Well, what do you say to such a one as Ryan. I actually spent one night looking at a DVD he had had a hand in making. It ended with a mock yet stark rendering of the disc. A photoshopped girl lying so, limbs eschew, small serpents encircling her limbs, their tongues extended. Well, boring for me I said, and a huge waste of time surely. He called the film Frat Filet — he’d belonged to a fraternity at university. So he said. What blew me away was his lordly presumption that such a timeless rendering was in fact sacrosanct...and then to discover, via Stephan, the extent of his drug scene. Roseanne was my precursor I think. She called him ‘Santa Baby’, a quip I didn’t appreciate at the time. I underestimated Roseanne. He threatened her before she left. I was then just stymied I think, barely imagining my own jeopardy. Shortly to be accused by the Morales’ goons of conniving with Ryan...hiding some of the money he owed. The threats started then. Two of their goons....well, so. I knew I had to get out.”

Here Tara paused, looking off, barely shaking her head.

“It’s when I went to Millie. She took me in. Then the random gun shots...two into Millie’s bedroom...and that slimy cop...”

Tara paused again, her testimony taking its toll. Hélène rose and put the water on for some tea. “I find this time of night a little Sambucca in the Chamomile helps settle the day.”

This comment entertained them both. Tara faintly smiled as she continued.

It’s an eerie discovery to find yourself head-tripping with a profoundly sick individual. As I’ve said, he could be turned on, entertained by vividly staged gore...he couldn’t understand why I wasn’t...I knew, or thought I did that such natures existed, but you don’t expect one day to find such a one near you...while trying to decide how to flee. The discovery of the one DVD knocked me out...I’d seen some repulsive sexual internet tubes, and heard stories about others, but nothing like the ones he later abetted the sale of, and maybe even had a hand in making. One of the later revelations. As was the ugly confidence scheme he actually helped set up — which may have served in finding young naive girls for the film making. His initial word was ‘patronized’. He was all gung ho then, part of a larger posh group. A tux set believe it or not. Millie may not have known...

Again the disabling disbelief and new breath.

It seemed — what I learned from Stephen — he actually helped a gang of restive immigrants inveigle then entrap many young — under age — white girls from poor families to serve as sex slaves. His early ‘sugar babes’. Some were used in the films. He plied the girls with gifts and acting prospects initially, holding out the promise of dramatic careers...even Roseanne, dear ‘impish’ Roseanne, was I think intrigued for a time. She did warn me though — before I came to grips with what was really going on. Even later, when Stephen threatened to expose Ryan, he bragged that the scheme was perfect because no authority had the guts to engage in ethnic investigation — that police departments were powerless before the politically correct juggernaut and the charge of cultural

harassment and discrimination. He mentioned a couple of people who'd already been hauled up before human rights tribunals in Canada — for slander and hate speech, which is apparently par for such activity. We've similar issues in the U.S. Ryan showed Stephen a picture of a Toronto, Canada, school room, the school and teachers funded by the Ontario School Board, where the boys are shown sitting up front, the girls in burqas sitting well back of them, the menstruating girls at the very back. He supposedly said — Stephen's words stayed with me — it's quite a testimonial: 'What shyster cop is going to complain about that? Western feminists are too busy getting universities to punish campus rapists — mainly privileged white boys — or, you know, construction firms for not hiring more women electricians — or not being more understanding and lenient toward alleged black felons.' Suave words that hang around. No one it seems has the guts to look at what other cultures are committing or allowing — that would be discriminatory, racist. 'Islamophobic, the ineluctable sin!' — another of Ryan's phrases to Stephen. In England's South Yorkshire town of Rotherham forced shagging had been going on for ages Ryan claimed. For mainly Pakistani men. Haraam does not forbid 'temporary marriages'. Modern gals specialized in them he claimed. I still have trouble believing...the one tape Stephen insisted I look at, one of Ryan's later tapes, Stephen had an acquaintance buy it off a Morales...the blood looked real enough in several frames, and the very young performers a long way from method acting...have you ever been immobilized by disgust, anxiety? Anyway, I did confront Ryan — something Stephen advised me not to do — and was galled by his insinuation that 'I' was a silly Western prude and hypocrite, a classic neurotic bigot. When I told him the imputation was obtuse he went into a rage, tore up a paper I'd been reading, scattered some of my notes, even ripped the seam in a gown — a birthday gift. I must have been askance for he asked what cat had eaten my 'delicious tongue'...such words molest. I hit him then, slapped him...which only set the match to the IED so to speak. He actually pulled a knife on me. I fled to Millie's. I'm a better runner than Ryan. Where he met Stephen. You don't know Stephen but he's not one you mess with, though he was injured. Ryan cut his shoulder. I couldn't believe how Ryan was flailing about with that knife. He's not all that strong though. Ryan left promising to get even — with all of us. That night a bullet entered Millie's dining room and hit a mirror. I was staying with her then. My alcoholic father was off somewhere. As usual. The police were called. They told us later Ryan had been in a bar with friends — who would vouch for him. Another bullet entered Millie's bedroom early the next morning. Two in fact. Stephen retrieved one from a door jam — a hunting rifle bullet. Which I know Ryan had. But by then he had disappeared. Stephen suggested I get away for a time. The whole area is a Morales' patch — some affiliate clubs at least as far north as Portland, even Vancouver he thought. He also talked to Millie. The implicit threat is often the most disturbing. Ryan is still off somewhere. The sums he owed, including a shark he'd been using to pay off some gambling debts, were humungous apparently. It's what the one cop said — that one of Ryan's meth-coke dealers said I'd make good the debt, knew where some money was. That's one awful part. He knew it was a put-on I think, the cop. I had no idea who he meant — this 'dealer'. This may sound paranoid but I suspected he was bent, that cop, a Morales' stooge — scaring me, thinking I was on the take."

Hélène sat slowly shaking her head, her chin in the hand. "I can barely imagine." Tara faintly smiled, took up the thread.

He was always around, that cop. Millie tried to assure me everyone was on the lookout. I think by then she was as fearful as anyone. Then two Morales bikers took after me...Stephen wasn't around then...an 'engagement' you don't forget.

Helene's ready dismay Tara took to heart.

Really, I am okay. Really. And I wasn't followed. Please be assured. I spent the morning I arrived — the bus got here early — scouting about the bus station. There was no one. And I have kept an eye on the neighbourhood. Please believe me, I wouldn't be here if I thought I might be a menace. I won't be here long. You've been more than generous. I can never thank you enough.

Tara gave into a long thoughtful pause, then taken a fresh breath and another sip of the Camomile tea Hélène had brewed, each cup with a tablespoon of Sambuca. Hélène was by then all but speechless, so absorbed was she in the girl's hair-raising narration! She also sensed a concern she rarely felt for her guests. Helping a care worn soul abets fortitude. Tara resumed with a laden smile.

That's about it...why I'm here, trying to get up the courage to deal with the reality. Set a new course. I still have a time imagining Ryan so obsessed and so keen...it was his demented assurance that blindsided me.

Again an abrupt elision and dour smile, noting Hélène's clasped hands below her chin.

It was seeing a side of a person you never imagined, could not conceive of, who believed aggression and cruelty the pulse of life. He said as much when he was high — 'Nature's Nerve'. With such a person there's no middle ground...he's on his own planet. Not Deirdre's planet of course. Not Didi's...

One of the stoic smiles surfaced then.

I think she instinctively knew that Ryan was a mess — long before the facts were known. But was not a spieler. You've been a great help, Hélène. Truly. But I must, will leave soon. I've got to get on. I want to see someone in LA. Said he knew a good private investigator who sometimes takes on pro bono work if it relates to other work he's doing. Who knows? Also an agent there — if and when I want to find some work. LA is a no-man's land. You can be invisible there — with some planning and time out. At least for a time. I think I can pull it off having been away — been up here for a while — with a new look, and altered makeup, maybe a new social name. Coming here has kept me sane. You're a godsend listener. I can never thank you enough. Truly.

Hélène recalled sitting with Tara for sometime after — mainly in silence but for a few bon mots about luck and providence. The rare gems. Even in the evening shadows she was amazed how sleek and elegant her stoic guest could look. Which reminded her of Mason's facial birth mark and limb. She hadn't told Tara about the 'accident': the time she got out to clear sleeting snow from her car's windshield...neglecting to see young Mason climb out from the back...then to attentively drive off not at first realizing her child was no longer asleep in the back...to be hit by a similarly blinded oncoming vehicle. Leaving him with a permanent limp. As the wise say, Nature is on nobody's side. She also wondered why Mason hadn't called. She never liked bothering him herself, but was always anxious when he hadn't phoned for a while. No news was not always good news. He must have a lot on his mind. His documentary work in the East End an on-

going trial she knew. She rather regretted Tara wanted her stay unknown.

Mason awoke in a setting he did not recognize. For a time he believed he might be dreaming — the sylvan landscape about was a storybook setting. It had happened before, this arrival of prickly uncertainty, but never in a wonderland like this — lush parkland with a stream by an expansive pond with water lilies coming alive in shafts of morning sunlight. He lay on a shaded embankment in an old smelly sleeping bag he could not recall climbing into, which lay near the stream that meandered into the pond, actually a small tree-lined lake, covered in white and mauve water lily blooms, thick as fleece in some patches it seemed. More bodies, nearby, were also shifting, coming to. He had a terrible hangover. Someone said, “Hey there sailor. You got a great right arm. You’re the one right?” Brief laughter from a hairy face ended in raucous coughing. Slowly, vaguely Mason remembered getting caught up with a group of kibitzers razzing some women parading with the hashtag #Our Bodies Our Selves. Some jibes were barefaced, a few of which he remembered: *Hey, don’t you need a license to be that ugly? Me a fuckin’ asshole’ — you’re envious, right? Your parents must have pleaded with you to leave home!* The confrontation was somewhere on West Georgia Street if memory served. Initiated by mainly older, paunchy, welfare idlers who habitually hung out on Second Beach in Stanley Park in the summer. Where they seemed as concerned about their bikini tans as they were in marshalling their philosophic duels, often animated as a Punch and Judy show. Yet they had smiled for his camera, adopting zany poses. He had been adopted or recruited, he couldn’t really remember. They had some kind of booze, vodka he now thought — his ‘great right arm’ — and, in their way, abetted his own wish to take a break from the exactions most everyone seemed locked into — to seek and find a space free of intimidation. Another variety of the ‘occupy’ mantra. In the present case the beautiful forrest and pond landscape of Stanley Park. He smiled at the thought that he might now be a player in this vain, self-esteeming fraternity of seasoned *flâneurs* — the word that came to mind — who had so seamlessly obliged him, this harmless, not unlikable naif seeking to record ‘veteran street folk’ for a nifty book — his wry come on that amused them — these career drones so unlike the craven derelicts he had recently photographed. “No hurry; the ‘coffee cops’ will still be at Prospect Point,” a nearby fellow said to another. His presence among these sensual unobliged folk now had an ironic edge he hadn’t noticed before — on this quiet idyllic stream bank where such denizens might still doss out in the fall. Yet he recognized no one. “Lots of time,” someone said, someone who’d offered the sleeping bag perhaps. Then the dizziness returned and he blacked out when he tried to stand.

Must have...for when he finally awoke or ‘came to’, he discovered he was in a hospital, bandages covering an eye and one side of his head. He was confused, bewildered. Had he been attacked? The one uncovered eye was not too efficient in the acutance department; the room seemed bathed in a downy mist or haze. A matronly nurse came, smiled, looked at a chart, took his pulse, asked if he could remember anything. He may have shaken his head, aggravating the headache he seemed immured with. Her words offered little respite. “You were near a building some rioters threw bricks at. The riot after the Stanley Cup game, remember? No? It’ll come back. You had us worried for a time. You’ve a head wound — one of the bricks or stones we think — also some cuts and abrasions. Another doctor will be here shortly. Got that? You’ve

had a concussion and may be suffering from amnesia. Tough I know. Hang in there.” He felt himself nod. She looked him over for a further few seconds, checked a monitor and intravenous feed, affably nodded and left to attend another patient in the ward.

It took him a long minute or more to decide he wasn’t dreaming. The intermittent acute pain he felt squared with the complex equipment of an intensive care ward and the likelihood of being seriously hurt — also the sudden frantic recollection of being downtown by the Bay department store, a building targeted by some brick throwing rowdies, the storefront glass exploding like IEDs. Yes, the night of the epic Stanley Cup riot in downtown Vancouver! The night

where nothing was off limits. A riot his memory had tried to stiff?

Slowly he sensed anew the dizzying disbelief, the harrowing recollection of downtown Vancouver’s second rehearsal of Armageddon! Memory as stammerer. Scenes that only got worse as the recovered scenes of that fated day and night passed in review: first off, his droll time with the jaunty campers in the park, passing out there, coming to, heading home, then hastening to the Nefer Club — to worship and exalt!

It was while awaiting Deirdre’s second set that the rioting outside began in earnest he now remembered: the primal yelling, night creatures darting to and fro, rocks and bricks fracturing glass, several hissing burning vehicles, shrill sirens, intermittent explosions and diverse fires. Not camp or bond fires. The after-game soirée. They lost — the Canucks. Somebody was responsible. Dirk and Paul had gone to a pub to see the game. They came to the club afterward but left when the mayhem began. Ryan was, as usual, elsewhere. Deirdre had come back to a darkened stage to confer with her band members and the manager. The second set would be cancelled. The club soon emptied. For a time Mason and a few patrons looked out from the club’s half-curtained windows with preternatural amazement. To Mason it seemed the Sixth Seal had been broken — to summon the Night of Pandemonium.

He eventually left the club to seek a bus on Georgia street. He could not believe the mayhem, the elation of the rowdies. He had reached the Bay department store, Georgia side, when the ear-splitting sound of smashed plate glass ignited a chorus of heady cheers. One shard nicked his hand. A second window exploded further down. Additional hurled rocks or bricks smashed counter cases nearest the windows. He was stupefied, numbed, when something stone-hard walloped the side of his head. He obviously lost consciousness for his sudden arrival in this emergency ward was a stupefying revelation. He did remember someone on Georgia Street saying the rioters were ‘avenging angels’ — to rapt endorsement. As the memories returned to him in this acute care ward, he badly needed to affirm his appalling recollections, thinking one of the nurses might help. It was then an unexpected but very welcome visitor showed up at his bedside. “Mason, it’s Paul. Yes, here and upright.” “Thank heaven,” Mason promptly said. Paul promptly placed and sat on a chair by Mason’s bed, to remark with some concern, “I actually saw you on the stretcher, Seymour near Georgia. You were lucky I think. One of the ambulances that got through. The nurse here told me you suffered a head injury and some post-traumatic amnesia — which is better she thought. I am assured you’ll live.” Mason grasped

Paul's hand with his one good hand as one being rescued from the Titanic. Affably Paul continued with, "You'll welcome some updates I think. That stoic smile of yours I recognize."

Paul thus began revisiting the singular disaster that would effect Mason the rest of his life. The telling of which affected Paul as well, especially a late dire detail. "What you won't know, is that a person was attacked just outside the Nefer club by an unknown assailant during the riot. The details are still sketchy. The unnamed person — next of kin and so on, sorry — was taken to the VGH emergency. Badly injured apparently. Dirk, who knows the club manager, thinks the person may be Deirdre Corr. I know, unreal."

Mason struggled to comprehend. "But how do you mean 'attacked'?"

Paul cleared his throat. "Not sure. Injured though, Dirk thinks. Unreal."

"What? But she'll be okay?" Mason frantically demanded.

Paul grimaced. "It's bad, apparently. I'll try to learn more."

Mason was appalled, incredulous, and attempted to sit up then lay back. A nurse approached with a scowl. "Please, you must try to rest." Rest, Mason wanted to say, how can I do that? From Paul's expression he sensed a calamity loomed. He was at sea here. He engaged Paul's empathic look. Paul nodded, saying, "I know, I know. I heard her too, well briefly, that night before the riot. She was awesome — what I heard. I would have stayed..." A hospital code blue signal broke the spell. They both sensed the bustle of urgent haste in the outside corridor. Paul stood, saying, "The nurse wants me to leave — a precaution when the staff is on call. I'll try to learn what I can and come back. Soon, I promise. I'm assured you're a lucky lad."

So. He, Mason Bascule, was alive, most likely — not dreaming. Stuck in a nightmare gaming house, Providence acting as a croupier. Sometime later, in a large six-bed ward — he'd lost track of time — Paul read to him from a Vancouver paper. Because some next of kin still hadn't been contacted, the name of the injured person was not yet disclosed. *During the riot, a person was seriously injured in a confrontation just outside the Nefer Club in downtown Vancouver. At least two witnesses saw the confrontation but did not recognize the assailant, though they thought the person attacked might have. The riot mayhem may have screened the assault. It is hoped the public will come forward with any personal knowledge of the attack, as well as any camera and video images of the riot itself.* Mason slowly shook his head. Said the attentive Paul, "It is Deirdre, Dirk says. Unreal. I'm sure they're doing everything possible." It was then Mason discovered that his injured eye could and did make fluent tears. Stinging cascading tears. A good sign someone said. Only vaguely did he note a nurse giving him an injection which promptly took effect.

It was the perforations in the ceiling panels he noted first. He hadn't seen them before. But there they were. Much too regular for bullet holes. So he could see a little better, much better through the one eye. An encouraging development one nurse said that day. Talk, also, in the voice snatches Mason could make out, of post concussion syndrome. Had the stone been bigger...the wider pain only incidentally physical then. And so it came back, slowly, agonizingly, most of it — briefly standing outside the Nefer club as the noisy conflagration began. He remembered being amazed, the tumult after the game seemingly both spontaneous and seismic.

Dirk and Paul saw him briefly but soon took off. Ryan, as anticipated, was elsewhere, turmoil being his ‘natural demesne’ Dirk said. On leaving Paul had wished him “God’s ease. Go back in, hear your song bird. Look you up later.” Which Mason had done, though by then the song bird was consulting with the manager who was shaking his head. Mindful Paul came from an otherwise devout family — yet tried to fit in, commiserate, defer even to changeling Ryan. A small pastoral tattoo of a humming bird on his arm testified to his ever ready engagement. How wondrously that night had begun — Deirdre singing her first set with a soul’s ease that captured one anew. Find a fair young maid and be glad. He had. He’d glimpsed paradise...at least for a time. And now, knowledge of an ugly dire encounter. If the police investigation was ‘ongoing’, some dread details had finally, grimly emerged. The seriously injured performer was indeed ‘talented Irish folksinger Deirdre Corr’ whose mother had arrived from Belfast. The extraneous shock was learning that the Nefer club office and safe had been broken into the night of the riot by a person or persons unknown! The riot served as a cover it was presumed. By then Mason was sitting up and reading for himself.

At the outset of the riot he had wanted to tell the hooligans to shut the hell up! You’ve been boring humanity for millennia. Put a sock in it. But the free-for-all he soon realized was becoming ominous, augural, what else could one say, the rocks, missiles, gas torches pitched with major league aplomb. One beaming a policeman outside the club. Had he really been there, witnessed such feral abandon? The rabid contagion? These were formidable golems he wryly thought, molested to breaking point by the thieving duplicitous world and corrupted wiseacres who ran it. The mego rapper’s business, inspiration. He’d couldn’t imagine dissipation alone prompting such vehemence. The virulence in pop culture had surely lent a hand. Which had obliterated his angel’s song. They were determined to reassert themselves, these inflamed maniacs, destruction of someone, of anything, the invincible high. Paul would tell him, in due course, that Dirk actually participated in the riot. Was cited for vandalism and disturbing the peace, and now out on bail. The family lawyer worked to get the charges stayed. “The lawyer claims his client was mischievously given a hallucinogenic drug. Not by me of course,” Paul stolidly assured, adding, “Ryan’s been gone now for some time. I think my recommendation he seek help stiffed my influence. I’m going to enter a retreat myself soon. Get my mind off late events. I have made an application to the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade as a Public Affairs Assistant. I go for an interview in a fortnight. One hopes. I can reach you through Sea Sent?” Mason promptly nodded.

Hélène, who was just coming to assimilate Mason’s plight, read once more the note from Tara with layered anxiety. The note was left the afternoon she disappeared, the day before the riot. Hélène had not expected Tara to depart so abruptly, so unannounced — leaving only this terse note with her key. She imagined they had become fellow travellers, so to speak — sojourners. Tara’s sudden abrupt absence she now sorely felt — both a keen disappointment and lingering worry about the girl’s safety. *You’ve been so kind. Many thanks. T.* The curtness of the note dismayed. It was then she noticed that the lovely Elizabeth Blaylock painting of a seagull was missing from the office wall. One of the cheap cameos from the hallway hung in its place. She

swiftly entered the hall to discover the Blaylock placed where the cameo had been — at the back of which, when she released it, another note was tucked! It took her a second or two to correlate the two. The wording here proved to be even more disconcerting.

So very sorry. The surfer I met turned out to be an Angels' biker who asked if I wanted some 'stuff'. He's someone Ryan could have known. He didn't know me — at least he didn't let on. I told him I was Pentecostal, didn't do drugs, and urged him to seek Jesus. He told me Jesus was a failed pusher and left. He's still around I think. This neighbourhood his 'patch'. Please, please don't worry. He's a canny peddler not an ape. I'd call the RCMP but they can do very little. I've been in limbo far too long. Hope to see you again one day and thank you properly. I wanted this info to be exclusive. Regular notes can be inadvertently read by strangers. Again, many many thanks. You were a godsend. T.

It was all Hélène could do to postpone calling the RCMP herself. Only in the last few days had she learned from Mason of folksinger Deirdre Corr's gig in Vancouver, of her dire injury there during the riot and, of late, in soulful conversation with him, of his fondness for her singing. His mother had not, of course, mentioned Tara to Mason, thus honouring Tara's need for anonymity. She merely told Mason she'd forgotten about a guest, and had to postpone her vacation. She also assumed Tara did not know of Deirdre's gig in Vancouver, believing the girl would surely have mentioned it had she known. In the following days she kept an eye out for the worrisome surfer. But he too, it seemed, had vanished. Mason did, in due course, assure his heedful mother that the ineffable Deirdre was not a mortal he might court.

Tara's sudden absence left Hélène with a sense of loneliness she'd rarely known, a loss that linked concern with sorrow. She even felt sick at times, and only realized one morning that her distress had a physical component separate from her dismay when she coughed up some blood. The initial diagnosis in emergency at Surrey Memorial warranted keeping her in for observation and more tests. An intestinal obstruction had resulted in a fistula and an abscess that ruptured. "Could disappointment trigger such an event," she had asked the on-call physician. "It could happen," the tired doctor said, adding, "Someone close to you hurt in the riot?"

Hélène lightly smiled. "He's improving."

She was admitted to the hospital and given a regimen of antibiotics. Her own doctor, after assessing several tests, reluctantly told her she should consider lightening her workload in the near future — she would need regular attention for some time. "How long?" she asked. "It's hard to tell. I would bank on several weeks if not months."

She knew the work and expense of maintaining Sea Sent was more than she wanted to undertake just then, even if Mason helped out. A day later she learned that a private room in the Waverly Care Pavilion was newly available, and her early application seeded priority. Because she had not felt all that well on and off for some time — Tara had kept her engaged, distracted — she decided she might have to depart Sea Sent. She would see how she felt in the coming days. If she left now there might be no coming back.

She also decided it was time to tell Mason about Deirdre's troubled half-sister. Tara was then elsewhere, her stay at Sea Sent a poignant plaintive remembrance.

PART TWO

We are stardust.

Edward Zganjar/Joni Mitchell

SEVEN

The famous eccentric film director, Antoine Plombiers, was puzzled, annoyed really, and talking to himself. Being sufficiently absorbed he was able to ignore the ‘heckling’ of some noisy canyon Towhees — for a time. He had barely touched the quiche Hans brought that afternoon to the terrace of his art deco style villa that outlooked Los Angeles’ Runyon Canyon Park, a bit browner that spring due to the diminished rainfall. He still had difficulty making sense of the incident. What could the creature have been thinking — the beguiling and enigmatic Tara Quin? To begin that day’s shoot — so splendidly — then skimble off like an Arizona roadrunner. Was it that oaf who insinuated himself onto the set? The street goonlet named Ryan something? A pint sized IED. Had he placed a hex on her? She looked as if she’d seen Beelzebub. He knew the Aztec theme of his film Moon Disc initially dismayed her — the mythic encounter between Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilpopochtli. She had readily come to the audition but a diffidence emerged when she began to read the resumé. Indeed, it looked as if she’d lost all interest for a time. Whatever bothered her ended when she’d completed the resumé. Readily had she taken up and began reading the designated parts in the script. He had her read some of them twice to affirm his astonishment. “A nice ending — in the film’s resumé,” she said, when she’d finished. In Antoine’s film the Aztec myth is upended, reversed, the Templo Mayor Disc becoming, in effect, a decimated Huitzilpopochtli! Antoine had been inspired, highly entertained by the day’s sisterhood manifestos and proclamations — and new transformative visions! Watching Tara Quin later undertake some choreographed movements for a fight sequence upped his amazement. Elegance personified he thought. He had rarely been so certain in his life!

Then — to so abruptly, summarily vanish when they were just underway, jeopardize a possible budding career. He was as dismayed as he was elated with his luck in finding her! This understated beauty who so sustained regnant anticipation.

A week earlier he had listened to a busy agent and been intrigued with his tape of a creature named Tara Quin. An accomplished folk dancer with some ballet training and a rich mezzo voice. To say nothing of an arrestingly lithe figure and alert, engaging eyes. The lone audition was enough. Some things you just know. Then along comes the yobo. Even the hands-on crew was bemused for a time, one of whom apparently knew the guy. To say nothing of burdening him, Antoine the Ineffable, with finding a replacement — at this late date! While the other poot, Artur Haas, his historic advisor, notes cultural slights in the script. ‘Don’t want to rouse the

vigilantes Plummy.’ Artur, darling, you don’t make a provocative film about a momentous Aztec battle without a few cranks taking note. Was it perhaps possible to proceed with what they had — just diminish the role originally intended? More feasibly — get fiend Ganyanov to work his digital hocus-pocus? A possibility if the furtive Tara Quin proved to be so easily unnerved, dismayed, frightened even. One might well ask why then seek employment in moonstruck LA? The padded ward in the American insane asylum as one writer put it. And now to contend with a preternatural flap about some aspects of the film being glibly derogatory. Fastidious Artur was ever one to flaunt disapproval. Sometimes, career cavillers like that require supernatural intervention — an Aztec divine well and truly torqued. Even a patient man might indulge a snuffle or two.

The groundbreaking film was to be a re-enactment of the seismic encounter between the mythic Aztec deities Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilpopochtli, the dis-membered body of the slain Coyolxauhqui destined to become the notorious relief sculpture in Tenochtitlan’s famous Templo Mayor Stone Disk. The film, however, would turn the myth upside down, daringly invert the ending, leave Coyolxauhqui whole! A fact that Tara, the newly cast Coyolxauhqui, had belatedly found so copacetic. Had she not even demurely smiled when the reverse advent dawned when she completed reading the resumé. Why her sudden, pre-cipitous flight so stupefied now.

For gay urbane Antoine, the notorious disk had always been a seamy icon, a historic reminder of macho dominance and subjugation he’d endured most of his life. He’d always slighted the sagas of ‘beefy boys’ — the stalwart gamers — and of late thought it expedient to join the growing number of wonder women, though he was disappointed they tended to berate Western swag boys not Mideast nabobs, Eastern autocrats or South American poobahs. He wasn’t, however, a combatant or instigator. He savoured his special comforts, yet would ‘cough aloud’ when he could. And *here* the cough would be loud and clear.

In his film, a singular twist finds Coyolxauhqui triumphant in the encounter and hot to reverse the historical score — carve up the mighty Huitzilpopochtli into sensational bits, the remnants of a collapsing giant star in the current script. A daring film that seemed poised to summon a spat eerie as the original feud. To wit: *another subversion of a regnant patriarchal mythos* — thus stoking the modern social tumult that seemed, at times, poised to engulf the planet. About Tara Quin’s sudden departure, her clocked up agent, one Cass Hart, seemed less surprised than Antoine. “Well, she did kinda come second hand, hadn’t really time to check her bonafides.” Great help Cass. How awful to be so frightfully busy.

Then the usually placid Antoine lurched into action and promptly called his able personal secretary, giving full rein to the slight stammer he decided early on to cultivate and so titivate his genius, and upstage the maddening crowd.

“Cally, we m, may need a replacement bod. For Coyolxauhqui. Yes. Identical as possible. Yesterday.” If it took him a while to learn the pronunciation of the Aztec gods in his film, he felt obliged to let the world know — free of all hesitation.

“A replacement for Ms. Quin?”

“Hmm. One without a nightmare sweetheart or ISIL b,benefactor.”

“Check.”

“Leggy but not string bean. Nor getting into a swivet about ‘subway skin’, nor appearing as a m,mocha soul sister if she happens to be a tad, well, niveous. Trust we still have performers willing to slight colour r,recognition.”

“Check.”

“Late twenty something that looks her age. Maybe a tad younger. Her mythic age is we may assume t,timeless. And find out just what, worry wart Artur’s been hearing from his shysters about derogatory aspects of the film. Also, if Willardson has not yet been c,committed, get him to call me. Here.”

“He’s still at the Queen Palm Hotel.”

David Willardson was the Paleomena Corporation’s curator of its art and historic artifact collections, select pieces of which had been requisitioned for replication in the film. But his presence here was not altogether reassuring, for he also served Arthur Pechenpaugh, one of the Paleomena Princes, as the chief executives of the Paleomena Corporation were called, a scrappy tycoon who fancied himself a film connoisseur backing au courant productions — including Antoine’s current opus, which was reputed to be giving the executive chest pains when he realized the tenor of it — an Aztec ‘slur’ which apparently didn’t sit well with his Mexican racketeers, some of whom savoured their Aztec imbued aura. In addition to his artifact smarts, Willardson had become in effect Pechenpaugh’s ‘explosion detector’ in the day’s cultural mine field. He wasn’t here this time to discuss Cholula pottery motifs.

Antoine fondly smiled. “David Abercrombie at the Queen Palm. Hum. How appropriate. I’ll see him about n,noon.” He paused to clear his throat. “Cally, you are worth your weight in gold. I say this sadly aware of how imp,pecunious I am.”

“Antoine, I am on a diet.”

“Such resolve.” He sensed he might enjoy a minute’s peace, just as the ‘hecklers’ outside resumed. “And can you not d,do something about these confounded Towhees. I can’t work pressed by imperious toffs. Their chip chip noises sound like f,failed slot machines. Some even have the temerity to come knocking — pecking at their reflections in my b,bevelled windows. Can you ima-
gine! Such shameless narcissism.”

“What about al-Qaeda — they specialize in ‘toffs’ don’t they? Sorry. It’s been one of those mornings.”

Ryan Dyck leaned against a remnant of wall near an abandoned subway platform — the Track Five ‘Yellow Car’ line in Los Angeles. Part of the track served as a shortcut to the motel he sometimes dossed in when trying to reconnect with older LA dealers. He convulsively banged his head against the wall, exclaiming, “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” He couldn’t believe what had happened. He’d gone to see cool Cutter, on a film set, to affirm the rumour of an arms shipment, thinking he was still in play. Only to learn from Cutter that he’d been seen leaving the

Vancouver Nefer club the night of the riot with a large bag, and that the money stolen from the Nefer safe that night was in fact a northern Morales' cache — this Mayday from Cutter himself, a widely trusted player! Then to actually see the pissy She herself on the set, costumed like some circus geek — and she see him! The bitchy prattler still at large — on an LA film set with smart well-connected Cutter! She left the set as soon as she saw him, leaving a puzzled camera crew, some of whom began staring at him! Impulsively he'd turned to follow her, only to run into a group of people, visitors being shown the set he later realized. Two or three even took pictures of this impulsive 'crasher'...what in god's name was he thinking! He could end up as the dork in a viral twitter feed. He almost lit into one of the picture takers, ready to smash the clown's face... he still could not believe it. Even Cutter, the last he saw of him, was shaking his head. Too obviously he was not welcome. Least of all *there, then*.

Yes, he'd nicked the cash in the Nefer club vault. He'd gone there once with Mason and noted the lax security. Some of that money he'd used to pay off a festering gambling debt — *not* his coke-meth dealer. An act that may have triggered his down-turn. A payment like that, when known, could only have come from a sudden windfall. Who wouldn't know by now, given Cutter's updated skinny! He then touched his forehead. He had thumped his head hard enough to leave traces of blood...he could not believe what was happening, had happened. Had his recent matchless luck in scoping and eventually cracking the Nefer safe dulled all perception, caution? Perhaps he should head north again, to Vancouver

— to North Vancouver, to sleepy Deep Cove, somewhere off the bloody map!

The Morales would be gunning to find him. Both here and North, as far as Vancouver — his coke and meth 'purlieus', Mason's toffy word. He still could not believe such luck fronting a calamity. Like the night of the riot when he ran into the other pissy She, the *first* pissy She, the elusive Deirdre Corr — her startling observant presence a fragmentation bomb. She was leaving from the backstairs exit, the very night of the riot and heist! Being seen by such a one, recognized, his carryall bulging...she'd asked if he'd robbed a bank! Well, he had acted, taken care of eyewitness Deirdre, always watching, scoping, always fucking looking! Well, he *was* in a bloody hurry. You don't hang around after stealing the crown jewels, especially when the surrounding mayhem leaves you more or less invisible. *No time for a chat, dear. Just a birdie blood bath. His knife an avatar*. He'd watched a couple of the ISIS beheadings, the icing of a *kāfir* in real time. The exhilaration an 'only'. The people about the Nefer club were so flummoxed by the riot no one really noticed. So he believed. Some blood maybe, but not the razor's edge, the quiet silent lightening strike. The blood of the covenant. And now to find himself an outcast among his own! So, take a hike, lad.

Cherubic David Willardson sat in the open dining area of the Queen Palm Hotel, hosting lazy palms, mundane furniture and a solitary parrot, all adjacent a narrow swimming pool. Antoine he knew would find the place rather ordinaire if not kitschy. Sorry news is sometimes best imparted in unimposing clement settings. An emergency flask of Courvoisier would deal

with the putative Oolong tea, if need be. Actually the tea proved to be drinkable and Willardson sat back thinking Providence was not always goofing off in this rawly deceitful age.

Minutes later Antoine swept in yielding a walking stick, scarf and fedora to an amused receptionist. Beaming his usual immaculate grin he spotted and moved to the chair opposite Willardson as one leaving a windy Promenade Deck. Looking about he remarked, “I d,daresay you’re trying to impress upon me the p,primacy of the national debt.”

Willardson rose and shook Antoine’s hand. “That too of course. If the ‘other’ matter were only as straightforward.”

Antoine crossed his legs and gave the room another candid appraisal. “You must know by now the Aztec g,goddess left with no forwarding. Angry mythic d,daughters lead hectic l,lives, apparently.”

Willardson smiled. A waiter approached. “You want something first?”

“An Irish c,car bomb is advised, but a Perrier will do.” Glancing again about the room Antoine sighed. “Hit me, d,harling.”

Willardson grimaced. “In the details, as they say. I believe my secretary in-formed Artur Haas, your history advisor, of the objections from those cultural sticklers who resent your fiddling with sturdy myth — depicting virile Huitzilopochtli as a ‘spastic dork’ — one comment I remember. Political Correctness has yet to suborn Mexican mores. At least at the racketeer level, where Aztec resort to vivisection apparently set a cultural norm, and ready graft the legal tender — aspects of Pechenpaugh’s investment world.”

“Very l,lyrical the voice of your secretary by the way.”

Undaunted, Willardson continued. “Pechenpaugh has had representation from some very politic scholars — ‘mousetraps’ I think they’re called — who claim the thrust of the film is a-historic and misandric, that the film’s climatic encounter does not fit the archeological horizon. Most await a gratuity of course, initially citing questionable pieces of your set, as well as the feather panaches and obsidian beading created for the royals. Too ‘foppish’ I recall one soi-disant academician declaring.”

“How,very clever of him.”

“I trust you and Arthur Pechenpaugh remain on speaking terms. I understand his backing of the film is again crucial here.”

“One day you m,must remind me how such a one as Pechenpaugh managed to become a c,corporate poobah — in the very corporation you so diligently shill for.”

For Willardson Pechenpaugh’s rise was self-evident: “The investment Chameleon who can look in many directions at once and change his colours to match his environment.”

“Ah yes, that wall-eye of his. One eye on the bottom line, the other on the banditos.”

“I think we must carefully look today *at* the film itself — its ‘pantywaist bent’ — another comment that’s come to mind — which, the ‘experts’ infer, badly reflects on your aesthetic sanction, especially now with Pechenpaugh’s resource proposals before the current administration. The Chameleon is edgy here. In such uncertain surroundings.”

“David, you would find my astute heedful script writer finely amused if he heard what you just said — about the film’s ‘pantywaist bent’. Do continue. As you know, I am unusually discreet.”

Willardson decided the Courvoisier would be needed, and added some to his tea with a reedy smile.

“Like the climate dispute, the cultural wars are heating up. It gets complicated. Many threads. A potent one here — the few courageous Vigilantes, the new Mexican patriots, who’ve hit upon a nationalistic trope to up their cause: they alone are resisting the hideous cartels which Paleomena players like Pechenpaugh pander to. The Vigilantes themselves find particularly pernicious the re-muneration from American drug addiction that bolsters the mob, whom Pechenpaugh, your major backer, bargains with to keep his dicey business ventures afloat. American indifference at one level, drug dissipation on another, both remain vexations for the Vigilantes — so much ready Yankee wealth sustaining a merciless netherworld. Whereas, on the other hand, *fiddling* with macho Aztec myth is frowned on by *El Cholo et al.* A prissy daughter killing a powerful father is bad. To cut to the chase: Paleomena’s Mexican investments are under renewed scrutiny, many projects still fledgling and sensitive to stray interveners. The determined patriotic Vigilantes are slowly succeeding in insuring that many Mexicans resent American meddling and exploitation, including, as mentioned, rank Yankee addiction, which abets, in effect, a reign of terror. The Vigilantes have even adopted a quasi-religious tone: evangelical self-help allied to insurgent peasant slogans. Indeed capitalism itself is to blame, some claim. As one writer put it, ‘The mafia has transformed itself into a capitalist enterprise, while capitalism has transformed into a mafia!’ An imputation Pechenpaugh would not find amusing.”

“So nice to know capitalism may have a future.”

Willardson paused for further sips of tea. His mandate was not negotiable and he soldiered on. He had survived speculative blether and dummy feints before. Well most.

“In short: your film’s sensational revisionist bent — the unprecedented lambasting — serves the patriots, the paternalistic Vigilantes, who want to end mob-male transcendence. Such that the drug lords could very well target Paleomena, a conspicuous Western megacorp, if a Pechenpaugh sponsored film trifles with the Aztec lore they supposedly prize. All they need to elevate pay offs. Put another way, these same drug lords have no intention of slighting the masterful cast of their dauntless extortion culture. This film perverts a mythic staple — the fervid execution of spoiled Coyolxauhqui, a willful mother killer — and could become a Pechenpaugh slur, being identified as the Poobah who might back such ‘flagrant monkeying’ — another phrase I recall from the experts who’ve so willingly ‘lent a hand’. It sounds tenuous I know, perhaps even preposterous, but we live in an age when micro snubs can lead to macro retaliation. As for possible major snubs...!”

For a moment or two Antoine looked as if he’d swallowed a broach. He soon revived, mindfully saying, “So, Huitzilpopochtli’s getting hit by some very ripe raspberries. As potent, in its way I dare say, as showing the corpses the Brothers have beheaded, butchered, boiled, burnt, acidified, skinned, exploded, et cetera — the timeless artistry they’re willing to share. I

promise to take another look at the script. But we d,do have a mission — we fussy progressives. The world *is* ‘reconsidering’. But do carry on.”

“Pechenpaugh’s meeting early Monday with some Mexican players. He has tabled an offer: discreet, judicious bribes to some key ministers — to keep the current business ventures afloat — calm the nitpickers. Some of the gold rings and pendants in our Columbia collection you’ve eyed from time to time. We know of an AM El Paso company that specializes in fine replicas. Some ministers from the old cabinet have been partial — to such ‘remedies’. At least in the past.”

Eyeing Willardson, Antoine mused, “With an esteemed c,connoisseur’s ap-proval.”

“It would be a gift of course. What happens afterward is anyone’s guess. Though the script should be modified. A precaution. Do what you can to keep the spotlight off venal opportunists like Pechenpaugh — in the new social-cultural *mêlée*. As noted, slights can become intolerable insults.” After a further sip of his tea Willardson added, “How much ‘notice’ may depend on the weight of the gold, and Pechenpaugh’s susceptibility to credulity and desperation. One must play the game.”

“Such nimble posturing. The amb,bassadorial approach: no radicals here.” Willardson smiled and added more Courvoisier to his tea. Pechenpaugh had pressed him into this tangled job. Him, a corporate hack — little more than a curio curator most days. Pechenpaugh’s words still resonated: ‘Just get the poofter to lay off a bit, discover some — some inadvertency. His ass is on the line.’ Willardson smiled, the ‘ass’ here being shared heinies he thought. To think that a mere film might engender such nervousness, such apprehension — that what once would have been a nimble jape might now galvanize a popular, righteous, vigilante community and alarm a corporate Bigfoot. Cultural revisions were drawing blood in that ‘righteous’ era. He had some work to do on the coins, of course, but felt the matter could be attended to. An old Canadian friend would help assess the credibility of the replicas. He must begin there. Bribes had to be discreet, inconspicuous in that gaudy gamy era.

At this time Hélène Bascule had given in to her chronic illness and left off running Sea Sent. She lived then in the Waverly Pavilion, an assisted living facility near the Peach Arch Hospital in White Rock. Her stately Sea Sent B & B was then being run by its new owner/manager, Paula Hauser. Happily, she and Paula got on. Hélène helped the new owner with some promotion, house maintenance and culinary details; Paula shared stories about her guests. One of whom, a David A. Willardson, an executive in the Paleomena Corporation, had reserved a coming weekend stay via the Sea Sent website. She promptly phoned Hélène, who was soon revisiting memories of her own life at Sea Sent. Paula was upbeat when she called.

“‘Your snuggerly seems ideal for a much needed furlough,’ Willardson said in his e-mail, alluding to an awaiting military venture. I guess corporate skirmishes can be bloody. In any case — a Paleomena toff at Sea Sent! A story for the insiders, yes? The reputation of the place hasn’t slipped. Thought you’d like to share in the news.”

They talked for a time about incidental matters. Paula had always wanted to set up a bed and breakfast but had little practical experience. Hélène was only too happy to help out where she could. If Paula's calls were now less frequent, it was because she was finally coping on her own — and hearteningly busy. Hélène was grateful she kept in touch. Her past hadn't yet abandoned her. Paula expressly said she would keep Hélène head up on the 'Paleomena warrior.' "In case I need some expert advice. Ha."

EIGHT

Luis Morales watched with bellicose impatience as the heavily tattooed biker sauntered into the bare dusty room, one of half-a-dozen boarded up stalls in an abandoned strip mall in the Nevin district of South Los Angeles. Six men stood inside: Luis Morales, head of a Southern California crime family, two of his soldiers, an old goombah (a former El Paso policeman), the biker called Tage, and a consigliere from another family. Luis was the first to speak.

"What fuck is this about again?"

Fabio Lucchese, a consigliere of the Michoacana Family in San Jose, re-mained expressionless as he said, "Tage has something to tell us, don't you Tage."

One of Luis's soldiers, Nat Schroeder, was amused. "Tage..baby! Yeah!"

With facile condescension Tage said, looking at Nat, "Dayo, padre." He then farted. Twice. Nat stiffened but stayed mum when he caught Fabio's warning glower.

Luis was relieved to objectify his anger. "We're fuckin' waiting 'Taggie'."

Fabio added, "In your own words Tage. Everybody's cool. We're all friends here."

After fingering a tooth Tage said, "It was A-head Adam Sally who told one of our dealers that he saw Dyck leave the Vancouver Nefer club the night of the riot in a fucking hurry. With a very large carry all. We told Cutter straight away."

"Who's 'Cutter'?" Nat blurted looking at Fabio.

"Not a name. A job title. The one who fits or tailors costumes. On set. Currently working for Corybant Films in Hollywood. An Owen guy."

Luis engaged Tage. "So a coincidence. Dyck-head goes to Cutter, thinking he's still in, still solo, the prick. Learns he's now in an ocean of shit. Just happens to see the cagey broad on set. Takes off like a bat."

"Well, given the Nefer heist...then seeing the arm piece he never muted..."

"So he goes direct to Cutter on Plumy's set, thinks Cutter's still a trader. Seems we've undervalued Cutter." 'Plumy' was Luis's choice word for Antoine Plombiers, the owner of Corybant Films, who sometimes requested gang protection for his scattered film venues and field film crews.

Fabio took up a further curiosity. "It's still a mystery how he learned of the Nefer cache — or how that girl got this film part."

Luis glowered. "She's little use now the fuck's come out of hiding. Maybe never was."

Fabio curtly smiled. “She is, or was, to play a daring Aztec goddess, one Ryan rather fancies.”

“Should he live so long. Any other shit?” Luis was getting bored.

Said a newly reflective Fabio, “I’ll have another word with Cutter. He might know some details of the heist, also how the casting for this film was done.”

“Ryan once told us she was the banker, the fuck.”

Fabio belatedly concurred. “Pathetic. He’s toast of course.”

“Make sure the body’s discovered. Our snuffy poster boy.”

“In due course, if necessary. We don’t want to slight Owen’s use of his Syrians. His arm length doers.”

Luis was by then pissed off. “What the fuck doesn’t he have — wacko provisionals and wacko a-rabs — pussy crabs and dump rats.”

“Can be useful,” Fabio added, smiling.

NINE

“And who is this?” Marianna Thompson asked Hélène with a faint smile. “A re-cent guest?” Together they looked at Hélène’s large photo album. Mariana was a volunteer at the Waverly Assisted Living Pavilion who had befriended Hélène. She aided the Pavilion’s recreational therapists by meeting and conversing with the residents, helping to keep them alert and engaged. She came twice a week with interesting news, engaging stories and questions. Memories of Pavilion residents’ early lives were often readily summoned and happily revisited. Mariana’s arrival was much welcomed. On an earlier visit Hélène had told of her life at Sea Sent, her leaving of it, and her cordiality with its new owner Paula Hauser.

Hélène too smiled at Marianna’s question. “Ah yes Him. A recent guest Paula Hauser had. The ‘panjandrum’ — her word — she accommodated recently: David Abercrombie Willardson. Paula likes to let me know the place is thriving and sent me the picture. He’s feeding Bear some tidbit. She’s grateful, I think, that I helped her sort out some promo and housekeeping issues early on. She tells me about unusual guests from time to time. Occasionally she invites me to supper. This Willardson actually took us all out one night — last weekend, in fact. The directors at Waverly let me out if someone like Paula or Mason is with me. Have to be careful what I eat of course. He was very charming, Willardson. An executive at the Paleomena Corporation — one of the world’s colossal multi-nationals, as you may know. He’s the curator of its historic art and artifact collection. He was here at the behest of a film producer he said, something about authenticity. He didn’t elaborate.” Here Hélène briefly smiled, mainly to herself. “He was a singular chap. He liked Bear — the feeling was mutual apparently — and didn’t mind Paula taking a picture of them together. He heard Sea Sent was an ‘Edwardian oasis’, his words — not entirely an exaggeration but hardly Architectural Digest material; my love of kitschy objets, a fondness Paula shares, ruled that out long ago. I like people and like what most people like. The

accessories and ornaments there — sentimental, sometimes cute, funny, often theatrical — hardly high-class turnout. My late husband called me a magpie. Paula's kept most of my 'collectables' — as we call them." Hélène seemed to revisit a timely memory or two before continuing. "He was more or less drunk, so Paula claims — his entire stay. His room reeked of scotch and eau de cologne when he left apparently. 'Disarmingly polite and an encyclopedic source of historic trivia' — another quote from Paula. This I can confirm because Paula invited my former neighbour Allen Pinker, a retired history professor — I don't think I've mentioned him — to join us for that supper. Willardson knew him, or of him, apparently. Paula keeps extensive notes on some guests, and photos when she can, something I should have done.

Marianna smiled. "She remains grateful I dare say for your help early on. So they got on then — this Willardson and Allen? They certainly look happy enough in the one picture."

"Oh yes. They talked. Over my head of course. Willardson may have disappeared of his job at Paleomena — don't mind me, I'm getting batty in my old age. They included us in the conversation — in their way. There were moments when Willardson looked rather glum. Not many, but some. I had the feeling he was here for something more than a film's 'authenticity,' whatever that might mean. For instance, I gather from their remarks they're both gold coin collectors — he and Pinker. We happened to get on the subject of investments, something Paula is especially interested in. Like Willardson, Pinker too works as an appraiser, in his case, historic coins apparently."

"He does look happy enough here — Willardson. Bear too looks pleased. Perhaps because they're together at Sea Sent?"

"A pleasant thought. No, it was the odd comment that surfaced. Comparing a director at Paleomena to a mythical beast. Bear reminded him of someone I think. At the time I thought it some kind of joke. He does fancy his liqueur. He seemed like one living in a past century. Another of Allen's comments to Paula. Polite, poised, kindly to a fault. He only stayed two days. One of the mythic guests Paula said. Here but not really here. Paula is an observant gal. Reads a great deal."

"But Professor Pinker liked him — found him engaging?"

"Oh yes. He mentioned him the last time he called me. He still calls, the dear. Well, occasionally. He said Willardson was a 'one of a kind friend'. Wouldn't quarrel with that. Paula, who is an avid mystery buff, said she'd keep me in-formed. Such fun. Ha."

Mason too was revisiting singular memories, but ones that yielded a pervasive dread not an intriguing curiosity. He seemed these days to be a kind of burnt offering. He still had bouts of dizziness — he walked then with a three-pronged cane. His mind had cleared sufficiently to follow the tragedy through again...and again. Sheer goading incredulity kept him at it. Media film of the riot he looked at several times, this day a segment on a TV in the lobby of the modest Astoria Hotel in downtown Vancouver. By reprising tapes taken at the time, the police hoped viewers could identify some rioters and come forward with names. He was about

to resume his documentation of vagrant life in the East End and lived then in a room at the Astoria. As before, he sought to be unexceptional, part of the vagrant street scene.

The current tape take showed a noisome crowd about the Nefer Club where Deirdre Corr sang her last set, a poignant star-crossed farewell to her West Coast fans — the night the Canucks gave up the Stanley Cup to the Boston Bruins. The night Mason felt the Nefer club would provide an escape from the swarms of gripers, whose acrimony mushroomed into an unprecedented horrendous riot! Dirk and Paul — Ryan was a no show that night — had wanted him to come to a video showing of the game in a pub, but hockey, indeed most sports, remained an embarrassment. The humiliation of his own body lingered.

He was steeped then in disappointment. Deirdre had survived, if you can call it that. The assault left her paralyzed — in a vegetative state it seemed, from which there appeared to be slim hope of recovering — the verdict from his own doctor who knew one of the trauma surgeons. “It’s a wonder they kept her alive, given the loss of blood; not a great consolation I know.” In the meantime, Deirdre’s mother had come and taken her daughter back to Ireland. Dirk knew the club’s manager and communicated the news of her return to Mason. Dirk was a busy if enigmatic lad these days. Attending special lectures on Islam! Not for ‘pandy dandy dreamers’ he said, his droll account of recent terrorist activity in Europe and America full of his facetious approval. ‘The age’s ultimate tuft hunters,’ he said. One never knew how serious Dirk was. It seemed he’d also taken over Ryan’s drug trade, at least some leftovers in Greater Vancouver — Ryan being a ‘missing person’ then. The lectures Dirk attended he characterized as ‘business seminars’. He was thinking of opening a funeral home he said — again with a sly laughter that seemed to burlesque the possibility. He never mentioned a Jack Owen, and said he only learned of the Nefer break-in from what the papers were saying. Mason didn’t believe him, yet never confronted him.

The TV screen suddenly brightened with a fiery explosion on Georgia Street, highlighting the throngs of bodies that seemed to gravitate toward the Georgia area between Burrard and Richards. It was an odd discovery, the consensual abandonment of the milling crowds. The ‘élan’ of rambunctious madcap lads and lassies who, in Dirk’s tirade, were out to do some serious complaining about the indentured invidiousness of modern life, remind the lucky smug assured ‘haves’ that ‘having’ was the problem, and bust up a few mercenary show off stores into the bargain....indeed Dirk’s Marxist rants had become abrasive, chafing of late. A radical impounding even his wit. What was left of it, Mason thought.

He shuddered as another brick sailed into a large storefront window — the Bay, Georgia street side, the smoke then from a couple of fires sooting, shrouding the air. He had to admit he had many times scowled at the myriad cosmetics touted up front on the main floor of department stores. More precious products designed to keep people feeling inadequate. Nearly as witless, he churlishly thought, as the girls who so easily appeared on the porn sites he now knew Ryan abetted (some of whom he’d happily caddishly baited and recruited) as they were tied up and molested, their lavish makeup bleeding while smiling so sweetly for the ‘happy as a lark’

takes. Dirk had shown him one DVD — his amusement manifest. Girls Mason had difficulty imagining putting up with such morbid manhandling and showcasing. Who yet seemed only too willing to molest the world's luckless peepers, the girls' sometimes winsome beauty a harsh sobering fact. How you sharpen disappointment he wryly guessed — as another brick or large stone in the tape passed through a still pristine window, the double pane splintering into a rosette of fragments, a veritable kaleidoscope. The shouting and laughter about as exhilarating as you'd find on a sonsy toboggan run. The faces ecstatic. A lost but animate tribe, only 'spoiled' by the obtuse girl who gleefully posed with an expensive hand bag she'd nicked — for a friend with a cellphone camera. Mason might have thrown a brick at her. He then felt a comradely hand on his shoulder. "Hang in there buddy!"

"Dirk! You're here!"

"An historic event, eh?"

Mason grasped his arm. "Paul said you learned something more about Deirdre."

Dirk faintly nodded. "The family, well the mother, took her back to the Emerald Isle, as you must know. Someone told the manager her one CD was selling well. Who would have known — besides you."

"A hospital in Belfast you said?"

"Guess so. The manager may have an address."

Mason weakly smiled. "Thanks."

"See you angel face." He looked at the screen. "God, what colours!"

Mason returned to the riot tape. Dirk had likely met one of his dealers in the hotel he thought. It was a busy hub. Dirk was not a user himself but apparently helped with 'deliveries'. That Dirk's voice was then little better than a whisper, Mason grimly reckoned with. His doctor was upbeat though. "Your concussion has caused some hearing loss, but you should improve, over time. Much research is being done at this time."

About this time David Willardson sat in Arthur Pechenpaugh's Los Angeles office staring at the disconcerting African sculptures Pechenpaugh decorated his corporate suite with. The sculptures ever reminded him that his fondness for gentility, modesty and decorum, to say nothing of comity, was being upstaged, if not rebuked, here. The sculptures invoked fear if not terror he thought.

"Would you like some coffee?" Miriam, Pechenpaugh's observant personal secretary asked with an insider's smile. "I make a pot about this time."

The coffee proved to be surprisingly good. He would tell Miriam on his way out — which he assumed would be soon after the big cheese arrived. He thought of the many precious bric-a-brac at Sea Sent, mainly palatable kitsch — stuff sufficiently amusing to excuse the hoarding of it. So unlike Pechenpaugh's stark gruesome masterpieces. He was finding them particularly noxious when Pechenpaugh entered, looking as ill humoured as some of his *magnae matres*. For the better part of a minute he ignored Willardson, choosing to sit at his large Empire desk and shuffle through some documents in a gleaming white folder before examining a graph on his

wide computer screen. Willardson thought of the code white in many hospitals — the prompt for threatening behaviour. Finally the lumbering ungulate senior executive — one of the five Paleomena Princes — spoke without looking up. His voice nearly that of a bot.

“You got hold of Pinker?”

Willardson affably nodded. “Of course.”

“He verified the cob? The macuqina?”

“He wasn’t sure it was from the Cartagena de las Indias mint, as you’d hoped — suggesting it was difficult to distinguish it from the Santa Fe de Bogotá mint. Both operational in or about the early sixteen hundreds.”

Pechenpaugh finally looked up but not at Willardson, rather something beyond his accomplished abettor and sometime shill. “But he took them for vintage?”

“He was impressed, yes. Very little clipping on the one.”

“So he suspected, maybe knew they were fabricated. Yet impressed.”

“There being so few of the vintage coins we could only commission a small number of replicas. They were well made. Dr. Pinker had trouble telling some apart from some originals in our own collection. He believed we were investigating a fraud.”

Pechenpaugh seemed in tune with this summation. But only briefly as he again confronted Willardson. “You met the cutout.”

“Yes, who brought an evaluator.. He seemed satisfied. Neither were antiquity experts I think.”

Again Willardson had trouble assessing Pechenpaugh’s mood. Despite what appeared to be a workable bribe, the moose-like Pechenpaugh looked undecided, edgy. What Willardson did not know was that earlier that week Pechenpaugh had met with Fabio Lucchese, a West Coast mafia consigliere, alone in a private room in a restaurant in San Diego’s Little Italy. A command appearance. The ex-changed words there were brief but pithy. They had made some changes in the Morales family, Fabio said, a key member of which would be ‘away for a time’. Pechenpaugh was to deal with a new family, the Belmontes, in future, which included a secretary to a government minister. The Belmontes were distant cousins of the Morales. Who had their own assessment of Plombier’s film. Something Pechenpaugh should keep in mind.

Thus Willardson was surprised by Pechenpaugh’s further comments, not so much to him, as to an intervening Kismet. “Damned if a woman isn’t muscling in. Alejandra Belmonte. Yeah. Not too many live amigos left in some broods apparently.” He added, “The one older Morales’ capo, Luis, is on extended medical leave. So I was informed. Probably permanent. In short, that messy gang may be up shit creek for a time — with a lame capo. The Belmonte family’s taking over. The new ‘advisers’ we’ve yet to hear from.”

After a further preoccupied interval, Pechenpaugh looked up at Willardson with a grimace. “A bloody mare’s nest. A Belmonte boss — now a bloody ho it seems! Stay tuned buddy. Miriam will ring you.” Cautioned, Willardson rose, noting the executive’s dismissive gesture, then went straight to Truluck’s Restaurant in La Jolla, a favourite eatery, but could not relax as he picked at his Ricetta Lasagne al forno. He never liked rawly expedient demands — like finding

appraising and commissioning needy goldsmiths. The after shocks were always unpredictable. The sly gold bribe may not be enough. He sensed Pechenpaugh was on his last legs in the corporation — the rumours were becoming resonant. Too many speculative interests. If he never liked the man, he recoiled at the staging of humiliation. Which he suspected was in the works. Such cycles never ended. Fortunately the proprietor of La Jolla, an old friend, was a gold mine of distracting salacious jokes. “What’s an innuendo? An Italian suppository.”

It was nearly dark when Ryan Dyck left the bus station in Blaine, Washington. The Birch Bay tide was in and he debated trying to swim across to Canada’s White Rock. Only with new identity papers could he risk going through customs. As usual he travelled light, his earthly possessions at the time stashed in a small water proof bag. His thoughts raced. With his snorkel he might swim some of the distance underwater. He would try that night, yes, using the waters near Semiahmoo just South West of the Peace Arch border crossing. The sky was overcast. The night would be dark. He could doss that evening in the old garage off Cypress Street. The structure, the last time he visited, was being used to store some furniture. He could use the public facilities off the East Beach main parking lot. This time of year the shower might even be working. He still had café contacts on the East and West Beaches, but he had to renew contact discretely. He fancifully thought of staying in one of White Rock’s sleepy bed and breakfast homes. He had looked at the Sea Sent B&B on Crescent Beach several times. A possibility. Would the owner recognize him? He might run into Mason! He curtly laughed. He *must* be incommunicado for a time. Subsequent to blundering onto the film set to see Cutter and getting an earful about the Nefer break-in, and encountering the pissy She, he learned with amazement about Moon Disc, the tale of the very myth that had always galvanized him, resulting in the dismemberment of the willful Coyolxauhqui depicted in the famous relief sculpture on the Templo Mayor stone disk. (He wasn’t then aware of the film’s inversion.) That Tara might play the part of Coyolxauhqui in the film enflamed his manic ardor. Seeing her so ‘rendered’ was a special purging of a lady castigator. The Whore Superior also with vigilant following eyes and a shrill busy tongue! Was the cunt that desperate, craven to seek such an acting role? His late overconfidence in thinking he was still spruce, working solo, and his rash reflexive act to personally seek out the well tuned-in Cutter — put him in harm’s way. He *must* leave the country, the continent — get to a mid-east training camp. Somehow. That option hadn’t wained. The beguiling image on the famous disk helped ease the strain. Yes. Someone. Sooner or later. A more apt killing of a show off scold he could not imagine! And with the prospect of summary recruitment by a jihadi cell, he sensed his world coming together, his energies coalescing and rejuvenating. If Owen was undecided when Ryan contacted him, he hadn’t said no. Just call back in a week or so. He must remain optimistic. His wild ad lib days were over. Resignation, compliance, and purpose the givens now. He even began to see his return to White Rock as his very own Night Journey. The lingering problem was eluding the Morales goons. He had to lay low for a time. He would learn, must master the selfless jihadi calling, the express *way*

to the waiting Paradise. White Rock and its environs would serve as a temporary haven. In due course Dirk might help.

Conversely, Tara Quin remained corrosively scared and undecided — again! Only this time the new unknown jeopardy made her anxiety far worse. On fleeing the film set, after seeing the ogre himself and glimpsing his beady eye, she had furtively sought the anonymity of strange neighbourhoods, mainly near the LA waterfront. She decided she daren't return to her hotel and frantically assessed current circumstance on the fly — that, for instance, she still bore some makeup markings of the Aztec deity she was cast as. She had whipped off the feathers and garlands as she raced through the change room, grabbed her coat, jeans, shirt and handbag and fled into the street, letting her feral brain elect a route away from the film lot. The guard at one gate looked at her with wonder as she rushed out, burbling on his cell to some authority — she hadn't considered she might be safer inside the studio than out. If such a one as Ryan Dyck — *Ryan Dyck!* — could get in, anyone could. That one lone grisly assault by his rat pack was still a searing memory. Only on the outside — way outside! — might she consider catching her breath. Some time later she found herself sitting in a restaurant near the Santa Monica State Beach, wondering if she could afford the Bayside Hotel there. She needed a secure, good night's sleep. When she left Sea Sent she had several hundred dollars in her hand bag. Most of it she still had, the last of her credit card withdrawal limit. By then, her makeup removed, she resembled a wraith from Dawn of the Dead in her compact. So what. They'll be looking at your money not your face, dharling. Scary creatures were a commonplace — here.

Half-an-hour later she lay on a comfortable Bayside Hotel bed looking at the room's scalloped-edged crown moulding, which looked good enough to eat. She had just turned the air conditioning down. Over eight hundred dollars left. So. Ryan once thought you were a gifted whore...any prospects? She was also an adept shop lifter. Yes, she *would* get by...for a time. Time enough to consider a second call to the agent she'd met shortly after her arrival in LA. Shouldn't be too long placing that call. But her strident inner voices would not let up. *Come on girl, you're hallucinating, you panicked. So how did he find me then? How? Directions? Hardly luck. And what would he be doing on a film set for gawdsake? Stay with the worry girl. Stay under the radar for a day or two. At least. And think, think, think.* But there was something else, there is always *something else!* The fact that she had left Sea Sent a day before the awful riot in Vancouver sorely amused her until she read about Deirdre's unfathomable injury *at* the Nefer Club — where she had been *performing!* In a coma still, the last she read. Deirdre *in* Vancouver! Singing *in* a club. To *rapt* audiences no doubt. Then to be attacked — *near* the club. She still could not believe. It made no sense. A finely talented entertainer *attacked?* Had she, they, stayed in touch... almost twins they were once...and now so...so...oh god! The guilt was becoming land-locked.

Reading of the attack dazed her. Why, who, how? She knew her imagination was working overtime, yet the ugly Ryan fit in most of the scenarios that then docked her mind and heart. She was soon wiping recurrent tears. At one stage lambasting her pillow. When again comparatively calm and lucid, she thought of Hélène and her son. They would have witnessed some of the

later riot pictures, at least on the tele. Dear Hélène, the sought out proxy mother...how was she faring, now?

After a time Tara promptly pulled the sleeping pills from her hand bag...

enough for one very good-night's sleep. The sleep of Lethe — Stephen's meta-phor. For Hélène and Deirdre, then, one pill. Well maybe two.

TEN

The usually debonair Antoine Plombiers indulged a pout. The question of cast members' authenticity had surfaced before. Artur Haas, Antoine's history guru, was ever the arrant perfectionist when least welcomed. The fact that he sometimes looked in on a shooting session — as he had again this day, offering more shirty nonsense — exacerbated the antipathy. Antoine rarely cavilled over Artur's 'admonitions' but this day decided not to stifle his much backlogged dander. The film was going ahead. Period. The handsome gold bribe had been paid and a new splendid yummy actor, given Tara Quin's sudden disappearance, been hired to play Coyolxauhqui. End of story Arthur; we can commiserate later. In short, Willardson's finagling had insured Paleomena's Mexican investment future. Well, near future. The major investment brokers and their government lackeys had been dickering with Pechenpaugh and Paleomena over land use titles, drilling and excavation permits all along, some contracts becoming more 'elastic'. Indeed, the film's exceptional dynamic turned out to be little more than a *divertissement*; another female *period* for the busy brokers and grubstakers, Pechenpaugh's initial concern perhaps adding to the levity. Willardson simply served as the resident page turner — assembling the 'gratuity' — while the talks intensified, the few 'time outs' spent mulling over newcomer Alejandra Belmonte's efficacy and clout or — in one of Pechenpaugh's seamier asides — when the drug barons might best bump her off! Alejandra had risen in the ranks and was now the lead broker in one family, her male relations being largely decimated in the ongoing tribal wars. Her influence had grown, such that some government leaders were taking note, working her into their program expectations. Thus did Antoine sanguinely sit back in his director's fauteuil arm chair determined to proceed with the current take. They were already behind schedule. But he would not be rash. Immaculate equanimity would settle the matter and humour his prickly history maven.

What Antoine did not realize was that his words with fastidious Artur had been picked up and amplified by a wi-fi speaker on the shooting set, a speaker used by the script editor and second director when giving directions. A coincidence of band widths it seemed. Antoine often wore a voice tracker about his neck to savour his bon mots, which were relayed to a ghost writer who worked on his 'autobiography'. He'd left it on this day. It would take him some time to realize that the exchange with Artur was overheard by active workers and cast on the set, reducing some to near hysterics, leaving them unsure what they might do or expect next.

The initial confrontation with Artur centered on the replacement of Coyolxauhqui. Artur debunked her suitability. His eminent observance had been slighted, again. The matter, touching on authentic details, might not, should not, be winked at. So. Touché. Artur's overheard words began with: "Do consider the impropriety: the ethnic Coyolxauhqui figure you wish to invoke here should not, I think, be so 'Caucasian', nor so, hum, 'Playboyish', so surgically up-tilted. Dr. Roy David's speciality tits — here, in Tenochtitlan? Antoine, really."

Given Tara Quin's flight, the actress Antoine had cast as Coyolxauhqui, an athletic dancer named Hayden Hunter, was a fine performer and not at all hard on the eyes, but American in ways dear Artur did not approve of now that the skimpy costume she would wear was at last completed and fitted onto the wearer, its braided feather panaches and snake garlands italicizing two grand bosoms — features Antoine was duly aware of when he cast Hayden in the role. Artur had not seen the girl in the flesh until now and suffered a twinge of professional conscience — and had the temerity to say so aloud — sufficiently and lucklessly so to be heard beyond the margin! The comment nettled Antoine in part because of his own concern about fashioning an authenticity experts might coo over. The costume itself had taken the better part of a week to complete, and was surely as realistic, detailed and vivid as any Aztec godhead might have wished. To have the film set back now because a cast member was, despite browned skin, a recognizable 'white', and had global boobies that coincidentally pointed decidedly out and up, was on the order of an immanent bomb threat. Antoine gritted his teeth and said to Artur, "Ganyanov may d,do some fiddling. Later." Pytor Ganyanov was their gifted special effects genius.

But Artur was not to be sidelined. Once begun the battle order remained. He *added*, "I may also remind you that Ms. Hunter's agent is a lawyer and most particular about his client's appearance, skin colour especially. 'No 'corbeau shades,' I recall him saying. The contract with this performer is, I understand, finely conditional. A tabloid tale in the making."

It was then that Antoine and Artur realized their words had been heard by most of the crew and cast. A happenstance posterity is prized for. Hayden her-self, who had heard much of the exchange, was nervously sniggering. Additional to the boob question, Antoine knew the makeup artist had spent all morning getting the right brown skin tone. 'Antique drab' Antoine called it. If it was somewhat darker than anticipated, it would do. Deciding on a new hue, blending the pigment and readjusting the complimentary costume shades could take an ex-tra day or two.

After shutting off his mike, Antoine stood and took his expert aside. "I'm sure Providence is smiling. You m,must study the mosaics for the palace scenes. Immaculate. We'll p,pontificate later." As Artur mechanically turned and walked, or was pushed off, the set, the crew, on Antoine's genial — "Do continue!" — readily completed the *mis-en-scène*, carefully placing the lights and baffles on the palatial stage, the lower steps to a full-size façade of the Templo Mayor. If it took a moment or two for the cast to settle down, the taping of the lethal reverse encounter between Huitzilpopochtli and Coyolxauhqui and their fearsome entourages mandated only two takes: the fight choreographer had done a fine job.

Half-an-hour later Antoine relaxed in his pavilion as a food server brought his afternoon Brandy Alexander white hot chocolate. He had tried to humour Hayden when the take was finished. She offered a dismissive shrug in return as she left the set. Watching her leave he decided he'd made an operable choice, given the urgency. Yet the misgivings Artur pertly summoned remained unduly annoying. A tiny voice intimated that the image, the appearance of the lovely co-star just might be problematic, a cautionary intimation — that the artistic furies were trying to tell him something, given the aptness of the inaugural Coyolxauhqui performer. Was Hayden a burr or spoon of sand some goon had thrust into his white chocolate? As he cradled the warm cup he thought again that the virtuosic Ganyanov would be allowed, at the very least, some leeway to modify their current Coyolxauhqui — destined in the coming take to seed the Moon Disc image with Huitzilopochtli's body parts, the 'sinews' of a collapsing giant star, as devised by the film's expressive art director.

As he sipped his drink Antoine sensed a reprieve. By the time the disc was carved into the steps of the Templo Mayor any dismembered cadaver may have been a lapsed memory. Who would really know what the face-of-painted-bells Coyolxauhqui looked like fully alive, let alone her tits? Artur, you arrant pedant. Antoine's spirit improved with every dredged up nuance. Coyolxauhqui could well have graced a Playboy centerfold. Who knows? As for 'corbeau shades' he doubted Hayden's agent, Nat Feingold, was that dogmatic. And had not Hayden herself readily undertaken the makeover? That evening, ensconced in the study of his Runyon Canyon villa, its Art Deco splendour trippy for the select tourists, he spent a happy half hour looking over the congratulatory notes and e-mails from the welcome patrons — half adulatory, half expectant — also two mindful and solicitous producers, a few personal friends whose graciousness hadn't waned, and — as dividend — a sweet if ironic note from stellar newcomer Alejandra Belmonte herself! 'Poor Montezuma II — his legacy sullied again by a precious gringo — and none the wiser. Poor fella. Imagine — Coyolxauhqui alive and well — swelling Mitt Romney's Binders Full of Women. Bravo!' That Alejandra was becoming an adroit Mexican spokes-person and entrepreneur would stir the pot. Give Moon Disc a revelatory edge. But the unexpected call from his studio secretary Cally ended the fond reverie.

"Nat called. He's in a snit."

Antoine smiled. "One of N,nat's favourite roles."

"Something about Hayden. He knows you're in."

"Do listen in if you like." It was one of Antoine's measured 'gratuities'; agent Nat Feingold was a Cally favourite. It took a moment to establish a clear con-nection.

"Yes Nat. So good to hear from you. Hayden, by the way was sp,ectacular. Such athleticism. Poor Huitzilpopochtli lost a few choice feathers and abeaded headband. Talk about a d,droopy tail. We only had to shoot the scene twice."

"Anto, I know you may be the best kind of elephant shit around but our contract didn't call for subway skin. I've just seen the rushes and you can clearly see her twat, a shaved twat, in a couple of passes. Not nice Anto. Not nice at all. You going to make me call Aryeh? Frankly,

Anto, the rest doesn't look that good either. All that brown guck. You've been a naughty boy." Aryeh Adler was one of the day's dreaded lawyers.

Antoine indulged a snuffle. "I must say I didn't count the m,milliseconds the loin decoration moved. As one with your inestimable encyclopedic learning knows, the Aztecs hadn't yet d,developed spandex nor silk case-sexes. And their gods, especially their fungible goddesses, were not slaves to reticence or d,demurral. We both share a v,venerable respect for creative genius do we not? I have it on g,good authority..."

"Anto, I can send you a catalogue of kids who'll let you cut their hearts out if you ask them to. Hayden Hunter is not one of them. Her conscientiousness is not the issue here. The contract with you is — which, in the fine print my road sec highlighted for you, allows for a framed pectoral but emphatically no twat. And no melanotic nigger skin! Light café not nigger. Sniffy citations, from several quarters, you and Hayden don't want at this stage. You really don't want me to call Aryeh do you?"

By then Nat's — as well as Artur's — trumped up objections beggared impertinence. Antoine was about to extol Ganyanov's select talents when he impulsively changed his mind, as much to incommode the overweening Nat Feingold. Moreover, he doubted that Hayden's career was airtight as Nat suggested. And Nat's smarmy resort to bribery this time barely a notch above al-Qaeda thuggery. What was the outfit he worked for paying him anyway?

"I think you b,better call your terrorist guru, Nat. Haven't had a chance to try the latest c,cough syrup."

"Anto. You're dangerously rocking the boat here."

"Have a heart felt day, Nat."

Antoine had no sooner put down the receiver than he summoned Cally on his cell, saying, "That original list of actors I w,want to see again. Especially the one, what's her name — Tara something."

"Tara Quin."

"Yes, her. Between you and me."

"Absolutely. How do I find her?"

"We might put an add in the g,goddesses wanted sections."

"Hey ho."

It took Antoine a moment or two to get over Cally's silent remonstrance. He did expect a lot somedays. But as he reviewed Tara Quin's portfolio her friend-of-a-friend agent had assembled, and the brief film take before she fled, he was struck again by the girl's sleek beautifully proportioned physique. A more elegant form he could not then conjure, nor a face he now elected to favour as feasibly Aztec. She appeared to be normal sized and likely halfway between 'up and down'. Her eyes and cheek bones alone might appease the prissy Artur and his own surfacing guilt for hiring Hayden. He recalled then that he had been impressed with Tara Quin's heed, poise, reserve energy and rich contralto voice, in addition to her leggy trig figure. Thus her leaving, fleeing so precipitously continued to puzzle. Did she need protection, from some disgruntled charmer? You only had to ask, dear. Being left up a creek for a replacement, he had

decided the acrobatic-dance performance of Hayden in the Cirque du Soleil quite miraculous. He had always favoured leggy hoofers — when feasible. And Hayden, at the time, seemed especially keen to land a film role. He had not anticipated her current agent being another Great Virgin Gamekeeper — who she more or less pretended to ignore if memory served. Such that his accountant had signed the contract which he'd cursorily inspected, the highlighted section of which appeared at the time a mere fustian ruse, a stolid way to augment a bonus payment. Now, as he looked again at the very apt Ms. Quin, he mentally marshalled the pertinent film takes. If fussy Artur objected to Hayden's bosom, the brief panned closeups of the sacrificial rite of dismemberment of Huitzilopochtli — a coming take — could well up the ante: all the bouncing chopping wallops! Big breasts intimating cudgels — more or less. So a replacement normal-sized lass, one without a vigilante agent, would not perhaps be amiss. Especially *this* inaugural choice lass. The oddity in Antoine's mind was the insignificance of the frames Nat objected to, which Antoine had reviewed that afternoon — the reference to milliseconds not entirely an exaggeration. Perhaps if she hadn't so neatly shaved. More evidence of Nat the stand-in Game Keeper at work. If the confrontational scenes might garner an R rating, Antoine had planned them to be little more than Tulum frescoes presented as soft-focus slow-mo 'tableaux' — with voice-overs, suggestive of a Greek chorus speaking in a putative Nahuatl dialect. One way to tone down the encounter and salvage a PC 13 rating. But Hayden's outstanding bumpers were just perhaps a trifle, well, bumptious. Even more so framed in Flamingo and Quetzal feathers. Dour fastidious Artur had fielded a point. Antoine wondered how realistically Ganyanov could change a face and torso and whether Hayden's contract permitted some adept morphing. If he had been tempted to just proceed as intended, the frames of Tara before him now were sufficiently galvanizing to reconsider the matter. Her genes seemed entirely fortuitous. The earlier afternoon shoot was an early take for the otherwise bountiful Hayden. A slight further delay would not bring down the temple, her recompense payout large but not ex-orbitant. His accountant was a mindful chap, unlike her agent. He ought to reconsider the more plausible Aztec 'she' and hope the want sections might elicit a call at least. Cally may have to wade through several score responses, but would not miss one from a Tara Quin he believed. In his excitement Antoine summoned Cally to a further briefing.

"When she calls or emails — our Ms. Quin — invite her to lunch."

"Sure she's mortal?"

"We live in a m,magical world, Cally."

ELEVEN

The singular want ad in *Variety*, placed by Antoine Plombier's film company, Corybant Productions, both intrigued and cautioned Tara Quin the day she sat in a Venice Beach café with the paper and morning coffee. She knew the want ad section of any paper could be filled with stalkers and defrauders. In the ad, Corybant Films wanted to reconnect with a 'superb' actress who was to star in the film *Moon Disc* but had unaccountably disappeared. How unusual

was such an ad? Was it worth even a disguised response? Still, if genuine, could she not be as safe there as elsewhere? Would galled cartel minders use such want adds? Would vengeful Ryan? You see a lot of shadows when you're scared.

Corybant Films has lost contact with a superb actress, initials T.Q. under contract for a starring role in the film Moon Disc. If you are this actress please contact CF at the number below. CF retains security personal, discrete residences, and legal council for all cast members.

She coolly debated the matter. Was it a ruse to let some mob goons know where she was, given the tracing facilities available, or a genuine even urgent query? Would such goons resort to such subterfuge? She did leave the film set in a hurry and remained 'at large'. She initially suspected someone on the set itself. The likelihood of Dyck showing up there *on his own!*...she checked the number given in the ad again. Corybant's studio office. Hmm. What to do? Have one of the street folk she met give the office a call — one of the many wannabe players, or the dudes posing as agents? Just such a one sat talking to a waitress in another café a day before, saying, 'Want me to contact him, tell him you're available...well interested?' She never learned who the 'him' was.

She scowled. Give it a try girl. Propose a neutral meeting place — of your own choosing. She called the number from a pay phone and, to her surprise, was promptly put in touch with the big cheese himself. "Ah — so very p,leased you called. Cally happened to take the call and recognized your voice. I'll send a car." After a brief silence he added, "Special identity lettering above the plate — HOUYHNHM. Known w,world wide. Let me s,spell it for you. A chap called Menninger pilots the beast." He then slowly spelled out the name of Jonathan Swift's transcendent godlike horses. In turn Tara stoically gave him the name of a busy neighbourhood park. She would come forward only at the last moment. The fact that the preposterous plate lettering came from the card himself helped de-cide the matter. Who else would fashion an archly preposterous custom tag like that!

She could hardly believe the limo that drew up to the Coral Tree Park. Nor the large spruce man who got out from the back seat. He looked about, spotted her, came forward, extended a hand. She hesitated, almost fled. Had he been more assertive she just might have. He smiled, saying, "Antoine is a lucky lad." She looked him over. With a tailor like that and wheels to boot, she had trouble imagining some kind of handoff. He continued: "My name is Menninger. Mr Walstrom, our driver today, is a chauffeur for chief executives at the Paleomena Corporation. You hinted at some worry for your safety in your message. Let me assure you, Antoine has sent the very best — us." He then politely, cordially beckoned for her to join them, which she did after a brisk intake of air. Immediately the wonder ensued. Had she ever seen let alone been in such a vehicle? A third man sat by the driver. He turned. "Hi, I'm Ken. I fix Mr. Walstrom's martinis." This produced a spate of polite smiles. Ken looked like he could take on and thrash Ryan and Stephen together. She stifled a laugh. So, girl, this auteur Antoine must be something bloody special. Better bank on it.

And he was, though not in any way she surmised. His office, at least the one he interviewed her in this time, not the production stage as before, was a circular art deco salon full

of gleaming fruitwoods and leather patinas. She had slipped back into the pre-war years she thought as she took in his fleet suit and waistcoat, easy Beckham coiffeur, understated van dyke, slightly insouciant bow tie, wing tip oxfords, and beckoning smile as he kissed her limply proffered hand. A delectable lunch someone named Cally had set out in an adjoining room was being extolled by Ken as he chatted with the same conscientious Cally. Tara was nearly speechless.

“I can’t imagine what I’ve done to deserve this.”

Antoine smiled. “Modesty c,can be a decided handicap in this industry. Indeed, a good actress has a struggle to pull it off.”

“I guess I’m a natural. One of the ingénues’. Do they still use that word?”

Antoine smiled and gestured for Tara to sit on the chair before his wide sumptuous desk. Noting her heed of the desk he said, “Grey elm and sassafras. Quite f,friendly.” He drew an envelope from a top drawer and perched himself on the desk corner as he opened it. “Be assured, seeing you again has improved the landscape here about. I won’t inquire about p,personal habits, but if you are trying to avoid them at present I can provide a comfortable and safe place to stay. We all w,want you to reconsider the film you abruptly left off. The script’s been somewhat revised if that w,was your initial objection.”

“Please, I’m here. The offer of a safe place to stay is welcome, and kind of conditional. A former boyfriend made some long-term enemies. He actually showed up on the set...I panicked...didn’t tell my agent...a sorry story. I’ve been ‘hoofing it’ ever since. I almost didn’t call.”

Antoine smiled. “We’re very pleased you did.”

“I’ll start shooting, or whatever, whenever you wish. But I may need some backup when it’s done. It would be helpful if I could use an alias for the promotion and credits. One I can register. Something simple, common — the name — ‘Ann’ something.”

Antoine quickly responded. “I’ll get our p,promo wizards to devise a surname immediately. Please be assured, the film will make you a b,budding star. You’ll be in a position to hire some Kens of your own. Naturally, we will help and be on the lookout for w,witless reviewers. Ken can be your back-up during the making of the film.”

It was then she partly laughed, partly cried. She had never been as anxious as she was the past week, thinking half of LA looked for her at one stage, even hiding one night behind a garbage bin. It was then Antoine presented her with a shiny gold key he’d taken from the envelope — to a suite in the very hotel this office was situated, L’Ermitage in Beverly Hills. He smiled and faintly shrugged. “The suite is arguably early Mycenaean, which I t,tend to shun. You’re entirely safe. We do have other suites, of course, should you share my b,bias. I think that’s what it’s dubbed and derided in popular parlance.”

She smiled and took the key, cradling it like a small delicate bird. A veritable hummingbird!

Antoine added, “ — Immediate possession. Cally and Ken will take you up after we eat. Cally can hustle up a w,wardrobe for the time being. A task she specializes in.” A comment

ample Cally took in with her stintless good humour. “We’ll talk again tomorrow. Early afternoon. Cally will convene a time and n,notify Ken.”

Tara thought of the few belongings she left behind on coming here. Shedding the detritus of a past. And thanked her lucky stars. Seeing Ryan on the set had appalled her, returned her to the dread of a pit and pendulum. The hellish assault that one time still numbed, debilitated. She knew Antoine’s film had some unsavoury scenes but none as gruesomely real as those she might have endured on her own. Her anxiety had almost subsided. That alone was a blessing. It was the first time, in a long time, she felt up to enjoying a meal.

Antoine too, when he again reviewed the early film takes before the goonlet showed up, realized he had overlooked the remarkable if understated beauty the first time round. He too sensed a Providence tirelessly at work. As for a new name, indeed a new personage, the prospect livened an auteur’s *raison d’être*. Something brief, common yet emphatic. ‘Ann’ perhaps, as she hinted — ‘Ann Green’ say. He said the name several times aloud without hesitation as his self-satisfaction loomed. If her welcome here was, well yes, a trifle *outré*, he sensed

in ‘Ann Green’ a talent rare and vital as desert rain.

TWELVE

A wary Ryan Dyck sat in the lounge of the Jasper Hotel on Vancouver’s Water Street. He’d picked the lounge this night because it was reliably dim inside. He had just sold some coke to a hophead in the alley behind the hotel and awaited to hear from a former supplier. He was slowly re-establishing a network.

He thought he recognized two men who took up a table across the room from him. He wasn’t sure if they saw him. They seemed preoccupied with their own affairs, not bothering with other patrons, and he relaxed somewhat. Ever since being curtly ominously briefed by Cutter on the film set — learning that the Nefer safe money was *not* a blessing — and seeing pissy tale-telling Tara, he’d been on edge. He’d been a fugitive before, but never quite like this, though he was coping. If the money he found in the Nefer club safe the night of the riot was predestined, as he initially thought — running into Deirdre, the singing Barbie, afterward was not. She’d plainly seen his bulging carryall and dryly asked if he’d robbed a bank. So he dealt with the ‘looker’ and escaped with his take intact! When you’re on a roll you deal with stray inconveniences. A reckoning with the watchful song bird long overdue. The riot he believed masked both theft and dust up.

His initial exhilaration over the Nefer bonanza had lingered for several days, especially the night he met and persuaded Paul to join him for an overdue celebration or, as he put it, ‘a rad night out’! Dirk was away ‘filling in’ and polishing his new insurrection spiel. Dirk, the wall-to-wall gum beater. Whereas Paul the good, the student of sociology, had just finished his volunteer gig at the Food Bank. Such magnanimity. So conscientious, modest. So discreet. Yet he knew Paul, like most religious folk — Paul was Baptist — had a weakness for nude sexy girls. After

some reedy coaxing Paul went along. “Here, wear my coat,” Ryan had said to give prim Paul a ready disguise that night, adding, “You’ve admired it — the coat. We’re amigos, right?” Paul was amused if not flattered as he donned Ryan’s expensive Covert Coat with its black fleece lapels. Ryan had a gold coin secreted inside the lining of one jetted pocket. A good luck charm he thought. A hard-up hophead sold him the coin. Said a friend stole a goldsmith’s graphite mould and made a couple of alloy samples, but was disappointed — too crude the friend thought, particularly the edging. Something wrong with the mould, perhaps. Ryan wasn’t so sure, and intended to find an upmarket assessor.

“It is a superb coat,” Paul had acknowledged while smiling at Ryan, then wearing Paul’s rather seedy tweed jacket. Soon they were off, chuckling like blithe truants. But while striding toward the designated show lounge two men had accosted them. They came from behind. Ryan didn’t know either. More rat shit he’d thought, sensing his own power, his transcendence that night, even relishing a fight. But he was surprised by the men’s skill and toughness. He tried to fight them off but between them they dinged his knife arm and had him on the ground in no time. Paul was knocked aside and struggled to regain his balance, then col-lapsed a second time after being pummelled in the stomach.

“What the fuck do you want?” Ryan had barely got the words out, the one arm about his neck a vice. Then he saw the large knife, a Tuareg he thought. Threatening words followed, accented words, Mexican he believed.

“You come with us. Want the safe money. All of it. Then you maybe live.”

“What fuckin’ money?”

Ryan had loudly called out, wildly gestured, hoping to attract some passers by. But the few about quickly shrank away. By then Paul had regained his feet but staggered about. The second blow left him winded, befuddled. He vomited.

Thus had the ‘night out’ with Paul turned into a nightmare! Someone else beside Deirdre must have seen him leaving the Nefer club the night of the riot — which his chilling meeting with Cutter had all but affirmed, for how else would he have known? Now, in the quiet Jasper lounge, the memory of his ‘night-out’ with kind Paul again left him appalled — the menacing words of his surprise attackers and his craven response still fulsomely acute.

“We kill you Dickhead, the way you like,” The one attacker had said.

“You’ve got the wrong guy!” Ryan exclaimed as the attacker’s hand tightened about his neck.

“Sure, sure punki,” the man said.

“No, no you silly fuck, he’s over there — Dyck. The Coat.”

They had looked menacingly at Paul, who began staggering up Powell Street, still short of breath, his voice then little more than a whisper. The two looked at one another. “Yeah — the coat,” one said. Said the other, puzzled, “No beard.”

Ryan had been frantic then. “Why he shaved it off, you dumb shits!”

The man with the knife hesitated then rushed after Paul. The other man, still holding Ryan, looked up long enough for Ryan to knuckle him in the temple, leaving him dazed.

Promptly, Ryan had fled in the opposite direction while hearing Paul's brief frantic shouts for help. The area about was then deserted. Ryan had run till his lungs rattled inside, hiding eventually in a dumpster somewhere back of Cordova Street. The verdict was in: he was now a singular pariah, yet he couldn't imagine how the Morales' caretakers found him. Who among Owen's crew would have known of his flight back up North? Would Dirk have told someone? Surely not. His mind was then, for a time, disordered as the reeking mess in the dumpster bin. Yet he didn't move. Daren't. "*You, you,*" he'd said accusingly. "*You! The first time, you!*" He knew Paul could tell them nothing. The yelling — so shrill, yet so brief. They gagged, took him away — most like. He remembered seeing a van across the street — where they might have taken *him*. He'd doubted Paul would survive. 'Innocents' rarely do. Gaffes otherwise finger, impugn. He might never see Paul again. A thought that eerily lingered.

A month later he stood on the shore of Stanley Park's Second Beach, the sun just setting, the sky at the horizon rich in flammable tints. He had just heard from the enterprising Dirk Church who was then collaborating with Jack Owen's operatives and enforcers, and sometime groomers of radicals like him. *Detonators* someone called them. A gull pecked at the shell of a small crab on the sand. His jitters, often so overwhelming and insistent, had subsided after Dirk called. Dirk, the new savvy Night Caller. "You'll leave from a Yankee waterfront yet to be decided. We'll let you know. A ship, the Cyra, will take you as far as Lisbon. You'll meet there a man called Akeem who will have a good picture of you. Remember to change your disposable cell when you arrive." Ryan tested the lazy ocean water. Not all that cold. He would swim about Siwash Rock, perhaps even climb it. He had once; he could do it again. With a ship and emissary awaiting he felt invincible. The time would come. Sooner than he imagined. Ding Dong Dirk. Who was now conducting a seminar for very angry young men — would-be internet scolds and/or jihadis. Ha! Life was good. A little careless sometimes,

but good. Paul a nagging but fading memory, their night out together a cruddy rotten date.

THIRTEEN

The headless handless body remained unidentified. It lay in the morgue of the Chief Coroner's Office in Vancouver. It had been found in a North Vancouver land fill next a torn, filthy, once stylish coat with an unusual gold coin concealed in a lining pouch. There had been some rain and the body was partly eaten by rodents. Allen Pinker, who had been asked to identify the odd coin, promptly phoned Willardson who flew up that day on a corporate jet. As they looked at the body Willardson thought of recent terrorist beheadings. The morgue attendant awaited a comment.

"You mentioned a tattoo."

"Yes. A humming bird — originally. What was left on an arm quite 'lovely'. The coroner will welcome a statement."

After a nod to Pinker, Willardson said, “Sadly, I can only verify the coin that was found in the inner pouch of the coat. A likely Aztec motif. Gold leaf. A modest facsimile of some in any number of Mesoamerican collections. Impressive but of little historic value. I have no idea of its provenance and cannot imagine someone committing — this. One must assume the body may never be identified?”

“Only if a friend or relative registers a missing person and can identify the body, though it is in a deteriorated state. Some dried blood was on the man’s street clothes when the body was found. A very hasty killing we think. The killers would almost certainly have removed the tattoo had they known. The man does have old scars on an elbow — old stitches we think. The coin is a puzzle of course — as is the coat, which appears to have been well made. A mess of course, the coat. Somebody likely looking for cards, ID. Didn’t find or know of the inner lining pouch it seems.”

The coin was a further reminder for Willardson that extortion payments of any kind were not always discrete and often followed torturous paths. He crossed himself as he left.

He and Pinker talked afterward in Willardson’s suite in the Hotel Le Soleil, the dining nook of which overlooked the stately grey-stone Vancouver Art Gallery. Some kind of rally was just concluding on the gallery’s front lawn near its Doric portico. Restless clouds umbered the sky. A light rain was falling. “Our liquid sunshine,” Pinker said.

They had ordered the Lambi — steamed conch with white rice and white beans — and exchanged distracting pleasantries as they ate, mainly to do with the culinary arts practiced at Le Soleil. As he poured the tea Willardson took up the matter of the enigmatic coin.

“Were such a cob coin not so rare — this fair replica being as surprising — I wouldn’t be quite so puzzled. What connection to the body is another matter. I am grateful you called.”

“I couldn’t help thinking it was somewhat like one you had me examine a while back. The curiosity of its presence in such a place must confound. What will you do now, if I may ask?”

“I must inform Arthur Pechenpough of course. It is a daunting puzzle. One would need access to an original design to make such a cob, the design rare and specific. The mould itself wasn’t top drawer though. I will consult a friend in the Numismatic Department of the National Museum of American History. Assess the current appeal of such a specie. I’ll try to follow up on any future identity of the body, of course. I may call on your expertise again.”

“On call any time. It is curious, a single coin carefully tucked away so.”

A newly reflective Willardson thought to himself how the matter was worrisome as a hand over a flame. He then brightened. “I did note, when I arrived — that the gallery across the street from us has a collection of works from the Pearlman Collection. Mainly Cézanne. A patron of the provident Graces. Usually. I trust you’ll accompany me. We’ll have a cognac first?”

“My dear fellow, a pleasure.”

Willardson was of course duly considering several improvident scenarios: the

cutout informing some cadres of his own, the goldsmith himself keeping a replica of the mould and a few coins he might later hawk to an inferior minter, an ‘accident’ on the way, to acquit another bribe, only a few sample coins recovered, prompting a pent up retribution?... Willardson was simply stupefied at that stage as the many possibilities loomed, the similarity of the coin to the ones he’d secured for Pechenpaugh far too close for comfort. He hadn’t inspected them all, yet felt this coin was extrinsic, a mediocre facsimile. Duplicity, perfidy was omnipresent in that age, everything ostensibly specious, feigned, ersatz. Italicizing the worth of Cézanne — ‘a seeker of authenticity’. The call to Pechenpaugh could wait.

FOURTEEN

Antoine Plombiers was at first quite speechless — a rare historic event. A pesky phone call Cally received and duly informed him of had clouded his horizon. But his secretary had things to do and soldiered on.

“ — Said today, ASAP.”

When Antoine found his voice it was less resonant than head-up Cally re-membered.

“Who they?”

“Didn’t specify. Decidedly discreet their appointment service — the Belmonte’s.”

“Them, now? Not the Morales?... ”

“No, the cousins.”

“There were threats?” Antoine’s voice was still finding its timbre.

“A postponement of the film was advised.”

“Ha.” His initial amusement soon faded. “Any r,reasons? A hint or two?”

“Just said your production crew needed some special instructions. Something about the script — something overlooked.” Again Antoine’s silence busy Cally dis-regarded. “You’re free at eleven, for about an hour.”

Said a sober Antoine. “Phone detective Shearer. The usual with backup. And let Alex know we’re expecting some r,riff raff.” Alex was one of the new greeters a L’Ermitage. “I want it minuted. So stay tuned.” They like some k,kind of equestrian stale — Scapa I think.”

“I’ll get some.”

“Such opportunistic patronage...imagining we’re all ag,gog, grateful for im-promptu intrusions. Put on your thinking cap when they come. Please in-terrupt anytime.”

“Roger.”

“Your boyfriend is a kick boxer, isn’t he?”

“Former boyfriend.”

“Did he t,teach you some maneuvers?”

“He wasn’t much of a teacher.”

“Ah.”

“Funny thing, it was a woman I eventually talked to.”

Antoine was momentarily stunned. “Good lord. You’re resorting to a drip feed again?”

“Thought I’d give the curiosity an honourable mention. Who you’re dealing with may be crucial here. Maybe Alejandra herself. Who knows?”

“Right! Battle stations! All hands on the table, Shearer and his team on the b,buzz line!”

The ‘buzz line’ was the device Antoine kept with him always. A senior’s emergency warning signal with the option to summon private detective Shearer’s team. Cautious Antoine had long since decided his peerless HOUYHNHM presence alone was not always honoured among the apostates of LA. And the interesting if problematic Alejandra Belmonte had yet to present herself. If in-deed she was the caller. Wonder of wonders.

Thus, Cally and Antoine were not entirely fazed when the surprisingly stylish, comparatively young, beautiful and somewhat diminutive Alejandra Belmonte and two friends were ushered into Antoine’s office by Alex, one of the ‘friends’ an equally swish if more robust gal, the second a monstrosity not in Huitzilopochtli’s battle regalia but a smart business suit. Erika and Mario. Neither Cally nor Antoine had met Alejandra before, though Cally knew of the woman’s rise in the Belmonte family from media accounts, including the fact she’d attended the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. After some handshakes and Antoine’s suave cordiality — “Cally may w,want the name of your couturier before you leave!” — Alejandra sat in one of the chairs placed before Antoine’s desk while her companions stood behind occasionally glancing at and through the room’s large bevelled glass window. Alejandra crossed fetching legs and studied Antoine with a Mona Lisa smile.

“You perhaps don’t recognize me.”

Antoine froze. “My word! Yes indeed. I never imagined Ariadne finding her w,way here — that m,miraculous clue of thread!”

The fussy pun obviously pleased him and broadened Alejandra’s smile as she said, “You’re perhaps distracted by the modern maze. Too many Minotaurs. Too many ‘bull runs’.”

Antoine adopted a theatric moue. Such knowledgeable and animated meta-phors! Alejandra fluently continued.

“Luis, my distant cousin, has left on a needed vacation. Before he de- parted he was sadly troubled by the very Nordic actress playing Coyolxauhqui. He left in a state of unease. Unusual for him. He suggested we help you find another, and well, further fine tune the script — keep Ariadne’s yarn in tact, so to speak. I trust we’ve come in time.”

Antoine smiled at Cally. Luis on ‘vacation’ — needed or not — was a telling detail. Nor could he believe Luis disappointed with the spectacular Hayden or cared a hoot about the script. Still, the opportunity that now presented itself was congenial — a Belmonte conversant with one of his favourite Greek myths! His astonishment was only matched by his anticipation. “Your t,timing is in fact impeccable. We are indeed considering a replacement. And, if I am not mistaken, you may m,meet her here this very day.” He looked at Cally who quickly responded, “— 3 PM. If she’s on time. She’s to sign a contract.”

Alejandra smiled. “Her very coming may prompt a new look at the script’s characterization of her of course.” She looked at Erika who belatedly nodded.

Antoine, finding himself quaintly speechless, broadly mutely smiled.

“This *is* fortuitous,” remarked Alejandra. “We look forward to meeting her. I suggest we convene in the North loggia of our Brentwood estate. I’ll send a car.”

Newly mindful, Antoine belatedly responded, “ — Ah. A special treat.” He briefly glanced at Cally woodenly smiling the while.

“Do we know the name of this new performer?” Alejandra asked.

“ — Ann Green.”

Cally managed to return Antoine’s impromptu smile; it was the first time she’d heard the new name.

“A promising newcomer?”

“M,most promising.”

“We also have assembled some costumes we think suitable. Which, in their way, better flesh out the mythic side of the character. Less prodigal than planned perhaps. It would be useful if she could try some on.”

Antoine could barely believe what he was hearing let alone seeing. Luis Morales ‘on vacation’ could mean a signal demotion or worse. As for getting Tara Quin, even as Ann Green, to a mob layout, after her terror at so recently sighting one of its goons, was on the order of sending Ariadne off to face the Minotaur on her own. It was then the heedful and well versed Cally piped up. “Ms. ah, Green was recently threatened by a man she once knew. She is very wary these days. She may balk at going to a new address.”

“I’ll drive the limo myself. Erika and Mario will be with me. You may bring your own sitters and advisors.”

Antoine demurely smiled. Cally silently gestured slitting her throat, a gesture Alejandra took note of for she smoothly proposed an alternative venue for a first meeting.

“I’m sure we can work something out. Yes. Perhaps we could meet her here first. 3 PM you say. I’ll bring some of the costumes. We’ll discuss matters in full then. I have a prospectus here you may wish to examine in the meantime. To help tweak some aspects of the script. I’ve followed your career and this film in particular with great interest.”

Antoine managed to keep his expression hospitable, maintaining his much practiced bonhomie as Alejandra placed the document on his desk.

“Indeed w,we shall. A prospectus. So looking forward to seeing — these ex-clusive c,costumes.”

The meeting ended as speciously as it began. When the trio had gone Antoine faced a candidly expressive Cally.

“A precious name — that. Spur of the moment was it?”

“A sudden illumination.”

Cally dryly smiled.

“Sudden, yes. If you have some n,notion of what’s going on here, do tell.”

“I have heard of women steering some of the families. A paucity of men-folk. Better diplomats on the whole I imagine — the gals. More prudent. Didn’t know about costumes. I suspect she’s had you in mind for a while.” This com-

ment was followed by a fetching smile.

Antoine mused, “A sorority number f,fronting the Belmontes.”

“She is a winner is she not?”

“It’s not the word uppermost in my mind. What can she be up to coming here — now?”

“She wore a St. Christopher medallion on her necklace.”

“Ah. You noticed that too. The one who assists people crossing a p,perilous river. An irony that daunts.”

“The bond between she and Erika seemed close. Glad she agreed to coming here. Astute gal don’t you think? All in all. Willing to roll a bit.”

“You had no idea? Luis on vac,cation and this new mob boss — a film connoisseur?”

“Don’t know about Luis. Alejandra’s interest in film is known though, not a complete mystery.”

“And you think we should p,perhaps not take a prompt overdue sabbatical?”

“Not really. Best not to annoy the new mother goddesses.”

“Is that possible?”

“With your ability and reach...a possibility.”

“Do remind me. So, no egress, no evacuation for the nonce. You might m,meet Tara before hand. Our new ‘Annie’. Take her to the fourth floor lounge for a ‘chat’. Get Ken to accompany you. I’ll phone Pechenpaugh.”

“And if she bolts? Our Ann Green.”

“We may have to compliment our g,guests on their reign of terror. I rather think she will come. We must try to be more b,broad-minded Cally.”

“Doing my damndest. I do know a bit about her — Alejandra. I’ll leave you a fact sheet before I go up. Some pithy details may have escaped your attention.”

Antoine brightened. “The b,beginning and end of all art. I also think we should cast an eye on that unexpected prospectus before we meet.”

“Roger. Hum. Ann Green. Hum. Our great live hope.”

None of the elevators Cally waited for carried Tara Quin, who had been told of a sponsor coming to the meeting that day though not her name. When Cally was about to call Tara’s room, she spotted her coming off a screened service elevator with Ken. She wore a large floppy hat and dark glasses, and kept looking about her. A ghost of a smile touched her face when Cally approached, advising, “Antoine suggested a brief update meeting in the 4th floor lounge before the scheduled meeting in his office. Ken you’re free, yes? Good.”

Cally had decided to jump in at the deep end, opening with the possible toxic news: “One of the film’s patrons will be present — at the meeting with Antoine. A smart gal — Alejandra Belmonte. She’s now the head of one family, and she’s radically changing the protocols of doing business. She has her own film production company. Advertising mainly. You’ll get on. She’ll be here in about forty minutes. You’re looking great. We’ve a new name. Yes. Hope you’ll try it on.” As Cally headed toward the lift she turned and said, “Ann Green.”

But Tara was elsewhere and barely moving. “A Belmonte? Here? They are one of the Michoacana families aren’t they? You can’t be serious?”

“Her extended family’s assisted Antoine before. Longtime. You accept the part and you’re home free.”

“Oh please.”

“It’s true,” Ken said. “She’s one of the new mavens on corporate radar. Pechenpaugh’s for sure. You’ll be as safe with her as anyone right now. In one of her sanctioned projects you’re sacrosanct.”

Tara quietly sighed.

Astute Cally was getting impatient and played a trump card. “You can of course beg off, leave — anytime. Now if you must. She doesn’t know you’re staying here. We’ll be disappointed but understand. It’s still early.”

Tara again hesitated. “Oh Christ. You people. She’ll know me as — what did you say — Ann Green? And she’s interested in Antoine’s film?” Tara’s expression conveyed major skepticism.

Cally again rose to the occasion. “Yes. Had a hand in it early on, apparently. Some cogent suggestions Antoine’s taken to heart.

It was of course a well crafted fib, a seamless improvisation, a Cally specialty. She continued with valid advice.

“The name ‘Ann Green’ I would use henceforth, regardless. We can instate the identity, put the registration together whether you stay or go.”

The ready candid assurance seemed to hold sway. Ken spoke up. “Meet her. Make up your mind. Give us that at least. She’ll know you as Ann Green. You can retain the alias if you want out.”

All waited quietly as Tara wrestled with a decision. “Ann Green,” she said with wry amusement. “What fun.”

Said Cally with ready reassurance, “Only if it’s copacetic. The name. Sudden, I know. Hadn’t anticipated Antoine’s brain wave. We all like it.”

“*Green*. Apt wouldn’t you say?”

Cally smiled. “Not a bit.”

“Not at all,” Ken added.

“Always a challenge or dare,” Tara mused, while dealing with a stubborn grimace. “‘Keep the enemies closer.’ Jesus.”

Cally resumed talking when they had settled in the lounge.

“When you finally meet Alejandra you’ll be less confused about her film creds. Her acumen and business ventures are exceptional, very sweet. I keep abreast of the Belmontes for Antoine.” Cally didn’t mention that her curiosity was largely her own and had no prompting from hoity-toity Antoine as she continued.

“She’s very bright and easy on the eyes, as Ken will affirm I’m sure. She has an MBA from the Haas Business School at Berkeley, and attended the UCLA film school. She owns two agra

businesses and half-a-dozen restaurants. She does her own media advertising and info videos. I've seen her in person and read a recent interview in the Sunday Times. I believe she's here to stay. Hope you do too. Again — she doesn't know who you are nor that you're staying here."

In looking over Alejandra's prospectus, Cally and Antoine realized she'd carefully considered the film's premise — even its setting and costumes. Agreeably, the thrust of the film's current narrative proved apposite Alejandra's own, at least in outline. After some token comments about studio life in general, Cally resumed her pitch to Ann Green.

"The revised film Moon Disc dramatizes the encounter between two famous or notorious Aztec deities. The turnabout is that in this story the female prevails. The famous 'stone disc' will picture the vanquished body of the *male* god — made to look like a collapsed star. The film's tenor suggests that it's time the old macho bulwark came tumbling down, it's hegemony the main hindrance to civilization — well, that's one topical presumption. I've seen some graphic frames and they look great. I suspect Alejandra wants to promote the film — by endorsing its premise and assisting its promotion. A testament to her own rise. Her backing should be plain to all in her community. Her timing may be adroit I think. Sorry Ken."

"Don't be. Decisive women can be intriguing...in most any guise."

Tara listened as one being briefed on strict custodial protocol, as Cally re-sumed.

"In the prospectus Alejandra left us, the costuming is exceptional in its fabric and pattern, especially for the aftermath — the 'awakening' as she calls it. The costumes help define the transformation she says. The fight scene will remain dramatic of course. Antoine's got a very fine fight master. The storyline of the film leads up to this encounter. The final scenes show a triumphant Cololxauhqui outlined against the remnants of a supernova, the candescent serpentine remnants of Huitzilopochtli settling into a vivid cloud. An astronomer has assisted with the graphic rendering. A star collapse metaphor we can all muse over in this confrontational age."

Cally sat back, took a drink of her lassi, and smiled at the attentive and diverted others before continuing in a more sober tone.

"One matter Alejandra apparently debated yet advises — in the prospectus she recently left Antoine. Some of the costuming is unusual in that it has a stark quality. She apparently wants an arresting but not gaudy female. One costume features ebony engravings. They purportedly trace the celestial movement of the potent divine your character represents — a kind of evolution in the film. The figure 'frames' the celestial engravings. Hard to imagine but plain enough when you see the tracings. This was not in the works earlier — that last time you ventured on set. Everything OK so far?"

Tara was still considering. "The eye makeup is still elaborate, or was. From my last time..."

"Yes. Very dramatic. Particularly for the fight scene. 'Peking Theater dramatic' — the face — one makeup artist's comment. As you may know Cololxauhqui is tethered to the sacrificial stone and given a weapon that resembles Huitzilopochtli's but the blades are in fact feathers. With the help of a sorceress, and a serpent with a taste for blood, she releases and clouds the

god's eyes with the feathers, seizes his obsidian barbed weapon — the maquahuiti — and begins clobbering him. Alejandra wants this segment to have a slow-mo feel, panned frame dissolves in the prospectus she left us. An innovative gal.” Cally smiled.

But Tara was still nursing her doubts. “The thrust of the story must make it newly dangerous for her. For Alejandra. For a Belmonte.”

Readily Calley resumed her take on savvy Alejandra.

“She's respected in much of the business community — pointing the way for others. From what I read she's in touch with several government ministers, who have an eye for winners, believe me. The violence in Mexico has angered many people, women not least, who are in some cases effectively lobbying, even directing some families. Sometimes they are the only viable members left in a cartel family, the killing of their male relatives being so wholesale. In general, they appear to be more astute, using violence sparingly and, well, more prudently I would guess. They also tend to be shrewder, less impulsive business minders. Alejandra is called the Magical Woman, the Milagroso Mujer. You'll see the world through innately shrewd eyes. It's a world where men vainly try to dominate...the usual fatal fanaticism. Not budding paragons like Ken of course.”

If Cally's monologue was a tad personal, she believed its tenets an article of faith and was keen to see them broadcast.

Ken smiled. “Antoine's language is infectious.” This earned him a token slug from Cally.

Tara barely nodded, saying, “Ken or another will be with me throughout the shooting?”

“Part of your contract with Corybant Films.”

“What does the busy Mr. Pechenpaugh, the one sponsor you mentioned, think of such a new twist? He comes across as a hard hat. Can such a one be happy with such a reversal?”

“Antoine hasn't been expansive here. I would assume he's happy the film's on track. Some of it now possibly Alejandra's input. Her family deals with many corporate proxies. Mexico's Secretary of tourism and the Secretary of Social Development, both tough women, should come on board when the publicity cranks up. The film will get an overdue debate going, how the Aztec Earth Mother beguiled her sons, making them subservient to her ominous fearsome resolve, which vilifies scolds like Cololxauhqui — thus certifying the potency and hegemony of her sons. It has been carefully worked out, the design of the film — which leaves unrivalled the procreative *mindful* genius of the female, and hence the prospect of sustained living. I say that as a witness to many feckless proposals.”

Ken and Cally looked to Tara for some sign of assent.

“I'm really not sure. It's may be more than I imagined...”

“Meet her. Meet Alejandra. You won't be disappointed.”

Tara gave way to a wary smile the others interpreted as a ‘yes’, further en-couraging her to meet the Milagroso Mujer. Whose dark windowed limo arrived a few minutes later. Tara wanted to see the woman arrive at street level. Cally believed Tara had an eye for untenable situations. Indeed, for a moment she may have considered leaving, fleeing. Was it the exquisiteness of the limo that gave her pause? The understated elegance of the one female

passenger? The deference shown her by her own stylish sitters and her own cordiality toward them?

Cally decided the question was by then passé. The relief she felt was considerable. She had been following the drug scene world wide, including her own country's plight. Strong smart gals like Alejandra could set a new norm.

FIFTEEN

If Tara, as Ann Green, was initially undecided, diffident, finally meeting the able, cogent Alejandra was a welcome reassurance. It was perhaps the very detail in the planning that calmed, held promise. Also the manifest fact that Alejandra was pleased with Antoine's new star. The contract itself was again spelled out in detail, including a handsome bonus on completion. There was no mention of visiting the Brentwood estate. Tara took up the pen Alejandra offered her like one signing a historic covenant. *You give your heart to each and every thing in turn!* It had crossed Tara's mind that Alejandra might be gay. The contract said nothing about sex with the convener...and so far, no inklings or come-ons.

What surprised and flattered was a further offer to model a line of voguish attire, mainly pants and skirts. Alejandra was helping a friend promote his prêt-à-porter collection under the Ceryx label. The offer came toward the end of the meeting in Antoine's office. If Antoine was surprised, he promptly endorsed the brand. "Altogether swish — Ceryx. Means 'herald'. In the beneficial sense." Cally, for whom this offer was also a surprise, said to a surprised Tara, to Ann Green, on Antoine's cue, "It often gets more amped up here on in. What can happen to able comers." Said Alejandra, "You'll have the time, it'll take only a day or two." There seemed no limit to Alejandra's moxie, exploits, resolve and creative savvy. First impressions. With Tara's — Ann's — cautious nod, Alejandra phoned a photographic agent on her cell. The group listened in: the photographer Louis Führ — the photographer she'd often used before — wasn't available, was in fact on assignment in Europe. But the agent had learned from a friend of a fine photographer who might be available. "He's done work for the 'Bygone series' in Architectural Digest, some period Interiors' specials, also style ads for Le Monde and Club Monaco, also Benetton — children's wear and a couple of their Unhate ads — and helped create archive sets — mainly dramatic stills — for some theatre companies in Vancouver. He's also done some ads for the Nova Corporation here in Canada. He's now, odd as it sounds, doing a book on the indigents in Vancouver's East End. He was injured during the riot there, but has resumed working. A mindful artist," the agent concluded. Said Alejandra, "Purgatory can be exhausting though." The agent laughed. If mention of Vancouver stirred a latent memory for Tara, she could not then bring it into focus. She further learned that this photographer was likely short of funds due to his recent injury. "He sounds like an outlier, an observer, not a gamer, given his contracts to date," Alejandra wryly remarked. "He'll welcome a brief profitable gig". Tara was in fact speechless when Mason Bascule's name was mentioned. Because she still feared for Mason's mother she decided to remain mum. She had read about the riot, the curiosity of

Deirdre performing in Vancouver, the dire injury she sustained at the club, and her mother taking her back to Belfast. The stark raw facts. The manager of the Nefer club had posted an email address but Tara had not received a reply. It was obvious Alejandra trusted her agent's judgement — with Antoine's endorsement — which had been promptly given. Tara managed a token smile. She thought for a moment of the fresh expansive bay just beyond Sea Sent. Her looming career a radiant sun...or growing storm.

On meeting 'Ann Green', a day later in a salon in L'Hermitage, a ready, operational photo studio space, Mason Bascule sensed he'd seen her before. The day after his discharge from hospital, his mother showed him a picture she had taken of a guest with Bear, a winsome if perplexing gal, named Tara Quin, who unexpectedly left Sea Sent a day before the riot. Her sudden, indeed abrupt leaving, disturbed his mother, who didn't want to burden him with such news while he was in recovery, she said. She knew how depressed he was. Ergo, when he learned from his mother that this Tara Quin was none other than the half-sister of Deirdre Corr, he was stunned and incredulous. "Are you sure?" "I'm sure," Hélène stated with a slight but emphatic nod. "I'll fill you in soon. The stories Tara told me. When you have time." Which she had. In plaintive detail. And now — remarkably — this girl, this Ann Green, a dead ringer for Tara Quin, actually here, the half-sister of the ineffable Deirdre Corr. He found he had to sit down. The more he looked the more the resemblance beguiled, arrested. Did she sing, he wondered?

Whereas, on seeing Mason, heedful Tara, the promising Ann Green, was disconcerted, apprehensive and predisposed, again, to promptly disappear. Him! Here! Her past coming to roost? After a cordial businesslike greeting, 'Ann' confronted Alejandra while a bewildered Mason found himself wondering if he was again dreaming; the enigmatic girl herself looked distraught, did she not? Indeed, it took Alejandra a few minutes to assure Ann Green that Mason, in committing to his East End work, would not be engaged by mobsters, let alone seek their sanction! Would he even know any of them? Alejandra did not know of Ann's stay at Sea Sent, yet was dismissive of the girl's pervasive suspicion, which struck her as paranoid. She added a footnote. "He was contacted the day before yesterday. And told of the new gig. No way could he be a cutout or plant in that time frame as you suggest. He's a fine photographer, period. Also, a bit of a romantic, a poetic lad, I think. Not always the best of informers by the way. What you don't know is that he called me later. Had he not known of my own work he wouldn't have taken on the assignment, he said. He did tell me he'd been in hospital — after the riot in Vancouver. He also mentioned a folk singer, one Deirdre Corr, who was injured on that awful night. Her fate obviously affected him. He said he was in a professional limbo as a result — another confidence to me — and needed to get going again. Hardly the comment of an indentured hood. He was grateful we called. I told him he came highly recommended. All in all, a welcome fellow, no?"

Tara wanted to believe yet held back...the lurid memory of that one en-counter...still so pervasive.

Alejandra firmly continued. “You *can* say no. You’ve signed nothing yet with Ceryx. Naturally I’d be disappointed if you did opt out, but the decision is yours. I’m sure you must realize you’re as safe here as anywhere right now. A career beckons before you that kids today would kill for. Talk to him. You are a good judge of character and motive. He’s not bad looking. And a handicap often makes an individual more caring and perceptive. You may inspire a new friendship. Artists toil to immortalize select subjects. I think so.”

It was these last deft words, followed by an attentive smile that persuaded Tara to stay, to see the matter through. With a keen eye. Tara’s unwelcome presumption that Alejandra had an eye on her dissipated with her approval of Mason. She looked about the studio and the cases Mason was now unpacking. So, break a leg — Ann Green.

The busy day that followed was indeed a revelation. She did model the new roomy, flowing, fine weave pants, skirts and jackets, in a series of takes, both still and animated. Mason’s direction of the poses and lighting, as natural, unaffected as possible, was what you might expect from a classic pictorial artist. If he spoke a little too loud sometimes, it was because he was adjusting a new hearing aid — he’d been injured during the riot. Unexpectedly, the manner of his approach was understated, almost apologetic, which further assured. Indeed, his attention to nuance rather defied a supplementary agenda, at one time using the example of Tai Chi to summon a flow to the movement. Which he tracked like a mesmerized mime artist she thought, maneuvering quite well on his one gimpy leg while using one of the few hand-held cameras. In between the shoots they talked. Alejandra’s designer friend had a variety of ensembles to exhibit. Often their voices mingled as she changed behind a screen.

Their conversation resumed at the end of that day’s shoot. The fact they were tired abetted the conviviality. Alejandra left them on the salon’s leather siesta chairs with a bottle of Rioja. By then they had extricated their identities. He fondly if sadly told her the little he knew about Deirdre, her injury, admitting to an infatuation with her — particularly her singing. She in turn told him of her plight with Ryan, Millie’s call to Hélène, her stay at Sea Sent, and subsequent adventure here under her new name. Hearing of her awful travail with none other than a toxic Ryan Dyck amazed as it alarmed Mason. She was surprised to learn about his early years at university, meeting Ryan there, and much later in Vancouver’s East End — his last encounter with a ‘troubled and barely recognized fellow’. The keen recollections and the happenstance of their meeting on this photo shoot contributed to a shared solicitude and subsurface humour. But Tara — Ann Green — wanted to learn more about Deirdre. She knew it was an emotive subject but her anxiety about the fate of her half-sister spurred concern.

“You did say you heard Deirdre sing just before the riot.”

Mason was slow to take up the thread.

“I was caught up in both her music and her voice, her singing...such that I must have been immune to what was happening outside. At first. As were most of the Nefer patrons I think. It was only after her first set finished that we became fully aware of the noise, the growing in intensity of the hubub...by then the band had packed it in. I was soon distracted by the chaos outside.”

He broke off suddenly, his face a frozen mask. But Tara's need to learn more of the details urged her on.

"You did mention being hit by one of the thrown objects."

This all too grim reminder forced him back.

"It's a time I still think unreal. A kind of, well" — he plaintively shrugged — "phantasmagoria. I need big words to hide behind." He tugged at his ear. "Sorry. The media account of it all is rather spare. It was only when I came to in emergency that I learned of Deirdre's injury — the absolutely bizarre circumstance of it. I still can't believe. To be attacked so — there. The two wit-nesses who've come forward only observed some spattered blood...apparently. The dense milling crowd limited visibility apparently."

Tara too was momentarily unnerved...a dismay Mason noted as he resumed.

"I never entertained any idea of actually approaching her...some paragons you best admire at a distance. Don't smile. Being as lovely as she was, the queue would be very long. But her singing placed one in a special world. A place you had to pinch yourself to recognize, to assume. The sense of well-being, serenity comes so rarely. What can I say now...except that, well, serenity harbours affection. As I think of it."

Tara was heartened by this testimonial despite the pathos in it. "You were in love with her."

"She reminded one of the courtliness in romance, its essence — trust."

Tara smiled. "And you were injured by one of the missiles the rioters threw."

Again the rigid mask. Then: "How demeaning is it to learn your special inspiration was so unprotected, aid-less? Seeing you that first day haunted. You seemed every bit as...singular."

"If only I could sing, eh?"

This brought a renewed smile to the sad face. "Who knows?"

It was perhaps but a matter of time she thought later. She reassured herself by thinking it was partly an act of kindness, of recompense — the convivial kiss that touched off the protracted whole-hearted embrace that ended in her frescoed Mycenaean suite. She needed to restore her sister, he to foil a too acute memory. So she guessed. She was aware from the start how beholden he was. He might lose himself in her embrace. It was some of the most attentive lovemaking she could remember: to be in the thrall of one who actually cherished you, his very freighted wonder a yummy engagement. Looking at her after a particularly winsome interlude he said, "I've decided to nix the monastery...the Gregorian chants."

Later that evening, as they shared a pizza and pinor noir, she finally detailed all: her trial with maniacal Ryan and the racketeers he widely served, his innate sadism, the one gruesome assault, his growing fascination with a fanatical Islam, and her anguish on learning of Deirdre's injury and her dread that Ryan could have had something to do with it — her own words a searing testimonial as she proceeded. "A monster I hung out with, for a time. The disbelief hasn't really let up." Neither were eating when she'd finished.

He said, "My dislike of him is less puzzling these days."

"He did look to you for a place to stay."

"He hadn't many options then."

After the shoot the next day, she tried on, modelled for him some costumes for the film, the fittings for which had been done at the hotel, a studious Antoine looking on with Alejandra. The eye makeup, which she had learned to apply, a wonder in itself. She also showed him the dark starry costume with the line engravings that traced her ‘peregrination’, as she called it, across the heavens. “The transit of Venus,” he fondly said. “The morning star — eclipsing Jupiter Mars and Saturn; not bad for a princess.” He added that stars take a while to be born but live a long time. By then their embraces in the interludes were nearly baroque, as he thought of them — ready, exuberant with many wondrous inventions. He couldn’t believe how supple she was, she how deft he could be despite his handicap. Several times they paused to look at one another like long lost survivors. After one particularly animated foray they collapsed like spent runners.

Later, in a faintly discernible dawn, their forms relief sculptures on a messy bed, they talked again about their sorry past and, in particular, the role of leniency — the unwillingness to ditch someone you knew to be in trouble. He lay on his side dumbly gazing at her. Had he seen a more beautiful seamless creature? Ever? By then his hearing aid was working as touted. She talked in the main. The Ryan she had gone to high school with had a lot going for him — tall, good looking, ingratiating, even charming when he wanted to be. Part of an act she later believed when she confronted his addiction to drugs and ugly pornography, and his late fascination with a heartless variety of Islam. “He delighted in misleading people I think now. Your all-inclusive scam artist. What you do when you so dislike yourself you think? When reality gets in the way? Fool and debase other people — upstage your credible critics!”

He was about to glibly say that he’d always been ‘downstage’ himself but checked himself in time. He’d been caught up in her nimble engaging presence and very telling words. Which tended to humanize his own pained recollections. One in particular which he expanded on.

“I do know Ryan was very casual about doing assignments — when we were at university. I used to think he imagined he was in say Oxford in the early twentieth century — there less for an education than a memorable good time. Almost like Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*. An illusion you can sustain only so long, though the four of us did have a few okay times that one year. Paul helped here, being the ready mitigator he was. Dirk and Ryan often duelled. Paul’s ready humour usually distracted the combatants. *Come on you guys — the whole world is your urinal*. Such sayings, here the ‘pissing theme and variations’, were a time out when I think of it now. Haven’t seen Paul for a while. Miss him.”

“I’d like to meet him one day.”

“You will. So unlike Ryan. Who had some issues that first year and suddenly quit, well before final exams. We lost contact. Until he turned up in the East End. Much changed of course. Took me a while to realize he was not the person I once knew.”

Tara quietly mugged a smile.

“I do miss Paul. I think he planned to go to a retreat about the time of the riot. Hope to see him when I return.”

Demurely he took up and kissed her hand as she fondly ruffled his hair with her other, her own story pending.

“I know Ryan left Fresno for a time after college, then returned. He didn’t mention a Canadian university. It’s when he started hitting on me. He saw me in a dance class...it was hot, we were sweating. A late memory. You don’t think much of it at the time, how unprotected you look. Too caught up in your own imagined prowess. But I remember him looking on — avidly. I wasn’t seeing anyone at the time. Stephen found me a little too uppity I think. I was ambitious then. Maybe a bit envious of Deirdre. We remained friends though, Stephen and I. He told me things about Ryan I didn’t believe at first. It was about then that things got dicey, particularly after Ryan lost a bundle gambling one night, such that he stiffed a supplier — who took after me. Someone said I knew where some money was, can you believe. It was about then I began to comprehend Ryan’s fixation, which still mystifies — the ghoulish sadistic pornography that led I think to his jihadi mania. Pornography’s haunt. The nullification of thought, solicitude.” She studied Mason for a moment. “You recall the Aztec Templo Mayor Stone Disc — the key icon in the Moon Disc film.”

Mason staidly looked at her for a second. “Yes, the ritually dismembered goddess.”

“Ryan’s ‘pound of flesh’. In the galvanizing sense. A tonic. ‘Nature’s Nerve’ he called it. I’m not making this up.”

Mason somberly nodded.

“Then the pimping stuff on top of everything. I was dumfounded at the time. You begin to doubt your own sanity, your own perception.”

Mason was a moment responding. “I actually felt some guilt for my own spite, dislike. At the time.” He ventured a smile. “I think it auspicious *we* should have tried to understand, befriend the same person.

Tara nestled closer, placing her head near his shoulder. “You are a very welcome sojourner.”

A mindful Mason continued. “I felt certain Ryan was involved in something rank when he precipitously left, but never learned what it was. He seemed a mess then, a break away train I think.”

Tara resumed her own narrative after taking up his gesturing hand.

“I was perhaps naive. A bit too hopeful maybe. He could be charming. Well, ingratiating, even fawning, as I’ve said. I still don’t know what to make of the sites, the images he downloaded. A late discovery. And then to call me a prude when I balked at approving. God, the sheer bloodmindedness. He said I would get excited. That was part of the dismay — that the girls, well some, actually seemed to enjoy it. The stymieing aspect. They hardly seemed to be acting. But who knows. An alien world.” She looked at him with a conspiratorial smirk. “You don’t think I’m a prude I trust.”

“I’m thinking of a credible Apsara — a sylph who beguiles both god and man. An ongoing revelation.”

She continued, as much to humour the appraisal. “So, not a prude. Well, I was attacked by two members of his gang, in due course — as much out of spite I think, rather than their thinking me an Eldorado minder. Stephen wasn’t around then. A story that needs telling...

sometimes. Yes, well — they tied me with snake-like cords, gagged me, cut off my clothes, and used a dildo maker covered in some kind of blood, circling my neck at one time — my so keen *voyeur* looking on. No, please, let me finish! — yes, *him!* — my ISIS ghoul *Ryan*, destined for — what did one card call it — Headhackinstan?” She looked away, yet took Mason’s hand. “I don’t think he ever wondered about his obsession. The sadistic thresholds a kind of dizzying hierarchy apparently. I’ve done some research on the matter.”

Mason barely managed to say, in muffled words, “Oh God...never thought of him — so. You are a wonder you know.”

“Trying to make sense of it puts you in a bind, I know. You’re the only one I’ve trusted to know about it, in detail...so far.”

“A trust I cherish, given the deed. Kind of knocks one galley west. I lead such a muted cautious life...an aloneness that can actually make you sometimes wonder about perversity...and one’s own relative impunity...given perversity’s universe.” The comment surprised Tara as Mason continued. “A kind of syllogism of mine, quandary if you like. This may sound provocative. It’s not intended to of course. I *have* looked at several SM sites. With some care and amazement. Yes. Many of the players are surprisingly well favoured. You know the word ‘concinnity’?”

But then she had risen up on an elbow looking at him with amiable wonder.

“Not really. Something to do with balance, symmetry — in art, literature, mainly. Not something I imagine being manifest during a porno assault. This is not a trick question I presume.”

He backed his head in his hands.

“The curiosity is we’d never allow an animal to be treated so. The opportunistic killing of a prize lion is more topically newsworthy than say gruesomely slaughtered Oromo babies in Ethiopia. Are humans so ‘dis-prized’? For instance, the Vatican museum has some ugly scenes in its art archive that some folk thought special. The moral heroism and degradation behind some scenes does not account for the elegance of the bodies — one measure of inequality, disparity. Think of the many crucifixes that portray a lithe beautifully proportioned elongated form. Would such crucifixes be as engaging or affecting if they were of a person who resembled — a Troll, say? Always a suspension, a wonder — the *human* splendour that seduces, and sometimes molests. Do we underestimate the antipathy for it in an *equality obsessed* population? A population now engaged in belittling almost all cultural standards, certainly Western standards, aesthetic and behavioural? Maybe the sadistic reservoir you hinted at? Which surfaces in popular porno-sadistic TV dramas, where the pretties mostly get picturesquely protractedly tormented *not* the homely.” He wryly smiled. You’ve surely noticed. “Sorry. The phrase crouching tiger, hidden dragon keeps needling me.”

By then Tara was on the verge of dry laughter remembering some of his directions during the shoot. “Your tiger pouncing poses — in the one layout?”

“One of your ‘memes’.” He turned to face her. “It’s a camp subject — deformity. All cultures have physical aversions, separate from peeves. Some conceptual artists thrive in

rendering hideousness. One reason perhaps I wanted to document the dregs in Vancouver's East End. The truly devastated ones. The people who've ditched their expectations. Even Schadenfreude loses its craven haunt there. Bodies entirely lacking dignity. No virtual surround at all."

"Yet an empathic pursuit — documenting such hopelessness, speaking truth to power so to speak." Tara was holding onto their shared solicitude.

"The humanitarian way of putting it. You do see some stoics there. The ones who haven't yet abandoned reality. But the will to change is gone for the most part. Some of them might even have heard Deirdre. One chap I know got in one night."

"He was as taken with my sister?"

"I would think so. He didn't look well. I looked for him during one inter-mission. He'd left apparently. I'll be on the lookout for him when I return. If he survived — both his poor health and the riot."

By then they both lay on their sides, their legs tucked, candidly eyeing one another.

"And you never thought of approaching her? Hard to believe."

Her smile set off the coming exchange.

Said he, "Just so. The tawny-throated Nightingale singing for her special mate. Hardly me of course."

Said she, "The *male* bird does the singing."

"Ah — one of my endemic confusions."

"Do your impromptu asides ever let up?"

He smiled. "A congenital condition."

"She was flesh and blood," Tara averred.

"A daughter of Mother Earth and Air." He then checked himself, such select eulogies becoming a bit precious here. "There *was* a confrontation...that night...two witnesses. The two...that have come forward. They saw some kind of skirmish but the swelling crowd intervened. One witness actually fell, injured a wrist. It was also fairly dark. The skirmish was ongoing when they left, they said. They believed they saw some blood on the assailant." Mason was then looking not at Tara but through her, a plaintive's stare. She apprised him again as he returned to regard her and finger her face. Fondly she said, "If only I sang."

This gave him pause. "I do listen. Rarely as intently as I have this night." But by then he was too enamoured for further talk.

An hour later she awoke to find she was alone and curiously alert to the faint sounds of a piano coming from the salon below her bedroom window. The playing was not at all bad she decided as she ventured to listen on her small balcony. Sounded classical, wistful, the music — music she knew Mason liked. She slipped into the elegant morning gown Alejandra had given her saying — "Let's begin 'The Legend' today!" — and ventured toward the music.

Finding Mason Bascule seated with a few of the hotel staff listening to a CD player with standing speakers was a surprise. The current track, a Chopin piece, contained the theme to Over the Rainbow. When it finished the applause was enthusiastic. Seeing her in the long silk

gown, Mason replaced the current CD with one retrieved from his coat pocket, assuring the audience they wouldn't be disappointed. The folk tune Greensleeves in slow 3/4 time soon filled the room — from the CD of Deirdre's band. One of the songs without words that featured Deirdre's lute. After a further bow to the audience he approached the hovering Tara and asked if he could have the first dance. The request amused the audience. Soon this part cripple was moving about the room with the elegant Tara in a surprisingly agile if not altogether fluent step, his one poor leg being a kind of fulcrum to his movements. He told her later he had unapologetically done something he always wanted to do — dance with a fabled Irish beauty to an ineffable Irish slow waltz! He doubted the opportunity would return, for she might find it easier to ignore him after. The CD had other cuts which they eventually sat and listened to, with a few remaining hotel staff, like orphic witnesses — including the song A Stór mo Chroi (Gaelic for 'Darling of my Heart'). Tara reminded herself that a performer is honoured when a talented admirer gets caught up in her work — and sensed some guilt for not appreciating Deirdre as he had.

After the next day's shoot — the last Ceryx shoot — she asked him what he thought of Antoine's film, the filming of which would resume that week. They sat at the margin of the hotel's salon they'd used as a studio, on a banquette that lined one side. She was a little anxious to explain the film's dynamic, ahistoric nexus before he answered.

"After laying out the Aztec brute, the face-of-painted-bells chucks him into the heavens where he seems to implode — 'precipitating the dust for a cosmic quasar' — Alejandra's words. I've seen the storyboard for the magic graphic renderings. They're quite miraculous I think."

"It will certainly stir a few hearts. A tale whose time has come, I imagine, given the PC fanatics out there today."

"Meaning?"

"Men being the age's cosmic heavies. The designated...black holes."

Coyly she asked, "You don't approve?"

"Anything you're in — I approve of."

She looked at him with a ready amusement he smiled at. "That's reassuring," she said.

"One of the axioms."

Tara fondly looked away.

They agreed on a holiday together when the film was finished. He was a little anxious, he said, to return to his solemn portraiture, as he called it, of Vancouver's East End denizens. "You stay too long on Cloud Nine you slight the bedlam below."

"I think you still seek my sister — in your special Emain Macha. That's the place, yes — in the Synge play? I looked it up."

Mason smiled, belatedly nodded. He was about to say something but changed his mind, bringing up another matter. "Other than finding Paul, I want to seek out that one fellow Deirdre may have befriended. The older street guy I saw her talking to in the club. See if he's still coping."

“Does he have a name?”

“Adam. Someone called him that. Adam Sally. I saw her talking to him before a performance one night. The second night I went. Two nights before the riot. She handed him something — money perhaps. He left shortly after. He never returned I think. She dedicated one of her songs — Silver Dagger — to a ‘special survivor’ she said. That I know.”

She looked at him then with the wistful esteem he treasured. “So,’ till we’re to-gether again,” she said.

“Not ‘till’, when. All good films have a ready fan club.”

SIXTEEN

The perceptive Fabio Lucchese was still fuming over Luis’s incomparable blunder. He even had trouble believing. To abduct and even rashly kill — *not* the perp, the Dyck-head — but some hoodoo he was with. How could they ever trust the rash capo again? Fabio had wanted to question Dyck. Find out who he worked with, and how he may have learned of the Nefer cache. Was it a daring fortuitous endeavour or tip off? The drifter Adam Sally was still at large, the wino who knew the street hoods in East Vancouver. Sergeant O’Doul, one of Luis’s canaries, believed the wino could identify some of Owen’s gang members Ryan may have consorted with up north, including some Syrians. That wino they also had to find. Moreover, the folk singer someone attacked outside the club had herself a half sister who knew Ryan...perhaps it was time to clean up that rank Morales family that had so carelessly guarded a mafia cache and dissed a bystander, letting the perp escape. All the creeps and spielers: human foot and mouth disease.

Fabio then gave way to a sardonic smile as he assessed the rise of Alejandra Belmonte and her cogent dealings with the Vigilantes — those citizens who were fed up with both the police and army, whose greasy ongoing accommodation of Western exploitation was now editorial fodder. Already, she had groups that worked to consolidate some families, make them indebted to her. A possible reordering of the hierarchy it would seem. Indeed the new film she backed would likely further that ‘recruitment’. Again Fabio looked away. He still could not imagine how the punchy, frequently suspicious, loud mouth Luis had overlooked the extraordinary Alejandra Belmonte, his rarified second cousin, the one with the MBA, who learned her craft in the American business scrabble — one measure of her acumen and resolve. Perhaps an intervening meeting and some expedient action...the more he considered the idea, the more the prospect suggested itself. Yet he was not entirely at ease. Not while contemplating the ‘broad option’ — for perhaps the first time in his life. Perhaps they might join forces in dealing with ‘outsiders’ — such goons who would steel a mafia cache! Luis had fingered Ryan Dyck, but not learned how he knew of the northern cache. Fabio suspected Dyck was in league with one or more of Luis’s own soldiers who colluded with some of Jack Owen’s IRA heavies. As disagreeable was the suspicion that some of Owen’s team were grooming terrorists *in* Canada, for jobs in and out of that country, Dyck himself once moon-lighting as a pimp for the maniacs. Was the perp that proficient as a whore-monger? Part of the ‘boot camp’ for a jihadi?...

SEVENTEEN

Mason had been a long block away when he saw the drifter he believed to be Adam Sally in the alley near the Kit Cat Club off Hastings Street. He brown bagged his camera and hurried along, sometimes moving onto the street to avoid the welter of street bedding from the night before. In his rush he actually did not see the accident, hearing only the ominous thud of metal smacking flesh. A large truck had collided with the fellow he believed to be Adam Sally. The speed with which the vehicle sped away keened the harrowing disbelief. A couple of haggard street folk were it seemed the only witnesses, one of whom leaned unsteadily over the body when Mason approached...by then he had called 911 on his cell. To his astonishment one of the mendicants, a wino he thought, began going through Adam's clothes.

"Hey you, for god's sake."

The man looked up startled and staggered off, dropping something on the way. Adam's head was badly twisted to one side, his one arm a hodgepodge of protruding bones, his chest too was badly contused. Mason could hear a siren a block or two away. He could do very little. He looked about for the wino but could not see him among the gathering throng. As he knelt to assess the injured man he saw what the wino had dropped — small dog-eared pages held together by an elastic band. He covered it with his camera bag as he checked for vital signs though he had little expertise in such matters. He could not tell if Adam breathed nor could he find a pulse. Two constables approached. He said he didn't see the collision, and was too far away to get a license plate. A large truck left the scene in a hurry he said, a crew cab he thought. By then he'd furtively nabbed the packet that may have belonged to Adam Sally, and stood back as the officers assessed the victim, their expressions uniformly grim. The gathering gawkers, mostly bleary eyed street folk, were being restrained by a third officer. "He had a curse on him," one derelict said looking at Mason. It took Mason a moment to realize the chap hadn't meant him.

An ambulance arrived sirens screaming. Two paramedics quickly assessed the victim, fixed an oxygen mask and lifted him onto a stretcher they promptly placed in the ambulance, which left seconds later. By then the policemen were canvassing the onlookers. Mason gave his name and his housekeeping hotel address. Did he know the man? No, he didn't think so, his voice then alien to his own. He was free to go but might be contacted later. He wondered if anyone noticed he'd taken the packet the wino dropped — which he wasn't ready to relinquish just then. When back in his room he set the packet down on the lone spare table, wondering if this was what the wino sought or just happened to notice? A mystifying find now. He undid the elastic to find a set of tightly folded pages, each containing writing in a small even hand, which he attentively began to read — lower case words in unpunctuated sentences that would score him the rest of his life. Someone had given Adam deft counsel, in a kindly and optimistic tone — words to treasure in a nether world. Words none other than those of Deirdre Corr — words dour Adam Sally had remembered and written down! One paragraph ended: *Deirdre the Beatific*. One of the few times Adam capitalized his words. Hardly something you'd think might prompt a murder. Yet the hit and run

looked decidedly deliberate.

If it took Mason a short minute to assimilate the ominous script before him, he was soon reading the lines with a monastic solemnity. Lines meandering, fraught, full of ghastly import...words that would not let up...words being the sole consolation left for one... Adam Sally.

said she you mustn't neglect your music you mustn't i'll buy you another magic flute it's a pitiful thing when ears are shut to the dulcet spheres let your heart be your guide your mother will only rest when you do so said the ineffable She the wondrous Deirdre of the Sorrows were Jack Owen's raw IRA lads never a spectre in her life can music mask such troubles cast such sorrows aside like her memory of my humble time in the first band how sweet-tempered her recollection of it was she then unaware of the drugs the sluggard's trig transport to dulcet spheres

As he read, Mason was astonished to learn that the wistful Adam had known Deirdre from an early age, that they shared a love of music and some early misadventure — possibly to do with the IRA. A reference to Synge's play, *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, daunted — Deirdre with her fated lover Naisi — Adam himself perhaps? Who then might heady Conchubor have been? Mesmerized Mason read on.

the discovery of oneself a sorry recognition the ongoing dismay the Stanley Cup riot a nightfall for some a departure for the Fair She the sorrows reign I spy one day long ago Sergeant O'Doul joking with septic US'er Luis Morales a tale of two lands that has no end I fear I know the names of Owen's perky provisional lads the sedulous North Americans Teddy Keegan Martin Flynn Kian Brannigan the names busy Sergeant O'Doul ardently covets knowing I may know I also know some Syrians Owen's exploiting

Mason could barely believe what he read. A gangland spat across an entire continent? Could Owen have killed Sally to keep some members of his team unknown to the Morales' O'Doul? Would O'Doul have known of Sally's 'diary'? Did Sally know who rifled the Nefer vault and attacked Deirdre — given his mention of a 'departure'? And the mirky O'Doul — the Morales' 'Canadian' cop? That gang networks might be that vast amazed Mason. Though Vancouver was a busy international port.

He was drawn out of this miasma by a call from an excited Tara. She was in a hurry but needed an answer from him. He initially listened as a stranger, a funk he soon snapped out of. Another of Alejandra's business associates, a Paris based stocking and sportswear manufacturer, wanted to use 'Ann Green' in an ad campaign for a new style of silk stocking called *Quetzal*, an Elysium apparel product. Tara was intrigued if not exuberant. "Alejandra is a pulsar, what can I say — her energy, smarts, contacts — I feel like some atomic isotope these days. Please forgive the keenness. In brief, the salespeople here requested a meeting next week. They haven't yet commissioned a photographer but liked the Ceryx ads and wanted to know if you were available." Mason's silence prompted a further comment. "I need a special friend, a second-guesser. Can you come? I'll pay your fare. You're the one person I can count on for sturdy advice these days. The film's all but finished — my part anyway. A couple of re-shoots. It's tempting, this gig — well the money and rep is tempting. Another means of leaving my domestic rut. See life from 'The Other Side'. Can't be all bad can it? You still there?..."

“I’ll come, of course,” he said “You have a day, a time?”

“Mid morning next Monday — ten o’clock — the proposed meeting, same hotel. But earlier’s great for me. You okay?”

“Shall I wear a wire?” he drolly asked.

“Your eyes and ears are all that’s needed. Especially your eyes. My ears still work well enough. You okay? You sound a bit peaky.”

“A late discovery...sobering stuff.”

“Can we share it?”

“I hope so. In due course.”

“Soon, I promise. Had to touch base, see if you could come. Must go. The makeup gal is waiting. Nearly there, the film. Some good moments. Clobbered the big H a week ago. He’s out in the cosmos somewhere. Hubble maybe can see him. Call you again later. Love you.”

When he turned off his cell, the world was unreal as before. Only now he seemed a fated witness.

After a protracted flight — a delayed departure — he arrived at Tara’s hotel suite to find her — he still had trouble calling her Ann Green — removing her slacks. He must have looked surprised for she said, with some amusement, “They want to see my legs — au naturel. They’ve not seen the rushes to Antoine’s film but heard some good things about it from Alejandra. They have seen the Ceryx ads. Glad you’re here. They are too.” He decided against telling Tara of Adam’s diary notes just then, believing her optimism remained relative, contingent.

After backing the slacks on a fauteuil, she stood speculatively eyeing him in a peasant blouse with a south sea motif, neat leather sandals and plum coloured briefs, her long lithe legs a Fifth Century Athenian sculptor’s dream.

“Alejandra promptly recommended you by the way. The ad campaign has an Aztec theme. Wonder of wonders. Some of the stockings have faint Aztec motifs. Inspired by the iridescent Quetzal bird. So Alejandra says.” After studying Mason for a time she added, “You don’t approve of sudden dapper ventures.”

“You won’t find a more dedicated chronicler — photographer.”

This comment freed up the waiting smile. “Lets go see the MAD guys. They’re in the suite just across the hall.”

In an expansive board room, the modern chrome furniture moved to the sides, two sales folk introduced themselves: Maria, a tall vivacious brunette in a chic pant suit, and Vincent, a runt with a mullet hair cut, chin strap beard, dressed in a starchy white tuxedo shirt, dark slacks and opera loafers. Mason wryly imagined Vincent a Tartuffe with a leg fetish. He also noted Tara’s sudden abstraction when she was introduced to him. Indeed, she was a moment fielding a smile.

A large white pasteboard had been erected in the middle of the room adjacent a large wide window. Ample sunlight filtered through sheer white curtains. Maria led Tara to a spot near the centre of the pasteboard and asked her to turn about. Vincent sat in a chair next to the screen initially studying Tara with the apathy of an iguana Mason thought. Soon however both Maria and Vincent were nodding to one another. Tara offered a faint apologetic shrug. She was not a

natural exhibitionist. Mason sensed a flare of irritability, though the specific reason eluded him; Tara — Ann Green — was being affirmed a singular find here. Vincent then outlined the ad campaign, to extend over a year, and briefly displayed some of the Aztec motifs incorporated in Antoine's film, then remarked how some of these same motifs would be imprinted in pastel tints on the stockings, and that each ad itself would be dramatic, though less apocalyptic than in the film. He indulged a chuckle.

If Tara seemed oddly unmoved, Mason was not happy that Vincent so easily assumed Tara an eager participant. He continued as if concluding a one-sided climate change debate. There were to be two sets of ads, he said — one for America, one for Europe. The European ads would be more arresting, in some the figure nude but for the stockings. People were generally more liberally minded in Europe he nonchalantly added. Then, as facilely, he requested to see Tara's torso. "Just remove the top. A simple confirmation," he said.

"We *should* see your torso," Maria unctuously remarked, "the over all contour." She might have been requesting a stock quotation, Mason dourly thought.

For a moment it seemed Tara had not heard the request then, to Mason's astonishment, she mechanically undid the front buttons to her blouse and lowered it to her waist. Maria offered a benevolent smile.

Vincent stood and looked at Tara from a couple of angles then sat down and formed his fingers into a wedge as if convening an inner debate.

"Not a little small?" Tara said with wry amusement.

Vincent immediately brightened after glancing at Maria, then exclaimed, "Not at all!. Exactly what we want in fact. Beautifully trim, balanced." After an explosive laugh he added, "Couldn't really imagine any better. Took a minute to appreciate our luck. You are a find."

"Just how nude is nude?" Tara asked after raising her blouse, her amusement on hold. Vincent seemed surprised by the remark and looked to Maria who took up the matter.

"All in good taste I assure you. Our art director is working up the poses. Main-ly profiles, using some Aztec murals for backdrops — ghost scenes to act as auras about the central figure. The nude takes are mainly for the European market as Vincent says. You'll see the array shortly."

"Do I have any editorial say?"

Again Mason stood open mouthed as stolid Vincent looked to Maria to stiffen the entreaty.

"We really don't think you'll find any unworkable. But if you are unsure at this stage best to let us know. We'll be disappointed but understand."

Tara looked at Mason and smiled. "My photographer is a maestro. His rendering of each pose should satisfy 'observant' Europeans."

Maria promptly said that Mason's input was welcome, and that it was a stellar day for them all. She added that Alejandra had highly recommended Mason for the campaign, and if he was willing?... Mason put on his limp guest smile and nodded. Vincent happily handed out some proposed art sketches and extant blurb copy. They could begin the following week. Tara looked

over the sketches with a commendable nod to some, an amused feint to others. By then everyone was displaying concerted smiles, though Mason imagined Tara putting on a performance, and had not fully restored her blouse. He sensed something amiss but could not put his finger on it.

After Tara left, Mason discussed some technical matters with Vincent, then returned to her suite, to find her standing by a highboy blankly staring at the opposite wall which featured a pastoral Minoan fresco. She had put on an oversize bath robe and seemed unaware he'd entered. She was not moving and appeared lost in thought. Her blouse and shorts lay on the bed. "You okay?" he lamely asked.

"I know him," she woodenly said.

"What?"

She briefly scowled. "Vincent. I know him. Vincent Gebara. He was one of a group of guys I saw Ryan eagerly approach inside a casino. All so convivial, ingratiating, real slap-happy pals...the Urania, the name of the casino." She added, with some chagrin, "One of the things we did when Ryan was flush, in the early days: gamble." She paused as if to reaffirm her own memory. "One guy in the group...was one of the Morales' goons who attacked me." In response to Mason's manifest alarm she said, "No, please! I've got to finish. No one looked my way. I was some distance off. Indeed, they likely thought Ryan solo. Anyway, Ryan came away from that meeting pretending nonchalance. He'd been given the URL to a so-called dating agency. Ryan was hesitant showing me. Medley I think it was called. A business venture Ryan said. A 'sponsorship trust' he called it. Straight faced. He would help vet the applicants here. I had a glimpse of some of the hopefuls, as he called them. Mainly women, all of them very young — one of the first intimations." She paused, as if constraining her anger. "A scam of course. A recruitment drive to find innocent sweeties." A brief sarcastic laugh. "He was on an upper that one day, so blithe, congenial. Very charming. No!" Again she held off Mason's consternation. "I'm fine." Another scowl, then, "I can only guess what happened after. Such an agency seems small potatoes for someone like Gebara, if he's involved. Though a lot of people might tie into such a scam. Seeing Gebara with those goons...so clubby, chipper...well, my ready rebuke ignited cherry bomb Ryan — the time I fled to Millie's, the time Ryan ran into Stephen — you still with me?..."

"Good god. You can't go through with this ad thing — you can't."

Tara was a moment responding, her voice more assertive when she did.

"I have to. I have to learn more about the swine. They're all mixed up — the top gangs, all eager to prove their moxie and audacity. Gebara wouldn't have noticed me. We'd been playing Black Jack some distance away. Ryan got up suddenly, said he'd be back shortly. Ryan was likely still making up his mind about me. I wasn't yet a *trusted* player. But Gebara certainly seemed taken with the up and coming Johnny Ponce. Just 'why' remains the puzzle. Had I known then..."

"But the others you knew of...the one cop. You were a person of interest. Someone would notice, sooner or later."

But Tara — Ann Green — was awash in her own thoughts. “It’s all joined. Gebara’s corporate reach, Ryan’s fixation. Listening to Alejandra gives one some idea of the overlap. The more I think of Deirdre the more I suspect Ryan may have had something to do with her attack. Yes, I know. A horrible thought.” She held up her hand again. “Let me finish. I didn’t think much of it at one time — that she knew something she wouldn’t tell me. She may have known before I did about Ryan’s drug dealing — even his awful porn obsession. Canny Roseanne intimated as much about Ryan. Stephen sent me an email a while ago — he’s discovered some things since — about Ryan’s former deeds, including some very shank film making. Stories of misused girls are now common. ‘Bragging rights’ Stephen called it. Then there’s the story of the Nefer club break in. Something Ryan would enact or join in. Alejandra’s helped out here — yes — she ties into a lot of chatter. She seems well versed on the riot and the break-in — if select on details. Urban Riots, especially those implicating gangland exploits, she’s an expert on. Has to be I guess. You may think I’m naive but I trust her. She’s her own head honcho. The Nefer club vault *was* robbed that night, and Alejandra has learned that it was Morales’ cache — a confidence to me. Any witnesses who noted one or more of the robbers would have been summarily dealt with she says, Deidre’s assault being an ominous coincidence. I did ask her if any of the money could be Belmonte money. It wouldn’t be, she said. Not her turf. She did say Luis is currently in a kind of limbo — she has a special smile when alluding to his ‘colicky chaps’, as she calls them. No names of course. I know, I know...yet I trust her. I cannot shake the suspicion that one of the cops ‘investigating’ Ryan in Fresno was on the take, and with that kind of drug and extortion money — well, he’d have gang friends wouldn’t he? Even a possible Gebara connection. There might well be a Vancouver liaison too. Alejandra agrees. She said bent cops were useful, not only to parasites. Her late advice to me: ‘Stay focused on your end game; that will absolve some players impugn others.’ Ryan was one of Gebara’s flunkies — I’m certain. I’ve got learn more about Gebara’s world. I’ve go to.

Alejandra doubts I’m still a target. But who knows. I am a value to her...at least for now.”

Mason grimly smiled, sat down shaking his head. “I really think you ought to reconsider — going ahead with this gig.”

But Tara was still absorbed in her own narration.

“When you wake up in a very messy situation...the repugnance lingers. Then seeing Gebara today — a client of a client of Alejandra’s for crissake. A late revelation. The underworld ‘Cloud’. She says she deals with ‘several cartel and business heads’. The respect accorded her seems genuine. You may think it odd, that I should believe, trust her. But I do. She’s her own player. She’s been candid with me — I know you may think otherwise — but I’m valuable enough to earn my keep. She did warn me — about Gebara. Well, not so much warn as suggest I carefully read whatever contract I signed with him. ‘He’s clever,” she said, ‘but works at arm’s length; not a grunt.’ Ryan was indeed mixed up with him. There’s many dating services she says, some undoubtedly sham. She assured me she would consult ‘the auricles’, as she calls her field players, for any recent activity. And now with this jihadi stuff...which I think Ryan was well

into before he took off.” After a shrug, she added, “Sorry, that’s how I feel. And I want to learn more. I must. A late imperative.”

Mason barely nodded. “But what if he did recognize you...you surely can’t go ahead with this particular campaign.”

“He didn’t recognize me. He would have said. And I can hardly invoke modesty, propriety, given the film I’ve been working in.”

Mason looked away. “You did pander to the louse.”

“The way you finger a nit.”

Mason scowled. “Oh come on — he’s obviously bad news all round.”

“No, I’ve got to try, to find out more. Find out if and how he abetted any of the awful stuff Ryan fancied, traded in. What more there may be to it. Alejandra is as interested. A guy like that won’t bother with street stuff unless there’s an additional take somewhere. And what about those missing girls in your East End? Some apparently made their way South. Alejandra keeps an eye...she actually sees Gebara from time to time...she’s not held back so far. Yes, I know, you think my trust in her is misplaced, but she’s not a cynic. A realist, not a cynic. You think I’m treading on eggshells but I’ve got to try. I’ve gone this far. I have to know more about him. Sorry. And I need you help.”

After this lengthy declamation she sat down beside him, crossed her legs and studied him.

“I am listening,” he said, trying to minimize a grimace.

“I have to learn more. I just have to. You can’t leave in the middle of a storm. I know what you’re thinking. The ‘stand alone’ babe. Well, I’ve got in touch with a private investigator. A retired detective. A guy called Pete Voss. Yes. Alejandra knows of him and approves. ‘Another perspective is always useful,’ she said. You’ll meet him shortly I hope. I trust you will help — keep an eye out, on and off the studio grounds. Yes? You said, in so many words, you hoped to remain part of my, our life — no caveats. Alejandra also approves by the way — of you. No caveats.”

Mason knew all too well by then when Tara was determined, resolved. His knowledge of Adam’s notes also steeled his own resolve.

He eyed her then with a poignant fondness.

“A mutual undertaking, then?” she asked.

“*Mutatis mutandis.*”

“Is that the phrase?”

“It’ll do. Things changed that have to be — with due attention to details.” Looking at her as she headed toward her bathroom he added, “I’ve got a sorry tale of my own to tell. Well, from another. Some things I recently came across. Things you should know. Concerning Adam Sally.”

“The East End fellow?”

Mason nodded.

Tara grimaced. “After a shower we’ll talk.”

By then she had opened the etched shower door and turned on the water. He was about to ask her to turn off the water when, noting his expression, she did just that. He said, “You better sit down — for a bit. I’ve something you should, must know about. Sooner the better. It concerns the riot, the heist, and a busy Vancouver Sergeant O’Doul.”

They repaired to Tara’s cozy sitting room and a pallet couch...Tara briefly absently toying with her bath robe ties as Mason read Adam’s plaintive words.

When he concluded, she said, in a near whisper, “No real turning back is there?”

It took him a while to say, “Not really.”

“You never met Adam Sally?”

“I saw him about. When I was photographing there. His death — he was DOA in emergency — was a blow. On a bruise.”

“You want to stay?”

“Very much.”

“Let’s shower together.”

Wryly studying him she removed the bath robe again and turned on the shower. Then, eyeing him as he took her in, “My inspector general.” The laughter soon faded in the rush of water.

Later, on the bed, as his gaze strayed to the adjacent bed sit and bathroom, he noted again the large ornate glass screens before the dressing room and wide shower stall. “Elegant teasers those,” he said. Snuggling closer to him she added, “The one by the shower has Rajput warrior motifs.”

“A steamy consolation.”

“My reliable seer. They’re both actually bullet proof.”

He dourly smiled. “I think you have a mob gene.”

“Tell me.”

EIGHTEEN

Luis Morales blankly looked at Fabio Lucchese. It took a while for the words to sink in.

“What fucking A-head?”

Again Luis looked as if he faced a life sentence for a crime he hadn’t com-mitted. Fabio continued as if talking to a third party.

“As we mentioned earlier, we think Adam Sally knew some people involved in the Nefer break in. Some northern gang members. You were told to find him.”

Luis’s mazy confusion prompted Fabio to state the essential points again, as much to absolve his growing loathing for the troll before him. “The vagrant, Adam Sally — likely had info, sightings the night of the riot we wanted. He even kept a journal, some say.” By then Luis was fit to be tied. “So we hit the wrong stiff. Happens in a long haul. We got a description. Acted. What the fuck else?”

Fabio dourly smiled, debating how much this moron, this *pasticcione* ought to be told now. Another simple operation he had bungled. They would never now know the people Sally likely

knew — former IRA members who worked for Jack Owen, whom Luis had consorted or connived with on earlier jobs, about the time Owen recruited some Syrian immigrants — a late discovery that daunted now. Fabio suspected Luis's 'wrong stiff' was Owen's target, one of Luis's own shills a likely hitman. Crafty Owen wanted his IRA lads — some of whom Irish Sally likely knew — unknown. Easier to muscle in on Luis's large fragmenting domain. Fabio also suspected Owen had intercepted a late arms' shipment — Luis's indiscreet, or 'moonlighting' team again. The open question was to what extent Owen knew of Ryan's likely rifling of the Nefer vault. The question that spawned many questions — including the role of Sergeant O'Doul. Well, it was a maze.

Luis finally weighed in. "It's this fuckin' break in."

Fabio adopted a tolerant smile. They had decided that Luis was a grave liability, hardly one to deal with his adroit younger cousin Alejandra. Indeed, Fabio had made a discreet overture to her himself. As for rash Ryan Dyck, he had wanted to question not kill him. Luis's team had obtusely killed a luckless friend or bystander instead, the body dumped in a land fill — what operational sluggards do to hide, erase a fiasco. Fabio had subsequently learned via a Vancouver police informant that a swank coat found by the body most likely belonged to Dyck, and that a unique gold coin was found in the coat — further engaging puzzle. Fabio suspected the canny Alejandra would sort out what was going on with her messy wide-ranging Morales associates — sooner than later. He'd find a way to join in. Luis was history. A ghost.

NINETEEN

It was with some diffidence that Hélène withdrew the family album from the highboy, the late memories it evoked still vivid and, in their way, unsettling. But her pleasure in sharing the album's pictures with Marianna made it difficult to slight or ignore the latest set. It would be an adventure, she decided, going over the trying events it earmarked with this observant gracious witness. Perhaps some of the equanimity imparted in perusing the earlier pictures would rub off here. Marianna was the first to speak.

"She is beautiful. And with such talent. It seems so improbable all that happened. What I've read in the Sun. To be attacked so."

They looked at the program photo of Deirdre Corr and Mason's picture of her. Hélène had told Marianna on an earlier visit of Mason's esteem for her singing. "He was as much in awe of her as enamoured I think. He went to several of her performances, including her last — the night of the awful riot. A subject he's not expansive on."

"You say he's better now — from the head injury he suffered that night."

"Well, for the most part." Hélène managed a defensive smile. She hadn't told Marianna that Mason's hearing was impaired, or that the current diagnosis was not optimistic. The tough part was that the loss was an inherited condition, his injuries in the club not germane to its onset. The prognosis was that he could be mainly deaf by middle age. He explained his new hearing aid by saying he wanted Tara, Ann Green, to know he wasn't becoming less attentive to her

words. A bit suave, Hélène thought. He was thinking of Deirdre Corr's one CD — surely. One he may not hear that well one day.

Marianna pointed to another picture. "That girl I've not seen before. She looks a little like Deirdre — well, an athletic Deirdre. Am I being a bit nosey here?"

"Not at all. She's actually the last guest I had at Sea Sent. Tara Quin. She was in a state when she arrived and wanted me to keep her coming under wraps — for a time. She's actually done well, very well, since she departed Sea Sent — become an actress — in the film *Moon Disc*, which you may have heard of — also a top model. Believe me, no one was more surprised than me. Mason told me of her late success — he'd been the photographer for some of the promotional

ads she appeared in. She now uses a professional name — Ann Green. Suits her I think. They got on apparently. He sees her periodically I believe. We'll see some recent pictures of her shortly."

"Were you optimistic for a time, hearing of their relationship?"

Again the defensive smile. "Mason has a pensive streak. I'm not sure. Tara's an extrovert I think. Some unfinished business at any rate — mainly on her part I gather. Mason's not spoken of her for a while — since he returned. So I guess they may have parted, amicably I'm sure."

"They do look happy in the one pic here. A model couple one would think."

"I do ask for pictures. He usually obliges. Some here he took in a welfare shelter. This one — the one who died in a street accident — he knew and liked. A death that plainly upset him. Deirdre's injury too has taken its toll of course, but I think there is something else bothering him. He's always caring and attentive when he visits. It may be, could be an act for my benefit — I don't know. He's never been one to complain."

Hélène attentively turned a page.

Promptly Marianna asked, "This is an earlier photo? Relatives?"

"No. It fell out from an earlier page — in the other album. I should replace it. It's from Mason's days at UBC. They're together here. This one is Paul, this one Dirk, this one Ryan. Ryan was the problem one. Drugs and some other issue. Mason never really explained. They were together for a short time when Mason began documenting life in the East End of Vancouver. He's not mentioned any of them since the riot. At least not to me — no, he did recently say he'd not seen Paul for some time. Nor has Dirk, apparently. I think Mason liked Paul the best. He might be at a retreat Mason thought."

"They look happy here. They make me think of my brothers. Friends for a camera, often teasing or worse after. Handsome — Paul. Mindful, observant too I should think. And the following are the publicity shots for the film that Tara, Ann Green made?"

"Yes. For the film *Moon Disc*. Actually I've not seen Tara — Ann Green — since her stay. Mason was to bring her around some while back but something intervened. It seems there's an issue that's far from resolved. He's not been expansive and told me not to worry — a dismissive comment that hardly eases one's anxiety."

“Do you think it had anything to do with the film?”

“Well, it’s a possibility. Though it was the later ads — especially the stocking promotion ads that seemed to be a concern. Again, as I’ve said, I’m only guessing, but Mason was more defensive then...his ready assurances that everything was okay.”

“And these are some of the ads?”

“Tear sheets I think they’re called.”

“She is a lissome beauty. Legs that go on forever.”

“Yes. ‘Legs out of a Balanchine ballet,’ Mason said. I’ve not seen such a ballet. Mason avidly explores art film archives. He seemed diffident about showing me the tear sheets. I’m glad he did. A couple of the stocking ads are revealing — the bold European set. So called. The designs *are* striking. There was a lot going on at the time I think, but he wouldn’t elaborate. We’ll come to some telling prints later on. Prints of a brief holiday they took in Vienna — coffee houses and concert halls. Pictures sometimes reveal traits, peculiarities you hadn’t noticed at the time.”

Marianna laughed. “Your pictures and thoughts are always interesting. My sainted mother used to say that albums have lives of their own. And never really die. Even strangers can fondly take them up she claimed.”

Hélène affably smiled.

TWENTY

The fact that Hélène remained unsure of Mason’s liaison with Tara — with Ann Green — was one consequence of a plan whereby the two would continue their investigation of Gebara et al in a keen but circumspect manner, given Tara’s restiveness — one move being Tara’s hiring of the private detective, an act Alejandra approved of. The other was the return of Mason to the scene of the riot to look for some Nefer patrons who shared Deirdre’s last performance, including those he’d witnessed the riot with, in hopes of gleaning details that might relate to Ryan and possibly Gebara himself. It was also deemed apt for Mason to enrol in an Islam introduction course, to better assess the degrees of Islamic resolve and Ryan’s apprehension of them. Tara was getting impatient, which a smitten Mason endeavoured to ease when they talked, her words one morning intense.

“God, what have we missed! I think we need a Sibyl — from your pantheon.”

“They talk in riddles, usually. Sorry.”

“Well, darling Ryan is still out there. The one given. Now, with Adam’s list implicating O’Doul and Owen’s Syrians...and running again into this Gebara chap, a friend of a particular Morales’ goon, who could well pass as a Syrian...you don’t mind doing some snooping...women aren’t all that welcome...in ulema forums, where Muslim doctrines get reviewed and approved. More or less.”

“Well, in point of fact, I’ve already enrolled in an Islam education class for Westerners. Yes. A recent endeavour. A start at least.”

Tara’s quizzical smile was immediate. “What in the world prompted that?”

“One of the fellows I photographed in Vancouver’s East End was an elderly Muslim who’d been ditched by his family. So it seemed. A younger brother wanted another wife and asked him to move out. He told me he and his brother never got on. He was a gentle soul. And very frail. Sometimes delusional. A loner. I don’t remember him having any visitors. So someone may have wanted him out-of-the-way. As I understand it, Muslims usually look after their own —

the much touted universal family of the Ummah. His one possession was his Qur’an. He read some passages to me. In Arabic. He didn’t translate. The verses were obviously precious to him. Afterward he said to me in English, ‘Life allows many lives; mine’s taken an odd path.’ Oh yes, he also said about the Hadith — a traditional source of guidance principles — ‘It sometimes reworks, remediates interpretations.’ Something, from a Muslim. I wanted to give him some cash but he refused, with a smile that still haunts. His face was, is, an elegy in itself. I’ve never photographed one whose equanimity, despite all, seemed as timeless, per-durable. A curiosity in our day’s sectarian turmoil. I decided I might, should learn more about his faith — as patronizing as that might be. Good timing, yes?”

Tara responded with protracted engaging smile, and a sudden kiss. “Righto sailor.”

The belatedly-arrived-at lecture was conducted in the warehouse of a large commercial mall in Surrey. The room was nondescript except for pronounced arabesques high on the walls and the edges of some blackboards. Mason nodded to the handful of participants already seated. All looked, none nodded back. He was one of the few Caucasians and perhaps the only cripple, which he imagined some taking note of. He was cautioned to find that they all looked sullen, antipathetic. Each exuded a menacing aspect it seemed. Had life in the West aggravated their loathing of it? So a newly wary Mason surmised. Any one of them could slice his head off with great panache he suspected. Then his conscience told him to lay off. He sat in a back seat and stared at the arabesques. As he waited, a list of some current events kept needling him, a list he’d recently compiled from several websites: the rise of ISIS or ISIL, the collapse of cities like Mosul, Ramadi, Kobani, the destruction of ancient Roman ruins in Palmyra, the extermination of Iraqi Christians and Yazidis, the staged beheadings of ISIS captives and the stories of youngsters who yearned to join such dedicated ‘avengers’. Also, the missing Nigerian girls, the late stoning of a Syrian woman by ISIS, an honour killing that got minimal media attention (upstaged by Western feminists’ ever more fastidious rendering of Western male assault and deafening silence about traditional misogyny elsewhere), the bombings in many European cities, the growing imputation of American ‘infamy’ in the Middle East, and the racial animosity in American cities often erupting in lurid confrontations. A perfunctory list of course. He also thought of some American nobs who rued the lower middle class, the newly named ‘deplorables’: their tacky homes, stolid routines, witless religion, limited schooling, marital slogging, dearth of spontaneity and creativity. ‘They paved paradise and put up a parking lot’ — one of the early long-standing rebukes. He wasn’t sure what a human paradise would look like

without some pavement and parking lots. Was the concern for living longer, spending an extra year or two in a care home the worry? Or the lack of a ready, approved suicide pill? Fentanyl et cetera becoming serviceable substitutes. The unparalleled freedom to live out a natural life hadn't much wained in America over all, and things like the providential Polio vaccine allowed even more folks the leisure to robustly sound off. And what about all those many, many meticulously made musical instruments, also the acoustic-friendly concert halls and recording studios, full spectrum recording devices, radio, video and music archives on networks that flourished despite the parking lots? The dissidents were a little shrill. America specialized in honing self-dramatic ravers. The problem is what you do for an encore! A problem some radicals were ardently coping with. Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders once hoped the United States would lose big in Iraq. A toffy tweet on a radical website blurted: 'Rocker Girl, Mother of Two and ISIS Recruit Wants to Behead Christians with a Blunt Knife.' As avant-garde as ever, Karl Heinz Stockhausen, the ultramodern composer — one of Mason's bugbears — called 9-11 the greatest creative act of the modern era. That Australian seven-year-old holding up the head his dad had just sliced off threatened to become routine as shelling peas — decapitation spooking virtual reality. He knew many if not most of the media-aired travesties were attributed to American-Conservative malfeasance by the enlightened denunciation crowd, so safely ensconced in the comparatively comfortable West. Western swine, especially stolid whites, lined up like bowling pins. The insidious perpetrators of historic mayhem. As bad or worse than the Jews. Could the others in this room read his mind, apprehend these scurrilous thoughts, given the general dour look of most attendees? The instructor, who apologized for being late — a congenial looking chap with rimless glasses, a bushy black beard and a knitted watchman's cap — immediately launched into a fevered jeremiad that seemed, given the prompt enthusiasm that greeted it, a salient feature of such sessions. It didn't take long for Mason to suspect he may have blundered into the wrong lecture!

"You all know the facts that don't make the Washington Post — which many investigative sites world wide have made plain. In brief, Western pikers are scared shitless of us. Of me and you. They know their hegemony is over — their despoliation and corruption of the planet. They distract themselves with endless texting, and video games and films of pornographic cruelty and adultery — 'Mature Entertainment'. (This comment prompted some laughter.) American kids who can barely read and write are fat, lazy, and sit in awe of their digital Frankensteins. In some schools little white girls are urged to cry to learn to atone for the sin of being white. Their mushrooming elders are often dismayed, disgruntled, their politicians venal opportunists. They haven't the guts to fight us man to man, so they pretend to patronize our faith. But our Muslim brothers world wide know better. They know we, and we alone, will bring order to the planet. Low birth rates and exponentially growing debt will alone destroy the West. We're just saving time!"

The applause following this outburst was sustained.

By then Mason feared he was indeed in the wrong place. The words were inimical to 'A Basic introduction to Islam' — the blurb that initially engaged his interest. Indeed, the current

avid speaker was well and truly torqued, his contempt manifest as he reiterated some details from a last lecture that he wanted to revisit this day, parenthetically, the exposure of ‘brazen Western coverups’, innuendo Mason knew was often cited by avid ‘experts’: “On 9-11, the leftover telltale sulfidated steel from WTC 7, which housed American intelligence and law enforcement agencies — ‘Guliani’s bunker’ — being removed and covertly destroyed, thus limiting any sturdy investigation; the paucity of plane wreckage in the Pentagon remains; the inability of Mohammed Atta et al being able to pilot jet planes into buildings without flight guidance, buildings moreover, that collapsed like accordions by ostensible thermite explosions, the ‘official’ explanations for which only incited many doubters. Also: the false leg ‘inadvertently’ missed in the Boston Marathon bombing and the police reprise of a terrorist bomb attack on the same day, and a paltry knife that could in no way remove the head of a man.” With some chagrin Mason realized that only a person with an exhaustive knowledge of the details — which excluded him — might question such flagrant incendiary assertions. He believed most of them had been explicated, accounted for, but could remember few details. He feared he had indeed blundered into the wrong space: this was not the genial introduction to Islam mentioned on the site he’d looked at. Something was terribly amiss. The incendiary speech continued: “The late slaughter in the Middle-East was done by America and its surrogates. The tales of doom’s day weapons in Muslim hands — all clever deceptive showcasing, astute fabrication, the Western speciality. Westerners can’t tell the difference between fact and fiction any more. Look at their nightly entertainments — every human bestiality and calamity — as entertainment! Much of it to a fun rock beat. And always more and more ‘realistic’ as their high definition increases and their paltry censorship lapses. Porno Gruesomeness Mandated. Even many American so-called artists work themselves into orgies of hatred and contempt for their fellow Americans.” Everyone in the room kept nodding. Mason did learn, when the atrocities dwindled, that Haraam — the things forbidden in Islam — included interest on most loans, buying investment certificates and insurance, keeping dogs and eating pigs. Apropos the first, American bankers, brokers and their government flunky regulators were touted to be historically conniving creeps — pitching whole communities into ruin with toxic credit while the perpetrators gave themselves handsome bonuses. A list of mainly Jewish bank executives, investment councillors and brokers followed, a list that seemed infinite. Indeed, the instructor pretended to run out of breath — to more incipient laughter. He then said he would answer questions. Even ones that shadowed Islam in the West. To one question the instructor replied, with some deliberation, that no, indentured labor was not strictly Haraam, and had its place when a crucial need was apparent. It was the only way some fractious ethnic groups might be tolerated. This assessment prompted more laughter. Another lad asked about Bacha Bazi, a type of engagement Mason did not know about — sex with young hairless boys who were considered girls — which too was not strictly Haraam, the ‘expedient marriage’ being matter-of-factly excused. Mason was also reminded, that women sometimes needed firm handling to keep them sane, keep the bellyaching to a minimum. No mention of specialty surgery. Then the recent example of Naomi Klein came up — her contention that runaway Western capitalism was the day’s chief earthly menace! The

instructor smiled. “Western feminists are sometimes our greatest allies. Western Human Rights tribunals are often made up of women. We sue the rare critic and such tribunals usually back us up. Islamophobia is actually a great ally. The mouse that roars. It’s so obvious they want us to win. They can’t wait for us to win!” More general laughter. A further plethora of ostensible facts and statistics followed, the minuteness of the detail such that questioning any one fact or number must again invoke an array of particulars only a person with a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the event or survey might pose — details and insights well beyond Mason’s apprehension — though he would have remained mum here regardless. He was not a crusader. In closing, the instructor said that heroically assaulting, killing a strident beligerant non-believer was an express ticket to Paradise — a statement that seemed to intensify the avidity in the room. Killing was both the warrior’s honour and the martyr’s sanctification, he said in conclusion. By then Mason wondered if he would get out of the room alive. He was either dreaming or emphatically in the wrong place! How that should have happened only keened his anxiety.

When the instructor finished he wanted the names of the attendees, so he could follow up on their life accomplishments. He had mislaid an earlier list but had been encouraged by some entrants’ determination to learn Arabic. He would remember their names. Everyone signed. Mason placed a false name and hoped no one would remember him. Some names were American, some Spanish, some Arabic, some for him obscure. If he had doubts about the dissolution of Western Civilization, the tales of its dramatic fall were, he knew, the life blood of many Western goads, some of whom were exceptionally polished in their rapt anticipation. He had read at length more than one eloquent Western execrator, determined chaps with endless allegations of the West’s perfidy, a compendium that suggested a lifetime of selfless dedication — a further wry reminder that he may have underestimated the attraction of catalytic drama for a comparatively comfort ridden populace. The instructor looked as if he might approach him as he was leaving. It was touch and go for a few seconds until another ‘student’ garnered his attention, but not before he had given Mason a cool assessment, a look not at all congruent with his self-assured manner.

On leaving Mason kept an eye out for followers as he returned to his car, which he’d parked some distance from the warehouse entrance. The suspicion that he’d stumbled into a recruiting or solidarity-enhancing seminar, a session few knew about, gripped him. Then, with some chagrin he realized the address he’d sought for the ‘Basic Introduction to Islam’ was in fact several blocks away; he’d neglected, not noticed, the extra zero in the street number he’d copied from the Internet. As he left could only guess at the many passing cars and the few pedestrians. He found himself strangely, freakishly swearing.

He was inside his East Pender bed sit for less than an hour, trying to assess what he’d just witnessed, when a bold knocking on his door startled him. He almost didn’t answer it. When he did two large men dressed as construction workers, so he thought, barged in, one grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. His feeble cry of “Oh for god sake!” was drowned out by the loud blunt query, “Who sent you?” repeated several times, each more menacing than the last.

“What are you talking about?”

“Who sent you! Who sent you!”

It was obvious if he didn't provide a suitable answer he was going to get clobbered; one chap had produced a kind of truncheon.

“Nobody ‘sent’ me!”

The truncheon was raised menacingly when a second set of bold knocks resounded on the bed sit's hollow door. The two goons looked at one another quizzically — without resolution it seemed. The knocking resumed. “Tell them to go away,” one goon whispered, which Mason did, only to be answered by: “Police!

Open the door!” The two goons were suddenly on the verge of hysteria.

“I can't, two guys are about to beat the shit out of me.”

“We'll force the door if you don't open it.” Mason tried to smile; the police chap had obviously heard lame excuses before. But what the police would want of him — here, now — perplexed as it giddily astonished, given the ogres already in his room. The two goons looked frantically about. Finding no exit or concealing defensive area, they suddenly, brusquely wrenched open the door and fled past two constables, almost knocking one over. The commotion that followed was seismic. The bumped constable, a robust female, caught the leg of the first goon, tripping him down the narrow entrance stairs. Following him to the bottom she engaged in an intense but brief struggle before binding and cuffing him. She called on her cell for backup while the first constable, a giant of a man, wrestled the first goon into submission on Mason's floor after a couple of robust slaps. A dumfounded Mason looked on this brouhaha as one in the front seat of a Real Combat match. Again he might be dreaming.

“Busy place,” the first constable, a heavy ruddy faced man, said when the goons had been taken off. “They wanted something, right?”

Mason was dumfounded, barely aware of what had just happened, and limply numbly shrugged. The gal constable then came into the room, assessed Mason's dismay, approached and said with some kindness, “Why don't you sit down and let us look around.” Which Mason promptly did, still dazed by what had just happened, including the bizarre arrival of the police on the heels of the first two wackos dramatic coming. He surely must be dreaming — again — but, as before, could find no role for himself in the story. “What something?” he managed to say.

The first constable looked at him with some dislike. “You took a packet off the wino who was killed in a hit and run. We have a witness. We want to see it.”

Immediately the comment summoned the earlier mishap on Hastings street — making the arrival of the first intruders here a possible further liability. Tara's comment about a ‘bent cop’ then flashed in Mason's mind. As did Adam Sally's mention of a shady Sergeant O'Doul. The distrust, suspicion was then unrelenting. Would these cops have known about the packet and what it contained? And how would they know? Were they just tallying Adam Sally's possessions? They seemed awfully keen to account for that possession. Provisionally he'd left Adam's notes and list of consequential players with Tara — which she had shown to her newly recruited detective, said detective wanting to keep the notes discreetly hidden for a time — an option,

when Mason learned of it, he readily agreed to. Thus, he spoke up, more forcefully than he intended.

“I don’t remember taking anything. I wondered if I could do something for the injured man. At least one witness searched the man’s pockets before I got there. I remember shouting at him.” This largely impromptu rendering he des-perately hoped had some credibility.

The first constable shook his head in sullen disbelief. “Just tell us where it is.”

Mason could barely bring the constables into focus. A third entered the room, whispered something to the large constable, something about someone being held up — someone by the name of O’Doul. Mason was certain he heard the name O’Doul. He shrugged, hiding his dismay. “I didn’t pick up anything. I felt for the the injured guy. I was concerned for him.”

“One street person saw you going through the victim’s clothes.”

“I wasn’t ‘going through his clothes’ — I was trying to help!”

The gal constable looked at him less amiably. “Where did you put it? The street person saw you pick something up.”

Mason shrugged. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Where?” The question was razor edged.

Mason was by then nursing his own suspicion. “So who the hell was that first duo — some guys you sent to read me a citation?”

The three constables exchanged more stark impatient looks.

“Just tell us where it is.”

Eventually, Mason found himself undergoing a marathon interrogation in a police precinct. In the course of which he told the questioning detective that he had blundered into what might be a jihadi recruiting session and wondered if the two chaps who preceded the police had come to interrogate him about how he ended up in such a venue. They wanted to know who had sent him and were resolutely determined to jog his memory. This produced a mere guffaw from the questioning detective. He was not there for ‘comic relief’ he said. Despite all, an encouraging comment Mason thought — the guy knew the theatric device of comic relief. It was then a female constable entered the room, whispered something to the detective while handing him a note. They conversed. She glanced at the viewing window. Mason thought he heard her say, “He’s here,” and wondered who the ‘he’ was. His anxiety was then acute. He was not yet ready to divulge Adam’s notes. Adam’s claim that one constable was on the take ratified Mason’s suspicion. The names he listed might well cue some action, also acquit if lost or destroyed. His question to himself then: Who might know of Adam’s witness to unsavoury events, his plaintive diary, and who would most benefit from reading it? It was some time before Mason’s bewilderment gave the questioners pause. His effort to document life in the East End may also have bored them but the reality of the dedication — from his several camera memory chips, plus his feeling for the Muslim which prompted him to seek out the intro lecture to Islam — peeled away some of the distrust. Though they showed no interest in the two goons who preceded them. “Likely got a wrong address,” one questioner casually said. “You reside in a messy neighbourhood. Mismatch alley.” The comment struck Mason as evasive, blasé, scornful even,

adding to his growing suspicion. Someone obviously wanted a detailed account of Adam Sally's possessions and deeds. Did the names of Adam's IRA chaps reveal a team in a cross border operation — possibly even a Nefer heist? Vancouver was, after all, a busy international hub.

Mason's own meagre worldly possessions in the bed sit were accounted for in their entirety that day after a thorough search of his bed sit. They could hardly believe he lived so. Almost the 'hand to mouth' of his subjects. "Can you not tell why a wino's effects are so important?" he asked them. They listened to this oddly declamatory question in silence. They did learn of his retail advertising work — he kept a diminutive-sized portfolio in his camera bag — and his mother's past management of a bed and breakfast residence on Crescent Beach, a background fact in the summary he was eventually obliged to give them, adding that he spoke to her every week at her care home. He would rent a flat in Kerrisdale when his work in the East End was finished.

He was told to remain in the city.

When again on his own, taking refuge in a Gastown sidewalk café, he re-visited the messy aftermath of the Stanley Cup riot, and how Adam Sally's familiarity with Vancouver's East End denizens might be of signal interest to a tainted copper who served a transnational gang in a busy shipping port. Did the observant Adam see something in the East End the same copper wanted kept secret. Had Adam carelessly talked to some opportunistic gate mouths, showed one or two his writing? The fact the police had no interest in tracking a possible radical Muslim cell underlined the PC mantra of the era and/or the possibility of a wildcard detective — or detectives. Corrupted cops rarely lacked for colla-borators, he presumed, given Alejandra's late words to Tara. He felt he must be discreet for a time. Perhaps if he were to 'lose' his cell phone for a while. He would get drunk one night and be picked up as a vagrant. A performance he then felt up to. In his ominous list of names, earnest Adam Sally clearly included the name O'Doul, a cop he thought bent. A name Mason was certain he heard the one policeman mention. He must continue to honour that fact. Such a rare list, in neutral hands could — as he again surmised — condemn or, if lost or destroyed, exempt!

TWENTY-ONE

Hélène looked up with a grateful smile when Mariana entered — to begin the second of that week's bi-weekly 'chin fests'. Paula Hauser, the new owner of Sea Scent, had called two days before, wanting to know if Hélène knew a Sergeant O'Doul, a member of the Deas Island Constabulary. Hélène said she didn't. Paula was managing well these last few months and called less often than she once did to learn the secrets of running an exclusive Bed and Breakfast. But the visit of Sergeant O'Doul had obviously alarmed her and she phoned Hélène when he left. She seemed surprised Hélène had nothing to tell her. Paula was plainly disappointed, for she spent a while almost accusing Hélène of not being upfront about Mason's activities when she sold Sea Sent. In the course of the conversation Hélène learned more than she wanted about Sergeant O'Doul and his interest in Mason. She couldn't imagine Mason concealing information

pertinent to an on-going investigation, nor do anything that might implicate or endanger Sea Sent. She had not told Paula of the hit-and-run accident Mason witnessed, nor divulged that event to Marianna. It seemed at the time too speculative and sensational. She did now tell Marianna about Paula's disturbing call.

"You must have been alarmed. And anxious."

"Baffled, more like. Particularly why one would want to search Sea Sent. It's very puzzling. And upsetting of course. Mason is not always candid with me, yet I can't imagine him impeding an investigation. Paula was very upset, to say the least. The police must have had fun going through all the nook and crannies there. Sorry, but the way I designed it, it was rather Victorian — so Mason said. Clutter is clutter after all when it's not wanted, not cherished. Non-prized objects find no niche, I read somewhere. Indeed, Paula wanted most of the furniture and *objets* — a word Mason fancies. Ha! I have no room here, as you see. I've kept some treasured pieces — I've two boxes in my closet. I must admit I find it very odd that Paula thinks I'm hiding something. I trust it will all work out." Hélène had no sooner said this when the pavilion director entered the room.

"Hélène, there's a police officer who would like to see you. She has some questions I believe. I think you should be alone."

Hélène smiled. "Of course show her in. Dear Marianna is just leaving."

TWENTY-TWO

Mason was upset the police had not asked nor mentioned anything about his safety, given the bruises they took into custody. Indeed, Mason heard little about them during a follow-up visit to his bed-sit. "Maybe nothing to do with you, though we don't know that do we?" the one constable reiterated. Mason must have looked shocked for the constable brusquely added that such intrusions were commonplace in that neighbourhood. "Maybe they got a wrong address. Maybe. You choose to live here, expect a few rowdies. They've been remanded — assaulting a police officer. Actually two. You want to charge them, see a lawyer. They were leaving when we arrived. It's apparent *you* let them in."

If Mason was miffed, he did his best to keep it to himself. They looked about his room again and took some fingerprints from the door, the lone window sill, table, the two chairs, wash basin and toilet. They left without comment, other than demanding he not leave the area.

"For how long?"

"We'll let you know."

He did return to the industrial mall in Surrey for the 'friendly' Introduction to the Path of Islam — in a new physical guise: his brown hair cut short, a knit cap snugly on his head, concealing makeup on his birthmark, and thick non-prescription glasses which made him look near sighted. Easy to assemble and easy to maintain. In his retail advertising work he had

helped refine the makeup on several models, men and women. Ann, who'd worked with several makeup artists by then, vetted the finished look.

The reading list he was given contained a book he'd already read. *A Brief Guide to Islam* by Paul Grieve, a chap who believed Islam a peaceful religion — by and large. The initial lecture, from a kindly elderly gent, dwelled on the 'thoughtful and heedful nature of Islam' and its 'growing appeal to millions of caring people'. Questions were to be written out and submitted at the end — to be answered at the next lecture. No names need append the questions. Islam did not focus on individuals only shared problems. The audience did not include flinty soreheads or would-be terrorists he concluded. Some made fluent notes. It was a school for acolytes, not gamers like Ryan or Gebara. He knew the later lectures would be similarly bland, and decided to seek out a series elsewhere — one yielding telling details.

He remained alarmed by the police constables' glib dismissal of his concern and fear — which he suspected to be deliberate. Something was amiss there. The two thugs who initially attacked him were in no doubt about his 'alien' presence at the incendiary lecture. Someone must have watched him return to his bed sit. Adam's depressing narrative kept him heads up, his eye ever peeled when he ventured beyond his room. His anxiety barely let up when he got through another day without incident. He was still a police person of interest, a fact a terrorist might find intimidating. He would seek out a new house keeping room in due course. He would choose the area more carefully this time.

After a close inspection of his current neighbourhood one afternoon, he called Tara from a pay phone — the now successful, ever elegant Ann Green. He told her at length about his witness to an Islamist diatribe, his near miss with a couple of thugs, and his ongoing truck with police — which may interest if not puzzle vigilant Muslims. He then asked about her own private investigator. Fine she said, then promptly wanted to know if he was okay and could he get away. He couldn't right then. She was silent for a time, then said she missed him and urged him to try to join her. "LA's a no-man's land. If you're not a celebrity here you're invisible."

"And if you are one?" he dryly asked.

With some staidness she replied, "I've a studio body guard — two currently who alternate in business hours. I've an emergency call button for after hours. The current two minders intimidate the occasional hustler." A light chuckle followed this comment. "They also look for sly prowlers of course. One of the givens. Alejandra's been a help. A mine of information, actually. Her dealings with Antoine is a further plus." She added, "I miss my uptown yodeller." She then said, "Lots of cowboys here but few complicit 'caballeros' — a word I've latched onto. To keep up with you, so to speak."

After a moment, Mason dryly said, "How about a 'verray parfit gentil knight'. Squire class.

"He'll do. Do I know him?"

"One of Chaucer's 'complicits'."

"Oh. Who's Chaucer? Oh. Him. What am I again?"

"The Wife of Bath. She holds her own among the jawing pilgrims."

"Is she good in bed."

“The best.”

“Do come.”

When the amusement abated Mason learned that the private detective Ann hired had uncovered leads on some drug dealers and porno groupies who knew Ryan — but nothing current. Yes, she had kept Adam’s notes safe — in an airport luggage compartment. It was agreed Adam’s notes should be kept close until they learned more. Ann’s detective agreed. Mason was by then all but convinced a bent cop had long disapproved of observant Sally, a person perhaps unduly aware of nefarious activity in Vancouver’s East End. You live it you see it. Yet the death of such a one hadn’t sufficed it seemed. He almost lost his voice saying how lonely he felt then, yet told her not to call him on his cell. The police may have it bugged, he said. For how long he didn’t know. Like today, he would call her at least twice a week from a call box.

Two days later he called her again — out of desperation. He had to talk to someone sane. “I was called in to identify a body...sorry, this is going to take a while.”

“I’m listening. Really listening.”

He had to take a breath before beginning.

“It all began when Dirk Church — a guy I told you about, who was acquitted of a misdemeanour charge the night of the riot — was called in to identify some people seen in one of the images the police were using to identify rioters; someone’s video included us standing outside the Nefer Club that night. He was asked to confirm the identity of the persons he was seen with. He identified me and Paul Landers, referring to Paul as ‘Humming Bird’, our choice name, which eventually cued the sergeant to a missing person bulletin. Ryan’s name came up — the police wanted to know all the people Dirk was with that night — but Ryan wasn’t with us when that video was shot, and we didn’t see him that night. In due course Dirk was called in to identify a body...what was left of it.” Again Mason paused. “Paul...Paul Landers...was, has been, murdered. A gang killing the police thought. Yes. Just so. I was called in to affirm the identity...the body having been left outdoors for some time...the family, well the mother, hadn’t yet been informed. Ryan’s a person of interest of course.”

Mason decided he would not add to the grief by mentioning the mutilations. It was only the faint leftover of the humming bird tattoo on the right arm that affirmed an identity. The arm had been covered in a bloodied shirt sleeve when the body was found Mason was told by a morgue employee. A possible reason why it wasn’t removed.

When told of the killing Tara began softly swearing, prompting Mason to say, “The one decent fellow. Our peerless harmless hummingbird.”

Tara was distraught yet keen to make some sense of the deed. “Did you learn anything — how such a thing might have happened?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Nothing. The who, how, why — all missing.”

“So very, very sorry.”

A solemn silence ensued.

Mason's requiem words that followed were a testament to a decent, generous, forbearing individual. His voice bespoke tears. He admitted he could not remember being so tired, bereft, whipped. She, in turn, urged him to join her. "You need to get away." After a pause she added, "Miss the parallel parking." He plaintively sighed, promised to call again soon, and assured her he was working on a disappearing act. "The 'boy scouts' insist I hang around of course, for another sleep over — or wilderness hike." Her plaintive sigh ended with, "Do come. Soon as you can."

On returning to his room he glanced in his washstand mirror and decided he might resemble a fugitive, one suspected of nefarious activity. His interrogation about Paul Landers had lasted in stages for the better part of an afternoon! It was his lassitude and frequent bathetic responses to their insinuations, he imagined, that gave his belligerent questioners pause: "No, we didn't call him hummingbird because he was a territorial nit." They had wanted to know if Paul quarrelled with Ryan over Ryan's expanding drug territory — reminding Mason of Ryan's self-inflicted plight. He must have sat there before his questioners like a ghost, a revenant. The apparent facts made no sense. He did remember some of the pauses in the interview, as someone came in from outside to cue the questioners. Was he in tears? Perhaps. He knew he had trouble breathing. Again he was advised to not leave the area. He did remember plaintively asking, "Where would I go?..." A question none of the questioners took up. The sight of Paul's savaged remains would haunt him the rest of his life. Only Deirdre's ongoing sorry state compared.

He phoned Tara a day later from a discrete phone booth in a busy hotel lobby hoping against hope she might be in — a sane ready confidant he needed then — but was caught off guard by the frantic pitch of her voice! "Oh Mason, something else has come up. I still can't believe — a Wanted poster I saw of Roseanne Hartley. I must have mentioned her. A school friend. No?"

"The name I remember. Not much else. Sorry."

"It was a shock. Seeing the poster — for I'd met her just a couple of days earlier! It's bizarre to say the least. I called Millie, who's trying to get in touch with Roseanne's mother. She was an item, Roseanne, always on the go. The 'skiddoo', Millie used to say. Millie and Roseanne's mother were close I remember. Who else would put up such a poster? Millie promised to get back to me. It's just so — unreal. Sorry. One of those freaky ominous shocks. Anything more on Paul?"

"No. Nothing new. I'm still a person of interest of course. The dour curiosity."

"Oh Christ. You must be worn out. That bent cop...Paul. You'd be better off here. I would be. Particularly now."

"I called, wanting to hear your voice. Someone sane. Tell me about Rose-anne."

"This may sound self-dramatic...I'll try to keep it brief...I know you're hurting. But it's something that won't let up. A school mate who knew Ryan — Roseanne Hartley — actually warned me about him. Well, I met her here a few days ago. She was auditioning for a film, a remake of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, she said. I wanted to say, yes dear, ISIL badly needs a night

out. I didn't of course, and I've since learned there is no such film production listing here. Wonder of wonders. Would she even know who Oscar Wilde was? But seeing, meeting her was an agreeable surprise. She was an alert kid, a good mimic and talented dancer I recall — hip hop, salsa — a competition regular. She looked great. Very yummy. She was in a hurry — we agreed to meet later at a café in Westchester. She never turned up. She didn't leave me a contact number. I kind of shrugged it off, she could be an impromptu act, but then this missing poster turns up — yesterday — of the same Roseanne! Then I remembered some internet pics of Ryan's I briefly saw — I'm sure of it — Middle Eastern, the Levant, settings he apparently liked. I didn't think much of it at the time. This will sound farfetched, I never thought of it until now — Ryan reprising Salomé. It's one of those creepy intimations that has legs. I just can't shake the idea — a theme he would exploit — harum-scarum sex, beheading, murder. And he did know and fancy Roseanne at home, though they did have a falling out. But now, here — who knows? This is so grody. Is the poster maybe a publicity stunt, I wonder? They do some strange things here. My private detective's checked out the poster but can't find out who actually ordered or posted it. There's no printer logo on the back or contact number. They are well made, the posters. A parent or relative one imagines would have ordered them. Mrs. Hartley was a single mom. It was the suddenness of the poster that shocked — days after I met Roseanne. It makes little sense. My detective can't find a Canadian or American nexus — no report of a missing person resembling my former school mate. Anyway, the anxiety won't let up. Millie said the mother's away but is asking around. She's not well — Millie. She has cancer and the chemo is making her sick. I felt bad asking her but I think she understood. My worry is that Roseanne could be a quarry for one of Ryan's babe recruiters. One of the pesky ifs. It's unlikely he'd approach her himself, given her past truck with him. But after seeing Gebara that one time he always seemed on the take, and met with many street hustlers. Please consider — the racy film industry here is ubiquitous. A 'million Gaussian points' some wag said, about the many independent players and gigs. The new 'normal'."

Mason's silence eventually flagged Tara's brisk narrative. "You still here?"

Said an apprehensive Mason, "Yes. It does sound odd, fishy. And possibly forbidding — the timing. Sadly, I've got some more sorry news of my own. As bad or worse." He could hear Tara give way to a sigh. "Seems Paul's killers may have thought he was Ryan. I've since learned from Dirk that the coat found with Paul was Ryan's. A smart dress coat the ghoul fancied."

"Oh christ, it never rains...and I had some other news...which can wait."

"You're interested?"

"We'll see. Later. Sorry, always seem in a rush these days. A taxi's waiting. Another interview. Bad timing. Should be free in an hour or so. Love you."

Mason then realized, again, how he missed talking and assessing things with Tara, Paul's fate being then as dumfounding and devastating as Deirdre's. Mason sensed the miasma of a furtive manic-depressive — but for Tara.

PART THREE

A lie has many endings.

Anon

Those serpents!

There is no pleasing them!

Lewis Carroll

TWENTY-THREE

It was an emphatic decision. The East End book was finished, the publishers wrestling with a thorny issue: the legal jeopardy for printing intimate shots of ‘questionable public benefit’ — the social demeaning aspect of identifying the destitute — and he had no further project lined up. He would take his chances and head south to see Tara. He still resisted calling her Ann Green. He phoned his mother from a pay phone and said he would be away for a while. He wouldn’t be long. A job he had to see about. The best excuse he could think of. He would phone in due course. He decided to keep the news of Paul’s death from her for the time being; Paul’s mother had apparently suffered a heart attack when she learned and remained in hospital. The police interest in his connection to Adam Sally was ongoing of course.

Hélène put down the receiver with some consternation. The police had not bothered her for a while, but there was no guarantee. Well, Mason was upset, and undoubtedly had things to do. She could tell from his tone of voice that something was urgent, needed attending to, such that she would keep the police visit to herself, for now. She returned to her morning news-paper and coffee. A piece about a child with an ungainly birth mark touched her. The child had gone missing. ‘We’re all ‘marked’,’ she said to herself. Some you see, some you don’t.

Two long days later Mason was bypassing Weed, California, in his rented Hyundai. An airline would have been more risky he imagined, his activities then of greater interest to the police it seemed. Thus he was surprised and grateful that no one stopped him at the border, making him wonder how official the ‘investigation’ of him was. Mind you, he had taken the quiet Sumas crossing when it just opened, the custom officer there half-awake and yawning. Perhaps he was lucky. The clear brisk morning around Weed was exhilarating, the air at that elevation comparatively pristine but for occasional fine wisps of sand or grit. He hoped to be in LA by mid to late afternoon. He had booked into a Friendship Motor Inn. He wanted a decent night’s sleep that night. He would find something more spartan and covert the following day. He had phoned Tara before leaving, her contralto voice beguiling as ever. “My very own wayfarer,” she said. “My other eyes. I called Millie last night, her birthday’s coming up — I sent her a suede toggle coat. We talked. I asked her how things were — asked if she’d learned any more about Mrs. Hartley. She said she’d left a note but not heard from her; she still didn’t know

what Roseanne might or might not be up to. Since I left, Stephen and the hoggers are still touch and go apparently. Millie sounded depressed. The chemo's a drag of course. Little gets Millie down." After a short pause she added, "Glad you're coming. I can use a willing partisan. A gopher to look for Roseanne. I can't rid myself of the possibility that Ryan or his ilk are involved here. I know, it may sound a little dotty, but it won't let up."

"Gopher. Um. Nobody more invisible or determined. As of now. You mentioned last time a new film."

"More when you come. For sure."

They met at sunset in a homey waterside oyster bar and ordered a bottle of Muscadet and the Horseback Devils — oysters wrapped in bacon. The sun loitered above a business skyline. Wicker furniture and gingham tablecloths were coming alive in a gloaming. She was more sleek and lustrous than he remembered. A shawl, floppy hat and shades all but masked her presence. Her smile was as warm though, the kiss not perfunctory, after which she restored her dark glasses. The conversation, much awaited, soon tripped along.

He looked about him, smiled. "No, not the haunt of a goddess — this joint. Good choice."

"Because you'd be an item in my current abode, I've booked a discrete hotel. We can meet there a few times a week. Tonight if you like."

"Very much."

Her smile could awaken a mummy, he thought. 'Mummy' being a word he associated with these days. She then sat back affably studying him.

"As I mentioned, I've engaged a retired detective, a guy I've come to trust. Hope you do too. Pete Voss. He's introduced me to an FBI agent, one Bruno Cavet, who investigates terrorist cells and their collaborators. Bruno knows Alejandra. "Mutual interests," was all he said. I can imagine. He comes across as wise and knowledgeable as — Thucydides and maybe as old." She smiled quizzically at him. "I think I've got the right guy — in the prudent assessment department. You suavely mentioned him a couple of times."

"Thucydides yes, top drawer. Must have a reincarnation or two."

"Both Pet and Bruno welcome a discreet helper. The 'gopher' I mentioned."

"Discreet and willing."

"You look well."

"I'm here. Miss the dancing of course."

This produced a fond chuckle. "I'll get a player installed. Deirdre's ballads lighten the load, yes? Any further word on her state? The last I heard from the mother — who did finally phone — she was in a care home."

"Sadly no. The same. The paralysis bad, apparently. Also a vocal cord trauma. From the wounding. The mother did post a recent e-mail. A general statement. She's obviously crushed. It's gruesome. The fact Deirdre only made the one CD one of the 'sorrows'."

Mason then stopped, as if short of breath. "A wilderness subject," he added with some dismay, then smiled as he regarded Tara, now the prized Ann Green who, sensing his dismay,

gave him a sustained hug. He fondly resumed with: “You hinted at some matter in an earlier phone call.”

“A film. One of those oddities — British, UK Film Council production, set here. Some kind of remake of *The Disappearance of Alice Creed*.”

Mason wryly smiled. “Do I know this ‘Alice’?”

“Probably not. Similar story, well somewhat similar from the little I’ve read. Hard to tell from a shooting script. Different title of course — *Missing Angel*. Which I had not say in.” She sighed. “Hoary enough coincidence. I haven’t yet been contacted, though my agent’s optimistic.”

“And nothing more on Roseanne.”

“Nothing. Pete was following two of Owen’s newly recruited Syrians who robbed a client’s computer store. Owen runs a motley network here, including some Russians. Pete needed a cut out to follow up, but didn’t finally trust the guy he might have used. I think he’ll consider taking you on.”

“He knows I’m something of a fugitive?”

“Yes. He smiled when I told him. ‘Can’t be all bad,’ he said. You’ll meet him tomorrow. You’ll get on. Incidentally, he told me he was looking into this O’Doul guy in the port of Vancouver and some connections here. He and Bruno frequently compare notes. He says Bruno’s been investigating the Owen gang, and knows of its former IRA provisionals and what appears to be mideastern immigrant recruits. The advent of some Russians working with Owen is the late skinny. Also the sorry state of the Morales. He knows his history, Bruno. He recently compared the day’s media to professional raconteurs. He and Pete were looking over a recent ‘gussied’ — Pete’s word — report on intercity crime. Bruno mentioned some historic guy in passing, a guy known for embroidered reporting — an oldie named Hero-dot-us. One of your pals, I think.”

By then Mason was smiling. “Yes, a great spieler Herodotus. An early gate-mouth. Quite full of it. But how ‘bout a real horny Thucydides tonight?”

Ann Green smiled, promptly left two bills on the table, and took his hand. “Quick march soldier.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Pete Voss seemed preoccupied when Ann introduced him to Mason in his small, musty, messy office, its general seediness relieved by a couple of surprisingly vibrant potted African Violets that sat on a cracked window ledge, the window pane itself, which outlooked a grubby commercial alley, dulled with unwavering neglect. Tara’s — now Ann Green’s — description of Mason as her ‘in-valuable friend’, seemed then an incidental detail, given how Voss’s train of thought was elsewhere.

He was a short stocky ruddy-faced man with close cropped red hair and a Karl Malden nose. A photo of one of Roseanne's wanted posters lay on his desk near a pad with some indecipherable writing on it.

When Voss's lingering abstraction abated he said aloud, as if addressing a seminar, in the voice reminiscent of a Southern marshal, "An unusual business. The poster. Strange there was no logo, nor any contact info. Unusual that. The timing too is odd. Seeing Roseanne, a lively Roseanne from what you said Ann, just days before you saw the poster. The picture also looks a little too posed, cutsie for my liking. Missing persons' photos are usually more informal, unrehearsed. It could be a ruse of course, but — given her past with this Ryan's zoo — we'd better follow through."

Mason smiled, impressed with Voss's summation, and said both he and Tara suspected something could be awry. Tara added, "I'd just feel a lot better if I knew Roseanne had no connection with Ryan's gang of procurers. An anxiety that won't let go."

It was then Mason made out the words in the notation on Voss's note pad...words that appalled.

TWENTY-FIVE

It *was* an unexpected and sobering discovery — the URL on Voss's note pad — that had daunted Mason. The subject still vexed a day later while drinking his morning coffee. Tara had slipped away early from their 'tryst' hotel. "The paparazzi are always hard up, so we should be discrete during the day," she had said with an affectionate smile. That a liaison with him might engender popular speculation continued to amuse and caution, given his current situation, anonymity being the shelter he lived in then.

He wouldn't have been as curious about the URL on Voss's note pad but for the many vexing recollections the ominous name ignited. The site's name THEDEVILSWITHOUT.NET was scrawled in capitals. He knew the site — a conspiracy theorist's haven, chock full of royal purple allegations. But what might the name be doing on a Voss note pad? He decided to keep this discovery to himself for the time being. Tara — the mindful Ann Green — had enough on her plate at the moment. But in looking over the content of the site later that morning on his laptop he was surprised by its expanded size and tone — because it was more virulently accusatory than ever. Then, as if subjected to an electric shock, he recognized one of the names of the site's contributors — Dirk Church! He knew Dirk had some radical ideas about the would-be perversity of the day's corporations and their government enablers. Was he just getting into his stride when Mason knew him? The man, he recalled, cultivated a blasé cynicism, but it seemed more a matter of style than ready intimidation. But when he had read a couple of Dirk's contributions he realized the cynicism had archly intensified into a blithe contempt for many aspects of Western civilization itself. He did recall that Dirk had told him, more than once, with fond esprit, that he, Mason, was a nearly lovable idiot. Mason had been on about the purity of pastoral serenity — or some such 'romantic falderal', as Dirk called it. Such poetics seemed a select amusement for Dirk. 'We're awash in pandy dandy dreamers,' Mason recalled

him saying — more than once. But as he read the essays on the site he marvelled at the burgeoning vituperation, the authors seeing cant, hypocrisy, false flags, subterfuge, speciousness everywhere, prompting Mason to compose an e-mail.

Dirk, what a wonderful 9-11 Truthers site — thedevilswithout.net. Catalytic drama to excoriate a smug, avid, comfort ridden society, eh? All these Western swine lined up like carnival targets. The sheer numbers! A fine recruiting tool for a clever Islamist. So relieved to find that one Mid-East head-lobbing execution an act staged by Western stooges. Was the slaughter at least technically halaal, I wonder? I suspect you're now monitoring the practice of Bacha Bazi — permissible sex with hairless boys, ascertained to be girls — making sure no Haraam protocols are broken. Really Dirk, I had no idea you were 'that' studious. Were we really so simple-minded, uncomprehending? Not as funny as the Three Stooges, but close enough, eh? Also, having broached your site, I think that Paul's advice to you some time ago — that you trust your doctor's advice about that recurrent eczema — may have been rash. Your doc might just be a stake holder in some cheesy new-fangled drug. I think you better thoroughly check him out first. You can never tell. Best of luck old boy. Cordially...

When he had finished, 'canned' his ire, Mason debated sending the e-mail. He could spend many months trying to ascertain the cogency of even a handful of articles on the site: anyone can marshal a lot of suggestive details but only the diligent expert unravel them — though few such authoritative minders were heard in that noisome prattler time. Best he remain more or less anonymous, the 'nearly lovable idiot'? You have maneuvering room as an idiot. Nobody pays attention. He would not send the e-mail anonymously of course and, in the end, simply trashed it.

He then debated the wisdom of mentioning the rants of Dirk to Pete Voss. The detective could be using the site to track some miscreants of his own. As a private investigator he would certainly be intent to follow some event or person of interest. Mason decided to keep his eyes and ears open, and inform Voss of Dirk's contribution in due course. Outside of Tara — of Ann Green — he really trusted no one these days. He *was* having a time dispensing with the name Tara — his limber sojourner. He consulted his watch. In an hour he was to join Voss in his office for an update on the investigation of Vincent Gebara, the person who at one time appeared to have emboldened Ryan and, thereafter, caused Tara so much dismay. He must remember to call her Ann around Voss. He gave into a wry smile as he took the final sips of his morning coffee.

He phoned his mother later that morning. She seemed pleased to hear his voice — yes, she was fine, then exclaimed, "Oh Mason!"

He was caught off guard. "You okay?" he promptly asked.

"Mason, something terrible has happened." It took Hélène a moment to spell it out. "Your friend...Paul Landers...is dead. I read the story yesterday in the Vancouver Sun. I'm so very sorry."

Mason then realized that in the hectic interim he hadn't told his mother of Paul's death. He quietly swore, leaving a silence Hélène must have taken as shock as she continued.

“He’d been missing for some time apparently. I don’t know the family. The story in the one paper is short on details. The police are investigating.”

It took Mason a moment to phrase a simple, unladen question.

“When did it happen? The papers here don’t have much Canadian news.”

“Well that’s the disturbing part — he’d been missing for some time. His mother Irene made a public appearance a while ago asking for help in finding her son. He was found several days ago, apparently, in a ‘deteriorated state’ the story said. And not identified right away. You know his family?”

“Not well — I met his mother. I’ll send a card. I should phone her...” But he wasn’t sure he’d do any of those things. The last few days had aggravated his own sense of jeopardy. He continued the pretence of surprise and shock. His mother, he believed, would be more upset, if she knew he’d known. A revelation he chose not to honour — then. “Were there any other details — where he was found, the nature or extent of any injury?”

“No. Just that he’d been found outside I take it. Somewhere in the East End. If I can do anything this end please let me know I know you were close.”

“I’ll try to get in touch with the mother. Though I’ll be of little help.”

Again the implications darkened his horizon. He was a person of interest in the investigation. Whereas not contacting the mother now was heartless. He’d not done so before. He decided he would consult Voss in due course if the detective proved trustworthy as Tara claimed.

He learned, after hearing about Paul from his mother, that her carpal tunnel syndrome in her left hand was worse, her digestion somewhat better than it was, and that she continued to enjoy the company of Marianna Thompson. She was grateful to know he was well and in touch with Tara, with Ann Green. “Please give her my love and best wishes.”

The ever piquant incredulity attending Paul’s death resurfaced after he said his adieu to his mother. He’d told Tara that Paul was a pensive fellow-creature, unlike the two other players he’d gone to school with. A quietly observant pal with heart and patience. Who would harm such a one? Now, with the media account of Paul’s death, a memorial service would likely follow. He would look up recent Vancouver Sun obituaries. He sensed his own world shrinking, withdrawing, leaving fewer places he might reside. Tara, as Ann Green, was on her way to becoming a recognized and celebrated gifted performer. He might be a nostalgic familiar for a time, but most stars ended in a firmament that seared shade plants.

When Mason arrived at Voss’s office for the scheduled update he immediately noted the new assortment of folders — most zipper binders — that sat on Voss’s desk, a fat one plainly labelled ‘Truthers’. So: Pete as ally or crank. Though Tara’s trust in him seemed to nix the latter. As usual Voss seemed preoccupied with a matter that excluded bystanders. Mason waited patiently for the spell to abate.

Without looking at Mason he suddenly said, “I think you’ve got to get down on your belly to Allāh — for a time. To better assess some Syrian immigrants Jack Owen’s IRA lads and his new

Russian spooks make use of from time to time. There may well be a Gebara connection given an enforcer need. Also a good disguise for you for a time — rooting for Allāh — as we learn more about Owen’s busy gang, also this busy Vancouver cop of yours, his wider network and possible connects here. Some names have come up. He appears be working overtime these days. We suspect he and Owen don’t have a lot in common.”

Mason kept his smile decorous.

Staidly Voss continued. “Don’t know how we should read this animal house Owen’s keeping until we learn more about the overall strategy — the operational intent here, and the options and seeded money for any potential Islamists like Ryan Dyck. All the hokey-pokey. Capeesh?”

Mason swallowed and tried to look appreciative, even if his mind was a welter. He managed to say, “I did a while back attend a lecture on Islam — for curious outsiders, nonbelievers.” Voss looked directly at him — for perhaps the first time as Mason continued. “I believe Ann told you I’d been photographing the derelicts in Vancouver’s East End.”

“She may have.”

“While there, I met an elderly Muslim who was on his last legs, yet possessed a serenity unique among the people I photographed. A closer look at Islam would not be amiss I thought — to assess his uniqueness and, well, the aptness of my pictures of him. I don’t meet many people in accord with their limitations, and the ways of Fate. The lecture was something of a disappointment though.” Mason decided to keep the ugly nature of the spiel to himself for the time being.”

Voss was momentarily amused. “Ann did mention something about a romantic chap she knew. Then you turn up.” He snorted, then reached over and fetched the Truther’s folder. “You can glean some topical tripe on Western corruption and dissolution here — one way to fit in with the keener crybabies. Learn a few names perhaps. I have a colleague who can provide some background should you take up the assignment. With enough detail from the Truther’s ‘devil’s without’ you’ll be part of the pecking order. Find some favourite seeds. Capeesh?”

Again Mason struggled to contain his anxiety. For Ann then. Eastward ho!

TWENTY-SIX

Mason approached the stately Anglican church trying to sort out the dual onslaught of anguish and anger he felt. The weather, being inclement, cloudy gusty and rainy, seemed apropos. He had decided he must attend Paul’s memorial service. The mother was ‘out of the hospital and coping’ a relative was quoted as saying in the Sun’s poignant obituary. Mason had crossed the border with al-ternate identity papers Voss prepared for him. “Moles need a few blow holes,” Voss remarked.

Mason stole into the church at the last minute and solemnly nodded to the usher whom, luckily, he did not know. He sat at the back. At first he recognized only the mother. He was saddened Dirk was absent. Had he really abandoned, slighted this crowd? Ryan, he assumed,

lived then as an evacuee — ducking, palming off his past. He recognized some faces from his time at UBC. Would any remember him? In any case, the sombre mood in the room daunted in-quisitiveness. A large luxuriant spray of flowers lay on a gurney before the lectern. Before leaving for the service he learned from Voss, through the FBI agent he knew, that Paul Landers had indeed been murdered, likely tortured, his mutilated body dumped in a land fill. A missing person notification eventually linked the hummingbird tattoo to Paul's acutely distraught mother, his one living parent.

The many moving, dismayingly earnest testimonials to Paul finally ceased. The minister gave his benediction. With some misgivings, Mason decided to bolt — slip away from the auditorium as inconspicuously as possible. At the end of the ceremony he could not face the mother. His courage failed him. He would almost certainly be drawn into the investigation again. His trust of the police was on a very short leash then. Thus, on this dismal day, he stole away from the funeral home as a fugitive penitent. He said a prayer for Paul and begged his sufferance for not hanging around. As a 'tyro' Islamist he might become invisible. One way to slip into the shadows — Voss's wry presumption. Though the last few weeks had disclosed a reality he was alarmed to discover, prompted in part by the numbing fanaticism Wahhabism spawned. On the unctuous thedevilswithout.net site there was no mention of the Rotheram scandal — young poor white children press ganged into serving as sex slaves for mainly Pakistani men. The murder of Christians and Jews by Muslims might make a byline or two in the media here, but the general reaction to Muslim excess was that Westerners had to 'look to their privilege' and not foment hatred. Indeed, atrocities that could not be fastidiously verified, were often deemed 'rumours' by the media or 'still to be confirmed'. Resolutely pointing a finger could get you labelled a rank fuddy-dud or hauled up before a Human Rights Tribunal accused of Islamaphobia. It was a tried and true tactic: the threat of a law suit being often enough to discourage candid criticism. The Ummah had bottomless pockets and abundant ready enforcers when it came to intimidating castigators. Even now, with the Rotheram story 'out' and charges pending, it remained largely unknown. You could say anything malicious about Christians (the world's early insufferable snobs), Jews (the Protocols of the Elders of Zion still served as editorial fodder in some parts of the world), and DEWMs, Dead European White Men (perpetrators of warped Christianity, colonialism and capitalism). In point of fact, *live* white men were then being slurred as the legatees of imperious cultural presumption — rank Capitalism's progenitors. Their reputation as campus rapists and rabid insensitive cops hadn't helped. In the U.S. the word Republican seemed at times synonymous with Reptile, Conservative with Con. Derogatory allusions to the MOSH fraternity — Mostly Original Substrate Humans — seemed as de rigueur in urbane circles. Whereas attacks *on* Muslims, usually got media attention.

What aggravated his malaise was the witless actions of many Westerners themselves. The modern commercial was in its shrewd invidiousness an acutely molesting act itself. Often brazenly spilling the unnecessary to the insolvent. Look what you don't have and likely never will. Look what you haven't been doing or can't — with endless vivid patronizing updates. Then there were the precious shills. Two TV Cialis commercials he still marvelled at.

A supposedly responsible parent, anticipating an uninterrupted lust-filled night, gives his son the keys to a prized vintage car — telling him ‘It’s time.’ The boy is surprised, shocked even, the act totally un-expected, suggesting the dad had good reason not doing so before. In another, an equally expectant housewife, otherwise diligently at work in the kitchen, tells her son he can, indeed should, stay out far beyond his current curfew time, to the boy’s bemused astonishment. Parental responsibility American style. Then there was the Japanese car commercial where a child orchestra is presented as horribly out of tune playing the otherwise celebrated fanfare to Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* — thus pissing on both Western music and its symphonic ensemble. Were the Japanese so less tolerant of North Americans than he’d thought?

In a past 60 Minutes segment, a flinty gal interviewed the Islamic activist Anjem Choudary, who described the September Eleven terrorists as ‘magnificent martyrs’. The interviewer had a few adroit questions but seemed totally unprepared for the verbal blitzkrieg she was bombarded with — a Choudary specialty, the sandbagging of unwelcome words. In ‘Real Combat’ the insular bravo who prevails doesn’t bother with grammatical nuance. The 60 Minutes’ non-interview was followed by a woozy lascivious commercial for Viagra, the actress in the ad making the pitch as unctuously as they come. The fact that she was so axiomatically banal — another foldout nonce — was a fine twisting of the knife for Mason. Well so. The upstaging of dated aesthetic and moral standards was the new norm. Why get upset? Get on with it man. Freedom embraces both bad and good, though the bad was more collegially entertaining, the burdensome good often getting devoutly shat on. The essence of drama and humour. Thus Islam’s loathing of parody and respect for the sword. Should he expect anything else? Ryan Dyck as a poster boy for a *cleansing* ISIS was not entirely a witless aberration.

TWENTY-SEVEN

It was one of those sunny sultry days in a succession of such days when many people seek distractions — to avoid hectic enervating chores that can wait, have waited. Yet, on one such day, a film production crew was diligently at work in a remote wilderness area some distance from Kelso in the Mojave Desert. An equipment rental deadline sparked the diligence. The current film was a furtive grey market affair, the main filming equipment scrounged from a larger company, a firm owned by a crony of Vincent Gebara. The set was a rendering of the great hall in the palace of Herod Antipas, the Roman Client State ruler of Galilee and Perea. The backdrops looked realistic at a distance but tacky up close. The staging of the action thus took place some distance from any single backdrop. The costumes and some props however were well made and credibly historic, the players themselves a colourful arresting bunch. Surrounding the set was an expansive authentic desert landscape. Curtains had been set up as much to frame the set itself as block occasional gusts of dust and sand.

Roseanne Hartley had never felt as alive, dynamic, so animated, such that she occasionally found herself laughing to herself. The sly advertising had been a triumph, quite literally ‘out of sight’ — the Missing Person Posters the cat’s meow, an air-tight ruse. When the low budget art-

house film she had landed the plum part in went viral, as she imagined, the once ‘missing’ Roseanne would miraculously reappear as a reincarnated Salomé! A new mesmerizing Pleiad! She was aware the film would have a second more flagrant cut, but the main effort was sturdy enough to warrant her enthusiasm. The inserts in a second film would be relegated to ‘eroduction bed bugs’ with substitute players, her agent said. It would all work out in the end — even with the odious Ryan Dyck, known here as Tom Grant, playing a banquet server. She was assured he’d be watched. In any case, she felt *then* immune to all such vermin!

Thus, on this adventurous day, the young actress, a nearly peerless Salomé, alive in a seductive dance costume, was for a time unaware of being attacked in an emphatic, unrelenting and unrehearsed manner. The scene she knew would be a bit up hill — the film’s final scene, Salomé’s murder/execution at the hands of the palace guards, which was being shot ahead of schedule due to the need to return some vintage artifacts. But the sudden shock and pain that ensued after the first deft knife slashes electrified her. A muffled scream was scotched by blood rising from her throat. A lot of blood. A momentary frantic writhing as more blood spurted, some of it spattering the nearest crew members. The stunned director and two of the cast’s guards belatedly and vainly tried to restrain her sudden attacker — none other than the little known banquet server!

Whereas dynamic Ryan, who also managed to wound the two guards who sought to restrain him, remained keenly aware of the newly stunned watchers as he stood near the fallen body, a dagger, a pugio, in hand, the watchers’ novel awesome swearing a further endorsement. He was sufficiently menacing then to discourage any further attempt to restrain him. The two injured crew members attended to arm and shoulder cuts with help from the sound recordist and gaffer. All onlookers were dazed by the slasher’s agile deftness, his knife ever menacingly poised. Indeed, the cast and crew was a time realizing the attack didn’t proceed as scripted — that the killing scene was in fact a grizzly murder not the sensationally staged execution of the headstrong Salomé, the sudden manic act of this raw banquet server defying belief. Ryan had backed off some distance yet stood his ground, a smile flickering as his audience shook their heads in stunned disbelief. The director and cameraman belatedly and frantically worked to stanch Salomé’s bleeding, copiously swearing the while as the futility registered — the neck arteries no longer summary fountains but idled conduits. Nothing worked, their incompetence and desperation manifest. Soon the blood merely suppurated from the deep slashes beneath a hastily tucked period shawl about the neck, leaving a lax motionless form. No ample first aid kit was on site, the few belatedly placed gauze bandages soon soaked in blood. The director shook his head; he couldn’t find a pulse. The numbed actors and spare crew looked on in a spreading silence, their looming culpability only just dawning as one of them dumbly stared at his cell phone; he could find no signal here. Even providing an accurate address to this wilderness location was unlikely, and the nearest community with an emergency facility hours away. The incredulity itself stymied, paralyzed. The futility of any real remedial action passed over the witnesses like the intermittent gusts of sand and grit. Furthermore, the production was underground, and, to the extent it portrayed, in its brazen cut, simulated pedophilic sex, child

and adult nudity, gruesome head hacking, limited in its sanction. Gestures of futility accompanied the intermittent fitful swearing. Ryan looked about with some impatience. He had imagined the scene a crossing of the Red Sea. Whereas he sensed he was being looked upon now as some kind of freak.

“What?” he said in a strident voice as the astonishment about him loomed, his poised bloodied knife a waving still menacing escutcheon.

The eerie muted swearing continued. The members of the once diligent cast and crew engaged in filming the final scene, remained largely frozen, dumfounded at what they had witnessed. The director, Peter Leone, was for a time speechless — as the futility, let alone the inability of placing a 911 call, mauled.

For Ryan the dismay confused. But only momentarily. He was still riding an ineffable high, the blood still warm on his hands. He had managed the execution despite the three or four who tried to intervene, two of whom had also tasted his deftly flailing blade. He could do it all again! His departure date to the mideast had allowed for some free time. Such that he managed to find work as a cast extra, a banquet server in the Great Hall. His sudden, dramatic appearance among the guards startled the others, but not impeded his intent. He smiled. He had acted with great panache he thought, nearly severing Roseanne’s neck. Another mission he was destined to undertake. What devout self-respecting Islamist would have done less? A much idolized Jewish whore slaughtered in real time! A historic reckoning! He’d learned about the film from some street folk. When he discovered Roseanne Hartley in the cast he applied as an extra. She was another pissy she he had a score to settle with.

Peter shook his head at the cell phone his key grip Jamie Collier held in a palsied hand. The dawning recognition of being accessories to a gruesome murder stupefied. A menacing defiant Ryan remained standing, still dandling his sanguine dagger, a scalpel-sharp Roman pugio, as if awaiting applause.

Peter, blindsided by the manic deed, sensed what he feared could be a protracted fit, and quietly said to the transformed banquet server, “Okay. You’ve done enough. Very impressive.” Solemnly he moved closer to those crew and players nearest to him and stated, “Those of you who want to leave, leave.” He felt he could, should say that. He knew this lot. Some had records, a few could be persons of interest in ongoing investigations. Yet no one moved.

If Ryan was suspicious at first, his edginess had ebbed into a smile. He gave the director a thumb’s up. “Great scene,” he said, before curtly nodding and heading toward the wardrobe/makeup tent. He added, as he rubbed at his blood spattered tunica, “You’ll need to wash some of the guards’ armour — for the inserts.” He vented a chuckle. Peter looked after him with mazed wonder as the cast and crew gave the ghoul a wide birth. Peter still could barely register what had happened, the pool of blood in one small depression of the set nearly ankle deep. Some in the crew and cast were then stifling fits of hysterical disbelief. They all looked to Peter whose raised hand signalled a pause, an interim judgement. “The film’s caput. We’ll be seen as liable, remiss. Those who want to leave, please do so,” he said with authority. There were a few

questioning glances to one another, yet no one moved. “We are all accessories to a murder, one way or another,” he added, pausing to let the implication sink in. “I think most of you should leave. I’m hoping Wes and Nick will stay. A request only. We’ll deal with the clean up, and our ‘banquet server’ in due course. It’s best you leave. Now.” This last comment had an edge to it that prompted a slow if hesitant departure, including the injured guards, their bleeding then stanching with handkerchiefs. As much to himself Peter said, “We’ll get beyond this...” He was then thinking of Roseanne’s reaction to first seeing Ryan on the set. Ryan had been a last minute recruit for a minor non-speaking part. “Him!” she had said with singular disgust. “You know him?” Peter had asked. “He ought to be locked up,” she said as she turned away. A member of the crew also recognized him. Such that Peter learned the extra named Tom Grant was likely someone called Ryan Dyck. The name didn’t ring a bell. Gamy adventurers and hopefuls filled that film trade like ocean plastic. Peter had said to a bristling Roseanne, “Don’t worry we’ll keep him at arm’s length. He’s one of the banquet servers — end of story.”

“Some banquet,” Roseanne had promptly retorted, before sullenly turning away.

They found Ryan sitting outside the makeup tent on one of the set’s ornate period chairs rubbing a bloodied hand on his hessian tunic. He was aware of Peter looking down at him, faintly shaking his head as he did so. Finally Peter said, “You’re crackers. Totally baked.”

Ryan smiled. “One way of looking at it.” He’d never felt as animated, as invincible, transcendent. Peter could barely comprehend his own seething hectoring disbelief. He looked over at his spaced-out cameraman, Nick Zilkovsky, who limply said, “The one guard’s arm’s was still bleeding a bit...but not as bad as we thought. He should be okay.”

Peter nodded and looked off at the paste board scene that backed the current take — the steps before the cell that had held John the Baptist, the last actor to leave. Peter still could barely reckon what had happened, and realized Ryan himself might have to be eliminated. This would have been their first NC-17 rated film — when their editor finished the cut for general distribution and the preview night. Select private vendors would receive the second ‘wildcat’ cut that Ryan so dryly alluded to. Peter’s chief electrician, Wes Fincher, came up behind and whispered, “You’ve an idea about the bod?”

“I’ll talk to Nick,” Peter quietly said.

“Until...where should we put it?”

Moving away from Ryan, Peter softly, discreetly said, “Take one of the tapestry hangings. It will have to be dumped. Put it with the backdrops for now. We’ll have to use some sand and dirt to cover the blood. There’s a shovel somewhere.”

“What about — ‘him’?”

Peter scowled. “I’ll deal with him. The blood on stage is also a concern. Better break that part up. Use a wardrobe trunk. We’ll dump it, along with...the remaining costumes, which we better rip up.”

Wes nodded and turned away with dispatch. Peter wanted to belt Ryan then, and would have if he did not still hold the dagger in one hand. Peter debated what to do next. Whatever tenuous link to reality this Ryan Dyck had, it had surely snapped. Yet he knew

madness was sometimes episodic. What would the lunatic remember, say, brag to others he wondered? He had a revolver in his shoulder pack...should he just finish him off now? Who would miss him?

He went to fetch his shoulder pack, but when he returned the maniac had left, vanished. Wes, who was then readying a wardrobe trunk to be used in the set clean up, said he hadn't seen him about. "Thought he was with you?" When he noted Peter's dismay he blanched. "He left?"

"Seems so."

Wes was a moment responding. "Holy shit."

Then together they noticed the last car, Peter's old Saab sport's car, swiftly driving off, Ryan at the wheel, happily waving them off. Peter swore as he realized he'd left his keys in the car. Once again they were dourly undecided; only the prop truck remained. Wes shrugged. "We'll never catch him."

Nick then approached, noted the disappearing car and Wes and Peter's whole-sale dismay.

"Fuck!"

A resonant silence followed.

After a time Nick managed to say, as much to relieve the dolour, "Luckily, none of the blood got on the equipment. At least the stuff we rented. We ought to take it back ASAP I guess."

Peter was then dourly thinking how madness might be animated by a ritual bloodletting, their guard's injury a second upper for the maniac?

Early, a day later, in a seedy motel room, director Peter Leone gravely, mutely assessed their diligent night's work. He, Wes and Nick had cleaned up the rank mess. The blood stained ground was covered with dirt and sand, the stained set stage broken up and unloaded in a stray rubbish dump. Roseanne's blood-stained headless handless body was wrapped in one of the set's curtains, the head in a large costume, both eventually taken aboard Peter's catamaran in Long Beach, where they were duly weighted and dumped at sea — along with the remaining costumes, which had been ripped apart. The hands were buried deep in the sand some distance from the set, the memory chips broken up and scattered in the dump. The backdrops and few good props were unmarked but for one brazier leg which was wiped clean of blood. These, along with the film equipment, which had been put in the truck with Roseanne's remains, would be returned to the rental company the following day.

Peter still half doubted what had transpired, his chest pains again severe, aggravated it seemed by the fact psycho Ryan had so readily disappeared — vanished. There would be rumours, speculation. Peter scrounged then for viable explanations. *A key backer pulled out...a distributor lost a network...a walk-on lost his cool, damaged a key set, caused a serious incident.* Incident. Yes.

Wes sat nearby, thinking aloud. "His costume tunic was missing as well as his street clothes. Never imagined him a psycho. What I saw. A kook maybe, but not a *kook*."

“He’s gone — and Salomé’s in the great sea cistern. The question is — the promotional stuff — the stuff that’s out there.

Nick shrugged. “Not a lot out there — we ran out of money.”

“I’m thinking of the posters.”

“Oh christ. Forgot about them.” Solemnly Wes shook his head.

“Nothing to be done. They’re out there. Best not be seen collecting them. No time anyway.”

“Did we even count the ones we placed?”

“About a hundred I think. The two cameras and the few good props we must return with some excuse. Funding again. Somebody pulled out.”

Wes shook his head while Peter tallied the lingering jeopardy. “The renters know we’ve begun. Been at it for a while. The question is — how mum is the crew going to be? And our splendid psycho. Gebara’s proxy will wash his hands of course. Pay off or scare any pry. Or he may be cagey...shrewdly vindictive. Some of us ought to check out new identities? Maybe promptly.”

Nick added a further concern. “Some of the crew may still expect some back pay. Sooner or later.”

The silence that followed this pronouncement seemed interminable. The only way they might do that now was to rob a bank.

Peter was suddenly, peremptorily dismissive. “It’s the proxy’s issue. He always works on the cheap.”

Finally Nick asked, “You all leaving then — disappearing for a while?”

Peter shrugged. “I think so. Less noise in the meantime. Better use rented cells for a time.”

Somewhere near Le Matador Beach a buoyant Ryan was laughing, laughing; he was then transcendent, invincible. Santa Baby bearing gifts! He had never sensed such exultation. The sunset promised to be a gorgeous showcase of vivid colours. The ocean further out an infinity he would soon traverse. A Twohee alighted on a scraggly pine and pooped. Life was good.

TWENTY-EIGHT

It was one of those days when disbelief and coincidence merge. In Ann Green’s case, sase, a *new* sighting of Roseanne Hartley, who she saw seated in a waterfront café near the Club Reina. Ann was on her way to meet Pete Voss and told her security escort to stop the car. When she approached and forthrightly enquired — “Roseanne?” — the girl turned, smiled, but shook her head. “A nice name, but not mine.” By then Tara, as Ann Green, on hearing the girl’s Eastern European accent, realized she’d made a mistake. The girl certainly looked like Roseanne — the Roseanne she had so recently seen, talked to. The face, physique, skin tone, even hair style — all were amazingly congruent but for the accent. The eyes too, Tara belatedly decided, were likely more oval. Yet the overall impression was striking. She dourly smiled as she returned to her car.

The similarity continued to haunt. We all have doubles she knew, sometimes dead ringers, a designation that struck her then as prophetic.

About this time a group of fishermen on the Santa Monica Pier noticed what first looked like a sick or dead shark floating some distance off the pier. The alerted shore watch discovered a body wrapped and tied in a kind of seal-brown curtain material. An emergency team was summoned and, in a nearby first aid shelter, discovered the body of a girl whose head and hands had been hacked off. It appeared that a weight attached to the legs had slipped free, as suggested by a sodden abraded rope mesh that might have held a sizeable stone or rock. Two frayed strands of the mesh had broken free. The disposal looked hastily done. The shore watch captain thought wave surges from some ocean floor seismic activity that night could have dislodged such a weight. Backup help was needed to keep the crowd at bay before the body was removed. It remained an exceptionally gruesome puzzle for a fortnight.

But eventually, a Mrs. Hartley became worried about her daughter who hadn't contacted her for over two months, when her custom was to call about once a week. She became sufficiently anxious to file a report with the LAPD Adult Missing Persons Unit, providing Roseanne's age, last known domicile and, when requested, as detailed a physical description as she could muster. Neither the Missing Person Unit nor Mrs. Hartley knew then about the posters. When no lead turned up, a review of the county morgue files identified a person with a pale birth mark on a forearm similar to the one described by Mrs. Hartley. When told of the possible match she became very distraught yet agreed to see the person so described. But when informed of the mutilations in the morgue's office, she fainted and had to be rushed to emergency. When revived and partly sedated, she managed to provide an odds-on identification of the telling mark, the only part of the body she chose to see, an ivory nevus on the underarm well above the wrist, a nevus she had considered removing early on. While confronting the horror she offered a timorous apology to the female officer who had accompanied her. "I do respect what you have to do," she managed to say through her tears. The obliging officer wondered if knowing *only* of a disappearance might have been easier to bear. The presumption of the coroner was that whoever dismembered the body had, in their haste, not noticed the faint but telling mark. A further presumption was that the nevus may have been covered in blood, given some clotted blood that hadn't been washed off in the ocean.

In reviewing her daughter's late acquaintances with a team of investigators one name stood out — one Ryan Dyck with whom Roseanne had been close to about a year ago. "It didn't last," Mrs. Hartley said. "I was thankful...he had a reputation...not something I dwell on." As fate would have it, Ryan Dyck was already a DEA person of interest. Renewed efforts to find him were promptly undertaken — a search that coincided with the discovery of the Missing Posters of the self-same Roseanne. The poster puzzle thus became grimly surreal. Mrs. Hartley, when she learned of them, became acutely distraught and had to be sedated and taken again to emergency.

All this Mason was unaware of as he descended the trailhead from the small parking lot above Le Matador Beach just North of Malibu. He had sought a time-out that day. He'd been listening to Deirdre's CD, and put off again trying to contact Paul's mother. He was himself a kind of fugitive then and the mother must be contending with many issues. He had learned that Deirdre Corr was in a care home in Belfast 'with family and friends' — the extent of the Nefer Club manager's blurb to the media. One band member was quoted as saying, 'You never expect something godawful like that to happen — in Canada!' That *happening* Mason still had trouble imagining. He ventured this day to the pristine Matador beach for a break, wanting a respite. He brought a camera and anticipated a spectacular sunset. Ann Green — with the help of her agent — was assessing late contract stipulations for the new film. A couple of scenes were ostensibly hard core. Otherwise she might have come with him.

The sunset promised to be glorious, already paintbox clouds harboured a setting sun. He was also pleased to find that section of beach deserted and the day warmer than expected. He sauntered along the sand taking note of a frayed strand of rope trailing in the water's edge. He then froze in his tracks. Further out, near a distant bluff edge, was a being he never thought he'd see again. Indeed he had to stealthily move closer with a tele lens, using a nearer boulder as a blind, to confirm his suspicion. Yes, it was — the prodigal overbearing Ryan Dyck, who now had a straggly beard and looked unusually grubby as he hastily tied a sleeping foam to a back pack. He sat for a while on the back pack then began to undress, fold and place his pants and frayed sweater into the back pack, leaving himself attired in shorts, T-shirt and what looked like a fat money belt. It was one of those moments one finds difficult to decide what to do. Instead of approaching, Mason hunkered down behind the boulder and waited, watched, taking several pictures. He called Tara on his cell but there was currently no room for messages.

Then Ryan Dyck surprised. After glancing at his watch he stood and waded into the water. The water level was high then and relatively calm. He dove into a wave crest and began swimming away from the shore. He appeared to be a good swimmer, his arms alive in a proficient crawl. Soon he was but a spec on the further light swells, then melded into the distant darkening waters, the sun newly set. Mason trained his eyes on the occasional lip of a distant wave surge, but soon could see no evidence of a swimmer. He was dumbfounded. It was hardly the hour to go alone for a prolonged swim. He waited thinking Ryan must return. But nothing. No Ryan. Was he meeting someone offshore? He believed he saw the outline of a very distant vessel, a game boat perhaps. He called Pete Voss, whose answer was forthright and reassuring.

"I'll be there within the hour — with an explosive expert. You're at the bottom of the North Trailhead stairs you say. Keep an eye on the backpack. Discourage any prowlers. It could be a bomb. I'll get a friend to investigate a possible pick-up further out — a Port Authority officer. Don't approach or touch the backpack."

Mason called Tara again and got through. "You're at Matador! Lucky you. Sorry I couldn't join you." Fluently she continued. "Oh god Mason, I've just learned — Phillip Noyce is directing a new film. Phillip Noyce! My agent thinks I have a chance for a lead role. Missing Angel may be a no go anyway. A key backer pulled out. I'm to go for an interview for the Noyce

film in two days. The only catch — the film is set in Australia, the East Coast. A minimum of two months work. I'm still amazed. I'll see what accommodations are available. There'll be a publicity angle I'm sure." When she paused to catch her breath he calmly stated that he had just seen Ryan Dyck, a comment that brought her back to earth.

"Him? There?"

"He was just rolling up a sleeping foam on the beach when I saw him. He was some distance away. I confirmed it was him through a tele lens. He looked scruffy."

"How scruffy?"

"A straggly beard. Long hair. A frayed sweater, a pair of those ripped, dis-tressed jeans."

"Oh Christ."

"He sat for a while on a back pack, then, after taking off the sweater and jeans, swam away from the beach. A good swimmer I think. But he's not come back — for nearly an hour. I did see a small boat much further out. I phoned Pete a while ago. He's on his way here. With a bomb expert. Told me not to touch the back pack and discourage any visitors."

"Jesus."

"A precaution Pete said. He's notified a Port Authority guy — to investigate a possible pick up. It's bizarre, but there he was. By himself. Looking off — like some mystic."

"You think someone was meeting him offshore?"

"Pete thinks it's likely. I did see small vessel much further out. No one's been near the backpack. Ryan was the only one I saw in this section of the beach. As I said, Pete's got someone at Port Authority looking into a possible pickup. Though the vessel I saw has disappeared."

"He must know something. He's not always upfront — Pete. God I hope we find the bastard. Pete will look for a bomb. One of his colleagues is an expert. Look it, I've got to go — my ride's here. Another script. I'll be at our hotel in an hour. Give me a call. I'll be waiting. Don't do anything heroic. Very fond of you. Bye."

As Mason waited, he looked out into the gathering twilight searching for the outline of the vessel he saw a while ago. But nothing.

Pete called him from the parking lot above. He was on his way. Mason soon saw him in the dimming twilight shuffling down the nearest steps with surprising alacrity. A second man followed carrying a large suitcase. A small dog followed the second man, its tail briskly wagging.

They went immediately to the back pack, about a hundred yards out from the stairs. Pete's friend — simply introduced as Doug — told them to stay well back until he had examined the pack. He first looked at it through Mason's telephoto lens. On approaching it, he used a large self-illuminating magnifying glass to examine the surface followed by what Pete called a light-based plasmon sensor to scan it. He then had Shasta, his dog, sniff the pack. With a satisfied nod he approached, opened the flap fastener and waved an all clear. While Pete held a flashlight Doug looked through the contents. First off: the sweater Mason recognized as his own despite its sorry state — the one Ryan took when he left the bed sit. It was then sufficiently ratty to remain unmentioned and unclaimed, though Mason was a time coming to that conclusion.

Also in the backpack: the torn jeans, a baseball cap, sandals, water flask, a small empty Advil vial, two granola bars, and an old wallet empty but for a tattoo parlour business card. But at the bottom — a tightly folded garment of some kind. Which prompted Doug to wave off Mason and Pete until he examined it while Shasta sniffed about, barking a couple of times. “Seems okay,” Doug finally called out with some relief while hugging his dog. “Our fun couturier,” Pete said as Doug spread out the garment, a historic looking braided tunic. They all stared at its blood stained skirt. “Certainly historic, maybe theatric,” Doug remarked, adding, “the blood alerted Shasta.” Said Pete, “The blood’s dry, congealed. Best get it to forensics ASAP.” Gesturing toward the growing darkness offshore he added, “I should hear from my friend soon. He’s an officer in the Coast Guard.”

Mason continued to stare at the tunic with a sense of dread he’d rarely known before. In no time it seemed Doug had, with gloved hands, placed the tunic in an evidence bag and headed off to the distant stairs, Shasta following, her tail going full tilt, Pete bringing the backpack.

Said the canny Pete before leaving, “I would’ve heard from my friend by now. Dyck’s been picked up. A louse doesn’t drown himself.” That finding Mason shared with Tara, with Ann Green, later that night. He doubted again he could ever call her ‘Ann’. “Let’s go for a drink,” he said. “Share some nappy visions.” A comment met with a laugh. “My very own Unicorn.”

TWENTY-NINE

It was Pete’s ‘busy friend’, a somber FBI agent, one Bruno Cavet, a big stout man with full jowls, bushy hair and reedy voice (Mason recalled an early print of Alexander Dumas) who informed the three of the details of Rosanne’s murder — which prompted an interval of quiet but fervent swearing. That meeting took place in a little used residence in Bunker Hill that overlooked a fire station. Bruno said it was a safe house he sometimes used in his investigations. Mason would later learn that the home was in fact Bruno’s and he an intermittent lodger after his wife died. The abode would become the setting for many dour future briefings. Bruno’s graduate level education in early European history and his fluency in several European languages, including Latin Mason would learn of in due course. “Known as ‘Dugong’ among his close pals,” Pete said. “Big in all departments.” On coming to know Bruno, Mason’s guarded respect for the FBI went up a notch. He even felt less at sea hearing the later disturbing findings in his presence.

At that initial briefing, Mason was surprised to learn that Bruno was also interested in the *thedevilswithout.net* site. Earlier that week Pete had shown him Ann’s pictures of Ryan, the net result being a video Bruno had unearthed on a blog site which he then played for the others on his iMac — a daunting video of a raw truculent Ryan trashing the West and vowing to remove every vestige of it from the face of the earth, a scurrilous derogation of all things urbane and seemly — the ‘time-honoured frauds’, including what he called ‘mawkish romantic music’. A rebuke Mason believed of his own melodic music, making him wonder if Ryan had ever listened

to anything other than ireful rock and rap — finally taking the jaded scoffers and profaners at their word. When the tape finished Pete said to Bruno, “You said you got a tip from one of the site’s contributors.”

Bruno curtly nodded. “I regularly hear from an undercover agent posing as a radical — a periodic contributor to that site, in fact. He’s slowly being accepted as a smart Truther. He’s discovered info that comes from several blogger sites. He put an ad on one requesting comments to better design and promote Islamist proclamations — part of a team effort espoused in the ad. Had a trunkful to choose from. But this one stood out. The tape, incidentally, may have been made here, some time before Ryan disappeared. The room wall behind him has some damaged crown moulding which was common in some homes in a storm hit area of South Los Angeles. Squatters have been found in parts of some ruined homes. Our agent also learned that Ryan’s elusive pal Dirk Church now works with an ISIS cell suspected of sending insulting letters to some families of American soldiers killed in the Middle East, and posting the family names and addresses of returning soldiers on rad blog sites. Dirk’s obviously been in tune with some livid bloggers.”

As he listened Mason reflected on the deliberation in Bruno’s bass voice, a study in sedateness and comprehensiveness he thought; what Bruno hadn’t wit-nessed had yet to occur you felt. Tara — Ann Green — sat silently shaking her head, even rubbing away a stubborn tear. It *was* a shock — the tape — on top of everything else. The Ryan featured there Mason could barely imagine. The cynical huckster, drug dealer and porno addict turned fevered hate monger. Almost one and the same he mused, yet was stumped to marshal the events and circumstances that could produce such a being — in a person he at one time believed to be a smug egocentric, a swank Cassandra, not one to plug a rabid, murderous, contempt. Madness, he reminded himself, could be progressive, gradational, even episodic.

Bruno continued after a further sip of coffee, his single-mindedness no less apparent. “Pete’s Port Authority friend found three craft in that area, but Ryan Dyck was on none of them. Each was searched. He was likely picked up earlier.

As we suspected.”

Bruno’s pad, the venue selected for this private viewing, was a tidy trig bungalow that accommodated newcomers. Mason had spent hours photographing interiors, often swank posh interiors, and fondly, meetly noted the snug atmosphere here. A tiffany shade over a breakfast nook housed at least one large spider. The coffee maker was fully operational, and an old refrigerator, opened when Bruno sought some coffee cream for Ann, housed a stollen loaf and several bottles of Blanc beer. Bruno’s lumbering frame seemed but another timeless fixture, his regard of newcomers somewhat stoic. Yet the measured pace in his voice gleaned attention. Especially when he took up a new subject, as he did now.

“Ann, this look-a-like you briefly saw...you thought she resembled Roseanne Hartley.”

“Well, I thought so at the time.”

“You expected her to recognize you.”

“That’s true. I did approach her saying ‘Roseanne?’ She smiled, said it was a nice name but not hers. It was then I noted the accent and the eyes, somewhat more oval than Roseanne’s. But at a distance, her look seemed dead on — the same physique, colouring, similar hair style. Even her voice, less the accent, could pass as Roseanne’s. It was uncanny. To say the least.”

“Could she be mistaken for the image of Roseanne — in the missing person poster?”

“Almost certainly.”

“She was by herself?”

“Yes, and looked quite fetching.”

“She was likely expecting someone.”

Bruno then promptly fetched a picture of one Senta Knovak which Ann promptly recognized as the Roseanne look-a-like she’d met. Bruno was a time resuming. Everyone was head up. “I don’t think it’s an issue here — the girl’s similarity — but it is a mindful coincidence, for Ms. Knovak is in fact a person of interest in an allied case, which I’ll get to in a minute. We now know that Mrs. Hartley knows of the posters. Though their number and specific placement re-main unknown. At this juncture.”

Bruno then glanced at Pete who easily nodded as Bruno continued.

“It’s apparent Roseanne’s murder was particularly rank — the clumsy deposition of the body suggests something hectic, rash. The historic tunica, believed to be Roman-Herodian, found in Ryan’s backpack, had blood on it we now know matches Roseanne’s, intimating some kind of lurid precipitous assault — the tunica itself suggestive of a theatric costume. I’ve already seeded a couple of undercover radicals looking for a Ryan Dyck. Pictures of Ryan will soon be ubiquitous. That should flush out some info. We’re still not sure how many posters of Roseanne were printed or actually placed. We do believe that many were put up well before her body was found. Mrs. Hartley contacted the Adult Missing Persons Unit but did not order the posters. Sadly, she’s suffering from bouts of amnesia — undoubtedly aggravated by her gruesome loss. One family member, a cousin with power of attorney for her, has agreed to the utility of leaving the posters, even adding to their number — to see who comes forward. She too is puzzled by them.” After exchanging a sober look with Pete, Bruno concluded by saying, “Salomé’s ghost.” That same day he told Mason to forget about his Vancouver plight. “O’Doul’s been furloughed. Enough said.”

THIRTY

Bruno, Pete, Tara and Mason watched a surveillance tape a day later in Bruno’s ‘pied-à-terre’, as Mason had characterized it for an observant Ann. Again Bruno’s narrative filled in the details.

“We are looking here at the famous yacht, the Kismet II, anchored near the Los Angeles Yacht Club, on which no less than Vincent Gebara and some colleagues are staying — including Jack Owen, a former IRA commander who now heads a right-wing paramilitary group, a few members of which serve as Gebara’s minders in Southern California. Owen also appears to be

‘grooming’ some Syrian Islamists for action here and elsewhere. Senta Knovak is a current escort of Jack Owen. The yacht just returned from the Bahamas where Gebara met some people at Little Whale Cay, including a contingent from the German Consulate in Nassau. We’ve recently been examining the actions of Gebara and several of his associates. Yes, just so. Senta, who we hadn’t realized was a Roseanne Hartley double until your sighting of her, Ann, is an aspiring Serb model who sought work in the U.S. a year ago, with some success apparently. She has an agent and will be in the American Vogue boutique pages next month.”

When the tape ended, Bruno poured himself a further cup of coffee and topped up the others. Mason had never tasted a better stronger brew!

After glancing at Pete, Bruno took up where he left off.

“We now know that Gebara’s associates are a wide assortment — British, Russian, German. Three of them billionaires. His association with Own is still being sorted. As you know, Ann, Gebara heads a consulting and advertising firm, some of its promotional work you’re familiar with, including stylish sports and evening wear. What you may not know is that he’s on the board of directors of Teles Pharma, known mainly for producing and diligently marketing ever more potent pain killers — which have matching opioids in the street. We’re just beginning to comprehend the extent of it, and how the one ominously promotes the other. It’s an issue the Drug Enforcement Administration is looking into. He also sponsors select films through a proxy, an undertaking that appears to be as much a hobby or obsession as a business. He’s been known in the department to patronize several cult film makers. We’ve been perhaps lax in scrutinizing his business ventures and colleagues — until now. We should have some interesting info in a few days.”

Bruno then turned to Tara — to Ann Green — the innate deliberation in his speech a call to attention.

“I believe, from what you’ve told us, Ann, that you have a special interest in Gebara’s world. Past and present. Were you to approach him — ask him if he had any more promo work, tell him you’re in between engagements and a bit antsy — the stocking ads are widely published, as you know — we’ll be able to better assess his intentions, associates, current preoccupations and so on. Your own evaluation will be useful of course. We think now his association with Ryan Dyck was through a gang connection, possibly Owen’s crew, using Ryan’s talent as a pry for one — anticipating select interests and targets, drug sales, and possibly working skin trade scams — a late revelation. Gebara is, in his way, a venturesome and canny tycoon. His lawyers, the very best.”

If Mason was aghast as Ann considered the suggestion — with an intent look he had trouble believing. He bit his tongue. Finally she spoke.

“I’d have a sitter...throughout?”

“Of course. Gebara’s about to promote a new BCD scuba diving gear line designed to appeal especially to women. We’ve just had confirmation. He’ll likely need some models, and employing you would be a fine coup for him. He’s also acquired a casino, a Bellerophon franchise. He’ll offer you something, I’m sure. We’ll see you have a boyfriend who’ll seem

carefree. Not your current studio escort. This guy has to be an unknown and special forces grade. You might mention to Gebara, in due course, that you're considering a new film, still in pre-production, and have some time on your hands. Possible?"

Ann promptly nodded. "Of course."

She met Mason's stoic smile with one of her own, while reaching over and pretending to sock him as Bruno resumed.

"Before you meet, we'll send a staged video to one of Gebara's lawyers anon-ymously. In it an avant-guard film maker is queried by a pretend tabloid reporter who's investigating a film set in ancient times — as you hinted Ann. The reporter is seen showing the film maker a picture of Roseanne who's said to be in the film, then asks if the film maker knows of the film. He claims not. The lawyer will show Gebara the tape. It's far too incendiary to overlook. Gebara's reaction will be assessed at all levels. Suspicion among tycoons is invariably useful. We'll carefully follow his response."

Mason silently, somberly looked into his hands. Ann noted his unease and touched his arm. "I can handle it," she said.

Bruno added, "It's a question we shouldn't minimize — the possibility of Gebara knowing about such a film. He might well be aware of Roseanne's dis-appearance, even her death. It's certainly possible he may know of a provocative video or film she may have performed in, and whether Ryan was involved. As I've intimated — such video fare is a favourite diversion of Gebara's. It's a subject we shouldn't neglect — at this stage."

After a further consideration Ann Green again said with conviction, looking at Mason, "*I can* handle it. He's one fellow I've got to 'deal' with."

Mason put his head into his hands. It seemed he was the milksop here. The late news about Deirdre was dispiriting. His Muse was paralyzed and had recently slipped into a coma. If Tara, Ann Green, had softened the blow, her courage, her

determination now increased his overall unease.

THIRTY-ONE

"Vincent? It's Vincent isn't it?"

As planned, Ann Green 'ran into' Vincent Gebara as he strode from his hotel to a waiting limo. He had departed the yacht that week and taken up a suite in the J.W. Marriott Hotel. FBI watchers had been following his comings and goings, which proved to be surprisingly regular that same week. On cue, Ann approached the hotel — to meet her 'friend' — and 'belatedly' saw Gebara briskly stride out from the hotel entrance. A later afternoon sun left the upper adjacent building façades in a bronze aura, the street people below mainly in shadow.

Ann smiled, then affirmed her recognition. "Vincent!" Gebara was a moment taking her in. "Hi. Long time! It's me Ann. I'm meeting a friend."

Gebara affected a warm recognition — so Ann guessed.

“Of course — *Quetzal!* — the very one. Ann Green. Now a stellar actress! My word. How are you? We’re off to the new show lounge and casino — the Bellerophon. You might have heard of it. Why not join us? Do, yes.” He broadly smiled and genially beckoned.

Ann hesitated. “I’m meeting a friend, from the studio.”

“Bring him along. More the merrier!”

“Really! Good lord. Well yes, great! He’d love to come, I’m sure. I was to meet him in the Concierge Lounge. I’ve read about it — the Bellerophon.” She hadn’t but her agent had on one occasion readily extolled it.

“Splendid. Andrew come over here.” He motioned to one of his companions. “You remember Ann — Ann Green — our super model for Elysium’s *Quetzal*, now a ranking actress! Ann please meet Andrew Foison.” After eyeing Ann, newcomer Andrew ex-claimed, “Mon Dieu! — in the flesh. I’ve only seen the ads, mamselle! But here, now! You’re joining us of course.” He reached over, smartly took and kissed Ann’s hand. Dismissively Vincent said. “Don’t mind him — he’s Flemish, or pretends to be. Some family that dates back to god knows when. Don’t get him started.”

Vincent’s joviality wained a bit when Ann returned with her boyfriend, all chiseled muscle of him, his neck alone the size of a stallion’s. Being handsome as well didn’t help, though Gebara seemed relieved when Ann took his arm saying, “Don’t mind Freddie. He sees I don’t split a nail — unnecessarily.” She initially sensed Gebara pull away, but she held on and he duly accommodated the cordial act.

The gesture had the wanted effect and, with Ann in tow, the entourage set off to Gebara’s new show lounge and casino, the Bellerophon, one in a growing chain of clubs the Russian entrepreneur named Kissy Borozov had devised. Vincent Gebara was a late franchisee.

For both Ann and ‘Freddie’ it was a new experience. Neither had been in such a sumptuous and detailed historic surround before. Ancient Greek as it turned out. On seeing a realistic model of a splendid hoplite warrior in the lobby, Freddie quietly commented to Ann — “Delta Force lifer.” Before a wide mosaic of a chap on a winged horse facing a terrible beast, a Chimaera, he added, “Great Osprey that — the horse.” Ann smiled. Freddie played his part well, staying not quite out of sight, while ‘reconciling’ himself to Ann’s impromptu engagement with Gebara. Often they exchanged fond glances and smiles, which Gebara took in with suave acceptance — a surprise for Ann, for he did not quite fit, at least that night, the character of the malignant overlord she imagined him to be, making her wonder just how culpable he was in late events. The confusion was limited though. The man’s seamless ingratiating, when away from strickly mer-chandising decisions, earmarked the successful modern buccaneer. Some of Mason’s rare perceptive certainty had rubbed off.

The stage show opened with a snooty comedian known as the Gryphon, whose rendering of topical obsessions had a sardonic edge that might elicit both laughter and moues, his very presence in such a club a further surprise for Ann. He pretended to acknowledge ready applause before he began.

“As we’ve learned in the last few days, it’s maybe best to diss, insult only people who are too weak to retaliate or too dumb or distracted to realize they’re under review. Object to another’s taste only if you can easily, readily and equanimously thrash him. For instance, you can say what you like about traditional Western stuff — the new PC Gospel gives derogation a new heads up. You can even stick a historic crucifix in a gallon of your urine — and be accepted as a discerning artist. Several connoisseurs have assured us of it. The many critics of the Jews say that if God gave them the Holy Land why didn’t He tell anyone else? So God’s either decided or maybe has a crucial wager going.”

Some audible groans followed. Ann too sensed a wonder at the aspersion, which Gryphon appeared to acknowledge, yet kept on.

“Do note that the message here has become axiomatic. Jokes about Jews and Christians in general are getting a little trite. No sense kicking down open doors. Other religious groups are mostly lying low. Comedians and cartoonists who value their lives have to be careful about whom they burlesque these days. They might look to the subgroups. Consider: we’ve heard few quips about Episcopalians Mormons or Baptists say. Mind you, Mormons take hits like veteran boxers, barely batting an eye. No audience potential there. As for Episcopalians, good lord, they befriend everybody. Whereas Baptists believe that many of us are damned from the get go. Difficult to quarrel over that.”

Polite laughter followed from some members of the stylish genteel audience. An audience that surprised Ann.

“Understandable. A word to the wise — to the ‘prudently edgy’ — those who want to be seen as perceptive and courageous but tend to shun head hackers. It’s the operating principle these days: *Safe Edginess*. How to be winsomely daring yet safe. You don’t want a group of belligerent critics waiting for you at the stage door with knives and bombs. So you burlesque those who can’t afford a blue-chip lawyer, won’t put your children at risk, or are too slow to realize they’re being butt-ended. You’ve got to be alert, shrewdly selective. Best to hunt down stolid folk who haven’t yet realized how inane they are. A reliably growing constituency.”

This esoteric analysis produced a few stoic smiles but generally a subdued hush. In all fairness, most people were still finishing their desserts and jawing with friends and guests. And the spiel was a little cryptic.

“We’re in the thrall of multiculturalism folks, and diligent micro-management. Cosmopolitan birth rates count here. Without them your multiculturalism lacks ‘multi’. And without ‘multi’ you don’t get on. Just for instance, your local Salafi seems less inclined these days to befriend a transgender priest. Even Al Sharpton’s cheery nature may not be enough to affiance the last Camille Paglia.”

The Gryphon paused as if to acknowledge the audience’s tepid response, then said with a leading smile, “Dance me to the end of love, as one popular prophet has said. A quick-step today. For instance, on the same day Massachusetts fondly legalized marijuana and same-sex marriage — gays have never stopped dancing! I quote Leviticus 20:13: ‘If a man fox trot with another man he must be stoned.’”

A few laughs but mainly a tolerant hush.

The Gryphon himself seemed irresolute about proceeding. It seemed the audience awaited the next act, a Russian dancer billed as an Apsara. Finally he said, “Okay, I give up. She’s on her way. Live. Yes, live!”

The curiosity for Ann Green was that Gebara — this Gebara — continued to foil the sinister image she had of him. He behaved rather well this night, seeing that Freddie was not neglected nor condescended to. And he seemed genuinely pleased to see her. Her worry was that she had overlooked something, that her performance here this night was only as good as the script, and here she was winging it.

The performance of the dancer — the numinous Apsara — was as beguiling and rarefied an exhibition of ‘exhibitionism’ as she’d seen. The transformation of the costume itself a wonder — from hermetic habit to bejewelled divinity, the proceeding revelations fluent and oddly decorous — the dancing of a Terpsichore who prized Sylphic movement and the music of Aram Khachaturian and Dimitri Shostakovich, ending with the wondrous Waltz from the Jazz Suite No. 2 by Shostakovich — music Mason himself had been plying her with! The next and final act was every bit as unexpected — none other than a splendid choral group, sounding like the Robert Shaw Chorale, singing seasonal carols in a seamless disco style with a great rhythm group and dancers dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses. The audience loved it. The performance recalled for her a very old but pleasing Christmas CD by Bony M. To which Gebara joined in with a fine bass baritone voice. By then Freddie was in the grip of a very droll expression. As was a nearly incredulous Ann. The audience itself seemed surreal, so appreciative of all the performers, almost a parody of an audience you expect to find in a show lounge. Ann Green was soon biting her tongue — in this quizzical setting. Moreover, how do you thank a suspected monster for a singularly touching night out? Was the whole enterprise a mere show? A clever means to mislead?

But whom for gawdsake? Was she ‘in fact’ dreaming?...

“That was a remarkable show!”

Ann’s exclamation Gebara responded to with: “A bit of a gamble. Yes. The casino itself, a floor below, is the business end. The show lounge is the work of the Russian who devised it. A quiet but assertive chap. A class act a little above me but well executed. His select introductory vouchers account for many in the audience here tonight. The acts may have to change over time of course. As I’ve said, he’s a singular chap — a 19th Century Russian, an elegant old-fashioned romantic. A *bien-pensant*, someone said — not in the derogatory sense I think. We’ll see. The casino is another matter of course. The sums are huge. The gambling franchise has a reputation with affluent Asian gamblers. The Russian behind it, a brother to the show lounge impresario, does a lot of business in Singapore and China. He and his brother don’t get on — as you might expect. I perhaps should have explained. Fortunately, the youngsters of the Asian élite here have found it well, copacetic — the casino. I must show you the underground parking lot some time. The cars.” Nearly askance over what she was hearing, Ann had no difficulty asking if he

needed any model performers these days: she was in between engagements and a bit restless. This comment kindled a broad Gebara smile.

“My word. I do have an offer. Two really. But the one takes precedence. It is a bit of a departure for me — an art film about the early court in the Roman client state of Galilee and Perea — yes, specifically at the time of Herod Antipas. We’ve had to interrupt the undertaking — one of the lead performers left early on in a huff, didn’t get along with a cast member — incensed the chap was even hired I’m told. Not sure just why. I also think she, the performer complainer, and the director didn’t get on. Anyway, we’ve been looking high and low for a replacement.”

It took an addled Ann Green a moment to field her question. “What’s the film called?”

“It’s loosely based on Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé*. We’ve changed many lines and added others. A canny update you might say. The production team has made some stunning palace sets. It’s set in the Middle East of course, as you may know. A new indeed refreshing take on a young teen’s duel with a lecherous stepfather and dour religious prophet. We think it will have legs today. We’ve had a time getting it into production. Some early disagreements, as I’ve said. But things should go smoothly from now on.”

Ann was dumbstruck and struggled to keep a straight face — thinking again she was dreaming. “You’re planning on staging the notorious beheading of John the Baptist? Isn’t that a bit daring — in this day and age?”

“It’s also a promotional bonanza — in this day and age! Think of the PC debate it may foster — a consequential tale of parental lust!”

Ann struggled to affect a smile. “I can only wonder what part I could possibly play in such a production.”

Gebara nodded and resumed the solicitous narrative that continued to daunt.

“The focus of the work is less centered on *Salomé* than it is on Herodias — her mother. A bit of a departure of course, but we’ve cast *Salomé* as very young, and her mother as a smart perceptive and still captivating woman — not a jealous vengeful harridan but an engaging seemly mediator. Yes.” Gebara’s smile was airtight. “Herod is portrayed as a haunted troubled fellow — badly in need of distracting compensation. How it all works out is less in keeping with the so-called historic reality than a take on, well — *Sense and Sensibility*, say. Yes, a Jane Austen ‘take’ you might say.” Again Gebara’s smile widened as Ann suppressed an incredulous laugh. “Meeting you as I have this evening, I’m hoping you might consider auditioning for the part of Herodias. It’s her canny foresight that saves the day — in our production. I cannot guarantee the part, for we are looking at two other actresses. But I’d be grateful if you’d consider it.”

By this time Tara was almost sniggering. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “My word. Me. I take it *Salomé* survives.”

“Well, she certainly survives the film. John the Baptist proves to be a rather disgusting tramp she uses for a time to tease her beset father who’s been a delinquent guardian over all. Toward the end, Salomé tells her dear John — John the Baptist or Jokanaan — that he badly needs a bath.”

Gebara jovially laughed at this, inviting Ann to join in, which she did with a ready smile. The entire evening had taken on a bizarre, freakish aspect — not the least being a Gebara who sounded at times as eccentric as Antoine Plombiers, making her wryly wonder if they might be in cahoots!

“I must admit — the part sounds very interesting. Where would an audition take place?”

Gebara pulled a business card from his breast pocket. “Give me a call early next week. We’ll arrange a time and place. There’s also a scuba diving gear line we may be promoting in the forthcoming months — a further modelling gig you may want to consider. The film takes precedence of course.”

A ready smile followed this assertion.

If Ann Green then expected a presumptive offer of a late night drink, she was further surprised by Gebara’s apology for having to leave when the show ended. “Andrew’s group is off to the airport, and I do have a bit of a gambling problem, and have promised a bad loser a rematch, to begin — he checked his watch — within the hour. Do please give me a call. I won’t be so pressed next week. Now let me get you and Freddie a cab.”

Later, a bemused Ann conferred with an edgy, disbelieving, Mason.

“No, I don’t think I was followed. Well, fairly sure.”

Mason was by then listening with steeped wonder to Ann’s rarefied evening with Gebara. His sense of the surreal also resurfaced. Ann had returned to their hotel hoping not to wake him, but he had been anxious for her and not slept. He had wanted to tag along that evening but Bruno averred. “A matter of safety and surveillance — both his and ours,” he sternly said.

Soon Ann was beside him in the bed while still reviewing the evening’s unbelievable events. She had climbed under the covers nude but continued as if her words were summoned by an oracle. Mason was readily dismayed by the prospect of her actually considering a Gebara film, an archly preposterous if not sardonic one at that. He was all but convinced this was Gebara’s camp way of nixing any association he might have had with the earlier film. Bruno’s reaction would be crucial.

To Tara he soberly asked, “You actually want to go through with this?”

“I have to, can’t live with the numbing confusion...all the charged clouds. Something’s very, very odd. Audacious on one level, malarky on another.”

Mason winced. “Go make the Australian film; you need some open space.”

This produced a smile, then a further surprise as she turned to face him. “I may not get the part. It happens.” Then, after a wink she said, “My fail-safe lover usually puts out here...helping one forget.”

After a slight hesitation, Mason declared, “He’s on call tonight.”

“Let’s not disappoint him.”

THIRTY-TWO

The intercepted cell phone conversations added more pieces to the Gebara puzzle. Again Bruno’s pad was the venue for hearing and discussing the calls. The fact the sun was radiant and a surging sea calm after another sudden storm capped the moment. Bruno was pleased to hear of Gebara’s ‘new’ film and his offer to Ann. “He’s obviously vexed, alarmed even, by the wreck of the earlier film, and badly wants to upstage it, resorting to a literary finesse that is surely rare for him. Bravo Ann. And if the film goes ahead, we’ll learn more about his film moxie — pre-production services, possible tax advisers, film crew, presales team. Just knowing his possible whereabouts at any given time will give us a timely head up. His drug company Teles is very busy these days manufacturing addictive oxycontin pain killers. The firm’s salesmen are now pressuring many physicians to regularly prescribe such strong analgesics. Do give us a date and time of your meeting with him, Ann. Apropos today, we do have a late recording that confirms some presuppositions about Gebara. It’s a fragment but singularly noteworthy. The timing device on our receiver had a delay default to elude warning prompts. As I’ve said, Gebara’s security is blue-chip. We’re not entirely sure we’re cryptonymous. We trust we are. The first voice is Gebara’s, the second a friend, a senior executive at Teles, called Alan. The tape, from a recent phone tap, records a call Gebara made from his Bellerophon office.”

G: *Yes, most promising Alan. Ann Green has agreed to an audition and will likely get the part.*

A: *So it’s decided.*

G: *It’s another means to give the film a ‘fresh mint taste’. Beguile the career predators. Toffy Antoine Plombiers directing gives the film a pristine aura.*

A: *The crew’s not the same?*

G: *A different film crew, yes.*

A: *And the posters? What will you do with those.*

G: *What will we do with the posters? Nothing. They were intended as a publicity stunt I believe. The family did not place them after all. We’ll simply delete what we can find, replacing them with posters of Senta. No one really knows how many were put up. Senta will play Salomé in the new film. The resemblance is uncanny. The posters may in fact be a trump card.*

A: *Senta Knovak?*

G: *Very yummy indeed. It’s also in the works, by the way — her ‘Santa Baby’ tube. She’s a gem in it, Senta. Should be out soon. In France I think, first off. It’ll garner special publicity there, and serve as a further diversion.*

Bruno resumed speaking when the tape ended.

“The rumour of a late film or video, that likely involved Roseanne Hartley, obviously alarmed Gebara. A project that obviously went awry. To what extent he sanctioned it, we don’t know. But Roseanne’s death will foster some speculation. He seems determined to elude any hearsay by conspicuously making a kindred esoteric art film. And by making the current film

both visually stunning and flattering to the day's liberal Zeitgeist, he's upstaged some demur speculators. At least for a time."

With some weariness Ann said, "I'd still like to know in more detail Gebara's outlook, if he has one. Where he fits in the political spectrum. For instance, is the Bellerophon one of his baits — some kind of, well, snooty distraction, diversion. I mean, how sly is he?"

"Good questions. As with all extremists there are quirks, curiosities. The current Bellerophon has as much to do I think with Gebara's gambling habit as it does the urbane Russian who conceived the show lounge program — which serves to mask the exclusive member-only gambling club below — the work of the roué bother. Gebara's former sly patronage of provocative film making is the nimbus here, the haze surrounding conjecture. Rumours can presume facts but don't elucidate them. I think the film Ryan Dyck may have performed in was, at least for a time, off Gebara's radar. Being a possible accessory, however inadvertently, could sully both his business ventures and soundness with his fellow tycoons. Thus his need to extol the current film, make it into something notable to foil rumour, innuendo. He's quoted as saying a while back that he keeps hoping film makers come to make eroticism more elegant, poetic — free it from, well, its 'Augean stables'. He often alludes to mythic deeds. Not always that accurately." Here Bruno indulged a smile. "The irony is that this task of the stalwart Hercules, cleaning up the dirty smelly Augean stables, was accomplished without due payment! But I digress."

Mason promptly freely added, "One time Mycenaean Eurystheus, king of Tiryns, who ordered the cleanup, declined to pony up." He smiled. "One of the stories I know. Seldom have an opportunity...carry on."

Said a smiling heads-up Ann, "He does play the swank connoisseur, Gebara. And you think I can play a part in this, this 'esoteric' film?"

Said Pete with a rare chuckle, "He'll count his blessings."

Said Bruno, "Freddie will be around of course. Indeed, Gebara may think him a 'seal' of approval for such a film. Pun intended. He turned to Mason. "You're not happy though."

Fondly looking at Ann he said, "Trying to keep up."

Ann fondly smiled. "My alter ego."

To Ann, Bruno said with conviction, "Audition for the film. You're safe there with Freddie as elsewhere. He'll act as your agent — one of the well-versed ones. We'll make sure he's up on the lingo. You'll learn some things about Gebara's business network we can all use, who his backers and promoters are for such a film, for instance. And the film should have some legs. Gebara's counting on it and paying his publicists handsomely I'm sure. A net benefit for a good actress. No qualms necessary. Meanwhile, Mason will take the measure of the Islamic holy war that the growing number of Ryan Dycks and Dirk Churches have taken to heart. The ones who haven't yet been sandbagged by fentanyl and P2P meth. It's one of the late underground dynamics — ISIS-ISIL's reach. We're playing catch up there. And hope to have, soon, a better understanding of that reach here. The numbers and who's listening to

whom. How embedded and widespread it is. Perceptive Mason's new bailiwick. Indispensable really." Here Bruno managed an affirmatory nod and smile.

Mason managed a complaisant nod.

THIRTY-THREE

Mason's somber re-engagement with Islamic indoctrination came the day he asked a kindly Muslim lecturer he'd listened to at the Al-Noor Academy in Massachusetts (*not* a 'spook pen' Mason presumed) to recommend a group that was, as he put it, 'impatient with growing Western factionalism'. The time was overdue he said. He conceded to the instructor that he was unhappy with many sorry trends in the West, sensed something vital and salutary in Islam, and wanted to learn more and help out where he could. He'd read some books and internet sites and hoped to get in touch with people who were determined to make a change. He wasn't able to do much physically, he said, his limp in approaching the instructor more or less self-evident. But he was articulate and might help with things like affidavits and reports. He came dressed in his minimal disguise: a short beard — he had not shaved for well over a month — a close cropped head, thin-framed spectacles with thick lenses that intimated deficient vision, also a roan watchman's cap. Makeup still covered his conspicuous birth mark.

The instructor looked at him with a gravity Mason hadn't thought him capable of expressing and said, after judicious reflection, "Stay after the class this Friday. I will call a friend and see if I can give you an address. What is your name?"

"Tom Graves."

"I shall look for you on Friday, Tom."

Following that lecture — select quotes from the Hadith and Sunna of the Prophet — Mason waited until the last questioners who hung around after left, then approached the instructor, who again looked at him with a sudden diffidence that slowly dissolved into his feature smile. "Ah yes. I've not forgotten. I won't be long." He then turned and entered a door at the back of the hall, promptly closing it after him. The man was gone long enough for Mason to wonder if he should just leave — worrying he may have bitten off this day more than he could chew. Bruno's patience and acuity, Voss's city heed, and Ann's selfless determination kept him there...all buoyed a need pull his weight. Slight as that might be.

The man returned through the same door looking at first abstracted, only taking in Mason when he approached. His smile had vanished. "I've taken your words seriously. You are sure you wish to enter into a serious dialogue with the Prophet? No ulterior motive? We'll find out soon enough if you do."

Mason nodded, trying to match the novel gravity in the instructor's face. He had carefully rehearsed his lines, trying to make them sound impromptu. "I believe the time has come for me to sort out my life. I think I must consider Islam's path to, well, disillusion. We sometimes call it 'disambiguation'." The concept he had carefully selected. It seemed to appeal to the instructor.

“It can be an arduous ‘path’.”

“Well, I can only begin with my own limitations.”

Again the instructor looked at him with something approaching forbearance, the prologue to his provisional smile.

“I know of a meeting you may wish to attend. It is in a building not far from here. It is a select group, a late devoted enclave, and you will be requested to register your name and address. You may be scanned before entering. A timely precaution. You must consider the consequences of attending. You will be approaching a sobering new vista, a new reckoning of your life. It will be hard even inimical to turn back.”

“It is what I want. Dearly want.” Ann had tutored him in an impromptu dramatic role. It had been assumed a lecturer at the Al-Noor Academy would not pander to psychos. Though the man’s intensity daunted.

With his new facial makeup, new identity papers, and his ‘preloved’ clothes, he felt reasonably assured he could pass as an interested loner. Thus, giving over to a method performance, he climbed to the upstairs floor of an abandoned storefront two day’s later where he was promptly scanned and presented with a register for his name, address, occupation and language skills. After this scrutiny he was left to join a small congregation of 17 men — he was the 18th — in a barren room with a single desk in front. He was the last to enter. He was surprised to find a nondescript group you might find at a sports event or cinema. He was further surprised to see only four non-whites, and all of these earnestly talking with their neighbours. Only two in the group sported beards. A couple in the back even glanced his way. One nodded as he entered. “Good show,” he said, offering a hand. For the first time Mason wondered if he’d overdone the disguise. All the men here seemed well acculturated if not home grown Americans? Only a little less blazé, insouciant, perhaps.

A ruddy muscular man with rimless glasses and a shock of white hair entered and placed a folder on the desk. He stoically looked about the room and stated, “God willing, we will begin.” This was followed by a short invocation in Arabic. Looking again about the room with what Mason imagined a headmaster’s propriety he said, “We are fortunate today to hear from a recent convert who speaks with an eloquence few of us master. His words are a beacon of light in this dark age. Please welcome the exceptional Naguib Elamin.”

The applause was prolonged, or so Mason thought, as he wrestled with the unsettling suspicion that he knew this newcomer — had in fact gone to school with him. As the recognition registered, he could barely believe his senses: the man then standing before them, this inspiring charismatic convert, despite his robe, straggly blond beard and brown turban, was none other than Dirk Church, now known as Naguib Elamin. Who promptly began his presentation with the old pernicious Charlie Manson calumny about Jews which, given the approbation and ready laughter that greeted it, was a favourite trope here. If Mason anticipated a barrage of callous cynicism he knew Dirk capGreen of, he was shocked by the tailor-made invective for this attentive crowd. No audience like a credulous, engrossed audience! So he surmised. If he worried about his own identity, he soon believed Dirk was sufficiently caught up in his arch

contumely and the raptness of his audience to see only a crowd that responded as one — including himself — his opening a screed one that baited witness. Made one a voyeur.

“We are often told there is no humour in Islam. That we cannot laugh at life. Well consider this: without anti-Semitism the Jew would cease to exist. Anti-Semitism is the defining karma for the Jew. Assimilation is his death knell, the marginal member the key danger. His touted singularity — as the Chosen People of God — lapses when he’s but another gamecock. Even the appeal of science and the arts can default. He needs to be singled out to be satisfied, his deeds conspicuous, unrivalled. Anti-Semitism is a meme, a reassurance of singularity, of peerless disparity! The *handmaid* to inequality’s guillotine. Curious the Jewish God told so few about His Chosen People. Was He finally a little embarrassed maybe? Just remember: the Jew excels at everything — including getting persecuted.

This gamy testimonial elicited protracted laughter. Mason winced. The question of anti-Semitism was for him but another historic clumping of perversity, a conclusion he knew could well be considered anti-semitic in some quarters. His own motley ancestors would be among the guilty and the vanquished in such carnage. The few Jews he knew were exceptional, independent, resourceful folk. Their very shrewdness and insularity sometimes daunting. Vide the deft Holocaust examiner David Cole! Or a formidable writer like the flinty Hannah Arendt, who would write half *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in footnotes. Such exacting scholarship always impugned it seemed. He often felt deficient, even possibly culpable around such erudition. Confusion was no excuse. In the end he feared he was simply maybe too stolid or restive, if not stupid, to fully comprehend such subtlety, such rarified nuance. The growing loathing of European whites generally was for him as disheartening. He now resented the malicious Dirk the more for reminding him of his ever haunting limitations as the maniac ventured on.

“The assimilated or liberal Jew becomes just another buccaneer in the sea of cut throat businessmen, promoters, officials and controllers. Note, the U.S. can never adopt enough government regulations — because Americans have no spiritual core, no residual integrity left. If there’s no majority consensus about right and wrong, who’s left to abide by an agreement? Ever more elaborate rules, laws and policies make enforcement desultory and deviance self-sustaining. *America’s* Jews have, by and large, been blessed, affluent *America’s* want of self-regulatory morals is a boon for the clever huckster. Indeed, *America’s* ventures in the Middle East, which have caused much instability, were spurred in part by a fervid Jewish-Christian-lobby allied to a military-industrial nexus that seeds distrust to boost its importance. Oil has been a major player there, as well as anxiety over Iran’s purported research into the making of nuclear weapons. If that lobby is less favoured today, it’s because it has fewer adherents among the new ardent feminist utopians. The world’s new lordly love-mongers.”

Ready laughter surfaced here.

“Today the new omniscient progressive is a romantic who wants to atone for his culture’s sins — all the exacting traditional beliefs and their adherents. Bless him/her. Christianity is becoming, as we’ve seen, a rather wormy moribund creed. On the one hand an

emerging protestant playground for holy-woke trendoids, on the other a Pope whose opportunistic activism has inspired contempt among his own devout. He's even patronizing aspects of Marxism in the hope of salvaging his stale church and dwindling clergy. Even indulging in what amounts to podophilia, fondly washing everybody's feet. He can't stand anyone getting their feet dirty. Select subjects only, of course."

The amusement here was ongoing.

"He's even now a climate change guru. Who rarely mentions Jesus any more, just the destitute and dispossessed, hoping perhaps to foil the festering memory of early indigenous Catholic schools, while his Cardinals mimic the Italian Chamber of Deputies and the Vatican Bank discretely allocates its money — well, it would wouldn't it, being so reliant on shrewd accountants who vet the tithes, donations and charities that help keep the same Rome clergy in creature comforts. Talk about the evils of sinecures, laundered money and bottom up sex! Like the hedge fund brokers — almost anything goes. Behind the confessional."

More enthusiastic applause. Mason tried to smile at the sly innuendo, and wryly fancied asking questions about some Muslim exploits — such as religious apartheid, female thralldom as multiple wives minding many children, humble worshippers sustaining a remote privileged class, the frequent use of aliens to build cities and palaces — or some Gulf States, according to Amnesty International, turning away Syrian refugees, thus slighting the Ummah's espousal of kinship. But he knew there were *other* gremlins here, other *historic* gremlins: the impetuous way the WWI victors played musical chairs with their coveted Mandates in the Middle East, arbitrarily setting boundaries, dislocating language and culture, facilitating the seamy future of political meddling and excising of native leaders — the Shaw of Iran being one of the dour replacements. So he remained silent, musing how honouring the day's late PC zeitgeist was to ride shotgun for the approved love-mongers — those who would obliterate discrete discriminative culture. Just as well, for Dirk was on a role.

"And talking about sex. Pray note the progressive sex education that's now being jammed down American youngsters' throats. Inspired by progressives who tout broad spectrum identification — such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pan-gender, intra-gender, bi-curious, pan-sensual, situational gender, asexual, transabled, limb hacker nullos — literally asexual: no outside parts at all — cis-female and -male, the cis-male being the ugly Western pig who's raping twenty percent of college women — much of this exotic fauna for grade school kids — in and out of school! One enlightened Facebook guru posits as many as 58 sexual varieties — more to follow I daresay — and urges the removal of the sex identification from birth certificates, sex being deemed a peremptory if not meaningless distinction. Pay attention, it gets ravenous here. Who here knows what a TERF is? T-E-R-F. One lad quietly said, "Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist." This provoked a few snickers. "And why is that contentious?" Naguib asked. The responder matter-of-factly stated: "Transgender men — men becoming females — resent not being considered women by some feminists because they have no vagina, just, well, an expensive, aromatic purse, in some cases." More abiding laughter over which Naguib asserted, "Indeed. All

opposing views are regarded as bigoted and illegitimate — the travesty of identity presumption. You try to combine or eliminate some of the above sex groupings and the PC hyenas will, in all likelihood, tear you limb from limb, including self-mutilating nullos. One daring traditional feminist — yes, there still are such fossils — has selflessly suggested that men changed into women aren't really women because their artificial vaginas, when they have them, smell different than regular women — dissimilar bacteria at large, perhaps. So, the modern smell test. Any volunteers? For the new 'menstrual' show?"

This nearly brought the house down. After gesturing for calm Naguib resumed.

"There's even dismissive names for traditional behaviour — mansplaining, whitesplaining, straightsplaining, menterrupting, bropropriating — the short list. Also, of traditional masculinity itself, derogations like toxic masculinity, testosterone poisoning, rape-gendering. What the Founding Fathers missed. The poor sots. The WOC — Women of Color — is now WOC/Non-binary POC — People of Color! In other words, there's no actual irrevocable male and female beings any more, or any meaningful ethnicity, tradition or IQ, only a morass that's perpetually guessing Who's really Who, and Who's on First and shouldn't be! Even ROTC candidates have been urged to march in women's shoes I understand, as if women had no say in the shoes they wear. It's so obvious they want us to win — their senior officers in women's shoes — the new feminized warrior. The modern feminist who imagines herself sovereign except for an aberrant quirk of circumstance. I mean, how can you prove yourself a strong, astute player if someone won't protect you from the horny 'man-babies'. My God, you risk getting pregnant!"

The applause here was nearly asthmatic.

"But wait — you 'ain't heard nothin' yet"! Even star athletes yearn to become feminist idols, the new lionesses. Brucey, so sorry — Caitlyn! — Jenner spends hours and hours in the media flogging a fine self-dramatic role, so heedful of his splendid 'debutante balls'. Let's face it: *American glasnost and perestroika would blush a yak!*"

The laughter here became convulsive, the high fives home run hits. Dirk happily waited, then held up his referee hands.

"Consider also that Charlie Hebdo has bit the dust — no more arty cartoons of the Prophet — none, zilch — whereas Andres Serrano's Piss Christ — a crucifix in a gallon of his own urine — is considered great art. Originally funded by the National Endowment for the Arts! Obviously a lot of people want to know which pot to piss in. We can help out here."

Again, near helpless laughter, which Dirk patiently waited out, then: " — Take the clamorous Black community. It continues to Cry the Blues, yet no one in the black community feels any responsibility whatever, no one. Many Democrats even sidle up to supporters of NWA — Nigaz Wit Attitude — whose iconic rap song is 'Fuck tha Police' and, like the African Internationalists, seek to demean if not destroy all vestiges of Western civilization and culture. Some openly encourage killing white people. Many, many Americans will be attacked, beaten up, stabbed, shot in the next 24 hours — yet the American media will remain highly selective in identifying the perpetrators. The earlier Integration movement is now the Diversity movement — diversity meaning specified groups exponentially entitled! One big name white gal, Rachel Dolezak

desperately wanted to be black. Frizzed her hair, dyed her skin. Presented herself as a role model, a black activist dissing white people — today's cat bird seat — until her white parents had had enough. Anyway, the lady inspired a very fine new word — 'wigger'. Which rhymes with — 'giggler', right?"

The laughter remained intermittently convulsive, audience members still pasting high fives. Mason managed to slap a couple himself. Rarely was he more gruesomely entertained.

"Yes — the new patricians are exceedingly touchy these days. Think of all the 'trigger warnings', the sinister 'microaggressions' foisted on them by traditionalist ogres — yes, *microaggressions!* — faintly unpleasant ideas or behaviours as full-scale offences. There's now a litany of such affronts: microassaults, microinsults, micro-invalidations and, for the poorly endowed pinhead, microrape."

If the laughter here was slow in coming as much from replete amusement as confusion, Mason thought, it reached a crescendo second-to-none before it abated. Had he ever witnessed such suave invective?

"The academic blether here — the micro insult — is for anal masochists only. The squalid behaviour is, I quote, 'Characterized by predatory non-physical prurient communications with the intent to penetrate the victim's emotional security on the basis of heteronormative impositions.' Ah ha. Got that? Hetero usually means heterosexual. Nonetheless — loads, piles and piles of ugly smelly normative. No number given. What to do? Just spell Indigenous with a capital 'I', and give the current 58 sex subsets a thumbs up okay." General laughter. "As for the left overs, those who still think of themselves as conventional men and women, the dead again believers — they're becoming the new pariahs, America's 'deplorables'. But hang on! Some of these are actually turning into canny realists who are even now considering the validity of sturdy shared principles — as in Islamic law and practice! Bless them. One might well think they can't wait for us to win. *They can't wait for us to win!* It's what you — you! — were born to do. Show them the way! The light! Allāhu Akbar!"

A hush followed, graced with some reverent invocations of the Prophet. Mason remained speechless, which some others seemed to interpret as awe, one duly smiled, nodded his way. He had rarely if ever felt so inept, so isolated.

"Some of you may have seen the obscene Tot's and Tiaras, where fathers, mothers parade three- and four-year-olds as fussed over beauty queen goddesses — about as invincibly idiotic and obtuse as American mania gets. Infantile cheer leaders with nothing to cheer. There are stories even of grade school teachers teaching young white girls to learn to cry for being white, to get them off on the right foot, so to speak — young lads being hopeless one assumes. Even groups outside the school yard avidly espouse facile heterogeneity. It's quite simple, really, Americans are turning into a bunch of hoary tasteless bat-shit crazies — who have no prospect of joy or fulfillment. Scolding, rebuking the undeserving is their lone vocation. Only their electronic toys distract. They can only engage digital game boards and video psych-outs — dollish and sado porno clinches co-opting most cable viewing today. Look too at much Western

pop music. Coddled baboon acts, diarrhetic words — not really words but endless mouthings — the ‘groovy’ stuff — so *rad, fab, brutal, tits*. ‘Monotonous projective vomiting’ one writer called it. The contorted faces of inane pop idols in splendid agony. How you dramatize piles perhaps. One enduringly popular song, less noxious than some — ‘I’m Ready’ — which gets repeated ad nauseam — sounds like a four-year-old on a potty waiting for his dear mother to come and wipe him off. Take the fulsome omniscient beat away and what do you have left — an eerie wasteland lull.”

More ready laughter.

“As for Western classical music — the so-call classic symphonic stuff. All that emotion.”

Here Mason listened with a particular dread.

“It’s nothing more than the *Requiem* for Western civilization. It’s all there — the terrible fulsome catharsis. The realization that regret, sadness, melancholy is all there is. The only real feeling left. That’s all, folks!”

More self-satisfied laughter. Here Mason almost raised his hand. He believed unsurpassed lyricism and the rich polyphony often accompanying it to be indices of solicitude, serenity, joy — his ‘euphonic stuff’! As for traditional classical music, what about musical wits like Gioachino Rossini? But he feared mention of say Grieg’s *Rigaudon*, Figaro’s aria, let alone a sylvan *trobairitz*, could merely incite more derisive laughter. Dirk was surely just nodding to tin-eared naysayers. Once on a rumbling roller coaster — tone-deaf when you get off. Still, it was a blow Mason had no pugnacity to fend off.

“Look at Western fashion. *Haut couture* they call the best of it. Humans dressed up as aliens. Arrogance enshrined. Some of you may not know the word ‘insouciance’. You should. What you get when you market anarchy — unlimited variation. ‘Middle class’ is the peerless derogatory term favoured by America’s urbane cognoscente. Indeed, America’s middle class is shrinking — yet paying much of the taxes. Only the poor and very rich are multiplying. And the very rich are as removed from reality as any beings in history as they hoard their money and salve themselves with foundations that often actually augment their precious prerogatives. Vide the Rainbow Coalition. The ‘colour’ white pre-sumably banned, in disgrace. Some American wealthy even lavish money on our Democrat shills who seem keenly in favour of the dissolution — in effect championing broad spectrum immigration, relaxing long-standing codes to do so, and reserving punishment mainly for recalcitrant whites. No one, however, is paying much attention to the humungous American subsidy debt. Taxing the wealthy to the hilt will only run the government for a month or two after all. Indeed several American cities have been bankrupted paying their civic employees salaries and pensions! The accumulated deficit itself since the Clintons was nearly 17 trillion dollars! And, given current trends, could be 22-23 trillion by the end of the current presidency. Americans simply shrug. Their trusted economists say ‘just create more easement’ — in effect, print money and buy up and repackage stale bonds and investments. Enough suckers to buy them or sharpies to score with them. What does that tell you? Think of the growing number of Americans who cannot afford to buy homes or products made in America. Think of the abandoned malls that attract archival photographers.

American infrastructure is also a mess but no one really dares confront it. There's no money! And now, with the coming legalization of euthanasia, the social advisement for it can't be far off — how the old and infirm, the mushrooming burdensome constituency, may be dealt with. While the new street drugs, ever more addictive and 'affordable', will insure a growing population of dead beats, particularly young men with little education, few jobs, their very *masculine* presence demeaned, such that they often find themselves to be 'incels' — involuntary celibates — especially before the recognized reality that fewer and fewer Western women desire babies *or* marriage, relegating such men ever more superfluous! Indeed, abortion remains a thriving practice in the U.S. Such dedicated removal experts. Even late trimester kiss-offs — the auction of baby parts being a recent seminal spat. A film about Planned Parenthood abortion practices was recently banned by PP itself. The scragging must be done *sub rosa*, so the humane progressives can continue to be 'humane'. Ardent progressives claim that failing to disclose your HIV status to a sex partner is a human right. You can choose to infect a partner with a consequential disease, so you won't feel isolated, embarrassed. Humane!"

A strained silence followed, many heads shaking in disbelief.

"Humane. A great 'high'. One state legislature made marijuana use and same sex marriage legal on the same day — meaning fewer inopportune babies to disturb the highs, I guess. It's obvious Westerners crave release *not* obligation. And who's babies will fill the gap? Islam's babies!"

The spontaneous uproar was robust and sustained. Dirk had to work his hands to quiet the lively response. When the cheering finally abated he said, "One late characterization of America from acknowledged expert Bernard Lewis" — here Dirk paused as the anticipation grew — 'America is harmless as an enemy, treacherous as a friend.'"

Renewed spirited applause.

"As for the rest of the planet's congregants? Well, Hinduism is now a venal business venture. Like many Asian 'isms'. All the other creeds — and there are scads of them, from the rants of health faddists to venal product gurus — are essentially bric brac. And they are all — all! — every last one, wary of us. None have the stamina nor vision to oppose us openly. They even shy away from facing us directly on the battlefield. They use drones — more electronic game playing. A craven major white news caster felt obliged to fabricate stories of his own heroism before such surety. Can you imagine? The guilt is ubiquitous. Yes, scared shitless — who wouldn't be in a bat-shit crazy society, a society that touts nothing precious except that of so-called liberty — when you remind them of it — which they've spent eons trying to define, and are now more undecided, more vindictively argumentative about the subject than ever. *Keenly intolerant of all unsanctioned tolerance* — the new PC evangelical diktat! Meaning, in the end: stagnation, fossilization, no one daring to act except the ever more rabid castigators. Because they are lost and scared! Think of the 'courageous' journalists and writers who routinely question the permissiveness, the flagrancy of free speech and its *sine qua non*, parody, because they know they are perfectly safe doing it! Think of the university professors who fear for their

careers if they use the wrong pronoun. Major universities now turn down speakers critical of the new imperiousness, bless them! Yes. Bill Mahr from Berkeley, Christine LeGarde from Smith College — because the multiclits see the IMF as crusader tainted — Condoleezza Rice from Rutgers, the apostate Ayan Hirsi Ali from Brandeis — a bloody Jewish university! — Robert Birgeneau from Haverford, Ann Coulter from several campuses. Jeremy Skahill in *The Intercept* adroitly argues that the use of drones is not only cowardly and immoral but illegal! What does all this tell you? Cowardly, immoral and illegal! It's too bloody obvious — they want us to win! They can't wait for us to win. *They can't wait for us to win!* Provide them with a culture that abolishes contrived ambiguity. It's what you — *you!* — were born to do — blow the asinine place to kingdom come!"

A sudden standing ovation was sustained, an applause Dirk fondly waited out.

"Let's remove the poor souls from the miasma of 'anything goes', of over-leveraged democracy, of *I can't get no satisfaction*. Hardly a mystery. They spend as much time gaming — screwing with Lady Luck — as diligently praying to a knowing and thus exacting God! Even President Obama was concerned about the 'less than loving expressions by Christians themselves' — all those Christians so less appealing than himself — a late ostensible leader of the free world. What does this tell you: he's already on board. *He's already on board!*"

These comments resulted in another standing ovation, which Dirk happily acknowledged. Holding up his hands for a further pause, he concluded with: "In short: Americans yearn for release, for a sturdy social structure. For a shared faith that doesn't cave in to cavillers. And only we can give it to them! Only we! The pure emphatic Islam. And you — you! You are the long-awaited heralds, the invincible enablers! The holy warriors! The soul and sword of Mohammed! Allāhu Akbar!"

The applause remained sustained. If Mason was appalled, he was also im-pressed with the sweep and poignancy of the harangue to a captive and all but consecrated audience. An audience he still marvelled at because of its un-anticipated whiteness — suggestively an upper crust college class! Some of what was cited he also found regrettable — Obama's derogatory comments about Christians just after the wholesale massacre of Christian students in Kenya — but the exaggerations were possible he thought because of the growing Western malaise of heady, seductive normlessness. What Emile Durkheim called *Anomie*. Deciding, by and large, on the fly, free of constraint, of all dated, timeworn precepts. The new PC wardens discounted most norms because norms always discriminate, and facts were always somehow suspect — those Steven Pinker marshalled for instance: more people worldwide growing old, a decline in maternal mortality, more growth in the last 50 years than the previous 2 million years of human existence, far less mortal violence and disease, much less crime overall, more real equality, even less absolute poverty. Was this all a Western ruse, a vainglorious academic wile? Sadly, the day's opportunistic political class had little stake in freedom. Unfettered, resourceful people decide their own fate. Better having a growing retrofitted, social justice constituency, solemnly dissing invidious achievement, success, luck — a constituency given manifests of excuse, of entitlement. The long-term trusted electorate. The question even he debated was whether humanity was

smart enough to realize the benefice of freedom. You can make a mess of your life in a culturally vacuous, entitlement-immured society with very little effort — one of the realities he confronted almost daily, porno-druggi-jihadi Ryan being a frightful example. He was also now, as the session drew to a close, wondering how he would get out of the place with a minimum of fuss. In-tense discussion groups were forming, Dirk — Naguib Elamin — being fulsomely patronized and ebullient in his encouragement as he shook hands and fielded questions. “Your message all Americans must hear,” one devotee said to general consent. The group then about Dirk readily concurred. Mason, still fearful he might be recognized, had sidled to the back of the hall, avoiding eye contact. To one guest he said he feared his parking meter was up. He’d return as soon as he could. “Do that,” the man said, smiling. In the corridor he could hear more ardent praise, brisk testimonials and cherished laughter. The solidarity seemed preternatural. He, the nearly lovable idiot, continued to ponder how a group of Westerners could find the culture that nourished and sustained them — when compared to many other authoritative ‘cultures’ — so moribund.

With considerable trepidation he finally slipped from the room, praying his leave taking was unheeded as it seemed. Once outside, he sought the corridor that led to the front entrance. A Men’s room sign pointed the other way, a direction he followed to avoid two men approaching the wide front doors. A hard right turn beyond the Men’s room led to a rear exit and a fenced area laden with construction material. The fence he deemed scaleable, and after maneuvering about piles of lumber and plywood, struggled over the barrier. Despite catching his coat on a stray wire, he ended upright on the other side. After a quick assessment of his whereabouts and dress, he set off to find his car, and with considerable relief noted the street he soon coursed to be empty. He thanked his lucky stars for getting away with minimal fuss, and vowed to never again attend such an indoctrination session. He might be persuaded to help review, particularize insidious blog sites — but that was it. Someone else would have to serve as a daring personal witness.

He used Pete’s ‘exfiltration’ maneuvers on returning to his hotel — sudden double-backs and exits from cluttered stores and hectic areas, ever seeking the busiest terrain while remaining vigilant to followers. When home free, so he trusted, he breathlessly phoned and told Pete Voss of his discovery of a former school friend becoming an exuberant fluent jihadist. Voss listened as one being told an old trite tale. “One of the givens these days — the ‘coming outs’, some less expected than others. You don’t think he recognized you?”

“No — he was far too wrapped up in his gospel. We — his audience — were so many numbed communicants I think. I doubt our former friendship would carry much sway with him now. Unless he discovered me a zealous con-vert. Not a credible option. They were an inimical bunch. Career discontents I’d guess. Not as sinister as that first group, if only because they seemed more home grown. I’m pretty sure no one followed me. I trust my disguise will leave me anonymous on their scan. No one deemed me an alien, like some did before — at least what I remember.”

“We mustn’t discount the fact that you may still be a person of interest of course. These cells do keep an eye out for strays. The vetting process often includes a scan, as you mentioned. We’ll assign a sitter. Bruno has some new and important information about Vincent Gebara — more cell phone intercepts. Some of it rather garbled, but the gist is plain enough. We should convene early tomorrow. You okay?”

“Fine. Has Ann come to any decision do you know?”

“I think she’s considering an audition.”

Mason winced, reflexively sighed.

Voss sensed the dismay. “Freddie will be there. In the background, but there. 10 AM tomorrow at Bruno’s copacetic?”

“Yes. Sure. I have a picture of Dirk — well a group picture of us. I’ll bring it with me. He’s now called Naguib Elamin. A wispy beard. But recognizable.” T a r a answered after several rings. “I was on the internet. Didn’t hear my phone at first. A so-called debate between Douglas Murray and a Muslim who’s name I didn’t get. In England. Like some others, this guy is adept at interjecting extrinsic

observations — distracting ‘particulars’. A speciality I think.” Mason’s silence newly alerted her. “Sorry, I’m listening.”

“An old school fellow...has become an ardent Islamist. I listened to a spate of his edgy invective today.”

“The session you went to?”

“I’m still, well, dumbfounded. Well, sort of. He was an arrogant guy, but not mad — at least when I knew him. He’s simply honed his fanaticism. I showed you a picture I think — the four of us, first year UBC.”

“He spoke at this meeting?”

“Yes, the group’s current Chosen One, an aspiring *éminence grise* I think. Dirk Church. Now Naguib Elamin.”

“Good lord.”

“Lordly for some.”

A brief laugh. “Doesn’t really help sometimes — laughter.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow — at Bruno’s?”

“Of course.” She added, after a pause, “I’m free tonight.”

Without embarrassment he said, “Ah, my ‘go to’ Minerva.”

After a further short laugh she mused, “Do remind me.”

“Goddess of wisdom and patroness of the arts. And later war.”

“She was a virgin wasn’t she?”

“Not that I noticed.”

Shafts of brilliant late sunlight burnished Bruno's lair the next morning — the wake of angels, Mason thought. He'd never met a human more perceptive or pertinently knowledgeable than Bruno Cavet — a feeling sustained that afternoon. If finding such a one in the FBI surprised, he had little doubt about the man's acumen. Again the strong delicious coffee awaited — this time with what was identified as a delicious burnt almond torte which prompted one of Bruno's rare intimate comments.

"Had my first slice in Prantl's Bakery in Pittsburgh. Walnut Street. With the wife. A best time."

By then the others were smiling and gesturing with their mouths full. Pete was the first to speak.

"Heard about the place. Never got there."

Said Ann after a satisfied swallow, "God bless Prantl's."

This brought a quiet but affable consensus of nods.

Bruno added, "I'll begin in a bit. Gebara's deeds are now more apparent and the philosophy behind at times perplexing. We now know he covertly funds an Islamic cell, its members recruiting disgruntled Americans, the day's endemic permissiveness leaving many people unsure where they fit in. Mason recently attended an incendiary lecture. It's this very restiveness that Gebara appears to be abetting. More on this later. The curiosity is that Shari'a Islam, less its Wahhabi menace, incorporates the stable governance Gebara seeks to emulate. The type of regime he may one day see as an ally. We shouldn't rule it out"

Pete nodded. "Our regimental vizier."

Ann and Mason exchanged limp smiles.

Pete candidly took Ann in. "Any more thoughts about the film?" He too had been alerted by Gebara's suggestion that Ann audition for the film.

With a belated smile Ann said, "Well, the *today* intercepts should help."

Pete looked at Bruno who nodded. Ann and Mason took note of the quiet exchange. Said a resolved Bruno, "Best get to it. Two voices. Gebara and an unnamed associate. Remember: how sly their strategy is. The use of terror to invoke middle class anger and solidarity. More in due course."

The very first snatches of conversation incited a growing incredulity for both Ann and Mason.

G: ...*No no, he's a find.*

UK: *Not Ryan Dyck.*

G: *No, not him...what's his name, the other guy — Church, Dirk Church. Naguib Elamin, the adopted name. A late Al-Ashtar fair-haired boy. A cell we think Owen's exploiting here and abroad — sharing in the profits from prostitution, arms and drug trafficking, identity fraud, money laundering, illegal dumping of toxic waste, passport fraud, and people smuggling. A full house.*

UK: *Does he know Dyck?*

G: *Yes. Former school mates. Dyck, a former drug courier and porno freak, is also on his way up.*

UK: *Sounds a bit risky.*

G: *He is a bit rambling these days. But we're managing. As for Church— what a name! — he's full of piss and actually quite good at lambasting the 'execrable' West — a word he likes. He's a bit snooty, but his language is taking root and it's a blast. He touches most of the bases. Gets standing applause in some sessions. He'll be a great blogger in Europe. His credo: Democracy is moribund. It cannot heal the destruction of its theoretical precepts — given the new censure of providential luck, free speech, an impartial judiciary, individual rights and talents, compromise, parody. The anarchical collapse will leave a mustering of our new 'untouchables'. Who share a wrath, a resentment with the Islamists. Ha!*

UK: *Worth abetting. What language skills does Church have?*

G: *Keep you posted of course. Nice conversing with you...all the best. See you in Davos....*

Bruno took up the thread.

“We believe Gebara and Jack Owen share many interests. For instance, Owen's many field operatives, his former IRA Provisionals along with some Russians, are exploiting the anxiety the many riots cause, including the B & E turmoil, thus fostering a new respect for protection, order and demonstration. The ongoing PC derogation of whites gives such 'safe keepers' an edge; you can rub a person's face in dirt only so long. The Islamic agitators Owen's slyly 'grooming' up the tension — make whites more prone to invoke past standards — including, ultimately, broad based jurisprudence that can only be enforced by an autonomous unified government.”

Bruno continued after a deferential nod to a newly alert Mason and a mindful, incredulous Ann who was all but speechless then.

“A lot to take in, I know. The many tactics. Gebara's a veteran member of a group whose ideology we're beginning to apprehend as a whole. We're convinced this 'dark matter' group wields considerable influence world wide — 'the hidden gravity' some call it. A possible progenitor of the Illuminati or the Thule societies. A friend of mine thinks the Thule Society is the better probable designation — a society that never really died out. Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' or Nazi party was a late and crude offshoot. It supposedly attracted the likes of Rudolf Hess, Arthur Rosenberg and a callow Adolf Hitler. Even before it became a Nazi icon its members were involved in a cult of the so-called Aryan race, whose beginnings go back to the mythical land of Thule, which the early Greek legend placed near Greenland and Iceland. I tell you this now because I think we've badly underestimated the appeal of such a peremptory ideology, a tough *Weltanschauung* — particularly now that the West is facing a cultural demise, certainly a fracture, as is anticipated in the following exchange. It is part of a conversation Gebara had with a *Lepénisation des esprits* organizer — one of the fervent Eurosceptics. We were actually surprised we found it — the line was less secure than expected. Gebara doesn't mention a name in the exchange but some references may be to a former backer of Jean-Marie Le Pen. We think the exchange is part of a transcribed advisement for latecomers, who want their *Weltanschauung* affirmed. It's not an incidental call. More on this later. Best to hear the exchange now.”

Mason and Ann exchanged gamesome smiles as Bruno cued the recording.

G: *It's the essence of shock and awe — awakening of the Sleeping Giant*

?: *It should foster encouraging developments — especially the debates going on in Britain and Australia — the ones I'm most familiar with. The Canadians are treading water. The Americans are, invincibly it seems, politically fractured. Their woke adherents ever preoccupied with the redistribution shtick — the fantasy of ethnic-racial-economic-sexual harmony. So touchingly publicly concerned, while patronizing the cancel-culture fanatics who seed their holier-than-thou gospel into our schools, as their mantras of diversity and tolerance mask the body counts in urban hellholes, and racial hostility becomes a media favourite. We've a picture of Obama smiling with Farrakhan, and some of Farrakhan's followers. One day Obama even fancied himself a Jew, standing for a picture at the Wall — then cavalierly spurns Netanyahu. Well few people like Netanyahu. So how are Owen's new recruits working out? Two I hear are fervent players. Both very recent finds, yes?*

G: *Um, two in the current group look particularly promising. One a maniac who will certainly try to bomb the state beauty contest you drew our attention to last week.*

?: *You don't think that's a bit severe?*

G: *We do plan on delaying the contest. We've actually given the organizers of the contest anonymous warning of a pending attack. Our warning will enlist civic monitors who'll keep the fairground empty. We'll see the bomber is apprehended and 'escapes' to a mideast training camp. Do remember the middle- and lower-class parents — who's kids would have entered the contest — are our waiting reserves. Such an outrage, even though aborted, will, in due course, help foster a desire for stability, steadfastness, decency, normality — a recognizable way of life, where avid deviance — everyone lauded as idiosyncratic — isn't prized. Our showcase bomber actually has a misogynist streak that's quite overwhelmed him now. He's mad as a stymied hornet, and has already opted to undertake the bombing rather than promptly join the taxhid in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. He'll certainly incite the middle-income folks who generally loathe fanatics. We call him 'Santa Baby'.*

?: *Do I know him — the bomber?*

G: *I don't think so. He's a new recruit out of California. A former drug peddler and warm-body necrophiliac — a late discovery — his keen interest in assault pornography being a catalyst for his mania we think. He was useful for a time — as a procurer — for some sex-starved cyphers there. Also a pry for Owen's gang — assessing targets, rivals, new drugs. A chap with another prize name — Dyck. Ryan Dyck. He was picked up a while back off Le Matador Beach. He's become a protégé of Owen's crackerjack agitator Dirk Church — the one keeping many disaffected lads particularly head up. A matter of sedating the mad dog until we're ready. The attempted bombing of such a beauty competition will further incite our pleb partisans — who in turn are becoming in effect contumacious, insurrectionary, even ungovernable...think of the recent street demonstrations and anarchic trucker convoys, for the largely vexed lower middle class, despite its diminishing size, still has many recruitable players, a modest start of course, to be followed by the 'other' outrages — the seemly encores. I know Foster has told you as much.*

?: *The 'inevitables'.*

G: *Well, the rank stink bombing of: a couple of film studios that exploit ever more pornographic lust and sadism, a bank that fostered toxic loans, an abortion clinic or two, the National Democratic Club. Some of the openers.*

?: *The prelude to a 'fortuitous' denouement you believe.*

G: *Look at it this way: the PC Truthers are a mother load of fanatical egalitarians — their main targets hierarchical Western institutions and their minders. They are, in effect, the regimental buglers, provocateurs for*

levellers like Soros. Whereas the Russians, in farting at NATO, are actually uniting the West. A uniformity that blunts eccentricity. A finessed hand.

?: Keep us in the picture.

G: Of course.

When the exchange ended the silence in the parlour seemed unremitting. After a time Bruno said, “It’s an exchange that’s verified some of our pre-sumptions. It’s apparent that Gebara believes a societal overall is due. If he has informers in the State Department, which he well may have, he can carefully plan ahead. The Saga of the suicide bomber will be a headliner. What will become of this zany film Gebara’s producing is up for grabs though. It may indeed be a foil —short term. He’ll not want it playing for long — patronizing the PC ideologues as it does.

To which a pensive Ann replied, “This may sound dotty, but I still have some confusion about what Gebara’s associates anticipate. I’ve never doubted his, well, bravado, but this takes the cake — if what I think is really going on — this cagey war of the worlds. Even a growing underworld, which he traffics with, more or less facilitating the dissolution.” She looked beseechingly at Pete and Bruno. Bruno took up her entreaty.

“It’s a good question — not dotty at all — that doesn’t have a tidy, succinct answer. Again we are in the land of a very assertive mindset — one far from predictable despite its chiliast fervour. We’ve been tracking Gebara and his coterie for a while. It is not something we’ve advertised of course, and your discretion is taken as a given here. As alluded to, this Thule group — in whatever late name or guise they now adopt — believes democracy has run its course, as affirmed by the toxic debt spiral and the growing PC fervour that’s now destroying the benefices of the Enlightenment — essentially the freedom, however imperfect, of speech and debate, and limber parody. Even intelligence as measured by IQ, and sexual identity, are now considered shams. As are most cultural norms. The Thule spokesmen we’re listening to assert that protracted comfortableness, ease, tranquility — irenic life, the endgame of ‘progress’ — make people complacent and indolent and, as some believe, eventually cowardly, dissolute and sick. Islam proposes a solution that tends to nullify the restless venturesome individual, leaving a path only a devotee will follow. Curiously, the Thule group seems as arbitrary, in their belief that *only* the ethos of the Enlightenment can renew mankind, a drama that requires a periodic wholesale purging of the unfit, alien members — including today the hordes of smuggled economic migrants, mainly young men, flooding into Europe, who will hasten Europe’s demographic demise. Difficult to sustain a culture, let alone its jurisprudence, without your own legates. The only difference between Fascism and this new Utopian creed — that they acknowledge, as unbelievable as it will sound — is that the Jews, being as masterful as they generally are, would be among the ‘chosen’, the ‘elect’ — in this inevitable transcendence. Please bear with me. The Jews have been on the whole impressively capable and masterful, throughout history. Indeed, we’ve heard spokesmen from the Thule group claim that if the top Nazis had not been so obsessed with them, the Second World War would have evolved quite differently. I tell a very old German friend, an urbane Jew who survived the war, that he

sometimes behaves more German than Jew and he dryly smiles as he rebukes me. The desirability and possibility of a permanent peace is thus poppycock for the Thule group. Like diseased plants, the chronic, vindictive malcontents merely define for them the hale, viable, accomplished individuals. Hence the eternal war against indolence, sentimentality, arch sanctimony, endemic disdain and vilification of tradition — all the emanations of a dissolute population they claim. And the way you do that is to rouse the Sleeping Giant — get the traditional staid Western middle-class to sit up and take action. Regrettably, for them, traditional Western middle-class culture, certainly its mores, is nearly a spent force. So time is of the essence. As I said, a callous but not inane creed.”

Ann and Mason exchange droll smiles. Said Ann, patting Mason’s knee, “Never thought of you as a Templar.”

Said Mason, “Way too anxious. Most days.”

Pete and Bruno looked at one another. Mason added, more earnestly, “Paul’s death changed some things...some of Ann’s courage has rubbed off.”

He and Ann shared kindred smiles.

Again Ann turned to Bruno. “So this Thule group has been under investigation for some time?”

“On and off, yes, depending on the department’s priorities. It has always been a tactful, prudent undertaking. Mainly by secret NSA code breakers. We don’t yet know to what extent Gebara’s proxies have influenced select members of government. It’s a consequential guessing game — ‘ducks and drakes’. You’ve both been a great help. Please be assured, you’re under no pressure here. We will readily understand if you want out now — both of you. As you know, Mason has a ubiquitous sitter these days. To keep an eye out for hired pit bulls. Not quite the match of Freddie, but near enough.”

Ann and Mason exchanged glances. Said Ann, “You know my interest — to follow up on the rank stuff Ryan traded in, which Gebara likely had a hand in. I can hardly leave off now — on the eve of an Armageddon.”

Again she looked at Mason. “Mason’s been a brick.”

Mason smiled. Looking at Ann he softly said, “*Cherchez la femme.*”

A pervasive quiet amusement ensued before Bruno continued.

“I think the next step is to sort out what Gebara hopes to accomplish with this ‘revised’ film of his. He’s obviously striving to nix all rumour of an earlier production. The funding for the aborted film likely came from an offshore source, where a backer is hard to trace. Both Pete and I think he’s planning something outstanding, even memorable with this much-touted revived production — to obliterate all evidence of the earlier gamy work by hoping its feminist tone will stymie any adpy still suspecting an earlier, similar but slummy film. We do know Gebara’s spent a lot of money on some very lavish sets. Whatever he has in mind, the advertising is exceptional and idiosyncratic for him. He’s never plugged a film this way. Indeed, he’s kept to the boonies for the most part. ‘Tastier free range chicks,’ a gossip columnist once said about him. Pete and I suggest you audition for the part, Ann. Your impression of the script, the film’s talent and

production values, will help flesh out our understanding of it. Whether it's a stand alone project or something else.

THIRTY-FOUR

When the four gathered for an update four days later, following Ann's audition, the weather had changed. A dry wind stirred up whirls of debris outside the fire station that Bruno's Pad overlooked. The street itself was empty. Following a few remarks about the weather — bi-polar disorder being one — they tucked into the coffee and pastries, this time Randy's Apple Fritter Donuts. Said a mindful Ann, "So very good. Given the name. We sometimes called Ryan, 'Randy'."

Mason smiled. "Dirk's word too, whenever he condescended to address us, now that I think of it." He eyed his donut. "I'm reminded that 'stressed' spelled backwards is 'desserts'."

Pete joined in after a savoured swallow "Do recall the important line in The Declaration of Independence: Life, Liberty...and the Pursuit of Country Fare." Receiving the amused response he anticipated, he added, "Not so much in California these days. You all know it became a state in 1850. Few folk had money then or electricity; most folks spoke Spanish and there were a lot of gunfights in the streets. Nothing's changed much. Except that women had real boobs then and men didn't hold hands."

Ready self-conscious laughter. Said Ann, "I doubt there were as many guns then either."

Quietly Mason added, "Well, they couldn't print their own. Progress."

This rounded out the amusement.

The film script itself, in Ann's estimation, proved to be a PC winner — a whimsical parody of the voluptuous legend of Salomé!

"Both Herodias and Salomé are quintessentially modern feminists with luxurious contempt for a furtive sin hound like Wilde's Herod and scolds like Jokanaan. If Salomé occasionally taunts her Tetrarch step-father, it is super-numerary to her main fun game — fondly reminding him of the curse Jokanaan, John the Baptist, has placed on him for marrying his brother's wife! A curse that is causing Herod nightmares. In one scene she says of Jokanaan, to Herod, 'He smells to high heaven, he's full of sores, so the curse *must* be infectious, poisonous; some hideous disease awaits you. None of your augurs have the courage to tell you.' In the current script Herodias is seen conferring with Salomé several times, but has few declamatory lines of her own — mainly ironic comments and stylish moues about Herod's dismaying quandary — as both ruler and husband — and Jokanaan's boorishness. The proposed costumes are sumptuous." Said Ann, in conclusion, "If they actually stick to the script, it could be an interesting lampoon."

Mason softly joined in. "'Cleanliness' being the next big thing." Ann dryly smiled at him. Bruno added a new advisement.

"Freddie thinks the production team is pulling out all the stops. With this astute showcasing of women's smarts. It's obvious Gebara is diligently masking, expunging any residue of an

earlier film. Hence, we're anticipating something dire — for we doubt Gebara would want this film entertaining, patronizing hallowed left-wing audiences for long! Pete and I have discussed the matter, and anticipate something seismic — like an unlucky innocent gas explosion which destroys both studio and film, about the time of its release. It's advertising by then extensive. We really can't see Gebara giving this film wings. You'd best bow out now, Ann. Your leaving will better flesh out what Gebara actually intends with this film."

If Ann was shocked, bemused she did seem relieved. Mason gave thanks to an in-tervening Providence.

Well, as Fate sometimes does, It suddenly intervened here with a seismic shock — a devastating explosion by a presumed suicide bomber in a shopping mall parking lot, very near the sound stage where Ann auditioned for the role of Herodias, and where a film crew was preparing to film an early scene. The explosion put the film in limbo. At first estimate eleven people were killed in the mall parking lot and at least two others near a side entrance. Three of the film crew were injured and taken to emergency where one ended up in intensive care. Two others suffered severe concussions. The final tally of injured and dead could take several days. It was a large mall spread over several acres. At first no one could figure out what happened. Was there a specific target — was the timing off? One media outlet somberly noted the proximity of a country fair and beauty pageant that had been scheduled to take place in a nearby park later that day.

In the course of the investigation, two witnesses, both looking for parking stalls in the mall's outdoor parking lot that day, came forward to say they saw a young scruffy man accost two ladies, each with a young child — very near the area they believed to be the epicenter of the explosion. These witnesses had left the shopping mall just before the explosion occurred and were not injured. It was when they saw the bomb crater on the evening news — in a section of roadway where they had seen the man and the two women — that they felt obliged to go to the police with their observations. At first their testimony seemed incidental, extraneous. Their words were duly recorded though. Both agreed that one of the women seen with the man, had packed her groceries and purchases into her Dodge Caravan but not closed the rear door. They noted this because it was a very busy day and even the outdoor parking lot was full. Several cars moved through the aisles looking for leaving vehicles. The witnesses said they had driven by the two women earlier and wondered why the one who had finished her shopping did not move her van. "She continued to yak away with a friend without apparent concern for searching drivers," the one witness remarked, adding, "On that one pass we saw this man get out of his car — very near the epicenter we think — presumably to ask if the one woman was leaving. He may have been insulting — may have — for both women ignored him. He returned to his car and we moved off and really thought no more about it. Eventually we found a parking stall on the far side of the mall. Luckily we'd left the mall when the explosion went off."

The witnesses' commentary, despite its dubious utility, was tabled but not revisited until a day later when a video tape made in real time was discovered on a little known blog site

which aired vignettes by incensed, accusatory individuals. The FBI had been monitoring the impassioned grievances and chilling testimonials on the site, each vignette fulsome in its rebuke of Western convention and tradition. The video recording caught the attention of a regular monitor because of its shopping mall vista — the very mall where the explosion took place! It was taped mid-day and had been made by a camcorder mounted on the dashboard of a car — the likely position. The voice in it was unknown at first, as was the brief image of the driver himself when he got out to approach two women in the parking lot. The tracker notified his supervisor who knew Bruno, making Bruno the first in his department to watch and listen to the exceptional video and identify the driver. On Bruno's entreaty, the sponsor of the site promptly shut it down, but not before a select audience may have seen and heard it. The debate to publicly air parts of the video would be ongoing, with no decision in sight. Bruno played it in its entirety for Pete, Ann and Mason. "Your association with the perpetrator is deemed germane. You will be questioned about it by a team from the department. They agreed you should hear and see it first, unedited. It would be but another example of road rage — here parking lot rage — if the explosive package were not so well devised and pervasively destructive."

Ann and Mason watched the tape in a solemn silence. The voice that eventually emerged, Mason was all too familiar with, though here it seemed more eerily deadpan than remembered. Ann would agree with that assessment.

The tape began with a parking lot vista, what one might indeed see via a camcorder set on a car's dashboard, while driving about a crowded parking lot, one of many vehicles trying to find a parking stall. The car stopped near a van filled with groceries, the rear hatch up. Two women were talking to one another near the van's rear. Two young children played about the van. One woman leaned on an empty shopping cart. A pause of several seconds ensued. The car then moved off, heading up and down several aisles before returning to the spot where the two women are conversing. The driver, a thinly bearded caucasian, is seen exiting his car and approaching the women. He says something but is ignored. It appears one woman responds to his query but in an offhand manner. The driver returns to his car and after a further reconnoiter of the aisles returns and stops before the two women who continue to jovially converse with one another.

It is then a modulated soundtrack voice kicks in.

"...I ask them...not unreasonably...Is the conversation going on for another half hour?" The one says 'probably' and ignores me. Probably. The word of another pissy she. Probably...probably. Such sweet contempt — you're a man after all, a pushy undeserving white man. Not worth considering, even acknowledging. The war has been declared didn't you know, ducky. Death to all white boys. A late discovery — this go-go allergy. Another of the late scabbies. So — bugger off dickie. Probably...probably. So...no time, no opportunity to park here and join the busy shoppers...no time to eat a last supper, then head off to the pretty pretty park and the silly silly show off pretties...these two dreamboats will do well enough. A surrogate beauty pageant...for a knowing witness."

The car, as evidenced from the mall's entrance security cameras, had driven by the entrance at least twice before veering back into the lane it came from, to stop again before the two women on the distant outside roadway. The phantom voice in the tape was then ghoulishly

limp, fading at last to a mere whisper. Bruno interjected to suggest the driver may not have been aware that the beauty pageant was cancelled, given his late surrogate comment about ‘silly show off pretties’...as the eerie voice resumed, the tape being transmitted in real time to the specified internet site.

...you're a man...a lucky batty cracker after all...born rapist, plunderer, defiler of innocents...you owe it to yourself to drop dead and rid the world of a roach...so the babe jurist once said, is saying, in so many words... lucky you got as far as you did. Lucky you. Lucky you. The war is heating up. Better believe it Santa Baby. Allāhu Akbar!

Seconds later a soundless deafening void.

The four witnesses to the tape remained silent for some time. Bruno was the first to speak.

“You know the voice I presume, and the person who earlier approached the two women. Allāhu Akbar was the last expression to reach the blog site.”

Both Mason and Ann silently nodded. For Mason the brief flare of anger in the voice masked its subsequent chilling apathy despite the morbid invective — which daunted, chilled. No feeling, no apparent vexation, the voice finally of a ‘bot’, despite its surprising articulation of the day’s topical contumely. Was he surprised a parking lot slight could trigger such stark vengeance? Not really. It just changed the venue somewhat — eschewing the park vista and the much touted beauty pageant. Gruesome Ryan was a very confused soul, coveting a mastery and deference that would ever elude and importune him — Mason’s late estimation. This desperate heartless act made him reconsider the old debate: the extent to which we’re marked at birth, the endowment that deals, brokers with circumstance, allows some to cope, others less so, sully the notions of equality and justice. He knew many people considered that idea a heresy, and he was stoic or craven enough to keep it to himself. But the prospect would not leave him. If there was a cause for everything, which he tended to believe, like today, we are all fated. Luck and happenstance both stem from and initiate actions. Even solicitude itself, without a sturdy culture to recognize and acknowledge it, can be a patronizing provocation. *You really thought, imagined, we wanted you here?...*

Ann finally spoke, still fighting back tears.

“Our exemplary ISIS protégé...! I can’t help wondering what Herodias might have said. Given the chance.”

Mason quietly soulfully smiled.

Without looking up Bruno said. “Matters are sorting themselves out. Given the proximity of the film studio to the blast, the devastation of some sets, equipment and crew members, the film is now in limbo. Gebara will never convene or sanction a replacement. Another ‘melt down’ too risky. Indeed, he’s left for the Bahamas. If the film is ever revived it won’t be under his auspices. And the environs it would play in unknowable today.”

With some chagrin Ann continued, “Still, I can’t help wondering where all this, this PC dogma guys like Gebara use as provocation-recruitment fodder, is going to end up. This may

sound a little morose, extraneous, but I've been thinking these last few days of the late Eighteenth Century notion of 'Forlorn Hope' — for those soldiers who were the first into the breach of a fortification in an ongoing assault — the ones almost certainly to be killed. I just watched a historic film recently...that told of that selfless heroism, and the cherished accomplished past that motivated, inspired it. That stiff upper lip. Which gets very poor reviews today. *For in spite of all temptations, To belong to other nations...He remains an Englishman...* where your neighbour was not a likely assailant or assassin." Lamely smiling she added, "Sorry, a bit stranded these days. A lot of things flood in. Like where was the example that would censure self-pride in accomplishment, or doing the *right* thing — at that time! Is Providence itself now a racist notion? Accomplishment a fluke? The 'value of effort' jingoist intimidation?"

Said Bruno, smiling, "We listen. Always."

Pete added, "Always."

Mason wondered if Ann Green was beginning to feel the day's reproof of pro-vidential talent and circumstance. Including her own, perhaps. If he remained flattered that he might be considered her current paramour, and useful to such a team as Voss and Bruno headed, he sensed he lived in the Last Days, that the 'breach' Ann spoke of yawned before them all. While his muse, the ineffable Deirdre, remained comatose.

Their shared poetess silent, stilled...his own being a dated curio. So it seemed.

PART FOUR

We live, as we dream — alone.

Joseph Conrad

THIRTY-FIVE

The death of Deirdre Corr came not so much as a shock as the imposition of a life sentence. The treasured muse, his trobairitz, had left just as his hearing was failing. For tristful Mason her loss seemed irreparable. The death of *his* wondrous diva largely unnoticed in the ongoing rebuke of past, once honoured, tradition. Perhaps Dirk was right: melancholy is the stolid classicist's legacy.

He'd been in touch with a head nurse at the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in Belfast, Deirdre's last abode. She died from something called autonomic dysreflexia — brought on by a serious fall and concussion that precipitated a stroke. Earlier she suffered a bout of pneumonia that left her in a frail state for several days. *Several days.* He also learned her mother, Mrs. Healy-Corr, had died a fortnight before her daughter. Several times he had thought of visiting his muse, but the sobering reality of her ghost-aphasia state stayed him — the cowardliness he sojourned. He

would remember her as he heard her in the Nefer Club. That memory had not yet dimmed. Not yet.

These immutable thoughts replayed themselves on his way to see his own mother.

He found her asleep and was on the point of leaving off his visit when she opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Oh good,” she said, sitting up and replacing a stray lock of hair.

The lounge they sought at the end of her hallway was bright with warming sun and a regnant lily gracing a glass flute on an end table. She was more frail than he remembered yet enthused to see him. He helped her into one of two apple green arm chairs there and fitted her cane to the rear of its arm rest.

She was very happy to learn that Ann had landed the role of the lead female actor in Philip Noyce’s new film. “I trust you’ll join her in due course.” He smiled, nodded. On earlier visits he had read the letters Ann Green — his ineffable Tara, sent him — except the last. His mother’s speech was somewhat garbled this day, yet he managed to get the drift. She had suffered a stroke a month ago but seemed to be improving. Marianna was expected within the hour. “Two plusses in the same day,” she said with some clarity.

What was he doing then?... He did his best to explain that the work was steady but routine — some ad work and annual reports. Not much creative effort, beside soothing pressed art directors — about his speed then. He still bid on some jobs south of the border and of late one in Europe. His agent remained active. Hélène didn’t ask about the book. The publisher had balked in the end; there weren’t enough anonymous pictures; the destitute ought not to be plainly pictured, possibly recognized in that era. Like his mother’s health, his hope and luck had abated. He smiled, kissed and hugged her, said he’d be round the next day then left, saying hello to the newly arrived Marianna as he exited the pavilion. “She’s in a good mood today. Keenly looking forward to your coming.”

Said Marianna, “She’s become a dear friend...there’s no resident I enjoy visiting more.”

In his car Mason debated going to his secret park. He savoured the diversions available then. As promised, he had a security tail watching over him this side of the 49th, a legacy of his truck with jihadi recruiters. Some time ago Bruno freed him from the worry of any further Vancouver police scrutiny — the earlier chapter — but would not expand. Mason’s suspicion of an ‘irregular’ cop had never really lapsed. Bruno had said, with his trademark resolution, ‘Forget about it.’

The study of Gebara was ongoing and urgent though. He helped out where he could — usually by identifying other persons Ryan may have consorted with.

He and Pete exchanged a few e-mails. But the day’s disgruntled factions were becoming so diverse and flagrant that studying their tactics, deeds and manifestos required teams of assayers. Mason’s limited association with Ryan and Dirk was soon mined of all useful details. Eventually Pete concluded Mason was sufficiently unknown, out-of-the-way and anomalous to be free of Islamic menace, and the watcher left.

He and Tara visited Deirdre’s grave in Milltown Cemetery in Northern Ireland. Kyrna, her mother, was buried in the Belfast City Cemetery — God’s Acre for the IRA, its partisans and

sympathizers. They weren't able to trace the father. Step sister Tara was the only known living relative.

With the help of the remaining band members, they arranged for a Parian marble headstone. Minimalist, elegant and rare. Many larger monuments further up the cemetery pathway loomed against an overcast sky the day they visited. Aspen and Birch leaves littered the grass and walkways. Deirdre's band members were then playing in a band in Germany — backing up some pop singers including the remarkable Helene Fischer in one special. “Doing okay,” one said in

a late e-mail to Tara.

She and Mason stood silent for a time before the simple seemingly plaque. Several times Tara wiped back tears. Mason left his unattended.

Tara was the first to speak. “What especially smarts is she never met you.”

Mason smiled. “She did actually.”

This comment brightened the mood a bit. “Oh, yes, that — the pic you stole during a performance. Not a great consolation.”

“She was actually was the reason I was allowed to stay; she got after the manager.”

“You didn't tell me that.”

Mason barely nodded. “She did smile at me. A look I didn't capture.”

Tara briefly, fondly looked at him, then knelt and placed the spray of Hardenbergia — Happy Wanderer — by the headstone that was engraved only with Deirdre's name and ‘Our Peerless Nightingale’ — a favour to Mason. *Peerless* indeed. Mason had sought and found a white winter rose that resembled one he once saw on the cairn in his secret park. This winter rose he slowly solemnly placed atop the plaque.

They didn't stay long, partly due to the somber blustery weather he thought. In the hotel they ate a largely silent supper and for the first time did not think of making love when they retired. Seeing the grave had somehow broken the link between them. It seemed inadvertent, almost callous to carry on. Then. They parted the next day. She to Australia, he to Vancouver.

She sent several letters from Australia. She never mentioned Gebara, Ryan Dyck or Dirk Church again. The land itself served as a distraction. The letters were in essence wonderful travelogues, what you would send to an esteemed friend, not a lover. A late CD of some folk songs, including some Irish ballads, also arrived — a CD he had but never let on. The CD included the Kazakh folk song about a butterfly lover he treasured, indeed, all but worshipped. He thanked her for the CD, too profusely he thought later.

The CD, however, wasn't mentioned in her last letter.

Dearest Mason,

I must write this. I've met someone. He is an investor in Philip's film. He's a marine architect. A great sailor. He lives a life I've only imagined until now. He works with a foundation to preserve the Great Barrier Reef. We're out in it, sharing its awesome wonders almost daily. It is a dizzying world. I've described it to you often enough I think. The creatures are ineffable — to use a word you like. His name is Saul Ellerman. He owns a

home near Airlie Beach. We plan to marry once the film is finished. I'll tell you more about the film when I've seen it whole. It's a sequel to Rabbit-Proof Fence. Indigenous spelled with a capital 'I', as you've noted.

Resent me if you must, but don't hate me. That would be unbearable. Please find it in your heart to understand. You helped set the peer standard! I hope to see you again, sooner than later. Wish me well... Lasting affection and gratitude, Tara

He was not altogether surprised, the anticipated disappointment something he had tucked away, knowing he likely lived on borrowed time with her. But for Deirdre, she may never have taken him on.

He went for a walk to nurse his wounds, slowly strolling by the newly leafed and blossomed trees in the streets of his favourite White Rock neighbourhood. Spring had come, with its vivid insurgent tints. Indeed, he stood before the entrance to his special park as one rawly amazed by the pageant springtime showcased. The crocuses and young daffodils were pristine, the tulips just offstage, the ground covers dewy and vibrant. His favourite cairn at the foot of the mighty Douglas Fir lay alive in a shaft of sunlight. Someone had cleaned off the dull musk of winter. As he approached he was further astonished to see a small fresh Mayflower sprig propped beside it...the mysterious communicant lived still and had been there in his absence! Would he ever meet this expressive friend of Elam Smith? Could he bear it? He sat on a bench a short distance off and marvelled at an acrobatic flitting Bluejay that suddenly alighted atop the grand magnolia, whose new tiny stars were gathering in their cosmic nursery. However chimerical this interlude, he knew he shared the space with a kind, alert and articulate human, and that certainty seemed to reveal the clear blue sky through the mighty laden branches of the Douglas Fir.