

ELSEWHERE
A NOVEL

J.S. CHILDS



ELSEWHERE

By J. S. Childs

Chapter One

Albert Vaughan was 47, too young, he thought, to be a widower.

He was too young to feel the pang of expired curiosity, but he was too old to explore some new realm of knowledge. He was too young for his paths to have dwindled to a single narrow track. But he was old enough that he'd lost the sense that he walked some path distinctly his own. What was worse, he worried that no path had *ever* been his. Instead, it seemed to him that his life had only a pattern—solitary to wedded man to widower to solitary. He lived in particular dread of the time when people might start matchmaking.

He was, in short, middle-aged.

But he was also a historian, and like smoking or heroin addiction, academic research is implacably habitual. Vaughan plodded to the university library each afternoon, made his way to his carrel in the stacks, and read, book after book, letter upon letter, record unto record. Once, in happy youth, this process occasionally led him to feel the actual presence of a day in some past year, the way light fell in its gardens, the odor of its city markets, the exact clatter in its streets. It was as though these impressions sprang from a kind of childhood—in the way that childhood memories lie dry and inert, like colors in an old paint box, and then one day something moistens them and they brighten and spread and suffuse across the sheet of dreams or waking life.

In the fourth-floor stacks (“History—World, Eur, Amer”), dust danced in boxed planes of light shed by the windows that capped each glass-floored aisle of books—tightly pressed russet, rusty brown, faded orange spines—books the color of a miniature autumn hillside. He rested amid the consoling scent of glue and binding thread, dusty ink and cover boards, ancient wood pulp.

Sometimes Vaughan heard another reader rustling pages in the stacks below or could see a blocky form through the bottle-glass floor, looking as though it were swimming in a lime-green pool. Somewhere in the distance, a book fell to the floor: Perhaps someone had dropped it, or perhaps it had dropped by itself, like a leaf in late November.

If someone walked by—a student, another teacher, or even an unlikely administrator—this was a good place to be, working at his humble formica-topped carrel, with his stacks of autumn-colored books, their pages paper-clipped, little yellow tags fluttering out of them, marking references. To be sure, not all of these books were immediately related to what everyone vaguely imagined his research to be. Some books *did* treat this subject, but the paper clips marking their pages had permanently embossed the paper and the stick-em on the yellow tags had dried. Mixed among them was a volume of Piranesi drawings and a second-grade reader printed about the time Vaughan was in second grade.

He looked out the window onto the campus and thought, inevitably, about about Julia. A single cloud, moving from left to right, travelled slowly across the sky. Rain began to spatter

against the glass, the sidewalks crossing the campus lawn darkened slowly like dampened blotters, and the sycamores bordering the walks shook off some of their remaining leaves.

If he could be with Julia wherever she was, he might escape out of the cavity that seemed to be spreading throughout his life.

Vaughan's sister, who was a psychotherapist with long practice in misreading his behavior, said that she understood his grief. She sympathized. But she said it was time to "finalize" Julia's death. Maybe they could make up a personal ritual, she suggested. Vaughan's sister felt that modern life was strongly lacking in rituals. Vaughan tried to explain that a mistake had been made, and the only useful ritual he could think of would be one that would remedy the mistake—the one that had begun with the phone call on a summer morning two years ago.

The colonial time-temp sign at the bank they passed said nine-fifteen. He was thinking about how July mornings have a tendency to trick you, to make you believe that the creation of the world had just happened, complete with Early American-style bank buildings and yew hedges and dew-moistened asphalt.

Sunlight gripped the landscape, buttery sunshine clenching grass and clamping fences. It clung in blurs, like small lemony monkeys, among the florid maples. To make matters worse, a zephyr blew.

Vaughan watched the suburban lawns slip by the car window. How much space they took up! They flowed from street to street, expanding around houses and public buildings, fanning out in parks, making neat lozenges amid public gardens—imperishable, antique as bristlecone pines. Long, dark-blue shadows fell on the lawns, and these were interspersed with yellow tints, blue and aquamarine tints, that signified, he supposed, different kinds of grass, different species.

Vaughan and the police officers drove round the medical center's main building to an immense lawn. The lawn was dotted with body bags like yellow chrysalises. Rescue workers had laid the bags neatly in parallel rows in a kind of aboveground cemetery. Some of the bags were strangely flat, while the contents of others seemed to have slid to one end of their slicker-colored cocoons.

Vaughan braced himself for bedlam inside the hospital. He imagined bloody bandages piled in the corridors, blanched survivors, angrily harried medical personnel. But the corridors were quiet. A candy-striper pushed a breakfast cart down the hall. The two police officers behaved like a capable young married couple coping with aged relatives. They took him into a sort of lounge and sat him down at a table. All around at other tables other possibly-grieving next of kin sat staring at jigsaw puzzles and backgammon sets.

The policewoman sat with him while the policeman went up to a counter. On the table between Vaughan and the woman officer a chessboard was set up, ready for a game. They sat silently staring at the table top as though they were pondering their first moves. After a while, he turned his futile gaze to the policewoman's name tag.

"Gallardi," he read.

"My first name's Stacy. My husband's Italian."

Vaughan glanced at the policeman, who was now looking at something written on a scroll-like computer read-out.

"My partner's Jason." She smiled. "He's not my husband."

Vaughan couldn't return her smile, but only because he was paralyzed by overwhelming nausea; his body refused to pay attention to anything else but itself and its

misery. And rather than any heart-pang, some delicate wring of his emotions, Vaughan felt he had some bad internal injury, with internal bleeding.

Jason returned. He looked meaningfully at his partner, his professional wife, before he spoke to Vaughan.

"They were able to make a fairly positive identification . . . The body is intact." He shifted his earnest glare to Vaughan.

He wants me to ask questions, Vaughan thought. But he knew questions were unnecessary: everything he wanted to know would be told to him without his asking. He could be entirely passive now. He could ask questions or not, as the mood struck him. It didn't matter.

Realizing that Vaughan wasn't going to question him, Jason decided to supply information on his own. "There was one small entry wound." Jason blushed. Maybe this was not how he should have begun. But now he was committed. "It was the one that killed her."

"It was an enormous explosion," Stacy said wonderingly. "People were killed a block away by flying glass." As husbands often are, Jason was clearly miffed by this womanly statement of the obvious.

"Is that what happened to Julia?"

"Or something like that. It wasn't a very large object, but it was travelling at high velocity, like a bullet." Jason paused to see what effect this might have on Vaughan, to determine what sort of victim he was dealing with before going on. But Vaughan looked all right to him, just a little green around the gills. "It entered here," and he touched the base of Stacy's skull. Stacy turned the back of her head obligingly toward Vaughan so that he could see exactly what Jason was talking about.

Momentarily Vaughan saw an image of Julia walking through the slow flicker of motion picture frames. She was wearing the pleated navy blue skirt she'd put on that morning, the white linen blouse. Before he could halt the progress of the film, he saw her invisibly struck from behind. Her head bowed, she crumpled to the street. The film stopped.

"Was she . . . ?"

"Death was instantaneous," said Jason. He gazed silently and sympathetically at Vaughan. Then he said, "Identification will be simple in your case. Lots of other people won't be so lucky."

Vaughan was baffled. What identification? Maybe the police needed his papers to confirm that he had a role in a major news event. Was he lucky because he could produce identification?

"My identification . . ." he began indefinitely.

"No, Mr. Vaughan, not *yours*. Your wife. You can identify your wife whenever you're ready."

His heart flipped like a salmon—then they did not positively know that the body zipped up in the yellow sleeping bag was Julia's. They might be mistaken, in fact they *had* to be mistaken. Why would Julia be near a government building at all? He was eager to view the body now, and he saw himself saying, as they folded back the plastic from the unknown dead woman's face, "That's not my wife! That's not Julia!"

The cadavers inside the hospital were different from those distributed on the lawn: The bodies inside were more or less whole, and they were covered with thick sheets like sailcloth. They lay in serried rows on brushed-steel gurneys in the hospital's subbasement. The air down there was autumnal, crisp and cool, and it smelled like a brand of licorice chewing gum popular in Vaughan's childhood.

Their little group was augmented by another technician of disaster, a hospital official in a heavily ironed white jacket apparently made out of the same sailcloth that covered the corpses.

He carried a folder which he consulted as they trailed behind him down the rows, past the invisible feet of the dead, checking the numbers hastily written in Magic Marker on cardboard taped to the gurneys.

They stopped at the end of a row, out of the fluorescent glare cast over the bodies. The bureaucrat carefully checked the number of the gurney against the figures on his sheet, and when he was satisfied, he delicately drew down this particular body's shroud to reveal the face and neck and a small patch where dull white skin was drawn tightly over the breastbone, to which were joined the twin points of a woman's graceful clavicle.

"Is this your wife, Dr. Vaughan?" asked the man with the clipboard.

Vaughan traced the collarbone with his fingertips, as though touching her was the only way he could confirm her identity. Her skin was cold, but then in these catacombs so was he. Her face was composed, but not in the commonplace serenity of death. It was as if she'd momentarily shut her eyes to concentrate. In the instant before awareness forever closed down, she'd closed her eyes to puzzle out the meaning of this sensation at the base of her skull and the anesthesia sweeping through her body.

"She never knew what hit her," Stacy said.

Jason repeated the technician's question. "Is this your wife, Dr. Vaughan?"

"No, this isn't my wife," Vaughan answered. No one said anything. They were embarrassed. As civilized people, they were waiting, Vaughan knew, for him to return to himself, to begin behaving in the rational manner of which they knew he was capable. At last, watching their patient, pitying faces, he gave in.

"Yes," he said, "that is my wife." And it was Julia, lying there on the hard, chilly—he hesitated—they called it a "slab," he remembered. He needed to warm her, to slip a cushion behind her head. But he had to give that up as well, the impulse to comfort her. Because she lay insensate to cold or rigidity, having entered the realm where there was no heat or pliancy or lover's consideration. He suddenly felt like a man trying to keep a foundering lifeboat afloat long enough to reach land, who once he's begun heaving his possessions overboard, knows that he may not stop until every last thing is gone.

He saw with stark prescience what he would become. He would not-so-gradually turn into . . . a kind of mirror. Maybe better, a window. And people would see him as they see windows: They're there all right, but only so you can look through them.

"I want my wife's body released," he said.

"It will be," said the hospital bureaucrat. "You'll need to let us know what funeral home you've selected."

"I'd rather take her now."

It was terribly urgent to bear Julia's body away from all those other poor, shattered bodies. Julia wasn't like the others, the corpses. The shoulders and neck demurely exposed by the plastic decolletage were still Julia's. Her dark hair curled against her cheek exactly as it always had. They were not body parts of a dead person.

"There isn't any way to get her . . . wherever you wanted to take her, Dr. Vaughan."

Yes, that was true. Why hadn't he thought of that?

Jason and Stacy led him out of the hospital, away from the hundreds of bodies, away from Julia's, whom he never saw again. The ordinary gang of health bureaucrats and paid ghouls delivered her to the grave. He could not now remember the accompanying rituals.

As the months passed, Vaughan began to understand that Julia's death was a mistake, and because it was a mistake it should have been in some degree remediable. For this reason Vaughan had done none of the sweeping-away-and-putting-out-of-sight that he should have done after Julia's death. He hadn't taken her underclothes and sweaters from her drawers,

boxed them up, given them away. The clothes in the laundry hamper overflowed onto the floor because he was unprepared to wash a load of Julia's laundry, as though cleaning her jeans and blouses would have finally rinsed her from life. He could not put out of sight her tennis racket, her briefcase, her jewelry. He did not open her mail but left it waiting for her in an overflowing wicker basket.

He could have done without dreams, the one form in which Julia did haunt him. The dreams had a limited, faintly domestic repertory. Vaughan and Julia lay in bed. Night fall or dawn was breaking. A lawn sprinkler had been left on, and Julia rising naked and lovely, went outside to turn it off and wound up talking to the paperboy and the milkman in the twilight. Or other times they drove along cardboard expressways, where phony scrimms painted with cartoonish scenery rolled past while they discussed having a child. They kept missing their exit.

Once in a while, he dreamed they were on a beach at noon in July. The other beach-goers were mothers and small children, and he could hear their soprano swooping calls and yelps over the counterbass of the surf. First Julia stood at the water's edge, looking down at her feet, gripping the packed sand with her toes, one of her beach pleasures. Then quite suddenly she looked up, as though she'd heard something—a cry perhaps—out beyond the surf. Watching her, Vaughan knew she would plunge into the waves, and he knew that beyond the waves was some other region where the ocean was flat and hot and wrong, but Julia, doing the effortless crawl of a competitive swimmer, swam quickly out of sight past the waves.

Still swimming, she spoke to Vaughan, and despite the distance and the racket produced by the surf, birds, children, and wind, he could hear her calling back to him.

"Come back in," he shouted. "I can't hear you."

"You're the one," she called, hardly raising her voice. "You're the one who's a ghost."

* * *

He looked down at the book open on the desktop, a collection of ghost stories propped up by a few more sober volumes from obscure academic presses, detailing various weak-minded investigations into haunted houses.

A thought occurred to him. He could go have a drink. His heart leapt.

He went to a bar at the edge of the campus: not the sort of place students went to, or faculty, or anyone at all from the university except perhaps the men who fixed the boilers. As any drinker could instantly see, it was a maintenance bar—much-frequented all day long by working people who needed one or two drinks at 10 a.m., at noon after driving a morning route, at midafternoon to ensure they'd make the last stretch till quitting time. It was a serious place, a place with a clear purpose.

He had two quick drinks and slowly drank a third. Pausing then he glanced through the plate glass window at the front of the bar.

The window was grimy, and the bar was lit by large fluorescent fixtures hanging from the high stamped-tin ceiling so that any passerby could see any drinker within. Vaughan remembered the taverns of his youth in an old industrial city, the ones his father went to, with their windows painted in matte black and chipped gilt. Daylight entered in a round shaft from a tiny porthole in the door, as though the drinkers were in a bathysphere that smelled of hops and sour mash. Perhaps none of this bar's patrons cared whether anyone saw them inside, and, come to that, no one walking by outside ever looked in.

At least he didn't think they did. It was hard to tell given the fluorescent glare off the inside of the smudged window. The rain was probably letting up. He looked at the old Regulator clock hung high above the mirror behind the bar. It was still mid-afternoon.

Vaughan finished his drink, buttoned his raincoat, and went outdoors. Although the sky remained overcast, the uniform shell of cloud had lifted from the rooftops. The heavens were a lighter gray, remoter, and the cold gusts had subsided to fitful chilly drafts puffing along the ground. Vaughan felt not exactly unburdened, but momentarily wound down, less uneasy, and most important, less thoughtful. Julia was certainly not absent from the panorama of acceptable things, but neither did she imbue all of them.

He came to a local art gallery and looked in the well-washed window. Some sort of exhibition was going on. He could see an impromptu bar set up at the rear of the gallery and, oddly, what looked like a second, smaller room set up in the middle of the floor. He saw a few university people he knew standing around chatting and drinking. He decided to go in and cadge a drink.

He stopped as he passed the room-within-a-room and read the placard set next to its tiny door. The placard said, "Ghost Chamber," followed by a date and a name, "Arpad Snug." Ghosts. He couldn't help himself. He had to go in.

The Chamber was a thirty-by-ten-foot room, darkened, with a dozen or so videos projected along the walls. Each video was simply a two-minute tape of an ordinary person. The taped people didn't do much except step forward, toward the viewer. Vaughan wondered if they'd been chosen to represent someone's ideal human cross-section: old people, middle-aged people, young people, male and female, different races.

He also wondered if the artist had had some specific psychological effect in mind. Dread? Uncanniness? Some sort of faint solace? He watched the flickering jumble of colored patches advance and recede. In one way, they were all alike: As each stepped forward, the ghost uncertainly traced the outline of a gesture that almost instantly left off — a lifted arm suggesting greeting or admonition, the slow flick of a wrist hinting at dismissal, or not even that much, the commencement of movement.

The spectres seemed to be making some sort of obscure appeal as they approached, only so far, and then were forced back into the loop of endlessly repeated, insubstantial half-beckonings.

He decided they looked like ghosts *should* look. Being alone with them was comforting. He could imagine he was one of them, sliding gently into a videotaped netherworld.

The netherworld. Where Julia was. Not that any of the ghosts particularly reminded him of her—even in their Family of Man variety, none of them was a forty-one-year-old white woman.

Afterlives, ghosts. People like him no longer even found them laughable. They were irrelevant. When he'd thought of ghosts at all, he remembered wearing a sheet over his head when he was six or seven, the damp linen around his mouth and nose, how cold he was in the late October frost with only a sheet for covering. He could not recall ever being frightened of ghosts, much less ever being interested in whether or not ghosts existed, and if they did, how they acted.

At the end of the Chamber, alone on a narrow wall, was a video of a little girl. Vaughan stood watching the girl approach and recede. Her particular sequence began with her standing still, as if gathering strength. Then she moved forward a few steps, stopped, raised her arm a little way, bent her wrist and fluttered two fingers. Again and again, she shuffled toward Vaughan and stopped and gazed at him as though the wall on which she was projected was a barrier of colored light between them.

Someone was moving around behind him. His heart skipped, the hair on the back of his neck stood stereotypically up. The Ghost Chamber made him feel a little as though he'd taken some archaic hallucinogen, henbane maybe, or belladonna. The kind of drug that smudged,

even erased, the boundary between life and death. It was easy to believe that one of the figures had detached itself from the wall. It had moved, as Julia might, from the still realm to the vital one.

But no, the person moving about the chamber was only another mortal, another tangible body whose gestures could alter with the usual misdirection of the living.

"Really very good," the intruder said. "It's not like anything I've ever seen."

Vaughan was annoyed. It seemed a discourtesy to the artist, or perhaps to the ghosts, to speak. He turned to leave, but his way was blocked by the other man, over whose bearded face fluttered a mask made of abstract patches of video.

Before the man could shift aside, they heard a noise: a single low sound, like a moan. "Did you hear that?" the man asked. Vaughan nodded. They were silent for a moment, listening. "It spoils the effect," he said.

"I don't think it has anything to do with the installation," said Vaughan, "maybe it's the air conditioning."

"Maybe so. If it's unintentional..." Vaughan had a hard time deciphering the other man's expression because it had been turned into miniature video screen. He appeared to be either smiling or grimacing. Then he said convivially, "Care for a drink before the bar closes?"

Outside the Ghost Chamber, Vaughan's eyes hurt. Even the gallery's dim track-lighting glared.

They ordered drinks at the small bar. Vaughan's new friend said, "I'm Lipsky."

"Vaughan," said Vaughan.

"You're history." This was an odd thing to say, but Vaughan was having a hard time these days knowing when people were kidding.

He smiled tentatively and said, "Oh, probably. Once you hit middle age...."

Now Lipsky looked puzzled. "Medicine?" he said encouragingly.

"Oh, I don't think there's any medicine you can take for what I've got." Lipsky continued to look mystified so Vaughan added, "I'll still be 'history,' you know. Ha ha." This conversation was becoming painful.

Evidently Lipsky now got the joke. He laughed. "I mean I'm in the *School* of Medicine. That's my faculty." He watched Vaughan brightly, as though he were someone coming out of a coma, for whom there was every chance of a normal mental life. "And you're in the history department."

"Oh. Yes...I'm a historian."

"I do research in neurology." Lipsky said. He smiled confidentially. "In a way, that installation, you could say that it artistically portrays what I do." Vaughan drank. Lipsky went on: "It has to do with the character of awareness at death . . . possibly even after death."

"The installation."

"The installation, yes, but also my research. What kind of neurological activity is going on when people die? What goes on afterwards?"

A tiny recollection fluttered in Vaughan's mind. He'd read something in the newspaper, or maybe he'd seen something on television. Nowadays it was as hard to tell where you'd picked up some specious informational bacterium. It was like trying to figure out where you caught the flu.

"You're the one doing research on . . . what do they call it on the news? . . . life after death."

"Post-mortem awareness, yes."

They finished their drinks and left the gallery. The late afternoon streets were wet. Enormous maple leaves, bigger than two human hands, plastered the sidewalk: The gravelly

smell of damp concrete, the musty late autumn breeze, the leathery leaves—they started up a memory trio, tiresome and familiar.

“Does anything go on afterwards?” Vaughan asked.

“Ah, well, that’s the point. All these after-death experiences.”

A whole aisle of the cavernous bookstore Vaughan patronized was devoted to books by people who had died and then come back to life as someone else or who had died and returned as themselves, except with a different perspective on the fundamentals. The covers of these books were often decorated with penumbras or tunnels of light. If you’d been dead, it was important to claim you’d been bathed in brilliant light, like being in a tanning booth for a very long time. Or perhaps like the experience you have as a child when you jam a flashlight against your eye socket and stare at the bulb.

“Many people find this a little macabre,” said Lipsky.

“And probably fascinating. We all want to know.”

“No,” said Lipsky slowly, “no, not many of us actually do. What are the alternatives? We find out that really there’s nothing going on once the curtain rings down. Or we find out that completely unimaginable things happen forever.”

“Or things pretty much continue on as they did in life.”

“Well, there’s that. A grim prospect, though, don’t you think?” Lipsky sighed. “Do you know what our earliest oath was? ‘First, do no harm.’” They scuffed on through the wet leaves. “You could only have oaths before there was technology.

“It’s the same with art,” Lipsky continued. “Back there, that installation, the Ghost Chamber. A few hundred years ago, people would have said those images, they *were* ghosts. And who could really deny that?”

“People have always had technology. It’s an essential characteristic of being human.”

“What I mean is that the usual variety of catastrophes that have always befallen people still befall them, but with radically different results. When these people revive, they’re definitely not the people they were before they were dead.”

“How is that?”

“They’re . . . Well, at first you think, ‘The patient is very passive, but no longer dead.’ They’re dreamy. Pleasantly detached.”

“Do they talk about how it was to return from the dead?”

“Oh yes, several of them have a lot to say about what happened—the light, of course, the warmth, the dear departed crowding round them. They resist returning to the world of the living.”

“They prefer being dead.”

“Yes, it’s too benign to be credible,” Lipsky said. “The same light, the same cast, the identical balmy warmth...It’s all too well advertised. We need a large pool of subjects, different subjects. More control.”

“But your subjects are people who by definition have died and been resuscitated. Doesn’t that limit your possibilities?”

“That’s what I’m talking about. We need volunteers.”

They passed by a small zoo owned by the university, although the university had long ago lost interest in it. The once gay architecture was old. Bars rusted, Chinese-carved cornices hung to the ground. Most of the exotic animals were gone, but the bears remained, the foxes and raccoons.

They went in through the zoo’s creaky turnstile, and walked up to the nearest set of cages. They stopped and watched an ancient brown bear shift in his sleep. Farther up the walk, a groundskeeper burned leaves where four asphalt paths intersected.

They moved on, passing another man about their age. Vaughan wondered if the zoo for some reason attracted stodgily dressed middle-aged men who liked the idea that seasons change, that buildings held in their facades traces of the lives which had been lived in them, that leafsmoke permeates one's clothes despite whatever damage it did to one's lungs.

In the porpoise tank, the porpoises swam in circles (there were three of them), half in and half out of the water, at what he assumed was a measured pace for porpoises.

"I love this zoo," Lipsky said, as they leaned against the railing looping the porpoise tank. "Although I don't usually come here at this time of day. I eat lunch here when it's sunny. There are more people around then." He mentioned this as though coming to the zoo when there were people around was a good thing, a normal thing. "But even so, there are never crowds of people, just parents and children. Or couples. From the university."

"I prefer it like this. I enjoy thinking that it's a lost zoo."

"How could it be lost?"

"Not so much lost as forgotten."

"It very nearly is forgotten. I don't imagine the university will continue funding it much longer."

The porpoises had disappeared below the dark green, roiling surface— the water looked as though it had been scooped from the North Atlantic— Vaughan couldn't understand how the small pool could have gotten so disturbed.

Lipsky sighed, a little artificially. Finally he said: "I sense something in you." This didn't seem to require a reply. "Dissatisfaction, seeking. . ."

"That doesn't need much insight. They're common symptoms of middle age."

"More pronounced in you, though. I don't have the feeling you're attached," he turned about, clenching his fist, "to . . . things in general."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sorry— my verbal skills are lousy. Which probably contributes to the reason my grants aren't getting funded."

"I thought your funding was drying up because of the shortage of appropriate subjects."

"Exactly." He paused, glanced at Vaughan, and looked away. He pounded his still-clenched against pant leg, obviously thinking hard. Then he said, "Maybe you'd like to come by the Institute. See what we're doing."

"I'm honored."

Lipsky glanced at him, trying to decide if he was being facetious. He looked away and said: "I mean it. There are ramifications of what I'm doing that . . . aren't easily understood."

"It's a difficult question. Is life cellular? Neurological? I imagine it's frustrating to pin down, scientifically."

"That's not quite what I mean. As the research developed, I began to take a different view of its scope. It's true that at first we wanted to describe a sequence of events in the body: The heart stops, then what? Yes, the brain is still active, but how *long* is it active? What's the quality of that activity?"

"That *was* hard to pin down. As you say. And then I began to wonder whether the moment of death was elusive because there was no moment of death." Lipsky paused, cocking his head as though he were listening for something "Do you want to walk around?" he asked. They headed toward the small reptile house, which they entered. Inside autumn vanished instantly, gray light was replaced by green, the brisk gusts were supplanted by still, fetid air. The atmosphere of prehistory.

"When I said we need volunteers, that wasn't entirely accurate. What's lacking is experimental design. These people we've been using weren't expecting to be dead in the first

place. Suddenly, they're dead, and they're unprepared for what happens afterwards, which whatever else it is is overwhelming." He paused. "So that's why we're more or less at a standstill. We need a trained observer...."

"I'm surprised you can't find one. Some journalist, for instance."

"Oh, it's not that simple. Somebody seeking notoriety wouldn't be of any use. Disturbed people, potential suicides – they're no good. No, this person has to be objective."

"Someone clear-sighted but available to die."

"But with every hope of being revived," Lipsky said earnestly.

They were silent for a few moments. The building's interior was circular, glass-domed, with a large swampy pool directly below. The snakes' glass cages—some lit brightly as the Mojave, some glowing mysteriously under violet light—were set in the circular walls surrounding the pool. Vaughan spotted a small crocodile partly submerged in the bark-colored water. The animal was so still that Vaughan wondered if it were dead. Who would notice? The Jurassic odor of bog, sloughed snakeskin, and methane was having an unpleasant effect on him.

"Let's go back outside," Vaughan said.

Now, at dusk, the sun at last appeared, escaping through a broad slit in the ashy overcast. Certain parts of the scene were preternaturally illuminated—the tops of the autumn trees, the broken, verdergrised weathercock of a lizard on the roof of the reptile house. These brilliantly lit objects stood out against the backdrop of roiling clouds like items in a photoshoot. The trees' coruscating russets and oranges, the sky like a finger-smear charcoal drawing, the unbearable plane of golden light—all were as they could only be on certain days late in the day, late in autumn.

Lipsky stared fixedly at Vaughan.

"But if we *could* control mortality," he said, "if we could immerse the subject in death, and then raise him back out . . ."

"Like a technological Passion."

"It's hard not to be passionate about it—It's terribly exciting research. There's nothing more crucial going on in science nowadays."

"Than to understand death."

"The body's so arrogant." Lipsky sighed. "Nothing is coordinated. Your heart may stop, but your liver and kidneys could go on for another twenty years. In fact, we transplant them, and they do! Meanwhile in death the brain struggles for dominance, just like it did in life. It can send signals days after the heart stopped."

"Surely you're confusing the issue. Doctors sign thousands of death certificates every day."

"Yes, of course, in the end death's measurable. But can you measure what comes afterwards? That's my question."

"Why does *anything* have to come afterward? Belief in an afterlife is only another groundless idea that allows people" Vaughan fell silent.

"....to go on at all," finished Lipsky.

"At the worst possible moment in your existence, you're fooled into thinking everything's going to turn out all right. Why not? At least it's more benign than the alternative."

"Still, we don't know, do we? Okay, every single human in the world has been exposed to some concept of an afterlife, but that doesn't mean we can't find someone who successfully resists that prejudice."

"Your trained observer."

"Exactly."

"Someone without illusions."

"Yes."

They had come round to the zoo's gate. In the distance a beast moaned. Vaughan and Lipsky stopped. They studied the ground at their feet. After a moment, Lipsky glanced toward the cages.

"As much as I like this place, I can't help thinking it's a bad idea keeping these animals here."

Vaughan cleared his throat.

"I want to volunteer," he said.

"Oh, I doubt there's much we can do about them," Lipsky replied, glumly.

"Do about whom?"

"They're old. What zoo would want them? Maybe the raccoons could be freed, or the foxes....but they'd never survive."

"Look, if you're not interested, just say so."

Lipsky stared at him blankly.

Vaughan continued. "I'm talking about someone clear-sighted but available to die."

"You're volunteering for my study...."

"That's right."

"Frankly, Vaughan, you caught me off guard. I'll have to think it over."

"Why? What's wrong with me?"

Lipsky apparently doubted his ability to die. Vaughan didn't often feel angry. He expected little of other people and accepted the general dominance of objects – so he was rarely provoked by people or things refusing to do what he wanted them to do. Yet now he was insulted! He was the perfect specimen, the ideal observer, the obvious choice to die. Trying to remain calm, to keep irritation out of his voice, he explained this to Lipsky, who nevertheless looked doubtful.

"You're a professional colleague. I have to consider possible consequences."

"You mean if you can't revive me – how the university authorities might take it...."

"More or less."

"In that respect, no one could be a better choice. The university's indifference to me is very nearly total."

"I have grave misgivings." Lipsky paused. "Personal ones. I have the uneasy feeling you're looking for a way out...permanently."

"It's not that."

"Isn't it? If the study didn't work out, if you weren't able to be brought back, then that wouldn't be anyone's choice, would it? You wouldn't be responsible."

Vaughan smiled. "Events would just take their course. I wouldn't even have to make that last decision to stop making decisions."

"Remember that we need somebody without preconceptions about dying – particularly that dying might be a major improvement in this person's life."

"I'm the best candidate, Lipsky, because I'm free from preconceptions about living and that means I don't have any about dying. I feel certain about that."

And he did. He experienced the kind of satisfaction you feel when something you blurt out reveals itself as a deeply held conviction you never knew you had. He *did* feel quite certain about the absence within him of all preconceptions, and the consciousness of this imparted to him a flimsy morsel of peace, like a communion wafer swallowed by someone whose faith has lapsed. And he further understood that another way of putting this profoundly comforting bit of self-knowledge (comforting in part because, like all self-knowledge, good or ill, it was both rare and true) was this: He had abandoned hope.

How marvellous that was! He no longer had to shuffle along under a nagging burden, like a sort of spiritual mattress carried on his shoulders. It was the germ of a philosophy, the seed of peace—the relinquishment of hope, which in turn had nothing to do with hopelessness. No, abandoning hope meant taking the high road, gaily circumventing despair because only people who hoped despaired.

Still, of the old trio, he still retained faith, of a kind—faith in Julia’s dwelling on somewhere. He wondered about charity. Maybe that was a virtue he wished he could have, a future tense virtue. You only had charity if you could pay attention to other people.

Lipsky sighed.

“Yes, maybe you’re right. Maybe you’re exactly what we’ve been looking for.”

Chapter Two

The outskirts of the university sprawled through hilly countryside interspersed with shopping malls and patches of woods. Narrow asphalt roads wound back from the edges of the woods to one or another of the institutes or think tanks set in woodland glades, their signage discreetly blending into the foliage.

He drove down a wet black lane which cut through the fold of two hills; a hardwood forest covered their sides, bare oaks bristling to the grey ridges. Around a bend two statues appeared abruptly on each side of the road, both some sort of large cat, mountain lions perhaps. Taped to one of them was a cardboard sign looking like an advertisement for a yard sale—Institute for Post-Mortem Experiences, it said— and a little past the sign, the building itself appeared. The institute had obviously once been somebody's home—instead of the usual daunting collection of tectonic concrete plates interrupted by massive expanses of sea-green glass, there was a modest, two-story Georgian manorhouse (complete with mist-eroded red brick and wrist-thick lianas of ivy).

As Vaughan parked his small, anonymous Oriental car among a rank of much more expensive European cars, a young man emerged from the building and stood in the arched doorway. He waggled his hand in Vaughan's general direction, as though welcoming a distinguished, doddering friend of his parents for a country weekend.

They met on the steps and shook hands. He was the institute's chief administrator, the boy explained, and in this capacity he was responsible for "human relations."

"My name is Perling," he said, pointing to the laminated plaque that said "Perling" pinned to his impeccable suit. He said this as though Vaughan might be harboring suspicions that he, Perling, was anxious to allay. A name badge, he seemed to be implying with his nearly iconic pointing to it, never lied.

Perling's office shared its owner's need to inspire confidence. Honest mullioned windows candidly revealed the lawn, still green despite the lateness of the season. Perling gestured to a pair of armchairs and Vaughan sat.

"Is there anything you'd like?" he asked, bowing slightly toward Vaughan. "Coke? Bottled water?"

"Do you have any whiskey?"

Still bent, still smiling, but having been given pause, Perling said, "Whiskey...Well, let me think. I know we have whiskey around here somewhere."

"Never mind. I don't need anything."

"Oh, no," Perling looked alarmed, "if you'd like some whiskey, you can have whiskey." He went to the phone and engaged in a whispered conference, which went on, Vaughan thought, at inexplicable length. Finally he returned to Vaughan and sat down. "A glass of whiskey will be here shortly." He was obviously pleased with himself, but then a look of doubt

crossed his face. "I forgot to ask you whether you just wanted the whiskey by itself, or if you wanted something in it..."

"It doesn't matter. I really don't...." Someone knocked on the door. A stout young woman entered, bearing an aluminum beer tray.

"Ah, here it is. The whiskey!" Perling said triumphantly, as if he were producing a real elephant for a child's birthday party. Vaughan took the glass from the tray, and tight-lipped, the young woman departed. "A graduate student," said Perling. "She's a research assistant, but she does double-duty." He grinned, and Vaughan wondered if he was being lewd. Surely not.

Taking a swallow of whiskey, he felt it sooth his extreme natural impatience. Feeling obscure bundles of nerves relax within him, Vaughan was prepared now to be as patient as the situation required.

"Before we can go any further," Perling said, "the basis of anything I might say rests on your having no dependents, no close relatives, even friends who might miss you to the extent . . . To some extent."

"Who might resent my absence."

"Exactly."

"I am a widower. I have no children."

"And your parents are no longer living?"

"They're dead. Their parents are also dead."

"And there isn't anyone else?"

"My sister, but we're not close."

"I'm not used to questioning people about their personal lives," said Perling. It occurred to Vaughan that this lack of relatives embarrassed Perling.

"You're young," Vaughan said by way of reassurance. "Having a family and a circle of admiring friends . . . I'm sure that means a lot to you. But I'm not like that." He considered telling Perling that he'd reached a point in life when loneliness was what was the steady state. Anything else seemed a dodge. But Perling was of course too young and filled with the ideology of human closeness to be told this. He was still stumbling around in the bright, meretricious fog of emotional entitlement.

Perling looked down at his papers and blushed.

"I suppose you're just what we're looking for," he said quietly. "As long as you're willing about the main thing."

"That's why I'm here."

"Evidently your skills of observation are top-notch," Perling said brightly. "That's what Dr. Lipsky says."

Vaughan wondered whether Lipsky *had* said that. He didn't think his observational skills were any great shakes. In fact, he usually had a hard time paying attention.

"Certainly everything will be under control. There's that," Perling said to his desk. "Seeing as they're able to revive these people who were actually dead to begin with . . . I mean really dead, with fatal injuries . . . then someone under the best circumstances should do all right." He looked up and smiled.

"I have every confidence in you."

"That's right—you *should* be confident. Looking at this in the correct light, it's an extraordinary experience. There aren't many frontiers left. In fact, there aren't any."

"My thoughts exactly."

"I can't imagine we could find a finer person to send."

Vaughan was touched.

"Really? Think of all the solitary middle-aged people there are."

"Everyone is unique," Perling said earnestly.

"That hadn't occurred to me."

"Really? It's true." He widened his eyes. They were soft and gray, like the shining pelt of a squirrel. Vaughan wondered if he might begin to cry. "And you're completely unusual. You have a right to think more highly of yourself." Once again he lowered his voice. "It's only fair to tell you: We've had a hell of a time finding an appropriate volunteer."

"Oh, well, that's not surprising."

"What I mean is ones we could use. Obviously, we had a lot of applications from people who wanted to commit suicide in an original way. But besides their inevitable instability, we couldn't be sure they'd want to come back."

"Obviously."

"You, on the other hand, demonstrate the right balance."

"*What is life that I should cling to it? What is death that I should fear it?*"

Perling stared, then tried to smile, and finally his expression lapsed into mild suspicion, a reaction Vaughan was accustomed to from his students: The effect of suddenly introducing verse into conversation.

Perling replied, tentatively, "Oh. That's hard to say. To get answers to those questions, you'd need to..." But he apparently couldn't think of what you'd need to do, so he stopped talking.

"It's something Queen Elizabeth wrote. I was using it to comment on what you'd said."

"What I'd said...?"

"About my having the right balance. I assumed you'd meant between choosing life and choosing death. Or not choosing them. Depending on how you look at it."

"Oh...I was talking about mental balance, though," Perling said. "The chance to die—and of course revive," he added hastily, "appeals to a certain segment of people who are unbalanced."

Vaughan felt uneasy. People like Perling seemed to be multiplying. His fatuity was infectious. Every encounter with them resulted in draining one's own supply of ordinary resolve. And in taking this step, in willingly dying—whether he were to be brought back or not—Vaughan felt that any diminution of seriousness would be a bad omen. Right now he needed, if not solemnity, at least a sense of seemliness. He finished his drink and looked out the bay windows, seeking solace from the season. The ashy basketry of oak branches against the cold sky elated him. Stately snowflurries began to brush the leaded glass. During these moments of concord, Perling had remained blessedly silent, but now he picked up a clipboard that lay beside him on a small rosewood table, slipped a fat pen from an interior pocket, and began to scribble.

"Dr. Lipsky had you complete the forms I'd given him?" he asked the document clipped before him. The pen made a mechanical noise as it ran over the paper, as though it were a tiny vehicle.

"Yes. Even though I didn't always see the point of the questions." Perling's paperwork had involved an inexplicable assortment of bureaucratic, financial, psychological, even political questions ("Do you expect a bequest from a near relative?" "Will you be disappointed if you don't get it?" "How often do you vote?" "Do you resent having to vote?").

"Mmhm..." Perling smiled, as though at the predictability of Vaughan's remark, despite the fact the forms couldn't have been filled out by many people.

"I don't understand why you need to know about my attitudes."

"But it's enormously important to know about those. Surely you can see that?"

"I suppose so," said Vaughan. Although it was reasonable they'd want to frame his temporary death within the landscape of his temporary life, he still didn't understand why he needed to reproduce a typical list of groceries.

"Dr. Lipsky embraces the gestalt." Perling paused to see if Vaughan knew what "gestalt" meant, while Vaughan wondered, given the nature of the gestalt, how you could embrace it. "His is a much wider perspective than mine. My research is modest," he added coyly, as one who'd say, 'My needs are few and humble.'

"So you're part of the research team?"

"We're all part of the research team, Dr. Vaughan. *You're* part of the research team."

"I thought I was the subject...of the experiment."

Perling looked a little scandalized.

"That's a little out of date, I think—'subjects,' 'researchers,' 'observations.'"

"I don't understand," said Vaughan, not understanding, "isn't that what scientists do? Observe experiments?"

"Many people, younger people, don't think science is what it's cracked up to be."

Vaughan stared at Perling, who was apparently serious. Well, he was all-too-familiar with this line of so-called reasoning. He'd suffered through interminable hours of seminars, conferences, faculty meetings being battered on by the lunatic notion there were no "facts." There was no "past." But when you knew the past wasn't even past, as the writer said, when things that had happened to you went on living their spider-like lives, poised in their pouches in the web of time past, ready to...

"Is something wrong?" asked Perling.

"No, nothing's wrong," said Vaughan. He absently raised his empty glass, noticed it was empty, and slowly put it down. Flimsy snowflakes, like dabs of wet tissue paper, stuck to the study windows.

"Would you like another drink?"

The words coming out of Perling's head now failed to bear meaning, a phenomenon more and more commonly afflicting Vaughan. He knew that Perling was making sounds nearly identical to sentences in every respect—Vaughan could even guess what this mimicry of language might mean—yet it was far too great an effort to infuse sense into this assortment of tootles and groans. You might say I've been anaesthetized, thought Vaughan; you could say I feel drugged. And this sensation wasn't simply metaphorical, a rough analogy to some purely mental condition, for the sensation Vaughan felt in his hands and legs and the end of his nose was pharmaceutical, numbing, tingly, indefinably pleasant. His head spun gently. But he was not drugged. Momentarily he had a confused vision of a childhood movie, of Akim Tamiroff spiking Peter Lorre's rum macao in *Mr. Moto Finds the Trail*. This made him smile. Perling too smiled, experimentally.

"I'm really not the person to be explaining any of this, though," said Perling, modestly.

"Explaining any of what?" Vaughan wondered how much time had passed since he'd been in this room.

"The research here at the institute. Dr. Lipsky's experiment. I probably seem naive. Well, I'm young. There's not much I can do about that, is there?" He grinned.

"No, there's only one cure." Now they were both smiling. A contented silence ensued, or at any rate its simulacrum. Perling's social gestures were following the path his words had taken, dithering off into a sort of silent movie with a cast whose antique theatrical flourishes no longer made sense and whose rouged lips no longer produced consonants and vowels.

Finally Perling said:

"I need one last signature. It's a sort of release, you could say." He handed a laser-printed page to Vaughan, who quickly read the two inspid paragraphs it contained.

"It's a certificate of death," he said.

"No!" said Perling, clearly alarmed. "It's just..."

"In every important respect, it's a certificate of death, Perling."

"How could it be a certificate of death?" Perling glanced at Vaughan, then glanced away. "That's for when the condition is permanent." He laughed—a kind of eructating bark—and went on, "You make it sound as though we're asking you to sign your own death warrant."

"I'm not objecting. Just being realistic."

Perling seemed mollified. His earnest, ingenuous, calculating gaze returned.

"You're right, of course," he replied quietly. "We must be realistic: Without abandoning our confidence in science, we have to recognize that you'll be entering a gate through which people don't usually pass twice."

Vaughan was a little surprised by this spurt of eloquence. Indeed, there was nothing to be said. Perling was right. Vaughan signed the document and handed it to Perling, and Perling solemnly accepted it.

* * *

On an operating table, polyvinyl tubes coiling into the veins of his arms and legs, Vaughan thought he heard rain beating on the walls. Perhaps the snow has changed to rain, he thought. Around him, lab-coated attendants adjusted delicate machines. He might have been a machine himself, he thought, his head, breast, limbs providing so many ports for sensors, but his vulnerable body told him otherwise: The thought of actually feeling one of those probes swivelling around in his brain or poking through an artery made his skin acutely sensitive, the way nude human bodies usually feel surrounded by the steely power tools of modern medicine.

This room was unlike the others he'd seen along the institute's manorial halls. For one thing, the chintzy, cherry, oak-lined furnishings were absent; for another, no natural light, not even the grainy and borderless illumination of December dusk, fell within the room. In fact, the space was dim, glowing only here and there with the submarine limelight cast from electronic screens or brightly pulsing in circumscribed circles of halogen lamps. Like a dim spectre, Lipsky stood off nearby, murmuring directions, suggestions, to his staff.

Vaughan thought of the hospital on the day Julia died. That odor of licorice, the decent, respectable heft of the shrouds covering the victims. Julia's perfect face. As time went by, he could see it ever more distinctly.

Where death was concerned, he was no different than anyone else: He retained, along with the theoretical physicist and the Amazon shaman, an array of simple-minded fantasies about the Afterlife. These were neither reassuring nor coherent, but they fulfilled the dunce-like addiction people have to visualizing themselves against some sort of backdrop through a succession of ill-defined and frankly preposterous scenes, uninterrupted by bodily death, and continuing into an indefinite and horribly monotonous future.

Yet if Julia might somehow occupy his own particular eternity, Vaughan thought, nothing else mattered. He lay on his table, bathed in the light of computer screens, and envisioned death's blackness. Or perhaps death was more like a kind of variegated darkness populated by shapes shaded in blocks of washy black, purplish-gray, charcoal, whose outline—like houses and trees set back from a road on a moonless winter night—were detectable only if you shifted your gaze a little away from them. Perhaps your eyes would eventually get used to the dimness (in death, after all, you had enough time to get used to anything), and the darkness would finally seem full of variety. In any case, he and Julia would be wrapped in complete

propinquity. They would travel effortlessly down eternity's midnight rural route, blown forward in the draft left by time's extinction.

For a moment or two, his heart palpitated, three or four strong, syncopated pumps, and following these he felt dizzily lonely.

Now another set of people busied themselves around him. His body had become an instrument in their careers. He had encouraged them in that view: He was content to be taken out of life, they were content to send him. He offered himself up as a kind of experimental epitome—both equably aware and satisfyingly passive. Yet even they perhaps harbored some compassion for him, and surely they would make any exertion to show him kindness.

But, of course, they could not tell him he wasn't alone. For if he had chosen his solitary course up till now, in a little while he would have no choice: He would be perfectly alone.

Well, you were equally alone at birth. And there was all that time before you were born, when if you were at all separable from the universe's other raw materials, at least you weren't conscious of the fact.

It was only at this stage, very nearly at the point of extinction, that the thought of God crossed Vaughan's mind. What he thought was, I won't be alone if there's God. This consideration was, however, so peculiar to him that he felt as though he were thinking somebody else's thought. It was though the idea had leaked out the of the skull of some very different person—a Cro-Magnon hunter shivering next to a glacier or some hemaphroditic technocrat trembling in space. Lonely people took comfort from the notion God was by them, or at least in the immediate vicinity. Dying people were comforted by the belief that soon they'd meet God, see God. God, these people believed, was infinitely more real than any person. But for Vaughan, Julia was more real than any other person, including Vaughan. She remained omnipresent, distended throughout his perceptions, and she was inextinguishable.

A lamp hung above. It was the sort of lamp that hung above dentists' chairs, but bigger. Its light was soft, shining, diffuse, and Vaughan stared into its core. Faint blue halos pulsed there, and surrounding these was an illuminated cloud the color of ice floes brightly sunlit on a Russian sea.

Sitting in the dentist's chair or supine in an examining room, gazing at such lights as though they were mesmerist's devices, Vaughan always experienced fleeting dread, as though the lamp emitted something hurtful and unseen, radioactivity or nerve gas. And for a moment or two he felt trepidation. A heart monitor, which had been peeping softly in the corner, now began a kind of staccato whistle, like a tea kettle. Lipsky appeared above him.

"Anything wrong?" Lipsky asked.

"It's just the light. The glare hurts my eyes."

"You could close them."

"Not quite yet. I may have them closed for a long time."

"Not getting faint-hearted, are you, Albert?" Lipsky said, smiling. "The last thing I'd have expected from you is getting faint-hearted."

Vaughan accepted Lipsky's inept teasing for what it was, well-meant, but woefully vain, camaraderie. He was dissatisfied with himself—because he'd been fearful, no matter how ephemerally, and, he now acknowledged, because he expected his passing, his demise (mock or in truth), to be accompanied with more...solemnity. He wanted more decorum, although on second thought the assembled scientific read-out readers and monitor monitors were hardly raucous. No, they were pleasant and subdued and in fact prim.

"I'm just impatient to get on with it. How long have I been lying here?"

"Actually, we're ready." Lipsky grasped his hand. "Come back," he said. Vaughan's irritation dissolved. He was touched.

And then chemicals started to pulse in him. His heart throbbed. He briefly registered paralysis, not that this mattered: He'd suddenly lost the need ever to move again. And following this, there came dreaminess and sleep so profound that sleep itself seemed waking. As he sank through the final layers of that other life, of dreams and rapid eye movements and alpha waves, he felt suddenly how akin to consciousness sleep actually is. In the face of death, the divide between sleep and waking was hardly worth mentioning.

And then nothing like sleep at all. Instead, his body blinked, spitting him out into the room, where he expanded like a mosquito net over his body. He was looking at a painting, a very formal painting, whose symmetry was nearly motionless. His body, with its mortal and plastic coils, lay neatly on the table, his hands palms down, fingers touching, lying neatly blanched against his legs, which came to a point in his extended toes. Four people, two frozen on each side, leaned gracefully over him: Lipsky rested his fingers on his breast, Lipsky's assistant—a woman—stood across from him, looking very much like a Florentine madonna who could never budge from her mysterious composure. An attendant stared upward at the ceiling, looking through him, and he too was lost in thought. The fourth attendant smiled enigmatically.

The net of his awareness dilated. A draft from his body blew upward and carried him through the ceiling through the roof through the clouds through the troposphere. And now, although all around him the moon and the earth and the asteroids were still, he was rushing outward like the universal hydrogen whose atoms are disseminated throughout interstellar space, parsecs apart.

And below the rain beat louder.

Chapter Three

His nausea was so great that he couldn't at first recognize he had awakened walking. But gradually he began to look around. It was nightfall; very far ahead, an old-fashioned wrought-iron streetlamp illuminated a small patch of sidewalk. He could make out the important features of the street through which he was moving by a sheen of pale red light reflected from above. The sky was lit like city skies in winter, when snow has fallen and the muddied spectrum of colored lights ricochets from the ground to the overcast and back.

Block after block of apartment buildings bordered the street, but looking down the street only added to his vertigo. Everywhere the lines of perspective joined too soon, as though he were standing in a bad drawing. The buildings tilted slightly away from one another.

The atmosphere subtly resisted movement, so any progress was exhausting. Occasionally, in the distance ahead of him or passing on the opposite side of the street, other pedestrians also plodded forward. He tried calling to them, but either they didn't hear or they simply wanted to ignore him. They were always solitary – never any couples or groups. Once he ran to catch up with a tall, dark silhouette walking only a block or so ahead, but its back continuously receded, always keeping the same distance between them.

There were other absences, which because they were absences, were hard at first to recognize. Eventually, for example, he noticed that no street signs appeared at corners, no house numbers were painted over doorways, and although the buildings were punctuated by storefronts, nothing was painted on the plate glass of their windows.

He sat down in a doorstep. He began to crave something, yet he couldn't identify what. As sick as he was, he thought that a glass of cold water would be soothing; but he didn't crave cold water. A little apprehensively, he began to list in his mind items he should plausibly want – a little food, warmth, somewhere to lie down. He realized that he wanted nothing at all. His craving was for craving itself. He needed to feel his body gripped with need. He tried to feel lust – something which infallibly showed up if he worked at it – but he was numb to desire, too. This was so disconcerting that he momentarily forgot his nausea.

An indistinct notion gradually became frighteningly solid: Possibly hell existed and he was in it.

He tried to reject this conclusion. He simply couldn't accommodate it to the jumble of superstitions harbored by all thoughtful modern people – such as the prejudice that hell resembled a waiting room, a train station, the minimalist stage set in a college production of *Huit Clos*. Yet here he was, Vaughan reasoned feebly, not sleeping but dead, lost on the cramped nighttime streets of some city without a sky.

Following this line of reasoning, *any* line of reasoning, however, was terribly difficult. Although he was heartened to find that thinking was still possible, the part of thinking that had to do with oneself, self-reflection, was very nearly impossible. Nevertheless, perhaps spurred by

a lifetime's worth of ceaseless, pointless ratiocination, he soldiered on, thinking through his situation.

If he were in hell, shouldn't there be something—he didn't know—awful about it all? Something tortured? At least unpleasant? Not that this was in any way pleasant, but then the experience didn't so far seem markedly different from life—a big disappointment for people who were expecting something more vivid, grander, whether for good or ill.

Vaughan looked up at the sky and tried to concentrate, but he felt sleepy and began to drift to and fro between wakefulness and semiconsciousness. His mind remained active during these moments of gentle stupor, not quite dreaming but flowing unconstrained down a spiral channel of memory, of thought, of peace. The diffused ruby sky reminded him of the large city of his childhood. Actually—it now seemed to him—this was none other than that, his first conception of the heavens, lit on winter nights by thousands of heatless neon fires, illuminating the alley outside his bedroom window in an infrared glow. He saw a plume of coal-smoke fanning out below the low sky, and tall, dark chimneys stippled the horizon just over the roofs of the buildings opposite.

He opened his eyes. His momentary tranquility was displaced by a sense of trespass. His sickness returned. He felt like a fever-afflicted explorer who could only think, over and over, 'I am somewhere I am not supposed to be.'

Yet he could not will himself to wish he were elsewhere. Acts of will were acts in deed, a motion like any other—just as philosophers and back-country preachers had always said.

The result of this distasteful realization was panic of the sort the sleeper feels who dreams he is paralyzed and cannot wake, and the more he strains to break out of sleep, the more the paralysis coils around him. Then Vaughan recalled that in such dreams the only escape lay in surrender. He must let himself be turned into a leaden lump. He lost consciousness, for a greater or lesser time—it was hard to say. Each event in death (if indeed you could call them events) seemed to have its own self-standing weight so that duration seemed beside the point. While you were sleeping, that was the only experience going on, anywhere, and there seemed no point in expecting any other thing to happen, ever.

He struggled to open his eyes, and looking about him was borne down by the street's darkened facades, the dim, clotted spheres haloing the streetlights so distant from one another that their light was sopped up by the gravy-like mist. His inner ear hurt, his sinuses squeaked, his eyes watered. He felt as though he were making a sudden ascent in a jetliner, and reflexively he began working his jaw. Then from the center of what had been absolute stillness a roar now swelled.

The noise filled the street, the sky, the pavement. It was as though Gog and Magog had turned on a compressor the size of an asteroid in preparation for sand-blasting assorted star systems. On the other hand, even this unbearable churning whine was at least a shift in conditions. Such an overpowering racket couldn't help setting things in motion.

As Vaughan desperately eked out this fleck of solace from the mineral veins of sound threatening to crush him, the circle of noise actually started to dissipate.

He gazed at the luminous and ruddy sky. He noticed for the first time that its color deepened at the meridian, gradually shading into lighter and lighter tints, until along the horizon (where the plumes of smoke still clung, smeared against it) it was a band of pale pink. He was reassured by this irregularity, evidence that life's haphazard design still lingered after life.

And as though following from this confidence that death, too, harbored differences, for the first time he heard an ordinary sound: the soft snap of footsteps. He wasn't able at first to determine the direction from which they came because the cacophony in the background,

although it steadily faded, was still making enough racket to confuse him. He studied first one end of the street and then the other, and finally a figure emerged into the feeble light shed by a forlorn streetlamp. The figure was approaching him, but it vanished almost immediately into the darkness, and for a while Vaughan could only hear the steps growing imperceptibly louder. A long time seemed to pass, but he found that he was content to wait. Impatience, restiveness, yearning—these seemed like exotic spiritual states, achieved by hermits and ascetics, which you only knew by hearsay.

Finally the footfalls drew near.

Vaughan concentrated on the sound of the steps, and as they became more distinct, he detected the brave and delicate walk of a woman. He imagined the kind of shoe that would make the dapper tapping that steadily came toward him—a shoe like a dancer's slipper but tough and resilient, capable of protecting the wearer wherever she travelled, even through the cinders of the underworld.

At last an outline separated itself from the darkness. The footsteps slowed, became hesitant, and at the same time the red sky cast down a ball of faint and rusty illumination on the figure of a woman.

Vaughan stood up. In fact, he began to walk quickly in the direction of the woman, who stood still in a russet halo. Two streetlamps stood between them. It took several minutes to pass first one and then the other, and yet when he'd done this, another streetlamp stood between them, and another beyond that.

His former lethargy slipped from him, like a cap blown off in a spring wind. He ran. The woman turned away, but as she did so, her heart-shaped face—the reflection of light from a pupil, the downturned corners of her mouth—for a moment became visible.

She might have been any woman, and thus she might have been Julia. Within himself he felt a tiny snap like a broken vial releasing the animating vapors of idiot hope. Ahead he saw her receding figure pause. Perhaps she was waiting for him to catch up. He broke into a painful, spastic jog. His will was active again, his longing.

But the effort was too great. He slowed to walking doggedly on. The buildings he passed presented a solid facade; no other streets bisected this one, and the avenue down which he walked pointed toward the horizon like a Renaissance study in perspective, where each line of sight was an attenuated rapier laid to infinity. On the whole, Vaughan thought, it was better that the prospect before him was dark, for had it been lit by, say, the moon, the view would have been terrifying.

Now the woman was watching him. Evidently uncertain about her next move, she walked a few steps, stopped, looked at the facade of a building, turned and walked back to her earlier position.

She crossed the street as Vaughan drew closer. The surroundings had grown even drearier, and Vaughan wondered whether some minor act of violence might occur, if that were possible where violence could have no result. She halted and hesitantly walked toward him, like an unprepared schoolgirl called to the front of the class. She averted her face until only a few strides separated them, and then suddenly she looked up. Her face was extraordinary, many times more beautiful than he'd been able to make out at a distance. Was Julia this beautiful? He couldn't remember. She was older than he'd expected. A thin, bright-gray strand ran back through her thick, dark hair. Three or four shallow lines fanned from the corners of her eyes, which were a bright, gem-like violet.

He felt as though his effort catching up to her had earned him the upper-hand in this encounter. He didn't feel obliged to open a conversation, he was in a position to wait patiently for her to begin. If she *could* begin, and that didn't seem likely as she stared, blushed, parted her

apple-colored lips, sighed, and went on staring. At last she seemed to have decided something. Her expression became slightly more resolute.

"You're Albert Vaughan," she said resolutely.

He nodded.

"Do you remember me?"

"I'm not sure. At first I thought you were someone else."

"That's good. Not remembering me – it's in your interest."

"If I'd met you, I'd remember."

He intended to say that he didn't know many people, but then realized how little that mattered when you were dead.

She gazed at him angrily, sadly. Parts of his legs were trembling. His thighs twitched, his knees felt weak. He wanted to sink down again, but she seemed to expect something of him. Curling into a ball on the pavement would probably disappoint her.

"I wish it wasn't like this," she said, turning to look at a nearby shop window. He could suddenly decipher a set of large, gilded letters floating free of the window itself. He remembered as a small boy walking home from shopping with his mother on a late winter afternoon. They passed such shops, through whose golden windows he could see sales clerks moving serenely, like creatures strayed from paradise.

Suddenly he felt even sicker than he had before. He remembered something else from his boyhood, the time he and his parents had taken a short trip on a boat. Maybe the boat was a ferry. Perhaps they'd been sightseeing. It was his first time on a wide body of water, and as he looked over the railing at the fierce, energetic chop licking the hull – as he looked up to see the buildings ashore madly shrinking – he became very ill, seasick. Sick of the sea. Sick from being cast out onto it. He hated the waves and the way they formed and re-formed, how they knew the boat floated on them and wished they could sink it. The shrinking, receding, crumbling horizons nauseated him.

Possibly she gripped his elbow as he lowered himself into a doorway. He wasn't sure. He put his head between his knees, and when the nausea had passed a little, he looked up. The violet-eyed woman had vanished.

* * *

He had always felt that one of the pleasantest, but unfortunately one of the most uncommon, effects of drunkenness was to lie semicomatose while the stream of one's thought gurgled effortlessly on, accumulating curious and delightful images, ideas vaulting limpidly upward, as though in fact one's mind did not belong to one at all, but to someone else, someone more interesting and less imaginatively congealed.

As he slumped unconconscious in the doorway, Vaughan's thoughts tumbled thus merrily before his mind's eye, one after the other in natural succession. To begin with, it was eminently reasonable that the entire universe might be run on the basis of ennui. Why not? In fact, it does occur to most people past a certain age, people thoroughly inured to the traces of existence, that death would very probably be yet another letdown, another overadvertised lead-up to an overmarketed dud.

This would explain – the clear spring of his thought babbled – the absence of some sort of supernatural officialdom. Devils or angels? Demons or cherubim? God or Satan would be too outré.

But as usual, human souls just had each other.

Dying, for instance, had felt like any number of ordinary experiences, like a daily event. It felt like a morning in late September, that slightly unbearable mixture of liberation and pathos;

it felt like the end of lovemaking at dusk on a holiday; it felt – as had so much else in Vaughan’s life – like someone else’s death.

From beyond the banks of this peaceful rivulet down which his thoughts floated with unwearied grace he suddenly received a brusque jolt, like the hooligan shove your consciousness gives you just as you’re falling into an afternoon nap and the phone rings. Out there, in the shards and pointed sticks of awareness, something was poking about. Vaughan half-opened his eyes. Well off in the distance he discerned faint ...snuffling, perhaps. If there were in fact something making noise somewhere in the murk at the far end of the avenue, the noise it was making was so difficult to classify that he doubted it was a sound at all.

But, there, he heard it more distinctly. The sound came nearer, raspish inhalations punctuated with sterterous snorts. Fully awake, Vaughan studied the darkness, straining to see some outline detach itself and come forward. The thing approaching him was certainly an animal. Its breathing was like that of a dog on a scent, a large, sick dog, and when the animal stepped into a pool of light in the middle of the street, he saw that in fact it was a dog, a very big dog. Its brindled, blocky head seemed to have been plunged neckless between its hulking shoulders. Padding forward on paws the size of small, deflated automobile tires, it reeled gracelessly, as though its spine were broken. Long, dirty claws – like a big cat’s – clicked on the pavement. As it lifted its head, its meaty flews fell back, revealing broken yellow fangs.

The dog now scented him. It looked toward the doorway, where Vaughan, now feeling far more lively than he had up till this point, froze. It didn’t of course matter how motionless Vaughan remained; the hound was operating by odor alone and would in a matter of moments discover him. He stood up quickly, at the same time shrinking back against the frame of the doorway. A doorknob dug into the small of his back. The dog look directly at him and growled, a low, reverberating gurgle. Very likely, Vaughan thought, the creature wasn’t a dog at all but a demon, a hound of hell. He imagined what the dog’s sturdy foreteeth, strengthened by much chewing on bones, would feel like as they crushed his tibia, and what the dog would do once Vaughan was made helpless by the resulting pain.

At the moment it was standing still, gauging him, but in a few seconds it would rush him. He felt the door behind him, and grasped the doorknob. Trying not to lose sight of the hound, Vaughan glanced behind him; there was a small, grimy window let into the top half of the doorway, through which he could see a dim hallway. Along one side a staircase led upward into the shadows.

He shook the doorknob gingerly and pressed with his back against the door, which gave a little against its battered frame but didn’t open. Reflexively, he hammered softly against the door with his elbow hoping to attract someone’s attention, to garner assistance, and then it struck him how pointless this gesture was. He started to laugh at himself, softly, his laughter turning into a hushed sob. The dog now had him firmly sighted, pinned in the doorway. Vaughan turned and rattled the door in earnest and it gave way. Once he was inside, he fell against it and heard the bolt feebly click home and was certain the lock would never hold against the beast’s onslaught.

But the dog didn’t attack. When Vaughn cautiously looked out, he’d disappeared.

Inside, the hall was darker than it had appeared through the smeared window and the silence more profound, as though here not even a distant footstep or animal snuffle could penetrate. The stairs, however, were lit by a kind of faint deep-sea phosphorescence that little by little petered out, without ever being entirely extinguished. Vaughan began to climb. At the top, a cramped gallery, bordered by doors as seedy as the one downstairs, circled the staircase. The luminescence grew and faded. Perhaps the mist from the avenue had penetrated inside. Doorways appeared and vanished in the fog and, feeling suffocated and panicky, he suddenly

experienced an overpowering compulsion to make a great deal of noise. Shuffling along the gallery through the miasma, he chose a door at random and hammered on it. This had no effect at all. He could have been pounding on wet cardboard. He flung his shoulder against the corky wood.

Something gave and he fell. Softly, not very far, and he landed on his feet. Palms stretched before him, he moved slowly forward in the absolute darkness until he bumped against something padded—possibly an armchair. Vaughan ran his hand along the chair's cushioned back, reached forward, and felt the edge of a wooden table. He methodically searched about the tabletop, looking for a light, but the table was empty. Then he made his way carefully around the room, colliding with invisible sofas, ottomans, cabinets, divans. Sooner or later, he hoped to knock over a lamp.

At last he stood still, in the dark, surrounded by these ridiculous furnishings, he sensed a shift in the soggy interior climate that had immersed him since passing from his previous existence to this one. It was as though a sharper, bolder zone of pressure had begun to edge out the apathy dogging him. He realized he was indignant.

He was entitled to some sort of explanation. What had happened to the Bath of Light? The souls crowding around the newly departed, welcoming him? Or, on the other hand, where was the fiery lake? The grim deathly transit worker transporting you over the River of Forgetfulness? If death were not permanent insensibility, he argued reasonably to himself, then some authority should be around to debrief you, if not actually to explain the meaning of life and death.

Probably he was expected to feel relief. How bad could it be? he imagined someone asking. After death, you, as you, were allowed to persist, more or less. But if this were the way it was going to go on—stumbling down smoggy boulevards and bumbling around claustrophobically in stifling apartments... If he were going to remain conscious, then he had a right to be impatient.

Final judgment would have been a relief. Even though during his lifetime he'd dismissed this aspect of the Afterlife as an especially ludicrous fantasy, anyone would be justified in feeling impatient that further intervention hadn't taken place immediately post-expiration when nobody showed up to judge the dead, or gather them into his or her bosom, or even just welcome them. He sympathized now with people who in life imagined that, for good or ill, in the kingdom of the dead somebody would tell them how they did overall during life: how many times did I do something that was really evil? if I did things that were actually good, did these deeds outnumber the evil ones? And, most important, most *natural*, Vaughan now thought, *Am I fundamentally good or evil?*

The phrase "eternal life" began to assume grotesque significance.

As he considered these things, he suddenly began to feel as though the pitch-dark surrounding him contained something besides furniture; awareness other than his own stirred among the ottomans and recliners and chaises longues. And to confirm this, he heard a spring creak. Irrationally, he wondered if the dog had found a way into the building, and he was frightened for an instant. Silence ensued and then another creak, as though someone were shifting his weight. Clearing his throat, he whispered:

"Anyone there?"

Silence. Then rustling. Then more silence.

"I know this is an intrusion," Vaughan commenced lamely, "but nobody seemed to be home." Maybe there wasn't anyone in the room after all. And if there were, why was he apologizing? They were dead. He doubted dead people had their own apartments. "Look, if there's somebody here, you could at least say something." No response. "I know what you're

thinking— who’s this stumbling around in my apartment? Why did he break down my door? But there’s an explanation.”

Now he could locate the source of these small rustlings and squeakings and slowly he slid over the carpet toward them. He came abruptly up against some long, low, stuffed object. A sofa. For all he knew, the soul of some dead domestic animal might have been slinking around on the sofa; but suddenly, only inches in front of him and a few inches below, someone cleared his throat. Vaughan yearned for illumination, even for the murk of the street below.

Maybe whoever was on the couch couldn’t for some reason rise from it. “Is there a light? Possibly you could direct me toward a lamp, and I could turn it on. If we could see each other, we might feel better.

“As it is,” he continued, “there isn’t any way for either of us to know that the other isn’t a threat. Or, even if one of us is a threat, then at least we’d know where the situation stands. Light always makes a big difference.”

“I’m used to darkness.” Startled by the sudden voice, speaking clearly and calmly in the dark, Vaughan leapt backward, tripping on a footstool. “Are you injured?” asked the voice.

“It’s hard to tell,” Vaughan replied in an aggrieved tone. Now that at last there was the possibility of sympathy, he needed to complain, out loud and shamelessly. “There isn’t much sensation. There’s *some* sensation. But not enough really to make a judgment about whether or not I’ve actually hurt myself.” He paused, indignantly. “That seems to be the way, doesn’t it?” he asked, principally by way of eliciting an expression of fellow-feeling from the man in the dark.

“Well, there, you see. It’s always like that, which doesn’t necessarily mean you’re not impaired. People may go about for some time unable to move properly, and it’s only after someone points out to them that a leg, say, isn’t moving or a hand doesn’t grip, only then do they actually realize they’ve been injured.”

The voice paused.

“Without light, the best thing to do would be to sit down. Possibly you could find a place here on this sofa.”

Since Vaughan was standing behind the sofa, rather than try to move through the maze of furniture again, he felt for the sofa’s back, climbed over, and was gently gathered into its cushions, which exhaled the breath of old scents, of his grandmother’s French soap and the shampoo his first girlfriend used, the nearly spent odor of month-old Christmas carnations. He realized that, since he’d passed over as it were, he’d been tired out by this alternation of somnolence and free-floating anxiety, vague physical unease and unpleasant paranoid alertness.

Now he became conscious that the person sitting beside him seemed to waft around him blessed and genteel kindness. He was content to sit quietly beside this invisible companion. Perhaps this in the end was what death came to: Sitting with a sympathetic soul in the scented dusk, liberated at last from longing. In fact he was again sinking into the ripply languor that had continually overtaken him since his death.

After a while, Vaughan sighed contentedly and said: “I was beginning to think I was alone.”

“Alone. You were starting to feel lonesome? Isolated? The only one of your kind?” Before Vaughan could answer, the other continued: “Ah, you don’t need to tell me about *that*. I have the original patent on being alone.”

For a minute or two, both men sat quietly in the dark, and then Vaughan said: “Well, you’re not alone now. I’m here.”

“People come and go. That’s not what I meant. Being here isn’t a question of being by yourself.”

"In life, I had absolutely no preconceptions about being dead," said Vaughan

"Lately, for some reason people arrive here thinking they're going to be locked by themselves in a shabbily furnished bed-sitting room for eternity. Like naughty children."

Vaughan was a little discomfited. In fact, this *was* one of the few conceptions Vaughan had about the Afterlife.

"So, did you see anyone out there, on the street?"

"I saw someone...I thought at first I knew her, from a distance." He paused. "She looked like someone else."

"Oh. What about someone, you know, a little threatening?"

"There was a vicious dog. A really big one. He was horrifying."

"Not animals. People. Were there any people like that? Did anybody follow you?"

"I don't know...maybe," said Vaughan hesitantly. "I wouldn't really have known, would I?"

"You knew *I* was here."

"You made noise."

"Not much noise. You intuited my presence."

"I don't know. Possibly."

"Would you say you were *driven* in here?"

"Of course I was driven in here. I told you about the dog."

"The terrible dog drove you indoors," the other man repeated softly, as though it were an exemplary sentence in a foreign language primer, as if he were trying to connect the sentence firmly to the image. For perhaps a minute he muttered to himself and then said: "Oh. Well, I suppose I know what that means."

There was a protracted silence. Vaughan grew impatient: "What does it mean?" The sofa sighed forlornly, and Vaughan had the distinct impression that his interlocutor had turned toward him and was somehow inspecting him, despite the darkness.

"I may be wrong. There's always the strong possibility I'm making up things to please myself. Ooooh," he suddenly groaned, "it's endless. Endless."

Vaughan shivered. The earlier consciousness of trespass returned, weighing like an alien object, a large ball bearing for example, sitting specifically inside him, in the region of his spleen. The hound at least had summoned up familiar horror, a cliché of the things you were afraid of in life. But far fuller of dread was the invisible speaker's "endless..." He thought of Julia, who had also died, truly and permanently, for whom there was no meretricious salvation through the agency of Lipsky's technology.

"You haven't answered me: What would all that mean?"

"All what?"

"Somebody following me. Somebody forcing me to come in here."

"I don't know. There's no way to say for certain."

"You're avoiding an answer. A minute ago you said you knew."

"I did?" He sighed. "Maybe I'm supposed to explain things. Although heaven knows there's not much to say. But I'm a bad judge. Maybe as far as you're concerned, there are one or two things I could clarify."

Vaughan asked encouragingly, "You've been sent...as a sort of guide?"

"Sent? I didn't say that. I said I might be able to answer a few questions. If I'd been sent, someone would have had to send me. I think that's clear enough."

"So where should I start?"

"Start what?"

"My first question. What should it be? "

"I can't help you, although if you'd like, I could tell you the most common ones. However, you can undoubtedly figure those out yourself."

"I think I'd have a hard time putting into words what's really troubling me."

"It's the same."

"What's the same?"

"That's what's really bothering you. There doesn't seem to be much difference between the two states. Life and death are pretty much the same."

Vaughan considered this. "Well, generally speaking..."

"Oh," his guide hastened to add, "I *meant* it as a general statement. But everything follows from it. For instance, when people are alive—on earth and so forth—millions of very complex things happen, and go on happening. Events intertwine, actions collide into one another...altogether an elaborate affair.

"But who's running it all? Who's in charge? Ah, evidently no one. Still, you think—you've every right to expect—in the Afterlife, a supernatural bureaucracy, if only to make assignments. Ranked cherubim and seraphim. It only stands to reason. And, of course, sooner or later, you hoped to meet . . . well, you know . . ."

"God?"

"Exactly."

"So, will I?"

"Will you what?"

"Will I meet God?"

His guide shifted nervously in the dark beside him. During some academic ceremony, Vaughan had met a man who was the secretary of something, a member of the presidential cabinet, and when the conversation had come round, naturally enough, to the president, the man had backed off into the same superstitious reticence, like those American Indians who believed names were talismans, supernatural objects you didn't want to have in your mouth.

"If I'm being indiscreet, we can change the subject."

"It's not really a question of being indiscreet. For a long time now, nobody's had any contact with...it's hard to find a way to describe it...*Elsewhere*, which is where in the past . . ." he lowered his voice, "which is where, you know, the presence you mentioned, where he or she usually could be found."

"You mean that God is missing."

"No, no, not at all. I certainly didn't intend to give that impression. After all, as far as that's concerned, being present or being absent—it's probably all the same thing . . . Elsewhere. Only, we, even the dead, who might be said to have transcended the normal preconceptions about how long things actually take, even we can only view the general framework in very limited ways. Which, when you come to think of it from the perspective of . . . from the perspective of Elsewhere, might in fact be no perspective at all."

"I've lost you."

He chuckled, and this soft, human noise reassured Vaughan, who for a moment felt that he'd returned to life.

"Ah, that's bad for a guide—to lose someone. Maybe we could move on to something more in my line."

"Please," said Vaughan, who began to warm to the voice in the dark, one that recalled another voice, long ago, from his childhood. Perhaps it was like his grandfather's voice, at once gruff and gentle, patiently pointing out the parts of ship's rigging from a lithograph plate in an old book, whose breath had the pleasant odor of pencils and stale paper. "Please, tell me anything you like." Settling further down into the sofa, he felt a tiny, pleasurable frisson of

anticipation—as he had preparing to listen to his grandfather tell about the main sheets or topgallants.

“Well, for example, you could easily meet various people, if that would interest you.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, simply that most people have died, so somewhere here you could meet nearly anyone, if, as I say, they’ve died.” He paused and then said inconsequentially, “Still, there are no borders here. It simply goes on.”

“My wife died,” said Vaughan. “Her name was Julia.” The name formed in his mouth without the participation of his mind as though names here, like the name of God, were palpable. It felt dangerous and lovely as it tapped against his palette.

“And of course you want to be reunited. Well, she may be here somewhere. As I say, the difficulty is simply knowing where she might be, what state she might be in.”

“What *state*? I assumed that there was only this one state.”

“Don’t be alarmed. It’s just that she might be Elsewhere. And as I say nobody’s had any contact with Elsewhere lately.”

His guide laid his hand on Vaughan’s forearm and squeezed gently, as his grandfather used to do. He was surprised and comforted by the hand’s ordinary, human weight. He then noticed that the room in which they’d been sitting had windows, for faint light began to outline what were perhaps shades or curtains.

“It’s reassuring you should want to see her,” his guide continued. “Of course. It implies that I’ve been assigned to you, to help you. It implies someone still makes decisions. That’s comforting, don’t you think?”

Vaughan was only half-listening. He concentrated on the light beyond the curtains. Was it actually getting to be dawn? Then he said, “I think my time here may be limited.”

“Certainly you have that air about you, as though you don’t belong here. As though someone might pluck you back.”

“Shouldn’t we set out?”

“Of course. We will. But I need to prepare myself. I haven’t left this apartment for ... a very long time.”

Vaughan could see the other man’s profile slowly gaining shape against the pearly murk. “I don’t pretend to understand how all this actually works . . . even though I’ve been around so long I’ve found it convenient to change my name from time to time...Self-delusion, really. I comfort myself thinking I can’t really be the same person I started out being.” He paused. “I call myself Klee now.”

“Like the painter.”

“Mmm. Well, it’s pronounced the same.”

Vaughan thought for a moment.

“How could you have been longer than anyone else?”

“Not here in this apartment, obviously. But I’ve been dead pretty much from the time this place opened up.”

“I don’t understand. You mean you were the first dead person?”

“Not exactly. I was second.” Klee paused and cleared his throat. “After my son.

“And before that,” he continued, “I was alive longer than anybody else. It might help if I start there, with my own background.”

“If you’d like,” Vaughan replied uneasily.

“Fine,” said Klee. “Then I’ll begin at the beginning.”

Chapter Four

You think you can't imagine Eden, that because it *is* Eden, it's ineffable or imaginary or at worst a carnival blind put up by God to shill you, my descendants.

Yet you all do participate in the real Eden. In even the worst childhood, Eden creeps through, and this impression of dawning, of a vivid life beneath the surface of surroundings, which all children have, maybe that's what I've bequeathed to you.

The sun rose, the sun set, the rain fell. There were even seasons. It's a misconception that it was always summer. How would Eden have been Eden without wistful autumns and raw, windy springs?

About the Garden. I remember it particularly as it was at night in summer, perhaps midsummer's eve. Moonlit definitely. Benches, stone ones, God had distributed in the arbors.

At first there was only me. I can't say when I hit on the idea of splitting myself off from my surroundings, separating myself from the flora and fauna. Maybe God gave me the idea – anyway, that was the story later on: He prompted me.

I was sitting on the ground, leaning against a baobab tree next to a big granite boulder. I must have been very happy. What little I recall up to that point is I spent most of my time not moving. I'd sit (or stand) gazing, gazing – literally absorbing my surroundings and feeling my surroundings absorb me. Dumbstruck.

I was sitting under this baobab tree, as usual gazing happily off into the distance, when something I was sitting on tickled me. (I wasn't wearing any clothes: A lot that happened afterwards hinges on my nudity – more, in fact, than you'd think reasonable.)

Suddenly the tickling stopped. I felt a sharp twinge and another, then another. I leaped up and looked at the ground. At my feet was a horde of little red ants. Other ants were crawling around on my thighs, biting me. I frantically brushed them off.

I'd been sitting at the edge of a small grove; in the middle of the grove an animal was grazing. Suddenly, in the tree above me, there was a loud squawk. From a nearby tree came a yelp. I began to run.

Brightly colored objects hurtled through the air, screeching and whistling. A large quadruped trampled across the path, barely missing me. It bellowed. Sounds of all kinds now filled the Garden – howls, barks, chirps, growls, whistles, peeps. I crawled under a hedge. Dark fell, I tried to sleep, but for the rest of the night I was awakened by new sounds.

Around dawn I managed to get some rest. When I woke a little before noon, I felt better: I was getting used to the noise. My formerly untenanted Garden was now filled with all sorts of animals, although at the time I didn't know that's what they were. Generally they ignored me unless I got directly in their way, as with the ants.

I knew Who was responsible. I waited for an explanation, but none came. My anxiety about the animals wore off and was gradually replaced by curiosity. Still, I was uneasy: My

surroundings were out of control. When I came to think about it, the animals themselves were less surprising than this flood of more subtle experiences that seemed to be happening inside of me. Inside, outside. The animals, the landscape, the sounds—they were outside. The curiosity, the anxiety, the sense of chaos—they were inside.

I thought that maybe I could somehow absorb the landscape. I considered eating the animals one by one until none were left, and then I noticed that they multiplied faster than I could eat them. So bringing the outside inside was probably impossible. Then I considered how I might reverse the process, imposing what was inside me onto my surroundings. And that seemed more promising. At any rate, I couldn't see any immediate obstacles. The problem was how to go about it: I sensed there was a way, but what was it?

I needed help. Since I still wasn't used to all this movement and commotion, I went and sat by the side of the empty savannah that surrounded the Garden on all sides; the animals weren't interested in it. God hadn't been in evidence recently, but I sort of suspected that He'd be out in the open when He put in an appearance. Probably He Himself made me think that.

And He did at last show up. I was sitting at the edge of the tall grass, my chin resting on my knees, when I felt His presence. We sat there together, the two of us, for a long time, just staring off onto the yellow savannah, watching stalks bend before the wind. I usually felt fine when He was around—everything always seemed just the way it was supposed to be. But now things were different: When He sat down next to me, I felt uneasy, perplexed by the inside-outside problem.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked. (In the early days, we communicated by telepathy—the way people who are close still do, I suppose.)

"You should know," I said petulantly. "Populating the Garden with all these animals is your idea."

"But I did it for your benefit. I thought you might want company."

"Company." I laughed bitterly. "I don't suppose you stopped to think how confusing this 'company' might be to me."

"Are you confused?"

"Yes, I'm confused. They're outside, clamoring around, jumping about unexpectedly, making sudden movements . . . And I'm inside, where things used to be...I don't know...uneventful."

"You'll need to take action."

"What do you suggest?"

"Name them." A little whirlpool of light sand appeared where he'd been sitting and swirled away over the heads of savannah grass.

Name them. What did that mean? I walked back into the Garden, amid the shuffling, flying, crawling beasts. I stared angrily at them. I concentrated, trying to make them hear my thoughts. They paid no attention. I can make noise, too, I thought.

"Byagggggh," I shouted. Some giraffes were gnawing at the trees; they stopped and looked at me. At least I've got their attention, I thought. For another half hour or so, I moved around yelling at the animals, until they got used to my voice and ignored me. I was mad with frustration: I screamed, I cried, I choked, I gasped. Panting, I fell to the ground. A ball of sound struggled up within me, and my voice swelled in my throat. I felt as though a hard, barbed globule were stuck in my chest. I couldn't breathe.

Just then a turtle crawled down the path on which I was lying. I sobbed. I sat up.

"TURRRRRRRRTLE," I yelled at the turtle. All around, the Garden echoed with my voice. The animals stopped eating and mating and fighting and stared at me. I leaped up, laughing.

"GIRAFFE. WILDEBEEST. POLAR BEAR. IGUANA. RODENT." As I said their names, I pointed viciously at each animal. I ran up to an oryx.

"You . . . are . . . an . . . oryx," I said, poking the oryx with each word. Its glassy brown eyes widened. It turned and ran a little way from me and stopped. Now I had them.

As the days passed, I grew convinced that the animals knew I had named them, and they were afraid. They were, as I put it, cowed. (It didn't take me long to move from nouns to verbs, although these were at first based on names for animals.)

Little by little, however, the way I experienced life changed. I forgot how I used to think about things because now I could only think in words. After a while, I couldn't even remember what kinds of things I had thought in the early days. Each name I invented was like a brick laid on a wall between me and my earlier self.

The Garden too was different—the undergrowth was thicker, the paths had roots beneath them, vines snaked down from the trees. I had to walk farther to get to the savannah. I spent a lot of time there now, what with the steady breeze blowing over the grass and the increasing animal population.

One day I was lying out in a space the zebras had cleared, napping, dreaming. I dreamed that it was later—I mean later in history, after we'd moved to the river—and I was surrounded by replicas of myself. Everything was busier, and as I looked more closely at these versions of myself, I felt myself rapidly changing into something else.

My bones began to squeal and creak and then melt. A cloud of sand billowed up around me. I was lifted up, bones splitting, marrow exploding into atoms of sand. Everywhere there were quartz, mica, feldspar grains, glittering. Then I was sailing above the Garden, a cloud of glittering dust, looking down onto the green and yellow landscape. I began to sift down onto the ground. A mountain of atoms that were in fact me drifted down, covering the Earth.

The dream moved to another scene. I was whole again, and night had fallen—no moon, only a few stars, almost total dark. I was single-mindedly running across the savannah, pursuing some other me. When I caught myself, I wrapped myself in my arms. I was at once struggling and grasping. Freedom, surrender, sweetness, dissolution.

I woke up. The sun was about to rise. Mist the color of finches' wings collected in the hollows on the plains, and as the sun penetrated the channels between the banks of mist, it penetrated me, warming my bones. And on my skin, the steppe breeze blew as if it were coming off water, off a northern lake.

And there she was, naked and looking startled.

* * *

I didn't think of her as naked, of course. What I thought was that she was God, God in a new, more stable form.

"Is this what you're going to look like from now on?" I asked.

She glanced at me, as though she'd just noticed my presence.

"Are you speaking to me?"

"If you don't want to carry on a conversation, just say so."

"I expected to be alone."

"I thought you had control over that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Where you appear and so on."

"I didn't have anything to do with being here. I'm not sure I like it."

"You don't like the Garden? It was your idea."

"My idea? I had nothing to do with it."

From the very Beginning, God was fond of tests: I decided this was a test.

"Yes it was. You told me you created the Earth—the waters and the land . . . the whole job was yours. I believed you."

"To my knowledge, we've never even been introduced. In any case, I'm not responsible for anything. Not this Garden, not you—as far as that goes, I'm not even responsible for myself."

It began to dawn on me that she was another . . . I searched for a word . . . another *person*. Suddenly, everything started to make sense: All these other species I had so carefully named, they had duplicates. Up till now, I'd been unique. I wasn't sure I could get used to the change in status.

"Listen," I said, "probably what's happened is that God has created another person. Like me, in my image."

"In *your* image?"

"Well, except in some minor ways, we're alike. We aren't, for example, like them." I pointed to a herd of musk oxen. She stared at the musk oxen, then at some bandicoots climbing around on a nearby limb, then at a stork flying overhead.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did God create me?"

She had me stumped (it wouldn't be the first time, not by a long shot).

"Well, probably so you could . . . help me."

"Help you do what?"

"Help me do my job."

"What's your job?"

"My job is naming," I said proudly. She laughed, for the first time. It was very disturbing: I couldn't tell if her laughter made me happy or uneasy. Either way, it was very pleasurable watching her do it.

"That's not much of a job," she said and continued to study the animals.

"You say that because you don't know what's involved. You've just showed up. If you'd been here during the first struggles, when through an effort of supreme will I taught myself to speak . . ." I described to her the troubles I had. This was also highly enjoyable.

"I think you've made things harder than they had to be."

I was furious. I was also fascinated. I realized that she completely monopolized my attention and that all I wanted to do from then on was to say things—whatever came into my head—so that she'd say things back.

Then God returned. In an instant, she'd forgotten all about me: as my concentration was on her, hers was on God. She stared at Him and trembled. I pressed myself gently against her and tried to think what to do next. Still gazing at God, she groped for my hand, which she then clasped in hers.

"This isn't going exactly as I had hoped," God said. "Let me explain to you what's happened." And so He did. It took Him a while, and when He finally left, night had fallen.

We lay on the soft steppe grass, under an acacia, and were silent for a long time after God's departure. Most of the stars were so close together that they appeared to be swathes of phosphorescence, although here and there a brilliant individual point burnt between the glowing bands. I watched the night sky move from horizon to horizon, and the longer I watched, the more it seemed as if the stars' groupings had some intention just on the verge of my understanding, as if the stars were like me when I was mute, just before I learned words.

I looked at her out of the corner of my eye to see if she was also looking at the stars. Her eyes were open: they were brown, like many of the animals' eyes. In the dark they seemed

almost black. Stars were reflected in them. Imperceptibly, I squirmed closer to her, until we were touching, flank to flank, rib to rib. She didn't seem to mind.

I remember how her hand had felt in mine—at once comforting and thrilling—so I touched her palm with my fingertips and once again she opened her hand to let me enclose it. She sighed.

"What do you think He means?" she asked.

"I've given up trying to understand Him."

"When He was talking about creating me from you, I was angry."

"Why?"

"It doesn't make sense. I feel different from you. I want to be what I am, not what you are."

"You *are* different from me. That's what I like most about you."

She turned on her side to face me, and for the very first time she looked at me intently, studying my face, then my body.

"We are different, aren't we? I don't understand why He insists on our being the same. How can our flesh be the same? How can our skin be the same? Your skin ends there..." She squeezed my hand. "And my flesh ends here." She drew her hand away.

"You can't take what He says at face value. I haven't had a lot of experience at naming so far, but I'm beginning to think He doesn't use words the way I do. One thing I've noticed, for example, is that my names don't make much difference, except to me. His names, on the other hand, seem to make things happen."

"That's frightening."

"Yes, it can be."

We stopped talking then, and soon afterwards we fell asleep.

The days passed, things didn't change much. All in all, we were happy. We happened on to copulation accidentally, like billions of other novices later. Of course, that first time, once we were committed, we couldn't have stopped if we'd wanted to.

Then one day the Garden became unbearable. The heat, for example, separated itself from being merely part of the weather and adopted a personality of its own—wet, insistent, malevolent. And then, perhaps as a result of the heat, the vegetation changed. Where before hedges bordered beds of wildflowers and evergreens surrounded woodland glades, now there was a deep mat of fleshy undergrowth, infested with a thriving population of snakes and stinging insects. The river now widened out in a thick, chocolate stew, pressing under the roots of mahogany and ebony, collapsing them into the channel. The whole mess rotted, erupted, burst up in growth.

We gave up trying to sleep in the Garden and moved out onto the savannah.

Among the hundreds of questions that now occupied my attention, I had one central question: Why was the Garden evicting us? And following from that, she had another; it was one I would never have thought up, a horrible question, but once it was asked, we couldn't stop asking it.

What had we done?

Was there a time when we should have taken some action? Or, instead, was there something we *had* done that had set off this horrible spate of growth? And if so, what was it? What was that act? That sin.

These of course were the questions all exiles would ask over and over. What have I done wrong that I am cast out from my home? Questioning, inevitably, led to prayers. God was obviously the source of our exile. We struggled to find ways to undo whatever it was that we'd

done wrong. This was a painful process (and again an all-too-familiar one) because we hadn't any idea where to start. We used our imaginations.

I tried to unname the animals, the trees, the birds: Maybe naming them had infused them with this goitered growth. We stopped copulating, and then we copulated even more. She prepared all sorts of food for God and left them in places where previously he'd made His appearances.

Finally, we ran out of ideas. Our life was so simple; there wasn't much we could change.

"I've thought of one last thing," she said.

"Let's hear it. Anything's worth a try." I sighed and put my head in my hands.

"I've been thinking that perhaps we're not supposed to be so different. Perhaps our differences are a mistake. Perhaps we're disgusting."

"Who knows? That's as plausible as anything else. But what can we do about it?"

"We could try disguising our differences. We could cover ourselves up."

So that's what we did, although it wasn't easy to know how to go about it. Eventually, though, we wound banana leaves around ourselves. Being wrapped in thick, glossy slabs of vegetation made the heat even more unbearable, and we moved even farther out onto the plain. The animals, who up until now had treated us with condescension, took fright. The herds kept their distance, nervously glancing up from their constant chewing to keep an eye on us.

Outside the Garden, on the steppe, I was lost. At night, the stars took over. They ran across the sky, and their movement made me realize that all around me there were things in motion—the long grass stretched over the horizon—who knew where it ended—new animals showed up, the river changed course—and all the while the mechanics of the sky churned on, apart from us.

More than ever, I was gripped by the need to name. I couldn't rest until everything new had its name and was safely stored behind the barrier of the named world. And because I could never finish naming the stars, the night hung above me uncompleted, restless. The shapes the stars made—those I could give words to—but each scarlet, violet, silver point streaking across the dome of the night sky . . . their wordlessness made me an insomniac.

In my restlessness, and in some way I still don't understand, I named work into being. By making the words for farming, hunting, house-building, I made them realities. Unlike the stars, these tasks were entirely my own, and I established a friendship with them, despite the effort and disappointment they gave me.

Meanwhile, we were in for another disconcerting surprise. Heva got frighteningly larger. Nothing she did halted her growth; she was like the Garden itself, and I secretly suspected that she, too, would continue expanding until she filled the plains. One morning she awoke in pain; her agony continued the whole of that day and the next, until, of course, the inevitable happened: A child came out of her.

A child. He looked like us in miniature, but his appearance could have been some sort of trick. Maybe he was another kind of creature entirely, one that needed naming. Yet as he grew (and she shrank), we began to assume that eventually he'd arrive at our size. Unlike the woman, he couldn't speak at first: I sympathized because I could see in his struggle to talk my own early frustration before I hit on naming. I set about teaching him the names I'd assigned to the world, and he learned these easily.

Children kept coming. We couldn't stop them. They grew to adulthood; some departed, some stayed around. They made their own arrangements among themselves, and I didn't delve too deeply in to what they were doing—which was a good thing, because shortly *they* started producing offspring. I admired them, though; they were very self-sufficient, figuring out for themselves ways to live.

In the meantime, although He'd ceased to bother with me, God had reappeared to my children. There were epiphanies and sacrifices. The point of the offerings, He told them, was to propitiate his displeasure with us. Yet He never told them what exactly they'd done. And there were elaborate instructions, mostly about altars and food, always unaccompanied by explanations.

Naturally, my children argued a great deal about what God actually meant. Each of them was convinced that he or she had the secret. They divided into factions. Because they hadn't known Him earlier, when he was puzzling but benign, they came to think of Him as severely rational. Maybe that's what He wanted them to think. In any case, He had a habit of appearing to them separately, pointing out that this or that offering had pleased Him, or, conversely, that a particular sacrifice wasn't what He'd had in mind.

I too prayed. I prayed that He would speak to me again, just once, so that I could reason with Him, implore Him not to single anyone out, but to give us His instructions collectively, clearly, simply.

This habit of visiting first one and then another of my children simply worsened an already unhealthy process: From the earliest youth, my two oldest sons had set out to be as different from each other as they could make themselves: The first son, following in my footsteps, had become a farmer (he was never particularly original); the second one, in reaction, herded animals.

As time passed, and as each accumulated a family and got better at providing food for it, they began to compete. Evidently God was speaking to each of them secretly, and the result was that they entered into a sacrifice contest. Early one morning they began building altars; they were already piling boulders when I awoke and looked out my window to see what they were up to. All day they worked at the altars, first stacking and fitting the stones, and then rearranging them.

When night fell, both altars were roughly identical, but the next morning, my elder son Hevel's altar had been painted. The base was deep blue and the top a glowing red. Even at a distance, I could see his brother, Qayin, was furious. He stood by the river, staring at Hevel's altar and fuming.

Right after that, things got impressively better for Hevel. His entire establishment was bursting with fertility; the woman he was living with had twins, all his cattle dropped healthy calves, his sheep give birth to triplets.

Then one day, the two men were missing. No one had ever been missing before: Where could you go? Several days passed, and having searched all the routine places they might have been, I finally decided to set off for the limits of Hevel's grazing lands.

I walked for two days, farther than I'd ever been from the Garden, and at noon on the third day, I found them. It was hot, as hot as the Garden before the Exile, but this was a new kind of heat, dessicated, blown on the wind, holy. Out here the sun seemed closer. Stretched around them in a natural ring was a circle of flat slabs, bleached like the bones of giants. Both of my sons were lying on the stones, at opposites poles of the ring. Both were motionless. Maybe they're sleeping, I thought.

But they weren't sleeping. Their faces were horrible: lips parched, eyelids peeled back, their faces painted like Hevel's altar—rust red and flaking. Worst of all, they stared upward unblinking in the hot air, at the dried sun. The wind quickened. Dust and sand was gathered up and blown against us, coating us. I touched Hevel's hand and drew back: his skin—in this oven—was cold. A fly was nibbling at his iris. I thought of our name for him, "breath."

Then I ran to Qayin and took *his* hand, which was hot, feverish. I shook him, and slowly he sat up.

"What's wrong with your brother?" I asked, raising my voice so that Qayin could hear me over the roar of the wind.

"He's dead," Qayin answered. He lay back down on the stone.

A new name, "dead." A name I hadn't made and didn't understand.

"What's that mean, 'dead?'" He sat back up again.

"It means he's stopped breathing. It means he's not going to talk ever again, he's not going to move around, he's not going to fuck his wife or play with his kids or eat breakfast or wade in the river or look at the world. He's not going to build any more fucking altars.

"He's dead."

He glared at me as though I might be dead, too, in a minute.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"I have my instructions. And now I'm going to carry them out." He paused and lowered his voice. "I'm going to Nod."

"What's 'to nod?'" I thought maybe nodding had something to do with dying.

"It's a place. Where I've been exiled."

"Another exile. I suppose this is what we have to expect from now on." I started to ask how he knew about this Nod, but then I realized the answer was obvious. "Are there people there? We're not the only ones around?"

"Evidently," he said, sliding off the stone and setting out. I ran up to him and turned him to me.

"No matter what's happened, I don't care. We have our own lives to live. Either He leaves us alone or we may as well all be dead, like Hevel. It used to be . . . I was by myself . . . it didn't matter so much what happened. Then I started to name everything—that's when it started . . . so I thought it was a test. But it wasn't. It was . . . it was . . ."

"It was a sin," Qayin said. "Like murder." And he turned and walked off into a cloud of sand.

"Like what?" I shouted after him. "What was that name?"

Chapter Five

The air in the room was muggy and used-up, and, toward the end of the story, Vaughan had a hard time paying attention.

After a while, quiet settled around them. Klee had stopped talking.

"It's amazing you remember all those details," Vaughan said politely. He found it hard to believe that Klee was the original, the first-person First Person.

"Don't you think it's a good story . . . as a story?"

"Yes.... But everybody's heard it."

"That's true." Vaughan felt Klee shift closer. "Although, looking at it another way, my version is the fresh one, the one everyone else has plagiarized."

They fell silent again. Weightless moments passed, like leaf-ash lifted by a bonfire, drifting, unsinkable, in the autumn wind. Klee took Vaughan's hand, gripping it as his father had when he was a small boy, crossing the street or negotiating a steep flight of stairs. Earlier in his life, Vaughan dreamt often of his dead father. In these dreams, Vaughan's father had been mistakenly dead—it turned out he'd only been travelling, indefinitely on the road—but now he'd returned to his family, weakened but cheerful. After Julia died, dreams of his dead father had been supplanted by his dreams of his dead wife. But with his hand grasped in Klee's strong palm, he remembered especially how his father smelled, of tobacco and wool and old-fashioned shaving cream. It was as if the memory were a small ingot of iron set atop his heart, weighing it down, slowing it. He felt breathless. A series of gentle thumps resonated in the darkness. At first he mistook these for his struggling heartbeats, and then he realized that among the dead there could be no beating of hearts. His earlier dread returned. Maybe the devildog was trying to get in.

"Did you hear something?" he asked.

"I think someone's at the door." Klee said, and then, sensing Vaughan's dismay, added: "But not anyone threatening. It's not anybody we need to worry about."

"Shouldn't we open it?"

"Ohhhh," Klee sighed impatiently, as though he'd suddenly tired of humoring him. "If you want to. Personally, I don't think there's any point."

"Why should anyone want to get in? What do you think they want?"

Klee snuffled. "Oh, to disturb us. To stir things up. Many persons here have an insatiable yearning for animation."

The noise at the door continued, evenly spaced, incessant, like a machine. Whatever was knocking knew they were in the room. If only the knocking been more importunate, if only it had sounded as though a *person* needed to get in....

"Ask who's there," Klee suggested.

"Who's there?" Vaughan whispered.

"No, louder. He won't hear you."

"Who's there?" His voice cracked. No response. The muffled rapping continued.

"One of us will have to get up and answer it."

"It'll have to be you. You live here."

"Live here? You're mistaken. I don't live anywhere."

"Anyway, there's a chance that whoever it is will know you. I'm a stranger."

"You're wrong about that. Your being here was taken note of from the outset."

"Taken note of? By whom? How do you know?"

"Consider how long I've been here. Not an eternity, I grant you, but very, very long. You don't stop learning, when you die. That's one thing, that's something on the positive side: You never stop gaining in knowledge."

Thuk, thuk, thuk. The padded, maddeningly importunate rapping went on.

"Oh, this is intolerable," cried Vaughan. He cleared a path to the door, kicking aside ottomans, shoving armchairs, overturning bibelots.

"Who's there?" he demanded. Vaughan opened the door, and a stumpy ball of rags slipped in, plunged forward, and fell blindly into the scattered furniture. Wood cracked, china crashed.

"I would have warned you if you'd given me the chance," Vaughan said unsympathetically. "It's dark in here." Their visitor moaned.

"I'm hurt." Vaughan sought him out by his groans and felt for his limbs, which were apparently wrapped under several layers of cloth.

"I can't imagine you're terribly injured with all that padding," Vaughan said.

"It's cold. I can't stand to be cold," the other replied.

"It's not cold. It's terribly hot."

"It is?" He paused, as though to consider this. "Maybe you're right. At least, it's not as cold as it was."

"Probably where he came from it was cold," said Klee.

"Who's that?" demanded the intruder.

"You know who it is, Noh. Don't pretend."

"Oh, yes. I should have known."

"Don't tell me you were you *unprepared*."

"Prudence is a virtue," Noh sullenly replied.

"Prudent! You're hopeless. Go back to your boat."

"The boat was all that stood between mankind and annihilation."

"You don't know that."

"I do. God told me."

"God told you." The cushions sighed. "Then I suppose it's true."

"In any case," said Noh, "I'm not here to argue with you. This person is to come with me."

"Where's he going?"

"I want to move on," Vaughan interjected. He felt compelled to escape the stifling darkness, like being entombed in a German apartment in winter — radiators blasting, leaden curtains pulled shut, down-packed bolsters pressing on his face.

Klee said: "I understand. You still need to get on...with things." He sighed. "But it's not wise to wander around here without someone who knows what he's doing." Klee said.

"He'll be with me," said Noh.

"In your boat. On the water."

"Yes...," Noh replied uncertainly. "But it's a short voyage. Hardly anything more than a ferry ride."

Vaughan felt slightly ill.

All at once a new noise erupted beyond the door, but this time the racket erupted from below and only grew louder, more threatening, as it proceeded up the staircase. Several pairs of feet (several persons or one being with many feet? Vaughan asked himself absurdly) stamped about on the landing. Then forceful, aggressive hammering began both on the door itself and the walls beside the door.

Within the room, they were absolutely silent, instinctively lying low, like hares crouched and frozen as the hounds dashed by.

Minutes passed, the pounding continued unabated, and then Vaughan's anxiety dissipated a little. The hullabaloo outside took on a new quality, if not exactly benign at least less threatening. It was as if inept and noisy builders were at work in the hallway, and he began to react normally, with irritation.

"I'm going to see what they want," he said impatiently.

"What?" Klee and Noh cried in unison.

"You don't know what you're doing," hissed Klee.

"Anything could be out there," Noh whispered through invisibly clenched teeth.

"Whoever it is, why don't they say something? Why do they keep pounding on the walls?"

"Exactly," Klee replied. "That's precisely what Noh means—it might not be...you know...it might be *anything*."

"What else could it be?" Yet Vaughan suddenly understood that whatever was pounding away at the walls might well be unimaginable. His dread returned.

"There's another another way out," Klee whispered.

Vaughan felt someone take his hand and he was tugged gently through the furniture. The blows went on echoing like kettle drums, but as he was pulled along, there were fewer things underfoot, the noise diminished slightly, and then a sound like a heavy bough breaking from an old oak made the darkness itself reverberate. This was instantly followed by the trampling of many feet, which (Vaughan once again thought) might have belonged to several two-legged persons or one many-legged beast. To be apprehended in this stifling, crepuscular tomb by that clearly malevolent centipede was more dreadful than anything he could imagine.

Except for the imaginings of childhood, where specks on the horizon turned into giants who leaped on mountains threatening to crush him, where silent, sunlit houses bloomed with ghosts. Vaughan now knew that these were actually only intimations of death, of this world wherein he now found himself harried by furies who'd lain in patient wait for him since infancy, from the moment he'd been born.

He'd forgotten these great, terrifying tracts of childhood. To recall how unspeakable and how palpable those infant visions had been would reveal the ridiculous buffoon's delusion of which the remainder of his life had been composed.

He was transfixed. I can't see my body, he thought—maybe it's vanished. That was no small blessing. It wasn't for nothing that hell largely featured bodily torture, he thought. You could dismiss having your bones fractured till the splinters pierced the neurons of your frying flesh; you could say that mental torture was the worst thing—but when it came down to it, when you really *were* in hell, you gladly accepted some psychological substitute. Everlasting clinical depression, for example.

"In here," Klee said. Vaughan felt himself being pushed forward into a mass of naphtha-scented felt and wool. Noh and Klee pressed against him, and a moment later they were

swaddled in darkness far greater than any up till now, so absolutely black that colored figures swam about his head, bluish stars the color of gas-jets blossomed above him. He could taste the odor of overcoats and petroleum, like soft feelers brushing the interior of his nostrils and mouth. This, then, was the end: This muffling, suffocating, hideous confinement had been in fact planned for him. Now he was truly dead.

A little star began to dance a few inches in front of his nose. Maybe he could find comfort in these dim hallucinations. He could cultivate them like a prisoner in solitary confinement. He hadn't heard Klee or Noh for sometime, but that didn't mean anything. Or, rather, it probably meant that he was now alone. They were his ushers into eternity.

But then the light diffused, rounded, spread before him, until it formed itself into a small window. Vaughan heard the homely sound of hangers scraping on a clothes-rack, as someone pushed aside overcoats, and then a long rectangle of silvery light opened from floor to ceiling, illuminating wool hats and umbrellas and galoshes and two rusted folding chairs. Before them was a landing, and leading down from the landing, steps.

Closing the door behind them, they filed down the stairs. Another windowed door illuminated the foyer below them. The hallway and staircase were absolutely still. There was no sign of pursuit, but they came to the foot of the steps without speaking.

Outside the pavement glared, the housefronts were shadowless, and the street's straight line, in contrast to its lunatic rigidity last night, now gave off an air of classical rightness, of impersonality. It was bitterly cold. In fact, he now noticed dry, glittering snow, piled like igloo-blocks of styrofoam, against the buildings. He thought he heard the distant tinkling of bells, of sleigh bells! What else could they be? They were unmistakable. But no sleigh appeared. The street was even emptier than it had been the night before.

They began walking up the boulevard toward the horizon. The distance seemed limitless.

"How far is it?" Vaughan asked.

"How far is what?" Klee asked testily.

"How far is where we're going?"

"That's immaterial," Noh said. Klee laughed. In this frigid and crystalline light, Klee did not look as Vaughan had imagined. He was, for one thing, neither old nor ill-favored, but rather ruggedly handsome, graying but still middle-aged, at the prime of his life, as they used to say in a more optimistic, less teen-obsessed era. His face and body might have been cast by a high-baroque sculptor conceiving a youngish Jove or the cowboy hero of a Saturday Western.

But even more pronounced was the warmth that hovered around him, a sort of ultimate humanity. Perhaps this . . . compassion or sympathy . . . whatever it was, perhaps it was a result of the way his eyes looked—large and ingenuous, clear and revelatory (what they revealed, however, was a mystery).

Their companion was another story. Primarily, he was dirty, swaddled in various articles of faintly naval-looking clothing. Beneath several greasy wool fisherman's sweaters, he wore a sort of kaftan, and that was tucked into canvas pants, which were tucked messily into rubber boots. Jammed down over his head was an ancient yellow sou'wester partially blocking his greasy, bearded face. Yet his eyes, too, were unusual—sharp, observant . . . in fact, prudent.

The buildings lining the street petered out and were gradually replaced by vacant lots partly filled with rubble, overgrown with now-withered milkweed and dried-out scotch broom. Spotted around the lots were the ruins of single buildings, tenements, and leading to the buildings were paths dotted with dessicated feces, perhaps from cats or goats, maybe even humans.

But the landscape wasn't entirely empty; here and there, huge ornamented buildings arose in the distance. It was impossible to judge their real size—not because they were too far away or because their isolation afforded no standard of comparison—but rather because it was impossible to know what the buildings were used for. They were like those towering Stalinist edifices thrown up by the Russians—part monument, part skyscraper, part deranged architectural fantasy.

Vaughan could make out the decoration of their facades, although detail sharpened and vanished, as though it appeared behind a thick screen of heated smog. Although he easily traced the delicate bas relief running under cornices or between columns, he could barely detect the obviously colossal statues that sprouted in colonades on the buildings' roofs. Perhaps that was why the figures limned by the statuary were indefinable, as though they were characters from the mythology of another galaxy.

"Are we headed for one of those buildings?" Vaughan asked.

Noh (who was much shorter than Vaughan) squinted up at him askance, from beneath the floppy rim of the sou'wester: "Why do you say that?"

"Because there isn't much of anyplace else we can go. Anyway, they look like public buildings."

His companions laughed.

"Nothing's public," Klee said. "Everything is individual, case by case."

"That's not where we're going," interrupted Noh, as though to cut short any foolish persiflage from Vaughan and Klee. "We're heading for my boat."

An improbable destination, Vaughan thought. The open spaces around them looked like the winter tundra of the landlocked northern city in which Vaughan had spent his childhood. In fact the snow-dusted ground looked much like the frozen steppe that was his school playground, where the children spent their recesses at school huddled, staring out at the tiny icy cyclones of dust abrading the packed dirt. Here too dustdevils offered the only things in movement in the suspended landscape.

They walked beneath an overpass, where overhead, something, perhaps an elevated train, rattled the iron gridwork. Noh turned and mounted a set of steel stairs attached to the gridwork. Vaughan and Klee followed, all three then making their way over a series of catwalks. A breeze began to blow through the interstices of the beams and in places brilliant patches of light reflected from the metal. Patches of frost, like etched illustrations of atomic bonds, clung to the girders.

Although Vaughan needed to stay alert to avoid missteps off the narrow walks, from time to time he glanced around from this new, higher perspective. He was surprised that the rise in elevation didn't afford a wider perspective: There wasn't anything to be seen that he hadn't seen from ground-level.

Perhaps the sky was closer. Or more prominent, or less diminished. The iron conflux of trestle and rail and I-beam gradually curved in the distance, and they approached a building at the bend, one whose front was made of that pale, glazed brick the color of tapioca which formed many of the facades on his boyhood street. There was as well the ivory-like stone that composed the decorative elements of those childhood buildings, the curved window-sills and mock Renaissance keystones, while its sides were built of homelier, coarse, ruddy brick. A design perhaps had once been painted on the weathered side facing them, which now appeared as a sort of pentimento painted in a spectrum of reds—Chinese red, burnt sienna, russet—streaked with chrome yellow.

Beside the large square of faded paint was a four-paned window bordered within by gauzy kitchen curtains. Through the window Vaughan saw a curved portion of some appliance.

It shone, in appliance-whiteness, beside an equally white tabletop. In the gray-green shadows to the left, a sink possibly stood, with a drainboard holding a few drying plates, a washrag neatly folded over the faucets. Perhaps a calendar with a photograph of an autumnal New England village hung over the sink. But what would a calendar say here? Maybe there would be neat, numberless appliance-white squares, and the apple-red and clapboard-white photograph would be monthless, except if you wanted to draw some conclusion from the season shedding its early glory on the deserted purple road under the scarlet maples. Vaughan knew that in the kitchen it was that time right before lunch—11:30 or so—when the air was fresh and cool, and the table clean, and the kids about to come in from noon recess.

“What are you doing?” Klee and Noh waited for him a little way down the catwalk.

Vaughan hurried to catch up but then asked himself why he should put himself out. Why should he rush anywhere now? There was no one around, there would *be* no one around. Wherever Julia was, she was far from here. The Afterlife was in extent itself eternal, limitless, and he envisioned dead souls scattered like asteroids parsecs apart among the limitless galaxies. When he came to think of it, there wasn’t any reason that they couldn’t still be wandering around somewhere in the old, life-containing universe: Maybe when you died, you just got your ticket punched for some other destination. The supralunary travel agents arranged for transport—not out of the familiar, weary astral level of ordinary existence—but simply someplace else within it, like being on an intensely boring business trip that never ended.

“Look,” Vaughan demanded, “I can’t go any further unless I have some assurance that ... that there’s more than this.” He gestured vaguely past the gridwork. Fleeting, he considered returning to the building with the weathered paint and climbing through the kitchen window. He could stay there until his situation got clearer. Somehow, though, he knew he couldn’t do that; he wouldn’t be permitted to do that.

Klee started to reply, but Noh growled, loudly, startling them. He’d jerked himself upright, gazing intently in the direction from which they’d come, his nose lifted like a beagle’s to sift the breeze for scents.

“They’re still behind us,” he said as he continued to stare down the catwalk. Klee and Vaughan strained to see their pursuers amid the jumble of cross-girders and horizontal beams, but they heard and saw nothing—not even a scrap of paper blew by; no distant echo of voices or footsteps marred the insulated world. This must be what a mausoleum feels like, Vaughan thought: gellid, marmoreal air, silence reigning as though the world were muffled by several feet of granite crusted over with heavy marble angels. Light coming in down the stairs leading to the tomb, coming through the barred doorway, spilling into the crypt.

No, it wasn’t like that exactly, because the sun still shone as if it were the always friendly half-hour right before noon, that time brought along from childhood and blessed by the smell of the classroom at morning’s end, the animal odor of other children and the golden tops of the elm trees beckoning outside...

He looked to the meridian, seeking the sun like a good luck charm, , and although it was cloudless, the sky (or whatever it might be called) had a milky pallor like the frozen flag of pearl in a glass marble. Where was the light coming from? And without a sun, why did it seem like daylight, changing through the infinite series as familiar as one’s own moods, in fact indistinguishable from them? How could the world be lit as if it were 11:43 in the morning in late winter in a northern city by a thawing lake?

A sound like someone hitting lead pipes with a small hammer broke the silence. Klee rotated his head slowly, like a hunter, stopping occasionally to study some part of the still scene more closely, and Noh, like Klee’s dog, lifted his nose still higher. The hammering rang out, growing louder and louder, until the noise finally resolved itself into the sound of many people

rushing up steel stairs, colliding into one another. Metal clinked against metal, as though they were carrying farm implements.

Noh suddenly broke into a sprint, running faster and more nimbly than Vaughan would have imagined. Staring in the direction of the commotion, Klee began to walk backward, grabbing Vaughan by the nape of the neck as he went. He was surprisingly strong. How could men that old move so quickly and grasp so powerfully? Then he turned and ran as well, thrusting Vaughan before him.

It was very hard to run along the narrow walk, where small, built-in obstacles popped up every twenty feet or so – switches and blocks and thick iron staples like miniature goalposts. Vaughan tried to keep Noh in sight, but the old man was easily outpacing him, and besides, he kept disappearing as the catwalk curved or passed behind a thicket of beams and girders. He heard Klee pounding along behind him, breathing heavily, and farther off (but not so very far), the stamp of hobnailed boots behind them. He felt the boards on the walkway jiggle and bounce.

He wanted very much to look back over his shoulder, but he knew he'd lose his footing, and more to the point, he didn't actually want to see their pursuers, to look upon them, for (he suddenly knew) to do so would be to inflict paralysis on oneself. He imagined how the sight of these furies would be like embalming fluid shunted unceremoniously through one of his veins. And he would feel faint – faint in fact as he had felt...when was it?...at the very first, after he'd died.

All at once, he was overcome by death's vulnerability. When you were alive, you kept moving; it was harder to pin you down, although that happened often enough. Still, in life you always had one last chance, however forlorn, to dodge, to slip ratlike and agile out of the way of doom. In death, on the other hand, you were nailed to the door. You'd made your last escape. You could never get away, never again.

He sank to his knees, Klee collided with him, tripped, and fell.

"You fool! What's wrong with you?" he hissed at Vaughan as he tried to catch his breath. "We have to get out of here. We can't let them catch up."

"Why?" Vaughan wanted to moan, to wail, to sob. "Where can we go? We're in hell...No one escapes his damnation."

Rubbing his right arm as though it were bruised, Klee gazed at Vaughan with concern, perhaps, Vaughan thought, with newfound respect, although he couldn't conceive what he'd done to earn that.

"My dear boy," Klee said rather softly. "We are not, as you say, in hell." He paused, as though to see what effect this revelation might have on Vaughan. "Somewhere, yes, we're definitely somewhere. And of course we're not Elsewhere. But you haven't landed in Gehenna."

Vaughan wanted to ask, then, whether there was such a place, and if there wasn't, did paradise exist, was there a heaven, but Klee rose to his feet, held out his hand and gently raised Vaughan.

"Come on," Klee said quietly, "it's not far now." Thenceforth they walked rapidly but no longer in a headlong panic, and Vaughan felt better, as though instead of fleeing, they were beating a kind of fighting retreat. They could still hear rumbling of their pursuers, like barrels rolling along a dock, but judging from the sound, they drew no nearer. Vaughan now had courage to look back: He saw no one, and indeed, looking forward again, there wasn't any sign of Noh.

After several minutes of steady, purposeful walking, however, they caught sight of him trying to hide behind a rusted iron arch. Vaughan and Klee drew even with him.

"I thought..." he began, "I thought you'd been..." He trailed off, looking at them curiously. The strain which had seemed a permanent aspect of his physiognomy, hardening the

deep folds running about his mouth, now perceptibly eased, and he looked tolerant—still humorless, but more forebearing, even kindly. And like Adam, he looked terribly human, as though being a human being was something you had to learn to be, and the longer you were at it, the better you became.

The catwalk ended, rather surprisingly, at a kind of pier projecting from the iron trestlework. A boat floated below them in a sea as clear as alcohol, its single mast rising up to eye level. Noh studied the deck anxiously. Then he gazed at some ropes swinging from the yardarm, grasping a frayed line as it blew toward them, and leapt into space. Vaughan remembered hearing that on land sailors looked deceptively awkward, a perception instantly dissipated on board a ship, when their seaborne agility came into play. That was very apparent now: Weighted by Noh's body, the rope swung like a pendulum as he slid rapidly to the deck. He ran to the stern and peered down into the deckhouse. He made his way forward, checking holds, hatches, the fo'c's'le. He called up to them.

"Come aboard."

"I suppose we should join him," said Klee.

"I don't trust those ropes."

"Why not? What does it matter? You're already dead." Saying that, he clutched a line and slid to the deck—a little awkwardly but still more spryly than Vaughan would have given him credit for. Vaughan looked around, searching for some other way down to the deck, a stairway or a ladder. Yes, he *was* temporarily dead, but there was always the risk of a more permanent state, maybe something even worse: falling to the deck or into the unnaturally crystalline sea could bring about something horrible, something more mortal than death. But there was no other way to descend.

The hairy rope turned out to be surprisingly silken. It seemed to have a life of its own and tugged him first into space, swinging well out over the transparent sea. He could see far down into its depth, down to the sugary white sand at the bottom. He could see reefs of pastel-colored glass far off on the floor of the sea. And then he swung back and floated to the deck like the feather of a passing tern.

Noh bustled about securing and loosening and otherwise organizing ropes. All at once a broad, dazzling sail exploded above them, lapped and luffed and finally trimmed.

Klee busied himself efficiently casting off, as though he too were a seaman. But then, thought Vaughan, when you'd been around as long as Klee, you probably mastered all sorts of skills.

The boat's prow swung seaward, Klee, who was now seated in the stern, hauled in the boom and the vessel leapt forward and settled into swift, steady progress.

Looking for someplace to sit down, Vaughan found a barrel nearby the tiller. Cargo littered the deck; a dozen cases of Italian tomato sauce were pushed against the gunwales, a keg of "Ezy-Wipe" window cleaner rolled back and forth against them.

Noh peered at the horizon. "The weather's changing," he said. Vaughan looked about him: the sky (if that was what was over them) was cloudless, and the surface of the sea (if that was what was under them) glittered, motionless. Only the wind moved.

The hull began to creak softly. Looking over the rails, Vaughan saw the seabottom, where long, pastel-colored shapes swam along, keeping pace with the boat. Their bodies were articulated, Vaughan noted, but he didn't think they were actual fish. They looked more like living submarines. Whatever they were, their movement was comforting.

"What are those animals swimming around in the ocean?" he asked.

Noh, who was professionally preoccupied by the set of the tiller and the angle of the sail, glanced perfunctorily at him and said: "I haven't any idea. I've never looked at them too

closely." He paused, pulling the main sheet in a fraction of an inch, making a minute adjustment to the tiller.

Then he added: "I wouldn't call this an ocean if I were you."

"Then what is it?"

"It's hard to say. It's not a river or a lake. On the other hand, it might be anything—without knowing its limits, you couldn't really define it."

"So you haven't sailed around it?"

"Around it? No . . . sailing around it hadn't occurred to me. I suppose you could, if you had any control over the boat."

This disconcerted and then annoyed Vaughan: Why the elaborate charade with the boat's equipment if something else were directing it?

"So it's controlled from somewhere else . . ."

"Yes, it's controlled from Elsewhere. Which isn't to say that I don't know its destination, most of the time."

"And you know its destination now?"

"I trust." Vaughan waited for him to continue, to say what it was he trusted in. The wind got brisker. Strangely here on the water the cold wasn't quite so bad. He slipped between a barrel and the coil of rope on which Noh sat. Even if there were no sun up in the...whatever it was...there was a kind of mild illumination which, in the protection afforded by his nook, felt a little like watery January sunshine. He felt sleepy. Klee had already dropped off, curling around the mast and covering himself with an old sail. The boards beneath him sounded like old cupboard doors creaking open. He closed his eyes and for a moment dreamt of the scent of wax and oranges, like Christmas, and he saw the felt-lined interior of a drawer in his grandmother's buffet; small silver teaspoons and little velvet bags were scattered about it, and spilt white salt on the green velvet.

He opened his eyes. Noh was staring straight ahead. Sitting stolidly steering the boat, he was again little more than a rag-wrapped nautical ball. Possibly, Vaughan thought, he was the well-known ferryman, the one who transported souls to the Other Shore. Or possibly he was another kind of inept guardian, like Klee, but in charge of this other realm, this limitless body of water, which was plausibly death itself—clear, endless, soporific.

Vaughan wondered idly when Noh had died and what he'd done before he did. He wondered how long he'd been here.

"Your experience since you've been here, it's given you reason to trust?" he asked. Noh glanced at him, then at the set of the sail, and then he turned to gaze stolidly forward.

"I was always a trusting person," he answered finally. "Despite everything." He trimmed the sail and adjusted the tiller; the boat swung a few points into the wind. Vaughan started to go back to sleep, but then Noh went on.

"In life," he said, "the situation wasn't much different."

Chapter Six

Until I was forty, said Noh, I never saw water, that is, large amounts of water—seas, great inland lakes, vast alluvial rivers, labyrinthine deltas, estuaries, the surface of the ocean as it grips you and makes you realize that here, truly, is the surface of the Earth, the only world that matters. On the blue waters, there are no losses because you've already lost the land. You give it up gladly. One day you decide to depart; it's your own decision, your sacrifice. And then you travel generally in the direction of where you're going, without at the same time hoping to get there directly, without the arrogance of thinking you're treading a line, as you do on the plains, dragging your marks in the hardpan of the steppe.

As a boy, we moved across the uplands, never settling down, but it wasn't like journeying on the sea. On the sea, you know you can never settle in one place, and even if you could, if you could remain motionless, the place itself would change: the water would flow out beneath you, the waves change from cobalt blue to emerald.

We never remained long in one place. My father was in some sort of exile, running from some crime the nature of which we could only speculate on. His blotched face evidently was result of this earlier experience, something that had happened to him in his youth. Instead of running up and down a particular street before a particular house, half-conscious of the shadows changing in the seasons and watching first the flowers of spring and then the weeds of summer, and the coloring and drying of the leaves falling on a particular yard—instead of this, I watched my toes make scratches on the salt earth. If you walk long enough, if you concentrate on your feet walking, eventually you become separated from your legs. You grow curious about where they're taking you. Perhaps your feet know where they're going, you think.

When my father died, he was very old, and as he died, he pointed out that he would have preferred never to have gotten that old. He said he would have preferred to be young for a while and then die, but for some reason that condition wasn't one that was given to him. At least, he said, he would have liked some explanation of the rationale—why life couldn't be a fixed span, instead of this wildly varying length that kept you from planning anything.

My reaction was different. The lesson I learned from father's living to this stupendous age (according to him, two or three centuries, but he might have been lying)—the lesson I learned was just the opposite: Plan For Everything. As for the lack of any explanation, well, that of course implied an explanation from God, and if Father couldn't wring anything from God, I doubted anybody could.

When Father started out trying to get an Explanation from God, he (Father) was fairly reasonable. His course of action was to experiment with ritual sacrifices. But after running through the usual sacrificial beasts without any divine response, Father began gathering up a strange assortment of animals and plants. He collected desert rats and ibexes and flowering cactuses and inedible fruit. Offering these up on increasingly elaborate altars, however, still had

no effect. God was no more interested in these exotic flora and fauna than He had been in ordinary goats, milk, and sheaves of wheat.

Acquiring out-of-the-ordinary sacrificial objects was the main reason we were always on the move. For weeks we wandered in mountains which were cold and barren, except for tiny, bright alpine flowers or colonies of marmosets. In the course of these travels, he learned a lot about biology, as did we, his children, although this knowledge wasn't of much use back then. Occasionally we would come across hermits living in these remote landscapes, men and women with whom my father had much in common. Both the hermits and my father had grown desperate in their longing to hear God's word—not simply to talk to him, but to have Him answer back. God had frequently spoken to others; that was common knowledge. Why did He refuse to speak to these earnest worshippers, these people who had in fact sacrificed themselves to Him? Why did He choose rich, complacent peasants as His interlocutors? Why were their unimaginative offerings pleasing in His sight, while the exertions of these more single-minded devotees unworthy?

Of course the hermits operated largely by prayer. They often suggested to my father that this was the basis on which he should conduct his affairs with God. They admitted that even though prayer wasn't foolproof, there was nevertheless a record of success.

Father tried meditating, but he wasn't much good at it. He craved action, and handling the elaborate rituals of his sacrifices gave him something to do. At the same time, I was growing up, becoming, as sons always do, a distorted reflection of my father; in most important respects, I was like him, with his same passion for collection and with that same compulsion to hear God's voice. Yet the form that these characteristics took was different, as though, beginning with identical needs, I'd turned abruptly on my heel and gone off at a ninety-degree angle, dragging my father's obsessions along behind me.

For one thing, as I grew older, I avoided the sacrifices in any way I could, and in any case, Father was too wrapped up in his rituals to notice my absence. Frankly, I couldn't bear to watch the slaughter of the animals as they came to realize—the moment before Father grabbed the muzzle in his meaty hand, thrusting the base of the skull onto the animal's back, and expertly drawing the curved blade through the pelt—as their eyes dilated wide and seeing, and they smelled their imminent death. The struggles of the larger animals ended up in gruesome scenes, my father sometimes slicing himself as well as the antelope or tapir he was sacrificing. Glossy violet blood, clotted velvety red blood, red geysers hosing the sacrificial table and nearby devotees—it was awful.

I began by caring for the animals that were for one reason or another rejected; sometimes we brought a creature far from its native habitat—lifting it from the high peaks and dragging it off to the baked steppes—before Father decided it wasn't what God wanted. Releasing it in this new environment would have been terribly cruel (not as cruel as cutting its head off, it's true, but still inhumane), and so I would keep the animal, and soon I had accumulated a small zoo.

There we'd be, my family and I, straggling across the plains with our donkeys and sheep, my brothers and sisters, my mother, everybody loaded down, strung out in a line a hundred yards long, and bringing up the end I'd follow with my cages roped to the smallest donkey, leading larger animals by leashes. When we camped, I ran off to find food for them, which wasn't always easy considering the broad variety of species I had in train.

After I'd fed my animals, as dusk fell over the steppe, I would study them as they ate. I idly sketched them in the dirt with my finger, and then, as I admired my drawings, I decided to preserve them. I had seen people making various kinds of records on wet clay, and so I began molding lozenges with earth and water. Discovering the right kind of ground, the kind that gave

up clay, preoccupied me as much as finding fodder for the animals, and eventually, as my family wandered from place to place, I found myself observing the entire landscape: Wondering what animals were in a place led to wondering what they ate, which led to looking closely at flowers and grasses and trees, and looking for deposits of clay made me inspect the earth, the rocks and boulders and streambeds, the way water rushed cold from the gray, nubbly mountains, abrading the plains, petering out in the hardpan. Where we went, there wasn't much to see: the land was, to put it mildly, inhospitable: Fairly soon I'd catalogued nearly everything in the natural world through which we passed.

But once in a while we would come to an oasis, and then I was useless to my family because I was too busy adding new frogs, reeds, fruits to what I already knew about the world. Finally, one day, we came to a great river, a river that led to the sea. Scores of birds I'd never seen lived on the river—herons, ducks, egrets—all kinds of wildfowl. Hippotamuses lived in the river, and animals you don't see anymore—giant, sleek swimming creatures, half-crocodile, half-whale, with sinusoidal necks, extending up, up from the river's surface, fifty pounds of kelp dripping from their tiny mouths.

The riverine landscape looked much different than it eventually became, so different that the way it was then is now unimaginable. The banks, the air, reedbeds, the river's surface blown into wavelets—it thronged with living things—swooping, splashing, hovering, paddling animals. Ponderous, swaying animals (like the hippos), half in and half out of the water; timorous, steppe-colored animals (antelopes and zebras) slipping to the riverside at dawn; toothy, predatory animals gulping down the other animals.

As you might imagine, my father and I had different views about this teeming variety of animal life: He launched on a frenzy of sacrifices. Nobody stopped him; in fact, he attracted followers from the populous settlements along the riverbank. His rituals would last all day and into the night, with the devotees howling and chanting in noonday heat, glistening with sweat, bitten by mosquitoes swarming from the nearby marshes. Animal after animal was slaughtered, offered up on the layered altars which stretched higher and higher, becoming buildings themselves, larger than the huts of the villagers. Although God still didn't appear, something was nevertheless inspiring Father to create elaborate variations on his original rituals; visions told him to add incomprehensible phrases to his liturgy, to perform certain symbolic movements, to use evermore complicated formulas to choose the sacrificial animal—the third-born, male offspring of a black gazelle born during the first full moon after the solstice.

We began living in a hut. It was something my mother decided; my father didn't care where we lived, and in any case, we didn't see him much.

Behind the hut, I had built my cages. I especially had a passion for birds, and one day on a remote part of the river I caught a small falcon—golden-winged, cinammon-breasted, with eyes like opals. Animals then were only mildly suspicious; they trusted me, and I never had any difficulty in capturing them. In fact, many of them lived outside of cages, without restraint, collecting around me at feeding time.

So one morning I was behind the hut, drawing the falcon's head on a clay tablet when my father appeared. Dressed in a grimy white linen robe (his priestly garment), his face smeared with ochre, his hands indelibly stained with blood, he stood gazing at the bird.

"God wants that bird as an offering," he said to the bird.

"No, he doesn't," I said to my father, "not unless God has finally started talking to you." It didn't matter much what you said to my father—he never paid attention.

"The bird is pleasing to the Lord. The bird is a messenger of the Lord. The bird will carry my prayers up to the Lord."

"It's my bird," I said. I waved my arms at the falcon, and he flew away to the top of a thorn tree. Then, as Father moved toward the tree, the falcon flew upward, higher and higher, straight up, until we could barely see him, describing gyres in the cloudless, hazy sky, and for just a moment it was almost as if we'd been an ordinary father and son, quietly watching an interesting animal, sharing in that sense of mild longing people have when they watch hawks cut loose from the ground, living in that other world of updrafts and thermals. I looked at my father, and for the first time in my life I saw him exactly as he was: the sadistic, saintly fervor had gone out of his face, leaving disappointment, impotence, weariness. I felt sorry for him in the way only adolescent children can pity their parents.

Then Father turned toward me, and his face once again became sanguine, insane. In his belt was one of the keen-bladed knives he used for sacrifices; he drew it and stepped toward me.

I'd always known it would come to this. I knew the time would come when animals wouldn't be enough: He'd have to start on humans. I ran from him, I ran to the river's edge, I ran down the river. I ran until I was exhausted and fell to the ground, and when I had recovered, I continued down the river, toward the sea.

But I never reached it, not then, not for several more years. Instead, I came to another settlement, and that's where I remained until the Cataclysm. The usual things happened to me: I met a young woman, we started living together, she gave birth to children, I worked.

I didn't work too hard—actually, nobody did at first. The world was full of animals, edible plants sprang up in neat patches by the rivers and extended for many acres into the plains. As for me, it was only natural that I accumulated flocks and herds that were healthy and prolific. And I continued to collect other animals as well. People knew about me, and travelers brought me exotic species when they passed through our settlement.

Perhaps had I been born later, when those criminal or half-witted lunatics that later generations cynically called "leaders" were around, later when there might have been a President of Babylon or an Emir of Nod, I could probably have sold off some of my collection as "pets." Anyway, during my lifetime there weren't any such things as either leaders *or* pets. On the other hand, people back then were more tolerant—they didn't have any preconceptions about how you were supposed to spend your time. So I collected lots of strange animals. Big deal: That was the general attitude.

As I got older, I grew more systematic about the animals, grouping them according to where they lived, or what they ate. I continued to sketch them, and I built a hut simply to house the tablets that held the drawings. It was wonderful work: I fell asleep at night devising new ways to organize the tablets, planning which animals I would draw the next day. In life, in death, it doesn't matter—the greatest joy is to be occupied, really occupied, filling your own particular eternity with work that owns you.

The life going on outside the collection was a dream to me, and perhaps that's why the news about Father reached me last. My family—my wife, my children, my children's mates—they had all known about my father, but they kept his activities secret from me. Yet there came a time when you couldn't ignore him; the human world then was too small.

It seems that having grown tired of trying to contact God, and not getting any response, Father had switched to a new set of gods. He wasn't alone. A lot of people felt the same way: Maybe there'd been a time when God had daily contact with humans, but since then He'd disappeared. These deities of Father's—no one knew where they came from. But they left no doubt about what kinds of rituals they wanted or the sorts of sacrifices they enjoyed. Frankly, I don't know the details: I didn't want to know. Suffice it to say, people started disappearing, the rituals evidently involved a lot of . . . unusual behavior, although, as I say, we were a pretty nonjudgmental group in the early days.

God, though, was nervous.

I was the only one who knew He was nervous, as fate would have it. One day I was crouched in the dirt, encouraging two different species of lizards to mate, when I heard a voice. I looked up, and I was alone. I glanced at the lizards; one was staring at me—the female. She spoke, and I was knocked over. Literally, I was pushed back-down into the dirt and Her message filled me up to the edges of my skin and went past that and out into the courtyard where I was and over the rooftops and careened against the mountains about six miles off, booming, sizzling, galvanic.

I'm not the only one to have had this experience, which is something I've learned as various souls have shown up over the millenia. I sought them out and questioned them—especially the ones who had some sort of reputation for hearing God. They all agreed: God talks, you listen. What God says replaces your cell structure—you can't be or do anything other than what the message tells you to be or do. You might as well be a plant-eater trying to be a meat-eater.

And yet God speaks in a voice you'll understand, maybe one of your own voices, the one you only use perhaps when you finally have something to say to yourself: The voice that speaks when all the other voices have been shamed, exhausted, dried up; it's the voice that talks when you've used up thinking. It says, "Now that it's obvious this plan will never work, perhaps you're ready to act as you should have acted a week, two months, six years ago."

Or maybe God's mouth is something you'll believe in. For me, it was the lizard—at first. As God spoke to me, other parts of the landscape spoke in turn.

At first, I lay on my back, spread-eagled, staring unblinkingly up at the sky, which now churned with sinews of red and orange melting clay.

"This isn't working out," said the lizard. "I can't keep creating new species of animals so that people can return them to me dead. And another thing: I ordered you people to work and get sweaty. But instead the fields are deserted because everybody's out capturing sacrificial beasts."

"When did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"When did you say that about working and sweating?"

"That was in the initial legislation. Didn't anybody write it down?"

"Why would we do that?"

"The point is that I never encouraged all these religious activities, and the reason I never encouraged them is obvious, isn't it?"

"It's obvious to me. But it's definitely not obvious to my father."

The lizard blinked—first one set of lids, then the other. "My reasoning was that if I stopped appearing to individuals, you'd get on with your lives. But things didn't work out that way." The lizard sighed. "I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention when you were being assembled. Too much circuitry."

"I had this plan, I hoped for the best, a creature aware of itself in the cosmos! You'd be a little like Me, my children. I saw your thoughts, sparkling and twinkling clear and unpolluted down your neural networks"

The voice left the lizard and rustled somewhere above my head. I sat up: Some figs on a fig tree spoke in chorus.

"But now it turns out your brains don't work right— yes-no, zero-one, bad-good, God here, God gone, on and on and on."

I had no idea what He was talking about.

“Actually, it’s a question of a state of mind. Someone like your father, he looks up in the air, he expects skywriting.” God’s voice swept upward and rushed down from the strands of high cumulus clouds, which had replaced the red and orange sinews. “Your father wants Me to approve of him, he wants direct contact. Gazing at the heavens, it’s no wonder he doesn’t notice the blood draining from the carcasses around him.” God’s voice switched to my pulsebeat. “A complicated mixture, blood. It’s beautiful...subtle, I grant you, not easy to understand, but a lovely concept. But your father’s brain has dried out.” Now the message trickled from the bucket hanging over the well.

“Flowing water, blood pulsing in the arteries where it belongs—these mean nothing to him.” The sound of God grew, modulating from the drip of the well-water, then to the patter of rain, to the rush of a stream over boulders, to waves, splashes, geysers—and finally the silence of flood, flowing over the land.

“It’s time for a new direction, or not really a *new* direction, but a *redirection*. If the human race is interested in sacrifice, if that’s the only subject that keeps their attention, then they can sacrifice themselves. Liquid is what they need. They’re too arid.”

At this point, having recovered a little, I spoke up.

“Are You sure You have the right person? I haven’t really paid much attention to what’s going on around here. The animals have kept me pretty busy . . .”

“No, you’re the one I want. Actually, the animals have saved you.”

“Saved me from what?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. All you need to do is follow my instructions.”

* * *

Cloud banks like we’d never seen before drifted northward from the ocean. The muggy heat got muggier; we slept outside, hoping for a breeze, but for several weeks the air was weighted down, full of moisture just on the verge of rain but never raining. Our sole relief was when the clouds blocked out the sun as they inched inland and broke against the distant mountains, where we could see them drenching the hillsides, turning them bluish-green, the color of the sea. The mosquitoes multiplied.

Naturally, the heat affected people’s minds: There were several domestic murders, a young woman showed up at the town well stark naked and delirious. But if anything the weather quickened the pace of rituals and sacrifices, which now went on round the clock.

Then, at last, it began to rain. We were grateful at first. When the first drops fell through the dessicated, shrunken thatch of our huts, everyone went outside to cool off in the shower. After a couple of hours of this—with children and their grandparents splashing around in the puddles and the stock happily bellowing and the crocodiles waddling dangerously in the mud by the riverside—the rain fell harder, so hard everybody retreated back indoors. Several days followed during which the rain steadily increased. I stood in my doorway trying to imagine how the air could contain so much rain—there didn’t seem to be any room for it.

Then there was the boat: I built it by the river. God would tell me to walk to such and such a place—to a grove of cedars for planks or to a nearby settlement where someone made pegs or rope or tar—then I’d come back and stack whatever part I’d found with the other parts. When I’d assembled all the components, God explained how to join them together.

It was like building a kit. Since I knew nothing about boats or carpentry, I had no idea what the finished product would look like. But after I was done, I was astonished: the boat was beautiful. My neighbors, who had taken an initial interest in what I was doing and then gotten bored and left me alone, now appeared one by one, admiring the boat. I took them on tours. Even though I’d only carried out orders, I was still proud of my job: After all, my hands had built the boat—it could have been worse.

A dearth of divine instructions followed. From the doorway, I could see the boat resting on the riverbank, and I worried that the river would rise and carry it away. One morning, a pig flew through the door. The pig was followed by several chickens, earthenware pots, a small tree. Anything that could be picked up and thrown into the air was flying around smashing into the side of our hut or sailing off toward the mountains. The boat and the river beyond it appeared momentarily and vanished: Water, which was no longer anything you could call rain, sliced horizontally across the landscape in laminated sheets. Each time the air cleared enough so that I could see the edge of the river, the water level had crept upward, until waves were lapping against the boat's hull. And by nightfall it floated in low water.

I now knew what the boat was for. I was worried that everyone in my family—which by now included my mother, my wife, my children, their spouses, my grandchildren—wouldn't be able to get on the boat. But when we all climbed in, we noticed something very strange.

I went down into the hold, expecting us to be miserably cramped in the tiny cabin. But after I descended the ladder and looked around, I was amazed: There were timbered corridors and lofts and galleries and other sets of stairs leading further downward. I scrambled back up to the deck where the proportions had remained the same. I jumped into the hold: the cavernous space was still there. One by one, my family followed me. Some of them were terrified and tried to escape.

Previously, I'd decided that it wasn't a good idea to explain about why I was building the boat; maybe God had spoken to me, maybe I'd lost my mind, maybe I'd become like my father. In any case, it was a good boat and there didn't seem to be any point in explaining how it was that someone like me could build something like that. I let everybody think that boatbuilding was a secret talent I had, which I hadn't exploited until then.

Now, though, I thought it was time to tell my story, which after all didn't seem so farfetched anymore. Knowing that God was in fact responsible for this boat calmed them down—at any rate, it explained why the hold was so enormous.

Then it occurred to me that with all that space I could easily bring along my animal collection. So my sons-in-law and I started carting the cages and leading the bigger animals on board.

As I stood by the railing supervising this, I happened to look up: A little distance off, emerging through the sheets of rain, was a very large animal. Another large animal appeared, and another. These weren't normal animals, not any animals I'd ever seen. After all, you couldn't have ignored them had they been around—the first was as big as our entire settlement. Its tail snaked around two huts, its head invisibly stretched up into the downpour. Others of these animals were lower to the ground, but just as large, with terrifying spiny backs and tiny heads. They lumbered toward the boat and stood a little way off, watching us load the last animals from my collection.

Then the boat's hull, whose keel must have been still resting in the mud, pulled free, and immediately we rushed away on the current. The group of strange animals watched us depart, and as they disappeared, I glimpsed their faces: They knew they were doomed.

We passed out onto the open sea, or where the sea used to start. We sat belowdecks, heaving and popping in the storm.

"What do we do now?" someone asked.

"I'm not sure," I answered. "It didn't occur to me to find out what would happen after the boat was built."

"Why did God choose *you* to build it?" a son-in-law asked. "I mean why didn't He pick someone a little more . . . practical?"

"I'm very prudent," I said defensively.

“Yes, he is that,” my wife said. “Noh is very prudent. That’s probably why God picked him.”

“It probably has something to do with the animals,” my mother said. My mother had a very mysterious attitude about my animal collection: I suppose she thought I’d inherited my father’s lunacy, except in a more benign form.

“So do you know how to navigate this thing?” my son-in-law continued.

He had a point: Now that I thought about it, there didn’t seem to be any way to make the boat go where you wanted it to. On the other hand, where would you go when as far as we could tell everything was underwater? I went up on deck to see if there was a sail I hadn’t noticed, or a set of oars.

We were in a deep canyon of water. On each side of the boat, a sheer liquid cliff rose out of sight; within the waves schools of fish swam at eyelevel, whales poked their snouts through the foam. The storm roared.

I returned below, where the passengers lay silently on bedding they’d packed against the walls of the corridor. Beyond, in the galleries and chambers surrounding the human quarters, the animals were also quiet, although they were less miserable than the humans. Mostly, they appeared to be subdued but alert. I walked among them and spoke to them softly, stroking them. I sat down in a pile of hay by the lesser gazelles. A single lamp burned in the vast interior space, only dimly reaching the corner where I sat. It was still and warm here—the rocking of the hull was less noticeable.

I wondered how far beneath the waterline we were. A few feet away, through the planking, the sea gurgled, and I began to imagine all the drowned creatures floating around us. I saw their bodies piling up on the seabottom, millions of them, and I thought about the strange leviathans who had watched us float away, about how they, and perhaps hundreds of other unknown species, would now vanish.

I wasn’t particularly distraught over the extinction of humankind since people and God have their own agenda, their own disagreements: But I couldn’t see any reason that animals had to be brought into what was after all a philosophical quarrel.

Whatever the human soul was supposed to be, as far as I was concerned living bodies were the complex part of creation. How much work had gone into them! Of course it was God’s work, but, I asked myself, what purpose did it serve to extirpate all those bodies? Bodies adapted to every imaginable space in creation, bodies which by their own means had discovered a hundred forms of digestion, a thousand forms of sensing, a million forms of reproduction. Now those veins and nerves and tissues lay on the ocean floor, levelled and transformed from life to simple mineral existence.

The snuffling and rustling of the animals around me, the warmth of the hay, put me to sleep. When I awoke I was disoriented: at first, I thought I’d lain down among the animal pens at home, and then I heard the water outside the hull and felt the pitching of the boat.

When I returned to their quarters, my family was desperate: the children were crying, the adults were moaning. They looked up as I entered. I knew what they were thinking, even though they were too ill to speak: What have you gotten us into? When will it end?

The tempest went on for many more days—perhaps the traditional forty—I couldn’t say: It was impossible to tell the difference between night and day when we were more or less underwater. Finally, however, the storm receded to the level of an average hurricane, and eventually the waves evened out altogether. Fog followed, and we were becalmed in the midst of a Void. Since the air in the hold had grown fetid, we now spent our time on deck, hidden from one another by slate-colored clouds, without depth, without borders.

Throughout these days that had no division, I fed the animals, doctored their minor injuries, petted them, and the rest of the time I lay on their straw, listening to them, drifting into sleep and waking. No one else bothered to enter their section of the boat—partly through apathy, partly because I suppose the smell of animals had grown too strong.

Finally, the fog lifted, the sun came out, time returned. The entire surface of the sea looked like some alluvial backwater where trash and bodies abandoned to the current had collected, washing slowly in the delicate chop. It was a horrible sight, especially the bodies, which had bloated and bleached after floating many weeks. Huts bobbed by, and carts and altars and clay tablets.

Late one afternoon, just below the rim of the setting sun, we sighted a mountain on the horizon, and the following morning we drew near to land.

Everyone was overjoyed—everyone, that is, except me. I helped them disembark, and I freed the animals. As the people bustled around the shore, taking stock of their provisions, hugging one another, celebrating, the animals stood around dumbfounded. They seemed to have forgotten what it was like to be on land; but eventually they drifted off, looking uncertain. I let them go. I'd lost my need to collect them or to record what they looked like, how they lived. I now realized they existed without me, and that what would happen to them, or to me, would happen.

I tried living on land again, but whenever I stood still, I felt cemented to the earth. I craved the flux of the sea. I built a much smaller boat, this time without help; it turned out that I *did* have a talent for naval architecture. I sailed away and I suppose my family was glad to see me go. And after I was gone, it was easier for them to make up stories about me, making me appear different than I actually was—better, more prescient, closer to God. In the end, in their imaginations, the picture they drew was a portrait of my father as I think he wanted to be remembered: A holy savior.

Sailing a small boat, actually having to tend sail and tiller, coping with the living wind on the surface of the sea's infinite and omnipotent body (the world's largest living thing), I thought of other living things, especially of the ancient animals I'd left behind. Having watched animals for most of my life, having studied them, I didn't have illusions about what they could and couldn't feel. I was reluctant to admit that any animals could feel the despair these animals' faces expressed. Yet they haunted me.

Now as I pass certain, inaccessible coasts, I sometimes see creatures which look like them, and I wonder if their spirits have been transported here. I stand off at a distance and watch them plodding up far-off hills, grazing on tiny patches of meadow. Perhaps each of us has an assignment in eternity—a problem we're supposed to figure out, an area of expertise, except that we never become expert at it. Mine apparently is animals. What do they know? What do they mean? For themselves, of course, they aren't required to have meaning. Animals exist for their own purpose, apart from ours. I think about their difference from us, which is that they, I suppose, don't reflect on us, while some of us reflect on them. And that must mean that reflection, within the scope of eternity, is itself unnecessary, which is a comforting thought.

Chapter Seven

Vaughan peered over the boat's gunwale down into the glycerine-like water where something huge and eel-like slithered across the distant seabottom. There was as much distracting detail in death, he decided, as in life: streets, doors, furniture, animals, windows, closets, staircases – the whole desperate accumulation. Some of it probably dangerous.

The boat's hull ricocheted against a row of pilings. Vaughan hadn't noticed they'd been nearing land and was doubly surprised to find that they'd landed at some sort of city that gently ascended a half-moon of hills cupping the sizeable bay in which they floated. Klee, who had rolled against the gunwale, moaned in his sleep. Noh busied himself moving agilely between boat and dock, tossing ropes and reefing sails.

Along the shore, other docks stood empty. Warehouses had been built out over a few large piers, and these extended back to the waterfront where more warehouses blocked the view inland. Leaves blew along the asphalt, and the port appeared to be abandoned, except for a lone figure standing at the foot of the dock, dressed like Noh in layers of clothing. The air was different here, crisp and autumnal, and fall clouds swept over the roofs of the buildings. Bars of light, like strips of gold-leaf applied on the sky, passed between the clouds.

Klee awoke and rubbed his eyes. He stood up and stretched.

"So we've arrived . . ." he said.

"Well, we've landed anyway," said Noh.

Vaughan climbed over the railing and then assisted Klee (whose earlier quickness had inexplicably disappeared) as he painfully straddled and finally cleared the gunwale and straightened himself on the dock.

Vaughan turned and looked out to sea. Perhaps their pursuers had taken ship and were sailing hull-down just past the horizon, although Klee and Noh seemed unconcerned.

"Those people that were after us," Vaughan began, "do you think we've lost them?"

Klee looked puzzled: "Which people?"

"The ones chasing us on the elevated tracks or overpass or whatever it was."

"Oh," said Klee. "Those people." He looked at Noh with an expression Vaughan couldn't fathom. Were they conspiring to conceal something from him? And if so, why? Maybe they were trying to protect him. Klee and Noh looked seaward.

"There's nobody there now," Noh said.

A long time ago Vaughan had been afflicted by bouts of anxiety, which had disappeared after he'd met Julia, who was never anxious. And after she'd died, Vaughan continued to be immune: You had to be concerned to some extent for your own well-being to feel that kind of disquiet. Without the solace that her body – her scent, voice, tread, taste – lent him, he simply didn't care, and if you didn't care, you couldn't feel that nameless fretting. He hadn't cared if something swarmed up from some unexpected quarter and engulfed him: Something already

had swarmed up and it had taken Julia. As for himself, he'd been contemptuous of free-floating demons.

Now, however, Vaughan felt the familiar hulking loom, bulky and illumined just beyond the range of visibility. But coming up fast.

And as if to give substance to his free-floating anxiety, a very old woman, her bone-white hair hanging loose down her back, was proceeding briskly down the dock toward them. Vaughan wondered whether she'd halt or walk right into him. Probably she couldn't see very well. When she stopped, she was nearly standing on his toes.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. Vaughan glanced at Klee and Noh, but they stood silent and impassive, onlookers. It wasn't up to them to offer explanations.

"You might say I was asked to come, and I came."

"It would be more accurate to say that you've intruded. You're a kind of trespasser."

"But that's not something I could have known. Not until I'd actually...arrived here."

He found it difficult to say that he'd died. He shrank from the dread, heavy and inviolable, that these words called up. Julia was not in this place. Julia was Elsewhere.

"You might have had a decent terror of death: That's what it's there for, as a kind of prohibition."

"If the fear of death is supposed to discourage people from dying," Vaughan mumbled, "it isn't very effective."

"The fear of death is effective in responsible people."

Klee finally spoke: "In any case, he here's now."

"That's what you don't seem to understand. He isn't anywhere. He's lost."

Exactly, thought Vaughan.

"If he's with us," Klee pointed out, "he can only be as lost as we are."

"It would have been better if you'd ignored him." She looked at Vaughan contemptuously. "He can't have a very high degree of reality. You might have shunned him, and eventually he might have disappeared. Instead, you told him stories."

"They were only stories, Ru'at," said Noh sullenly.

"What kinds of stories they were, how much they correspond to actual fact, or even if they were or were not your own stories, doesn't enter into it. By telling them, you've encouraged him."

"They're only the stories that everyone already knows," Klee said.

"He may go back where he came from. And then he'll repeat them."

"I'm having a very hard time concentrating," Vaughan said impatiently, "It's hard to remember. But even if I did remember what I've heard, and if I repeated these...these stories, no one would care. They're stories nobody would care about."

For a moment, Ru'at gazed at him curiously.

"They wouldn't take them seriously?" she asked.

"Of course not."

"Not even if they believed they were true?"

"Especially if they believed they were true."

"We're losing touch," she said. She looked up at the sky. It was doing a number of impressive things, turning itself first into a Tiepolo sky, baroque and aureate, and then gradually into a Canaletto sky, milky, glowing and infinite.

"The sky here is quite nice," she said. "It never changes."

They stood silently on the pier, each lost in thought, the wind turning to come off the water, bringing with it a solid ledge of clouds moving fast. A few flakes of snow fell and big

golden leaves blew along the asphalt; one landed against Vaughan's leg. He picked it up and turned it over: it was a sycamore leaf.

He looked around to locate the tree from which it came. In the direction of the city, gates opened out to small square ringed with sycamores—"plane trees," they called them in Europe. And the buildings around the square were unmistakably European, gray and impassably bourgeois. Iron balconies bulged from the first-story french windows; lyres and indecipherable crests were worked into them. Large arched openings, iron-gated, were set in the center of the buildings' facades, and oblong granite coigns were set at the corners. Here and there gilt figures—dolphins? tritons?—sprouted from the rooftops. Vaughan had seen similar streetscapes, but he wasn't sure where: possibly some backwater Eastern European capital, but possibly he thought this because the snow, now increasing, lent a sort of Austro-Hungarian ponderous gaiety to the architecture.

Ru'at began to sob, softly at first, then sniffing loudly.

"What's wrong?" Vaughan asked, although as he asked, he knew that what was bothering her was the same old thing, the same old earthbound autumnal squeeze, gripping their hearts.

"I can't handle this," she said. "We'd better start walking."

He realized that Noh had disappeared.

"Noh's gone," he said to Klee.

"What?" He turned to the sea. "Oh. Well, he probably felt it was imprudent to stay."

As they approached the limits of the port, Vaughan saw that a fence, topped with concertina wire, ran from each side of the gate leading to the square, and dwarfed in one corner of the gate was a booth. Atop it a sign said, "Douane."

Klee gripped Vaughan's arm.

"Don't forget you're related to me," he whispered.

A uniformed man emerged from the booth, and Ru'at, sniffing, approached him and spoke to him in Hungarian, possibly, or Czech, although this impression may have been simply owing to the wheedling, teary voice in which she now spoke. Drawing close to the guard, and taking his sleeve as though for support, she stealthily produced a small notebook from the folds of her coverings. Head to head they inspected its cover for a few moments. The man from the booth stepped back.

"Move quickly," she said as they passed the booth. "If he notices you, you won't be easy to explain. Keep in mind you're not especially here."

They walked diagonally through the small square. Close up, the granite-fronted buildings looked anonymous and imposing, like Swiss banks or municipal halls. Cafe tables were scattered along the sidewalks. A few empty cups sat on the damp metal tabletops. A discarded newspaper fluttered on a delicate wrought-iron chair. Beyond the scattered tables and chairs, within a wide plate glass window, Vaughan saw a bar illuminated as though by a small spotlight. A man stood behind the bar, a forgotten cigarette smoking itself in an ashtray by his elbow, as he leaned forward, staring out into the empty room.

They reached the opposite corner of the square and entered a narrow street winding uphill. There was a street sign: Via Ottobre 7.

"What happened on October 7?" he asked.

"I haven't any idea: possibly today is October 7," replied the old woman.

"They have these confused ideas about time," said Klee. The old woman gave him an acid glance. Vaughan wondered who "they" were.

The way grew steeper, and Ru'at began to wheeze

"Stop," she panted. "Let's wait for the streetcar."

The snow had begun to cling to the sidewalks now. For some minutes they stood without speaking. Vaughan had the fleeting impression that they were naturalists settled unseen in a blind because figures like timid wild animals began to emerge on the street, bundled up from head to foot. They plodded furtively by, hugging the shopfronts. A little way off, rising over the low gabled rooftops, a church spire appeared and faded in snowy fog settling over the city. Greasy black smoke suddenly poured from its graceful, sculpted tip; the smoke sank, curling around carved leaves, tracery, fluted columns.

"That church is on fire," Vaughan said. Klee and the old woman looked up at the spire.

Ru'at looked away. "It isn't a church. It's a factory."

"But it used to be a church?"

"No, it was always a factory," Klee said. "There aren't any churches. Factories are what there are instead of churches."

Vaughan began to ask what the factories produced, but he realized he had an obscure anxiety about the answer.

A narrow streetcar appeared, painted red below its windows and yellow above, lightly clanging against its rails. The colors glowed against the snow.

The elderly driver ignored them as they boarded. They sat, Vaughan at the window, Klee beside him, and Ru'at in the vacant seat in front of them. Klee stared glumly out the window at the gray blocks, which rolled by very rapidly. After a while, as though he were making an effort, Klee said:

"I tire easily. Nowadays I often feel the weight of my years."

"That's only natural."

"I didn't want you to think it had anything to do with you. Besides, this part always depresses me." He went back to looking out the window.

It was clear why Klee was depressed. The gray light grew paler, drawing itself out in the timeless, attenuated dusk of northern winters. Was it midafternoon or early evening? The curtain of snow momentarily split, revealing a panorama of burnt, shaggy shells of buildings interrupted by a few small houses, darkened but still intact. Vaughan turned to Klee, who was still looking mournfully out the window.

"This is one of the areas subject to raids," he said.

"What raids?"

"Air raids."

Vaughan was startled.

"Where would air raids come from?"

The old woman suddenly stirred. "That isn't what they are," she said without turning in her seat, and she added inconsequentially, "Anyway, it doesn't matter where they come from."

Klee ignored her. "It's said they come from Elsewhere."

The woman now tried to turn, evidently painfully, toward them. "Nobody knows that," she said dubiously, the earlier strength gone from her voice.

"From God?" Vaughan asked. "God sends out air raids?"

"No, not God," answered Klee hastily. "The raids have to do with another department."

At that point the horizon flashed. Points of silver light appeared in the distant sky, heading in their direction.

"Fortunately, we've arrived at the subway. It's safe underground."

The bus stopped, and the driver switched off the motor. They'd arrived at a cul-de-sac surrounded by bombed-out townhouses; at the center of the turnaround was the entrance to a subway station. They joined a small crowd filing down the steps.

Below there was a small platform leading to a narrow escalator, and they waited in line to descend. Meanwhile, from above, muffled explosions began to rattle the walls. The crowd shoved forward.

Vaughan surreptitiously looked about at the faces surrounding him. A creole woman stood one step below, her coppery hair tucked under a cake-shaped velvet hat. A long-faced man stood slightly lower still, his mouth slightly open, showing several missing teeth. He was blinking nervously. In fact, everywhere, up and down the escalator, were human beings—unremarkable except in their tireless variety, not simply in their broad or jutting cheekbones, their canteloupe-colored or espresso skin, but in the myriad ways they'd adorned themselves in response to the equally inexhaustible promptings of the odd and unfathomable ways they saw themselves, as they saw others see them. They wore hats that didn't fit them and hats that did; impractical, stylish overcoats; scarves slung jauntily around grimy necks; shoes built like envelopes and shoes built like cars. They were in fact rather like the sampling of humanity in the Ghost Chamber.

This realization comforted him.

The descent seemed interminable. He looked over the heads of the souls below them. The escalator went onward, under yellowish fluorescent lights, past peeling posters pasted to the walls, toward no visible end. It then occurred to him that the usual adjacent escalator wasn't beside them, the one going up.

"What happens if you want to get out of this station?" he asked.

"No one ever wants to get off here," said Ru'at, who was standing on the step behind him.

The downward movement of the escalator wasn't smooth. It rattled slightly, made little bumps in its descent, and the steps themselves were treaded with wooden strips. It was in fact identical to the ones in the London Underground, and the posters too, looked vaguely English, homely, cheery. He thought of the bombed-out streets above, and these too were like London, the city of the Blitz.

People around him were speaking to one another quietly in a measured British way, and the escalator made a sound like a child building a wooden fort, busily clicking the blocks as he built. Somewhere much deeper in the shaft people were singing, their harmonized voices rising like warm air to the surface. Vaughan strained to make out the song: it sounded valiant and nostalgic but not sentimental. A wartime song perhaps—about licking the kaiser or Hitler or some other bully who would sooner or later feel the bulldog's bite. It occurred to him that no one in the crowd looked like people he'd known in his American university town, like shopping, recreating Americans in general. Americans don't actually die, he thought mordantly; sickness, old age, and death aren't in the marketing plan. Maybe they went somewhere else when their bodies, despite lifelong pampering, gave out—an ethereal theme park, perhaps, where the unpleasantness-censor ubiquitous in his country's moral life airbrushed out the lack of plumbing, the cold water, the short rations, and the low-simmering joy of people living in history.

That was of course what made these people riding downward different: They looked like they'd been agents, victims, and coconspirators in events at once massively shared and personally exiguous: tyrannies, social experiments, torture policies, megabombings, extreme shortages of food, heat, light, freedom, air itself. They looked as though all this had been going on for a long, long time, and they and their forebearers had been witting participants, shabbily and enduringly proud that they were still around, if only to suffer further mass onslaughts from God through his prime instrument of salvation and punishment—history.

What self-delusion! thought Vaughan. I am a historian, but I may as well be a biologist or a priest or an economist. Everything could be explained by genetics or divine purpose or the free market.

This was, he reminded himself, the Afterlife. Death. These were dead souls, subject to mysteries he definitely did not want to explore. But they weren't "dead" souls, after all. All about him was evidence that, as religious people worldwide had always claimed, souls were, if not immortal, at least death-proof.

No knowledge he could acquire here, he now understood, would lead him to Julia. Wherever he was, in the Underworld or Elsewhere, the territory was as populous and variegated as any worldly region—undoubtedly in fact far more so—and he had as little chance of finding Julia as though, in life, someone had said to him in Times Square at New Year's Eve midnight, "She's here somewhere—go find her!"

He sighed deeply, shudderingly, as though at the finale of a bout of weeping, and he felt Klee's hand fall shyly, lightly on his shoulder.

"You mustn't take it so hard," Klee said.

"It's hopeless."

"Of course it is. You mustn't indulge in feelings that compete with eternity."

"I haven't any idea what that means," Vaughan said resentfully.

"Just that hope never ends. While you're alive, you *can* go on hoping and hoping, in the sure and certain knowledge that dying will put paid to it. 'While there's life, there's hope.' Which is true enough, except you'll wear yourself out." He paused. "Besides, there's nothing to hope for."

At last Vaughan thought he could see an end to the escalator: People seemed to be in motion, walking down the moving staircase, the way they do when they see the ground floor rise up to meet them. After a while Vaughan said, "I thought I'd see Julia." And saying this he felt even more as though he were going to break down, to burst into sobs, to wallow in grief. He saw no reason to restrain himself, and oddly he remembered a snatch of poetry perhaps, or perhaps Bible verse: 'And there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.'"

"Who's to say you won't see her?" Klee, looking concerned, answered. "She's here. You can't actually say you *won't* find her."

"It's unlikely finding *anyone*, once they're lost," the old woman sudden interjected. "Living or dead. What's the use in looking for them?"

"It's terrible," said Vaughan. "Going on alone forever. If there isn't going to be some sort of...reunion...." He hesitated, knowing as he said this how fatuous it sounded. Then he continued less certainly, "Then it should just end. I don't understand—what's the point of this...this personal existence, going on and on." His grief had transmuted to resentment and that had to changed to anger. "That's what paradise is, isn't it? Elsewhere—whatever you call it...Extinction. Lights out." He stopped, and then he had a glimmering realization: "This is hell. Going on with the same awareness. Having to think, for eternity. Having to be who you are, having to know pointless, shameful things about yourself..."

"You're throwing a tantrum," the old woman said. "Stop it. You'll tire yourself out."

"So? Do I need to preserve my stamina? For what? We're dead."

"All the more reason," the woman said ambiguously. Vaughan waited for her to go on.

"More reason for what? Is there something else coming, some trial? Do you know what's going to happen?"

She stood stolidly above him, unspeaking, staring down at the other travellers, until there was a tiny stirring in the crowd, and the people in front of him began walking down the

stairs. Vaughan saw a corridor the color of faded asphalt open up below them and then they stepped off.

They were impelled forward by the masses behind, yet they were neither crushed nor hurried. Vaughan felt as though he were part of the crowd in a Manhattan subway transfer station during evening rush hour, when the weary stream of commuters was too sapped to thrust itself forward but simply flowed on, like a thick and inexorable industrial distillate. The corridor opened out onto a platform. There were several sets of tracks below. With the old woman leading the way, Vaughan and Klee began walking through the crowds—who were now halted and standing about singly or in small groups, murmuring. Vaughan was unable to see a tunnel, any arching darkness to signal the platform's end, and quite soon the crowd started to thin. Eventually, the platform jogged slightly to the left, and when Vaughan looked back, the crowd had vanished; only four or five people stood scattered about.

Several sets of tracks stood between Vaughan and the opposite platform. Running along each set, separating it from the others, were a series of gracefully arched openings, like the piers of a catacomb but for the gentle light falling even in obscure corners. The station platform across the way was empty but again bathed in some remembered illumination, and he began faintly to recall the basement laundry room in the apartment building where he grew up. On cloudy winter days, the unshaded fixtures cheerily lit the washing machines and whitewashed walls—the hearty smell of Tide and Cheer and running water rising hygienically about the piles of clothing. Or perhaps his memory was confused: Possibly he was mixing up the basement laundry room with a subway trip he'd taken with his mother as a small boy, and as the remembered taste of licorice chewing gum reanimated itself, he noticed a bright yellow gum machine with a scalloped mirror bolted to a nearby steel upright. Next he fully anticipated his mother would show up in her platform shoes and boxy wool coat and silk kerchief and the purse that she'd snap open to hand him a nickel for the gum machine. Or maybe the low, expansive, steadily lit space was a figment of someone else's memory; hoardings on the opposite platform showed old-fashioned posters advertising products which had been long deceased before he'd been born. Men with slick hair and broad, razor-sharp lapels smiled confidently from the ads, brandishing unfiltered cigarettes. And all around him—the platforms and arches and tracks and hoardings—the entire scene was as though drawn in chalk, composed of intense primary colors yet nevertheless muted, clean and well-lit but still subterranean.

Stirring himself and looking about, he was a little surprised to see Klee and the old woman standing nearby, themselves clearly lost in thought. He'd forgotten them. He tried to remember whether if in life he'd brooded so continually, whether he'd been so incessantly introspective, but it was hard to remember now exactly *what* he'd thought about in life, or even in general what he'd been like. Was he mostly depressed? Yes, he suspected he had been—in any case, after Julia's death—but before that? It suddenly seemed to Vaughan desperately important that he remember the sort of man he'd been, and he began to panic as he realized that he could form no picture whatsoever of himself before he'd died. He could easily recall things that had happened to him throughout his life—in fact, experiences he'd forgotten for thirty or forty years now seemed to rise up everywhere within him, unbidden. This too aggravated his anxiety, for he felt that very soon these memories would drown him; they would be all that he perceived; he would be awash in ancient nuances of taste and smell and the way light fell on objects. It was as if he were excavating his own prehistory and examining the era, which all people harbor, dominated by the mythology of their own childhoods. Except for knowing Julia, nothing after his childhood now seemed at all crucial. His boyhood, instead, appeared to be the central point of his life, its height, its marrow and its soul. Why, he wondered, had God let him go on living past twelve or thirteen?

It must have been so that he would meet Julia.

Brussels, the city of Eurobureaucrats and cold Channel skies, had since become for him the most romantic town in Europe, absurd reinforcement for the truism that love makes the most prosaic locales dreamy.

They sat across the table in the Rue des Bouchers, a bowl of plum-color peonies and a platter of mussel shells between them. On his right Hannah Wu was saying something about the Silk Road—she'd been saying something about the Silk Road, and had gone on saying it, since before the mussels had arrived. Julia and Ben Uffelman were having a much better conversation. The parts of it that he could hear were funny, catty, absorbing. Ben told good jokes. He was one of Vaughan's best friends and he hated him. He tried to hate Julia, too, but trying to do that was laughable. For one thing he couldn't hate somebody who laughed like Julia, loudly and quite literally musically—as though she were singing different combinations of three notes. Sometimes the notes rose up the scale when she was anticipating Ben's punchline, or sometimes they ran in an incredulous three-note run punctuated by a final dismissive "ha!" Sometimes when Julia was laughing she looked across the table conspiratorially at Vaughan, and he grinned addlewittedly back.

They're lovers, he thought. Ben was married, so they had to keep their affair secret. This made everything all that much more...dangerous? serious? Whatever it was, Vaughan wasn't. What was she doing at a conference of historians? Somebody said she was a Simultaneous Translator, or some other sexy Romance language job. She definitely looked like she was in love.

Later, when he told her all this, she said, "Yes, I was in love. I was in love with *you*, Vaughan."

"You didn't even notice me," he'd replied sulkily.

"Oh, you're ridiculous. I listened to you reading that paper—whatever it was—and I thought, 'This is all real for him. He can travel in time. I wonder if I'll fall in love with him.' And then I did."

Air stirred in the station, the breeze signalling the arrival of a train, which soon pulled up to the platform. Entering the car, they sat down and resumed their separate meditations. Like the escalator and the station platform, the train looked as though it had been scavanged from various periods in the vanished twentieth century: the wicker seatbacks, the bare bulbs screwed into ordinary household sockets, the leather straps, the pointlessly cavernous roof. The tattered ads above the windows had the bold, spare look of Expressionist drawings or the curlicued elegance of fin de siècle European posters. There were few passengers in the car: a middle-aged woman sat a little down the aisle from them, looking at her reflection in the obsidian smoothness of the window and resting her chin on a big, shapeless shopping bag propped on her lap. To the left, another woman, slightly younger, sat together with a small girl, to whom from time to time she whispered softly while pointing out the pitch-black window. The child would then look attentively into the absolute obscurity. Two men sat side by side at the very end of the car, near a door.

They stared with bold disinterest at Vaughan, Klee, and Ru'at. Their dress was nearly identical—old-fashioned felt hats with rounded crowns, high-buttoned jackets exposing narrow, colorless ties, rusty black mackintoshes. Vaughan returned their gaze equally frankly, but this didn't seem to disconcert the men, except that after a few minutes one of them drew a scrap of paper and a stubby pencil from an inside pocket and scribbled something. Vaughan's newfound indifference to his own future made him reckless, and he was annoyed by their arrogance. He rose from his seat to confront them. He envisioned wordlessly snatching the paper from the note-taker's hand. There would be nothing to read, he suspected, nothing of interest, but it

would be satisfying to confirm this. Klee clutched Vaughan's elbow and firmly brought him back to his seat.

"Let me go. I'm going to see what they're writing about us."

"That's pointless. You know that," Klee said.

"So what? Following us around is pointless. Pretending to write things down about us is pointless."

Klee's face became patriarchally stern. Vaughan was brought up short by the change. Klee suddenly looked as indeed he was—an ancient of ancients—and he said, clearly enunciating each word, "There...will...be...repercussions."

Vaughan's sangfroid vanished. "What repercussions?" he asked hesitantly.

At this point the men rose from their seat, came down the aisle, and stopped in front of Vaughan. One of them inclined his head downward very slightly, with the effect, Vaughan noted, of literally looking down his nose at him.

"Your identification papers, please," he said. The effect was so banal at first, the echo of a hundred motion pictures, that Vaughan didn't react: It was as though he were semiattentively watching Conrad Veidt in black-on-gray Gestapo tunic half-heartedly repeating his unimaginative lines on a distant screen. "Right now, please," said the man, quite sharply. Klee stirred.

"What papers? He hasn't got papers. Who'd give him papers?"

"After a certain cut-off date," said the second man, "individuals must have identification."

"A death certificate," added the first man.

"He just showed up," persisted Klee, "as we all did. Countless hosts of souls entered the Afterlife, decently, without paperwork, and now all of a sudden, somebody wants to mimic the foolishness of the living. I won't stand for it," he said, standing, "I'm asserting my rights as the original resident. None of this was here. Nothing." He stared fiercely at the men, who watched him indifferently. His voice began to rise.

"God was here," he said loudly. At this Ru'at, who had been lost in thought or simply sleeping, snapped up her head and gazed fixedly at Klee.

As for the investigators, the effect of this pronouncement was even more electric. Their eyes widened in a way Vaughan had never seen outside an animated film: They enlarged to the length of half their faces, at the same time as pupil, iris, and even the tiny surface veins vanished, leaving a smooth, eggy white over the giant oval surfaces. The result was ghastly. Their bodies seemed to elongate, too, although this perception may simply have been owing to the disorienting horror Vaughan experienced as he watched the gruesome distortion of their eyes. The two men now looked, Vaughan realized, authentically demonic. The traditional goatish horns, schnauzer ears, hot-dog-colored skin—these were only the childlike naivete of Halloween. But this cartoon deformity frightened him: no, it did more than that; it terrified him, nearly rendered him paralyzed so that only with great effort, like the force you exert in a dream over your cold and claylike muscles, could he turn his head a little to see if Klee and Ru'at were also rendered helpless.

They, however, were impassive. Klee watched these facial antics contemptuously, while Ru'at simply seemed to look through the two men standing before them. Nothing happened for what seemed like a long time. Then Klee repeated softly:

"Only God was with me." He paused. "I knew his presence. I was intimate with God." The men backed off as Klee shuffled forward, still talking in a kind of vibrating whisper. "We were co-creators. By myself, I made up languages. I conceived of sex." His voice rose, its timbre now like steel, his words tempered bands, sharp and pliant wires whipping their faces, their

mouths, their eyes. "I have thought about Creation nearly as long as God, and, God help me, I'll go on thinking about it until the end of time."

The men now no longer made any pretense of standing their ground but fled down the aisle and through the door at the end of the car. Ru'at watched Klee tenderly, the tips of her eyelashes damp with tears. Vaughan shuddered.

"Were those men..." he timidly began, "where did they come from?"

Klee was silent. Finally the old woman said: "They're what you might call demons."

"Then there is a hell," Vaughan said, to himself, as though trying it out. "I am in hell."

"Look around you," Klee said testily. "Things go on as before, among the living. It's not any simpler here. There are plenty of demons mixed in with...with the..."

"The righteous," finished Ru'at.

"Yes, well," Klee glanced at her impatiently, "you'd know. They invented that kind of terminology in your time. I had enough on my hands naming practical things, tangible things."

"They were horrible," said Vaughan. "What they did with their faces—I felt like I was going insane."

"What did they do with their faces?" asked Klee.

"Didn't you see?"

"I suppose my mind was on something else."

Ru'at drew closer to Klee and grasped both his hands in hers. "You were magnificent," she said. "A righteous man tramples his enemies like a mighty bull. He rends them like the lion."

Klee was clearly embarrassed, and he disengaged himself with some difficulty, returning to his seat, but now the old woman came and sat beside him, leaning against him, passing her arm through his as he sat stiffly, his face grave and ruddy. Vaughan sat down across from them. Ru'at sighed.

For a while everyone was silent. There were still a few fellow travellers scattered about the car—he hadn't seen them during the contretemps with the demons. Probably they'd stayed back, out of the way. Then he realized that so far the train hadn't stopped. It must be a long way between stations, he thought. He thought about how he'd always liked trains, even subway trains; they were hypnotic, with their regular bump-bump, shuttle-shuttle, but they were rather quiet for all that; the noise level aboard jet aircraft was so high you didn't actually notice except that you couldn't hear anything anyone said. And, besides, jets were subject to sudden jolts and dips. You'd be drowsing and all at once you'd have fallen five thousand feet, abruptly being brought up short, and your fellow passengers would collectively say, "ooooh," and you'd be wide awake then, all right.

Meanwhile the train rattled pleasantly on. Finally Klee said to Vaughan: "She's always been this way—you can't judge by first impressions. She's actually quite sentimental."

"I wouldn't say 'sentimental,'" she said, laying her head against his arm and looking past Vaughan with the expression of a puzzled child. "It comes of being an orphan. I was an outsider. Then when those other outsiders came out of nowhere, I felt kin to them. I felt like at last I had a family."

Chapter Eight

We stopped what we were doing and watched Naomi's family enter the village, gazing at her as she made her way up our main street. Her body said, "I am listening, I am watching. The world interests me." We knew they were Jews, from Judea, our neighbor to the west, from which nothing peaceful ever came. They probably thought they'd stay a while, just until the recession or change in political party or whatever it was in Judea quieted down, and then they could return to their home.

They moved into the house next to ours, and this allowed me to observe them. I sat on our roof sometimes for hours watching Naomi in their yard crushing millet or pounding the wash. Then one day she looked up, palm outward to shield her eyes from the sun, and she saw me staring back.

"What are you doing up on that roof?" she asked. For a moment, I wasn't sure she was talking to me. I had forgotten I was there. Slowly I stood up and, foolishly pointing to myself, I made my face say, "Who me?"

"If you're looking for my sons, they're not home."

Before I could think about it, I said: "No, lady, I was watching *you*."

"Watching me?" Her eyes smiled, prepared to be surprised or anyway pleasantly distracted by this footless peasant girl. "So what do you see?"

"I haven't seen a Jew before," I said. This wasn't exactly true: Jewish traders and their caravans occasionally passed by, half-heartedly trying to disburden their camels of some of their heavier goods. But I'd never seen a Jew like Naomi.

"Do I look different from the women in this village?"

"You look different, but I think you'd be different even if you weren't a Jew."

She considered me for a moment. "I think you are also different."

"Me?" I was surprised. Then I said, "I'm an orphan." Perhaps this was the first time I'd ever said that out loud. There would have been no one to say it to because everyone in the village knew everything there was to know about everyone else, including me: My parents had sickened and died, and naturally my aunt and uncle, who were childless, had taken me as their daughter. The truth was that I frequently had a hard time distinguishing myself from my surroundings. Once in a while it occurred to me that I would someday become like my Aunt Sarah, that I would drift together with a man like Uncle Aaron and I would sink down into the sand, settling like the bricks of our little houses into the dust, rubbed smooth and featureless like everything else in the desert.

By way of further explanation, I said: "I'm exactly like every other person here."

"Except the others don't spy on people from their roofs."

"I like to watch you work." I blushed. She had the power to make me blurt out whatever I was thinking. Perhaps Jews were magicians.

"I feed the goats, I hang out the wash, I fix the henhouse. What could possibly be interesting about that?" She paused and then said teasingly, "You're not a little off in the head, are you?"

"Maybe," I answered, suspecting for the first time in my life that, yes, maybe that was my problem—I was addled. "I can't help it."

"Because," Naomi continued, without much listening to me, "I wouldn't want a crazy woman for my son's wife." She considered for a moment or two. "I wouldn't mind it if she were a little *unusual*, though."

That was when I started being part of Naomi's household. I spent more and more time there, coming home only to sleep at Aunt Sarah's. To begin with, I stayed out of the way, carefully watching what went on. I'd always been mesmerized by the way people did chores, like the way Uncle Aaron built a fire—the way he neatly shaved the long slivers of cedar, piling them in a little mound, with slender cedar stakes in a kind of basket above the shavings, each step taking exactly as long as the others. I guess watching them was my way of loving my family and the way, I'm sure, they expressed their love to me. Aunt Sarah and Uncle Aaron and I were in some ways still people of the desert, shaped for endless distance and tempered to emptiness. And like all desert people, we were grateful when there was something to observe besides mirages and simooms and the snake curves of the dunes.

At Naomi's house they never stopped talking. Moabites talked a lot too, but I discovered when I was still little that somebody cast a spell on us which made us repeat the same things on the same occasions over and over and over. If you were in the market, then you had one speech to say, knowing that the people listening to you would say their pieces in reply. When you gossiped over the fence with your neighbor, your words blew up your throat and over your tongue and through your teeth while you simply stood by and watched them. In our village, conversations had themselves.

But Naomi's family talked nonstop and long-distance, raising their voices as they moved from room to room, out into the yard, bellowing at one another at the limits of earshot, like there wasn't any distance between them, louder and louder until the neighbors, people passing the road in front of the house, everyone overheard.

One of their common, ordinary topics was themselves, the Jews, and their god, Yaw Way. This was very different from the way things were in our village, where people were happier when there wasn't any discussion of gods or magic or extraordinary events. We went about our lives with the unspoken surety that the less said about these things the better.

When Naomi and Mel, her husband, talked of the Jews and Yaw-Way, even though they used the words we all used, it was as if they were uttering something that wasn't speech at all, not even gasps or cries, but wasteland sounds, the grate of blowing sand or the croak of herons. Or maybe it was like another language going on along with the usual one, like puffs of mist accompanying words on a cold morning, curling in the blue air as though the breathy clouds were making up their own conversation.

What did "nation" mean, for example? What went on in a Jew's head when she said that word, what was it to have a "homeland"? Moab was just a countryside made of scrub and scrawny meadows where I watched goats from the time I could walk, and if I thought of it at all, I thought "This? A country? It's a national pasture." Judea, Israel, the Land of the Jews—this was a Nation among nations chosen by the god of the Jews who was in turn the God of gods.

One day, I'd asked how the Jews had come to live in Judea. "After preparing in the Negev for forty years, our ancestors swept the former inhabitants from the landscape."

"After *training* in the Negev," Mel added. "They were disciplining themselves! They were magnificent soldiers when they emerged from the desert, inured to any hardship."

“They were larks of morning,” said Naomi a little confusingly, “hawks stooping to take their prey.”

Saying this, Naomi closed her large eyes as she imagined the Jewish troops rising to destroy their enemies, and beneath her thick, dark lids, her eyes moved watching the young men girded for battle.

Then something happened. I saw the soldiers, too, I saw them like swift birds darting over the meadows.

All the years I’d listened to people’s words, the sounds had rattled around in the world of chores and familiar faces. But when I heard Naomi’s words, pictures sprang up like flowered vines from magic beans, and I wanted to be near her so that this more vivid world would always be going on in my head, like a nonstop dream, and I wouldn’t see the gravelly pastures and rubble-strewn lots of our town, and I wouldn’t remember that I was an orphan.

I started to think about words, the ordinary ones that people – Moabite and Jew – used all the time, trading them like nuts or eggs whose shells we never cracked, never realizing the meat inside. I thought about “mother.” Aunt Sarah had been my “mother,” that’s how I and everybody else always talked about her: “Ru’at, your mother’s calling you...” Aunt Sarah had diligently cared for me, but she wasn’t my mother, the mother of my body. The body of the woman from whom I came had been put away, laid in a desert grave, so that there was only sand between me and her, and nothing had replaced the feel of her hands on me, adjusting, cleaning, straightening, absent-mindedly caressing. And my body would never have known a mother if Naomi hadn’t begun to care for it, speaking to it with her touch as eloquently as she ever did when she explained about the strong-thighed young men girded in their battle-aprons.

She washed and brushed my hair, all the time softly talking to me. It was the greatest pleasure I’d ever known. She would whisper a little story to me, one from the Jews’ endless stock, of warrior heroes, kings, travellers, magicians and farmers, people who’d put themselves in the way of Yaw Way. The patter of her words flowed like sunheated ointment through my ears, pouring down the back of my neck and over my shoulders, her hands, her voice, her words like balm. Even the sharp pulls at my scalp when Naomi teased apart the clay-caked braids with the point of an ivory comb were only the necessary prelude to this mute ecstasy.

For ecstasy it was. And because it was accompanied, or perhaps even somehow sparked, by those stories of the Jews’ god, I accepted that bodily delight and the word of god were joined. As Naomi poured warm water down my scalp, and with the tips of two fingers coated each strand with oil, I was lifted beyond the scat-strewn streets and woodsmoke-burdened air of that insignificant collection of huts and those people for whom even hopelessness would have been an improvement.

The things you did to care for your body, Naomi said, had to be done at the proper times. Washing your hair was as much a ritual as any of the other thousand and one holy and ordinary actions the Jews performed according to the old rites and established times. The Jews were apparently guided through all of life by these steady and proven cycles. So I learned to anticipate the washing and combing and storytelling the way a drinker eagerly awaits a wedding feast where wine flows like a stream, the way a bride waits for her new husband, knowing that in a few specifiable moments she’ll be transported, wrapped up in unmixed bodily delight.

If this was what it meant to be a Jew, to worship god, then I was ready to fling myself down on Her altar.

* * *

Naomi’s sons were at first indistinguishable to me, and in fact the only thing I noticed was that Moab didn’t seem to agree with them. Whether it was the sand-filled air or the

swarming flies or the stagnant heat, father and sons were always more or less under the weather. Other mothers might have coddled their ailing sons and fretted over them, but Naomi decided they should marry, quickly, and have sons of their own. I would marry Maylon, the older one, a serious, careful, gentle man. For Leon, Naomi found Oprah, a zaftig and pleasant-looking girl who was marked among us for her high, sawing voice and exceptional ignorance.

I accepted Naomi's decision like you accept anything in nature.

I was surprised in fact that my betrothal to Maylon afforded happiness to Aunt Sarah and Uncle Aaron, and in any case they were well-disposed in their kindly way to give me over to someone else's keeping. I think they may have been proud of the match, in an obscure way, as though I were somehow moving up in the world.

Naomi and Mel built a second storey, to house their sons and their brides—the first such building in our town. Each of the two small rooms had a tall, narrow window on opposing walls: you could pull back the heavy cloth covering the slit and air would circulate through—a technological marvel. But for me the windows' most appealing feature was that I could peer out over the plains of Moab, and in so doing I discovered in myself a passion for horizons and the distances running up to them.

It was unusual for one's parents-in-law to afford the luxury of their own room to their newly married children. Most of the girls I knew spent their wedding night grappling blindly under a hot blanket a cubit or two from their new in-laws. This privacy had a drawback, however: At the end of the day, Maylon and I were left by ourselves, two reticent strangers. Still, we were dutiful. We knew what was expected of us, and at least nobody knew when, or if, we were coupling—even so we tried not to make any noise. This wasn't hard given that neither of us was much disposed to moan or sigh during lovemaking.

That wasn't the case with Leon and Oprah. You could hear them next door, in our room; you could hear them downstairs; you could hear them out in the street. Sometimes it sounded as if they had each grabbed an end of their bed and were tossing it in the air and letting it come crashing down on the floor. Other times, they appeared somehow to be sliding the bed across the room until it bounced off a wall.

Maylon and I would glance at each other bashfully, each of us wondering, I suppose, what Oprah and Leon had discovered sexually, and how they'd come to discover it.

In the end, however, either owing to Oprah's insatiable enthusiasm or the fecund variety of unfamiliar Moabite diseases, Leon began to decline, and after a short but violent illness, he died. And although Maylon had conserved himself, he too succumbed, bitten by one of the many insects borne on the dusty winds. Finally, passing into the shadow of these deaths, their father's vigor faltered. Mel grew absent-minded and was inadvertently trampled by our ox, a grave and serious animal, who from that time on looked woefully apologetic. In the end, he followed his masters.

The people of my village were embarrassed by the deaths of the sons and their father, feeling as though they were obscurely responsible. In the usual course of things, when one of us died, we bound the body in sheepskin, walked en masse to our burying ground, and laid it in the hard, scrabbly ground. We hadn't any other accompanying rites, and the family mourned in private. It was generally agreed, however, that in this notable instance more was called for. What, we didn't exactly know: Just as the watercourses of our neighbors petered out at our borders and the spent dust of more fertile lands fluttered over our salt basins and scrub, so was our religion a kind of silt blown downwind from our spiritually richer neighbors.

Still, our village did its best to exploit every rite we could remember in burying Naomi's husband and sons. An old man who in his Babylonian youth had been a temple acolyte confusingly chanted what he could remember of a hymn to Astarte and threw millet to the four

sacred directions. Six matrons politely keened. Small children dressed as djinns danced around a pole set up in the cemetery. When, however, the bodies had been lowered into the grave, we ran out of ritual. Oprah began to cry, bitterly. I was surprised, but then I realized guiltily that unlike me she was actually bereft: Leon's body, which she had learned to cherish, lay inert and stiff in the bottom of the hole at our feet. Never again would it twine acrobatically, joyfully, with hers. I tried hard to call up some warm, physical memory of Maylon, but all I recalled was the way he snuffled during the height of our lovemaking.

I was wondering why there had been no passion between us—was it chemistry? something I lacked?—when we heard a new sound, one we'd never heard before.

"Listen to that wind," said a woman behind me.

"Ghosts!" whispered someone else.

And indeed the sound the wind made was as you'd imagine the moaning of captive spirits, a single, low, resonating note that made your scalp shrink. Then the tone modulated and shaped itself into one barbed and strangled word: "Eloiiiiiii."

Even when I turned to Naomi and saw that sound came from her, that she was keening, even then I had to will myself to believe that the sound could come from a human mouth.

I heard in the strange coughing words and weird harmonies the dim accent of her god's voice, and I suspected that Jews harbored a dangerous secret, one that I was probably better off not knowing. Like most people who were not Jews, I assumed that many places in the world casually harbored spirits and that certain exceptional places—the camel-shaped mountain on our northern horizon or the unidentifiable tree inexplicably growing by itself on the waterless hardpan—that these places contained gods.

But now another idea gradually took form within me, and as I saw its shape, I struggled to cast it out. The world wasn't populated by a crowd of divinities, who despite their unpredictability, nonetheless had the saving grace of nearness and intimacy like neighbors whom you like or dislike but who anyway fill up the world with understandable activity.

No, in truth there was only this one god, Naomi's god, everywhere and nowhere, whose purpose was his own. And I knew that to be a Jew was to spend your life in searching that inexplicable purpose. Now I too was taken up in this journey, wherever it was headed, like an unwilling traveller bound to a caravan partway across a limitless desert.

I looked at the dirty grains strewn around the open holes and at the children's makeshift costumes, at the ancient acolyte's ox-like face.

I was also ashamed. Our lives in the village had always seemed ramshackle to me—I knew there were greater, richer peoples far away. But now I understood that of them all—the gilded Babylonians and the urbane Syrians and the fabulous Egyptians—by far the most magnificent were the Jews and their awful god.

Naomi's mourning was intimidating, a mighty stream of sounds that rattled the plates and tables. When the lament rose toward dusk, even the walls reverberated. When I woke, the house still dark and even the birds still silent, I heard her below reciting feverishly, desperately, as though her god had imposed a time limit on her and she must finish saying all the words for the spell to work. Despite gaps of silence between them, these recitations appeared to be all part of one interminable incantation.

Oprah and I worked quietly, trying not to interrupt, but the need to know the secret of those hymns, complaints, eulogies—whatever they were—was overpowering, and finally I could bear it no longer. On the fourth day of her mourning, during a lull in her chanting, I knelt by her, laying my head upon her knee. As in the old days, she began to separate the tangled strands of my hair, and after a while I asked:

"What is it you're saying, Mother, in your language?"

After a few moments, she replied: "I'm arguing." I waited for her to explain. Silence.

"Who are you arguing *with*, Mother? You can't argue with the dead." Perhaps she resented the fact that they'd died selfishly, her husband and her sons, as though they'd gone romping off leaving her to finish some complicated chore, like shearing the sheep.

She stopped running her fingers through my hair and sighed.

"It's part of being Jew, I suppose. I think we must have been arguing from the Beginning. . ." She laughed shortly. "We always lose, though."

"You argue with each other?" I thought she was unhinged by loneliness. Maybe she imagined an invisible Jewish opponent sitting there in the dusk arguing back at her.

"Sometimes with each other," she answered, "but mostly with God."

"You talk with your god? He hears you? You hear him?"

She tucked a hank of hair behind my left ear. "I certainly talk to him. I suppose sometimes he hears me and I hear him. Whether each of us always listens...I don't know. You have to listen very hard to hear God. I think God has to listen hard, too."

"It's hard to make him do your bidding..." I offered. Naomi laughed softly.

"That's not the problem. The problem is to know what his instructions are and how to carry them out."

"Oh," I said, "they come in dreams. Somebody has to interpret them."

"No, not in dreams. It's just that there are many, many...duties he imposes on us."

"What you're doing now, this singing – that's one of the duties."

She didn't reply.

I tried another tack: "What does the song say?"

"It's a song about who we are." She paused and then added, "If we're anything at all."

So there was a song that explained who the Jews were, what they were. An answer. "And what does the song say about you?"

"To say everything that the song says would take more days than we have left together. Besides, you'd have to know our language."

"If I learned the language of the Jews, would I know about God?"

She lifted my head from her lap and held it between her hands, gazing at me as if she were checking my face for a feature she'd forgotten, the color of my eyes or the length of my nose.

"Why should you want to know about God?" she asked.

"Why *shouldn't* I know about your god?" I was insulted. "Because I'm not a Jew? I was good enough to marry your son." She smiled. I grew angrier. "I was good enough to be knocked up by Jews but not good enough to *be* a Jew."

Naomi stopped smiling. "Our God is a jealous God," she said grimly. "There isn't any limit to the sacrifices he requires."

* * *

The time of shiva passed, rushing away as days do from the death of someone you know, leaving them farther and farther behind like someone standing still in the road and waving goodbye. Thinking about this, I came to the conclusion that any particular hour or day or even year hasn't much to do with the living; it's the dead who are marked in time. The hour of someone's death is *their* hour, they belong to that time as it belongs to them, while the living hurry on trying to outrun time, evading it so that it cannot claim them, for being claimed by time means dying.

Thus Mel and Maylon and Leon receded for me and for Oprah especially. And Naomi, too, had turned away from where she'd stopped in the road to bid farewell to her men and had begun to walk to where it was she was next going.

One day in the marketplace she started talking with some merchants from a caravan headed east. They'd just come from Judea, where the disturbances that had forced Naomi and Mel into exile had evidently ceased.

"Your god," the oldest of the merchants said to Naomi gravely, "has blessed your people and gives them bread."

I pictured an endless number of Jews lined up to receive their loaves from Yaw Way, whom I imagined as a tall, well-muscled, scantily clad young man—a warrior, perhaps with a kind of burnished aura about him, deftly materializing bread from thin air. But I knew enough about Naomi's god now that I was vaguely ashamed of conjuring up this image—not because I'd fantasized that Yaw Way was a desirable young man (after all, I was only human) but because I'd envisioned him at all. Shame gave way to anger. What kind of god demanded that you sacrificed yourself to him without even the possibility of imagining what he looked like? It was intolerable that Yaw Way insisted you hang your hardwon hopes on thin air, on nothing. I began to understand why the Jews argued with him.

I wanted nothing further to do with Jews. And immediately I understood that I would never be at rest again.

We walked slowly back from the market in silence, each of us contemplating the resourcefulness of the Jews and the omnipotence of their god. At our door Naomi halted and looked down the road to the west, and as if speaking to the road, she said:

"It's time for me to go, Ru'at. I can't stay in Moab any longer." This was more or less the same thing I'd repeatedly said to myself since I was four years old so I sympathized.

"Good," I replied. "I'll start packing right away."

Naomi studied me gravely, as though she were sizing up my doubtful capacity for some ordeal ordinarily allotted to someone stronger and smarter. We stood silently at the threshold for some moments.

"You can't come with me, Ru'at," Naomi finally said. "It would be too difficult."

"You mean I'm not a Jew. I'm a barbarian."

"Jews' lives are complicated. Life's not easy in my country."

I thought of Naomi sitting by the window, saying prayer after prayer, each one of which, as far as I could tell, was entirely different from the others.

"I can learn your language," I said, "I can study your rules. I can memorize your spells and incantations. I'll learn to read your...whatever you call your secret book."

"It's not secret." Naomi sighed. "There aren't any spells. But it's hard to follow the rules if you're not born a Jew."

"Why not? What makes you so different?" It was hard to read her expression: I think my question made her uncomfortable and I pressed on, spitefully. "That's it, isn't it? You're smarter than everybody else. You're better than we are."

"No, it hasn't got anything to do with being smarter or better. If we're different, it's because God has singled us out."

"Why? For what?"

"To be Jews."

"So being a Jew means getting picked to be a Jew."

"That's right. It's a question of being chosen."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be your god who chooses me, Mother—maybe all it needs is for *you* to choose me."

The day following this conversation, she went around the village, thanking people for their kindness to a stranger, for their sympathy in her grief. She stood in their doorways, as usual compact and serene, holding them in her confident and benign gaze, and as usual the

people of my town were abashed. The men studied their toes in the dust and pulled their beards; the women, hands rolled in their aprons, glanced from hands to her face and back to their hands, as though in bondage, with Naomi their liberator.

On the eve of her departure I lay in my bed and for the first time I felt Maylon's absence. Instead of the reassuring tent of bedclothes that Maylon and I had made with our bodies, the thin coverlet clung chastely to me. No one warmed me, and worse still, no solid male body weighted me down, anchored me to the bed, to my room, to Naomi's house. From time to time I heard small noises below me. I wondered if Naomi ever slept now. I wondered about her route home to Bedlam, what the Salt Sea would look like, whether there'd be bandits or soldiers. I imagined Israel after Naomi ascended from the sea into the hills around her homeland. It would be far greener than Moab, I decided, perhaps not exactly lush (I couldn't in any case visualize a lush landscape) but anyway laced with streams, and the streams would rush onward deep blue with snowmelt (cold water was something else I had a hard time imagining). I saw myself parched and grimy from travel stepping into the first mountain rivulet, lowering myself into the stream, and I felt the icy current run against my breasts and flow around me, embracing me.

All at once my heart stopped. I thought at first perhaps the roof had fallen on me, the weight on my chest was so great. With enormous effort I managed to lift my head a little and saw that nothing at all lay atop me. Maybe I was being raped by a demon. No sooner had I thought this than I was convinced it was true. I even began to see the demon faintly outlined in the narrow wafer of moonlight coming from the window across the room. He looked a little like Maylon. It occurred to me that Maylon's ghost was lingering in our room, possibly trying to make up for lost time. I felt sorry for him. I knew the flavorless quality of our lovemaking was my fault. I was sure that had he been given a little encouragement, Maylon could have been an enthusiastic lover, and maybe he'd then have aroused something in me. I was a healthy young woman: Surely I harbored somewhere the capacity for passion toward a man. Anyway, I prayed that I did.

As I prayed, I felt like a snake I'd once spent all afternoon watching as it shed its skin. As the afternoon wore on, my fascination was replaced by a kind of grief for the snake's agony as it writhed out of the dead thing clasping it. To know that a part of you had died and yet still clung intimately to the greater part of you that lived—that seemed nightmarish, intolerable. Added to this was the snake's utter vulnerability. It appeared to be blind to me or any other threat, and then, after the process was over, it went on coiling and whipping itself across the sand: I was certain that its new, raw skin burned and chafed and that the snake sensed its fragility. A pebble could tear it, a windblown twig could rip it open.

My heart had hardened like potter's clay, as though it been had fired into a small, hollow pot. My scanty breaths rasped in my throat like wind blown across the neck of a clay bottle, like the breeze sweeping a discarded snake's skin along the hardpan.

I felt quiet now, and I listened for Naomi's moving in the room below. I heard her speak, whether in our language or her own, whether to her god or to herself, I couldn't tell, but her voice spiralled upward, melting me.

Downstairs she'd warmed our last bowls of pottage, which stood tilted on the slant, splintery table (carpentry hadn't been one of Mel's strengths). I began to eat, slowly, Oprah began to eat, sniffing, and Naomi watched both of us mildly, her breakfast untouched. Nobody said anything. Then we cleaned the bowls, stored them away, and carried a few sacks out to two donkeys waiting patiently in front of the house. A small crowd looked on, two of the men helping to lift the bags and secure them on the animals' backs. We drew these simple activities out as long as we could, but we soon found ourselves standing idle in the early morning street. The raucous clank of a bellwether sounded somewhere at the bottom of the hill leading out of

our village to the east, and a herd of goats appeared. The goats in the rear of the herd impatiently shoved the ones in the front, and as they passed, they shoved us against the housefronts, rolling their big, unpleasant eyeballs at us.

We watched them pass out of town to the west, toward Judea, toward Naomi's home, leaving goat-scat and puffs of dusty sand in their wake. For a moment Naomi studied Oprah, who'd stopped crying but couldn't return Naomi's gaze. Then she turned her attention to me, and we exchanged one of those absolutely limpid silences in which your entirely shared thoughts are unbearable because you know that sharing one mind can achieve nothing in the actual world, the world that isn't you, that isn't thought or sympathy. Like a parting lover I took in her face—her long, bladelike nose descending from the high and delicate forehead, luminous eyes the color of dark olives. She gathered up the rope of the lead donkey and started down the western road after the goats.

Small, rust-colored ground-clinging flowers grew about the dooryard of the house across the road. The woman who lived in this house swept the ground, including the flowers, every day. Probably she didn't see the flowers because she didn't plant them there, or she saw them but she figured that if they were hardy enough, they'd survive being swept. And in fact they did. Being scoured with the rough broom only seemed to encourage them.

I listened to the soft plop of Naomi's donkeys' hooves receding down the road, and I looked at the scarlet flowers, paying full attention to them, and I realized that simply glancing at them each time I stepped out into the street, not even thinking about them, they nevertheless lent their tiny portion to my weariness. Had I ever been without it, this spiritless tint cast over our town? It was woven up in me, like the dust-filtered light of afternoon.

But now it had slipped from me, like the grit rinsed from my hair when Naomi washed it. She had opened another way for me, and now it was impossible to keep on in my old life.

I ran to catch up with her, and she stopped and turned toward me.

"You can't leave me here," I said.

She watched me for a moment, then she said: "I have nothing more to offer you, Ru'at." She smiled. "At my age, I can't make anymore husbands for you, and it's time for me to go home."

"You're my home. Wherever you are is my home." I knew this was true. Perhaps Yaw Way was inspiring me to know it clearly so I could speak it. "I'm your daughter."

For her part, Naomi looked (for once) surprised.

"Yes," she said after a while, "yes, I suppose you are."

Chapter Nine

“**Y**ou were prepared to follow her to the ends of the earth?” Vaughan asked.

“Yes...”

“And now...are you still...?”

“I don’t think you understand,” Ru’at said. “Just because one dies...You haven’t grasped the extent of it.”

“The extent of what? The extent of hell?” he said impatiently, “the extent of the underworld? Doesn’t anyone keep track?”

For a few moments, Ru’at and Klee remained silent.

Then Klee said bitterly: “Possibly you’re thinking of some kind of book. A registry. Someplace that good deeds and bad are recorded. You imagine, I suppose, that all this is taken down by a recording...” Klee halted abruptly, like a sleepwalker waking at the edge of canyon, looking aghast at the abyss falling away an inch from his bare toes.

“By a recording angel,” said Vaughan. “Yes, that’s right. That’s exactly what I imagine.”

“Ooooh, shushsushush,” Ru’at sighed and rocked back and forth in her seat. Klee leapt up and began going up and down the car, looking through windows. Outside all Vaughan could see was grimy charcoal sameness, too blurred and featureless even to provide the sense of motion. Still, Vaughan could tell they were moving by the occasional bumps as they rattled over the underground points.

“It’s not a good idea to talk about them,” Klee said, finally returning to his seat, not visibly reassured.

“Talk about who? About...” but now Vaughan too found it inexplicably hard to pronounce the word “angels.”

“Yes, about them.” Klee paused. “Besides,” he went on, “there aren’t any such things. Elsewhere, they probably knew, more or less, when somebody died. At one time.”

“They probably still know,” said Ru’at to herself. “We can’t really say one way or the other.”

The train entered a station, halted, the doors slid open.

“This is our stop,” Klee said.

Getting off, Vaughan looked out over what appeared to be an enormous switching-yard. Here and there domes of light glared and sparked like they were made by a score of acetylene torches. Along the horizon there was a steadier diffused glow silhouetting distant gantries and cranes. A roof vaulted overhead, which seemed to be decorated with acanthus leaves and the misshapen features of giant masks. Closer at hand, he saw they stood on a thin strip of paved siding backed by a battered concrete barrier. There was neither platform nor station. They were literally at the end of the line.

Klee began walking toward the horizon, and Vaughan followed. After they'd gone a hundred meters, and he'd grown accustomed to stepping over rails and greasy ties, Vaughan turned to say something to Ru'at and found she'd disappeared. He did not ask Klee whither she'd gone or how she might have suddenly vanished. He was resigned now to these unheralded exits, so much themselves like little deaths.

They approached one of the domes of pure, silvery light. Staring at the steady chemical luminescence was painful. As he glanced away, the half-shell of light twitched, then darted across the field of tracks. All around other beams had begun to move.

"Searchlights," he said softly to himself.

"Yes, searchlights. They're looking for something," Klee replied.

"You mean they're looking for someone," he whispered, impatiently. "That's what searchlights are for."

"It could be that, of course." Klee stopped and looked around. There was nowhere in the landscape to hide, except perhaps between the tracks, if you pressed your body hard enough against the ground, which is what Klee did. Hesitatingly, feeling a little humiliated, Vaughan imitated him. They lay head to head, saying nothing. Cinders dug into Vaughan's cheek. The smell of tar was very strong. He closed his fist and found that his palm was sticky. Hard specks of grit clung to it. A searchlight swung about nearby, like an inept dog vainly casting for a lost scent; it veered toward them, lingered and swivelled on.

A psychotic, mechanical chuckle sounded somewhere in the distance and was immediately accompanied by high-pitched wailing, like a widow's mourning keen, also borne from far off. The two men, faces inches apart, gazed at each other and listened intently. Vaughan cautiously peered over the rails atop the trackbed, but apart from the jerky dance of the searchlights, there was nothing to be seen. The soft puck-puck-puck of the chuckle went on. The wail faded and grew and faded.

"What's that noise?" Vaughan whispered. Klee didn't answer. The instinct for silence and concealment lay so heavily upon them that making any sort of sound seemed dismayingly difficult, as if a palpable force had rendered their tongues inert, like a small, disagreeable animal that had crept into their mouths.

Again Vaughan peeped over the rails, and this time he spotted a silhouette flicker in and out of a searchlight's beam, like a jerky chiaroscuro figure in an early silent film. The light darted purposefully now. The hound had finally caught its scent and soon snagged someone running with difficulty across the railyard. The sputtering noise returned, now closer, louder, and with a steely clatter. The sound of a machine gun. The runner and the beam, like a dancer and his spotlight, skipped over the landscape until all at once he was transfixed, histrionically slapping his right hand over his heart, throwing back his head, and slipping to the hot ground. No, thought Vaughan, this is impossible, we are in death. You can't shoot someone who's already dead. Then a dreadful thought occurred to him: Maybe there were other living souls trespassing in the Afterlife and here was the penalty for trespass.

Possibly, someone somewhere (someone Elsewhere), had said, "Fine, if they want to be dead, then so be it. They'll be dead indeed."

Vaughan tried to recalled what it was to be alive, and remembered that he'd lately thought that his life was really death-in-life—his state since Julia's death, in which he smugly assumed he'd "shared." Now he wondered about the depth of his mourning. In life, he liked to picture what that desolate section of his interior might look like—like tundra perhaps, wintry and pure and Scandanavian. Never would it be reanimated, a fact that sensitive people would instantly perceive. "Poor Vaughan," these people would say, "he's no longer with us, really. Not since Julia died. His emotions are bleached and sort of austere, like Scandanavian furniture."

Julia's death had provided him with the perfect alibi. "Alibi" meant "elsewhere," he remembered, and fleetingly wondered if this Elsewhere which awed the dead was an excuse for angels, thrones, and dominions to stay clear of muddied human souls.

Looking once again over the tracks, Vaughan saw that the searchlights had moved on. The only light was provided by the horizon's upcast glow. He rose to a kneeling position, brushing the cinders from his chest and thighs, and peered in the direction he thought the machine-gunned man had fallen, but he could see nothing. Klee sat up more cautiously. Finally they both stood and carefully made their way forward.

Suddenly a single spotlight burst on Klee. He sat down abruptly, neatly folding himself cross-legged, as though he might be meditating. He looked startled, and like someone suddenly meeting a long-lost acquaintance and remembering his perfidy, his expression hardened. He fell backward, his legs still crossed, his eyes open, his expression still disdainful. Vaughan stood over him, waiting. Klee didn't move. Vaughan bent down, leaned closer, touched his cold skin. But then Klee was dead. The state he was now in, however, seemed more dead.

Vaughan gazed at the body lying in the furrow before him. He felt as if he'd aged rapidly, senility settling in with the anxious dislocation between fully recognizing a familiar face and having no notion of the name attached to it. He concentrated. His own name was Albert Vaughan. He was a historian. But what did being a historian entail? Something to do with history of course: Taking part in it? Creating it? No, it meant remembering, being a kind of official rememberer, yet he could remember very little, not even the name that went with the face resting on the tiny slope of gravel.

Yet the rusty iron rails, the uneven cindery ground anxiously lit by needles of light, the cracking weight of danger—these spoke for themselves, like all presentations of threatening fact, indifferent to their hearers. Needless to say, a clear perception of the facts wasn't in itself reassuring. That was why he'd become a historian, to—what was the well-worn phrase?—to dwell in the past. To organize its facts. Immediately he remembered the comfort of distant memory, the past farflung from anything having to do with Albert Vaughan, infinitely lovelier than the most complacent imagined future because *you* might be called on to *exist* in that fantasized future. And how then could you be free from yourself?

Vaughan sat beside Klee's body for a very long time, and for once the busy, idiotic movie that had gone on in his head all his life was stilled. Blessedly, words and ideas did not pop through his mind in their usual spastic dance.

Now the searchlights had been switched off, leaving only the pit's glow to illuminate the underworldly switchyard. What was he waiting for? Whatever Klee's condition was, Vaughan could do nothing about it, neither give help nor seek it.

Suddenly Klee's eyelids popped up, like a doll's. He seemed to gaze at Vaughan, although Vaughan knew that if Klee were in any way still able to see, he wasn't at any rate seeing Vaughan. Vaughan wondered if Klee had been punished for befriending him. That's what happened in hell, after all; you were punished for your misdoings. Vaughan stood up and moved away from Klee, toward the pit. Something fluttered by his ear, beating its wings with a sound like the flap-flap-flap of a long silk skirt, like a woman in a jet-beaded silk mourning dress climbing stairs—a sound he'd never heard in life...like the sleigh bells he'd heard...When was it? Somewhere in death. His memory was taking its stand in the Afterlife, so that now he had distant memories of his earlier death, ones that he could barely remember. He was incurious about the noise, not turning to see what had made it. Perhaps a kind of puppet bird, a black crane perhaps, awkwardly flapping across its poorly lit Japanese stage.

He heard someone behind him, wheezily running. A blocky man wearing a peaked cap and heavy cape caught up to him—maybe the cape had made the fluttering noise. Vaughan was

unafraid now. He couldn't link any conceivable danger with whatever was happening to him, possibly because it seemed as though nothing were happening to him.

The man and Vaughan stared at each other. He was officially serious, gray-faced and thin-lipped. A thatch of very black hair escaped from under the cap and fell across the high, bony brow under the cap's shadowy visor. Eventually, he said:

"You'll need to come along with me, sir, until this is sorted out."

"Sorted out? What sorting out?"

"I want you to accompany me, sir," the man patiently repeated.

"You said something needed to be sorted out. Before we go, I want to know what."

"Just this..." said the other, flustered, and then glanced down at Klee's body. Klee appeared to be gazing serenely upward at a sky filled with June clouds, with winter stars.

"He was shot," Vaughan said simply. "That's all there is to it."

"No, he can't have been shot...Not so as..." He removed his cap. His hair was plastered about his skull like a cheap satin yamulke. Perhaps because of this, Vaughan felt a blip of sympathy on his emotional radar screen, but he firmly moved himself out of range: He wasn't going to entertain any further compassion for the dead. He'd had little enough for the living. Besides, if they themselves couldn't keep up with events...

"I'm tired of being led around. I've travelled a long way, and I can't seem to get where I'm going."

"Where are you going?"

"I...I'm trying to locate someone."

"Ah. Locate someone. And how are you going to do that?"

"I was with...with him," said Vaughan, pointing vaguely to Klee.

"He isn't going to be much use anymore now, is he, sir? Not that he could have helped you to begin with."

"He claimed he was the oldest inhabitant," Vaughan said feebly. "I thought that if anyone..."

The official removed a flashlight from a sidepocket and shone it on Klee.

"I don't recognize him myself—not that that means anything. He could have been an old-timer. I wouldn't necessarily know. There are just too many people here." He glanced at Vaughan, with a look of childish candor. "Frankly, sir, that's the cause of all our troubles."

"What is?"

"Sometimes I think they've lost track. It's only a suspicion I have, but there are signs..."

"Signs?"

"You for instance, sir. There was a time, begging your pardon, that you couldn't have crossed over. They wouldn't have allowed it."

"Elsewhere." For a few moments, the official watched him cautiously and then said:

"As you say, sir. Elsewhere. The moment you arrived, someone would have known, would have been on the spot, so to speak, to turn you back." He paused, considering. "Or to admit you. Depending on the situation."

"I'm trying to find..." Vaughan began and stopped short. What more was there to say except these four heartrending words? He repeated them, like an actor weighing the emphases of a crucial line. "I'm...trying...to...find." A teardrop plopped first from one eye and then the other, a tear for each word. Then a film of tears leapt blessedly from behind his eyeballs. He sobbed like a lost child. Yes, that said it all: *He was still trying to find*. Through long years, he'd gone doggedly on trying to find, so inured to the search that he mostly paid no attention to it.

The official watched him with an air of nervous solicitude, finally saying:

"What's wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm trying but I can't," snuffled Vaughan. He was doing his best to sob softly, with dignity. He wanted to demonstrate (to whom?) that he would go forward, seeking, even though it was obvious to the most cretinous child that nothing would ever be found. How much had he wasted in playing this parched, attenuated game of hide-and-seek?

"No, no, of course you can't," said the other, consolingly. "Some of us know that right at the beginning." He gazed at Vaughan fraternally. "Others must learn it later."

Vaughan's tears began to dry.

"I'm trying to remember," he said.

"You are?" The little man paused, considering. "Oh, that's natural. Remembering. You get in the habit." He added, "When you're in life, you know. I suppose it's because you have to. Otherwise you couldn't get back into your house because you wouldn't know where your keys were." He chuckled encouragingly. "Well, and there's the other things, the pictures. Like your mother's tired face against a chairback, taking a catnap after she's nursed your sick little sister through the night. You can see it like it's just there in front of you, you can reach out..."

"It's not just that," said Vaughan. "The recent past, since I've been here—it comes and goes." He lost his thread. "I saw someone earlier..."

"Someone...?"

"Someone I knew." No, that wasn't right. "Someone I thought I recognized."

"Why not? Sooner or later everyone you ever knew ends up here."

A frisson of hope, confident and sensual, rippled through him. "That's exactly what I've been saying: Where else could she be?"

"Where else could who be?"

"My wife. Julia. She's dead."

"Oh. She's dead," said the official dispiritedly, as if this fact altered matters, changed them for the worst, possibly made matters even hopeless. "In my experience, it was easier to keep track of the living. Possibly because there were not so many of them." He paused, considering. "It doesn't look like there'll be end to them any time soon."

"An end to the living?"

"Well, to begin with. But then they're dead."

"Eventually it has to end." Like most people, Vaughan harbored the vague conviction that in the end there would be an End. Whether this would entail divine cancellation (with or without an Afterword) or just a big explosion didn't matter. As far as mortals were concerned, it was beginning-climax-end, that was the whole story, the way things worked.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but you're forgetting about the fundamentals." Vaughan gazed at him blankly. "About, you know...about eternity."

"Oh," said Vaughan. "I assumed that was just a technicality. A hypothesis."

"I'm afraid it's real enough. Things, as they say, are bound to go on and on."

Vaughan surveyed the otherworldly Rust Belt encircling them. So this would be here unceasingly, and he might very well remain until everyone of his memories was dwarfed and devoured, no matter how precious. His memory of Julia too would finally be weighted beneath the billions of years staring at these rails and ties, watching the hot-forge cherry of the horizon, studying the insect-like gantries and the sodium-colored beams.

In the face of that, what did it matter if he returned to the living, temporarily? He'd be right back. If not here, then somewhere else, pleasant or unpleasant.

"Maybe there's a chance I'll end up like him," Vaughan said looking down at Klee hopefully.

"Oh, you mean an endless coma, like? Eternal rest?"

"Yes," Vaughan answered eagerly. "That's it exactly. 'Upon an instant cease to be.'"

"Keats," said the other man proudly. "You see? You don't forget *everything*. Poetry. You remember that..." He paused thoughtfully. "Although I can't think why. It's useless here. Misleading, you might say."

They fell silent.

The dead air stirred, and a cool zephyr blew over his face, an instant spray of autumn air rising from nowhere and instantly slipping away. "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness." He imagined "mellow fruitfulness" printed in an old typeface on pages held between tobacco-colored leather covers themselves like leaves, like the palm-sized leaves of an old chestnut; and he remembered the early afternoon sunshine, strong even in late October, penetrating the green canvas awnings of a bookstore. Julia had opened the volume of Keats at "To Autumn" and had begun to read to him in her low voice. The student cashier gazed distractedly through the bookstore's front window.

So he wasn't entirely amnesiac after all. In fact, his memory began a little ordinary mnemonic housekeeping by way of trying to sort out which bookstore this had been and why they were there in the middle of the day. They'd been travelling, in New England, in fall, and they'd stopped in this peaceful shop on the small main street of a crimson, gold and clapboard-white town in the Berkshires. A current of recollections surged as the demon of remembrance awoke, throwing on the synaptic power switch. He smelled the hotel shampoo from her freshly washed hair and he felt the brisk breeze, sunwarmed about the edges, slip in from the shop's open door and saw her long, sinewy hands lightly hold the book, and the color of her hair, nearly black to the black-brown of coffee beans, unmixed yet with gray.

She was still in her thirties. They'd been married for five years. They were celebrating the day they'd met. Taking an autumn trip in New England, driving on narrow roads cut above roaring streams curling around granite blocks and speeding on in their last plunge before being stilled by the northern winter lockdown. The maple reds had already expired on the steep hillsides climbing above the road, but the greenish-yellow of sycamores and the deeper reddish-gold of oaks still cloaked the mountains, softened them, disguised the anxiety-ridden landscape that would soon emerge under the early dead dusks of January.

He tried to take her picture beside one of the streams, framing her in the viewfinder, but he found that he couldn't snap the shutter on her in that dark little tunnel, out in the broad sweep of sunlight and the glare of the whitewater-tipped waves on the stream behind her, the graver green of hemlocks as her backdrop...If he never took the picture, they would remain here, Vaughan watching her, as she stood there marvellously happy, unconscious of being held like a tiny genie in the camera oscura.

The inevitable propinquity of two people driving a long distance in a car, physically the closest a couple could be short of being in bed making love. Her hair gathered businesslike in a barrette, the crisp, attentive glitter of her dark eyes as she watched the road wind before them. A muscle swelled on the back of her hand as she gripped the steering wheel. Candid sunlight poured through the windshield, illuminating four faded freckles over her eyebrow, a tiny comma-shaped scar below her lip. He strained to recall the precise tones of her voice, the register of her laughter. But he gave up, in despair. He couldn't remember anything of what they'd said, side by side, driving for hours and hours. All their lives together, they'd talked, and – it was horrible – he couldn't remember any of it.

The morning she had died, what had they said to each other before she left the house? Probably they'd said what they'd always said before one or the other of them left for work, but what was that? She was usually cheerful. Did she say, "What are you going to do today, Albert?" "What shall we have for dinner?" "I'm not looking forward to meeting X this

afternoon." Why hadn't he listened to what she'd said that morning? Maybe he'd been too sleepy. But it was more likely that he hadn't been paying attention.

Vaughan was seized by the inescapable conviction that he had been damned, justifiably and (he now saw with steady clarity) inevitably, for his inveterate distraction, for his failure to give his whole mind to any person, any thing, to love itself. He had been damned for not paying attention.

* * *

"Watch your step here, sir," the man said as they approached the the rim of the pit. A kind of steel-mill refulgence shone upward from it. Vaughan halted a few steps from the edge and prepared himself for the descent into hell. He sought in vain for strength to witness torture, and, who knew?, to bear it as well.

Even less than the power to bear the torment, Vaughan knew he had no power to imagine it. This too was a weakness, a sin. How often in his wickedly fatuous scholarship had he written, "The conquerors/inquisitors/rulers tortured their populace/victims/rebels"? More to the point, who had less claim than a historian to ignorance of the commonplace torments that the powerful inflicted on the weak everywhere, all the time? But to him, as to nearly everyone else who could be called to account for their intelligence, "torture" only summoned the barbed-wired bumper sticker that he received by mail pleading for his help.

He also suspected, obscurely but no less terribly, that once he and his guide disappeared below the lip of the chasm, he would lose what was left of his memory, although this itself might be a mercy.

"We'll need to go on now if you're ready, sir." Against the golden flush given off by the flames in the pit behind him, his companion was featureless, like a crisply cut silhouette. Impelled by heedless despair, Vaughan walked rapidly toward him, past him, to the edge of the abyss and even beyond, on to the path leading downward. It wasn't until he'd progressed several meters, with the official catching up to him, panting, that he looked unflinchingly below.

There were no furnaces, no fires, no beds of smoldering coals. No souls in torment were stretched on red-hot gridirons. The only flames were those flickering in gas streetlamps mounted on a few ancient housefronts. Vaughan looked back to the pit's rim. Beyond it, the "sky" above was a dull blue, like an old serge suit; no searchlights played across it, no acanthus leaves or tragic masks loomed out of it. He knew the vault above him was not the night sky of the living, yet despite that he felt the usual effect of walking in the night—the pleasurable diminishment of self, the anonymity, the parousia of space in its uncluttered, pure, and infinite winter.

Below them, apparently, were the outskirts of a very old village, or something larger, a town perhaps. The low, ancient buildings tumbled a long way down the mountainside. Their steep, red-tiled roofs slanted over the narrow stone-cobbled streets. Long, heavy shutters—necessary barriers against thieves, wolves and winter cold—were pulled tight against the windows. The shutters gleamed with black paint layered on like lacquer, their old worn edges standing sharply out against the housefronts' equally thick layers of sandstone-colored plaster, impasted as though with an artist's hand. Tiny doorways were sunk deeply in the thick walls, and over some of the doors swung signs whose splotches of umber and burnt sienna and carmine made them look like smoke-varnished Dutch oil paintings. The shutters contrasted handsomely with the yellowish housefronts. Vaughan imagined the people of the village in conclaves standing about in the streets, thinking about color combinations, textures, startling but pleasing differences. The result had been this tasteful streetscape, a combination of artifice and age and subtlety that you only found in the Old Towns of European cities.

On closer inspection, however, the village began to seem less like some tidily maintained vieux carre and much more like the enormous, self-contained set of a silent film. He stopped and tentatively pushed against a housefront, but the wall was indeed solid, rough, a real house in a real street. Like most Old World streets, the cobbled lane didn't go twenty meters before its direction switched dramatically, concealing what lay ahead. Above, the housetops sometimes bowed toward each other in a near-arch, sometimes fell backward offering a dizzying view of limitless darkness. A few of the buildings possessed hipped roofs with garret windows through which shone the only light other than the gaslamps at street level.

"Feeling better now?"

"I don't know," Vaughan replied, "I wasn't expecting..."

"Why are you whispering?"

"I don't know." Vaughan raised his voice a little. "I suppose I didn't want to disturb anybody. Everyone seems to be asleep."

His companion glanced at him from beneath the visor of his cap. "You aren't trespassing here, Dr. Vaughan, if that's still bothering you. No one guards this place. It's beneath notice, you might say."

"It's very old. Medieval."

"Is it?" The other man seemed to consider this for a few moments. "Yes, naturally it seems that way. When you've been here for a very long time, it seems quite up to date. You need a fresh pair of eyes, like yours, sir, to see past the obvious."

"But these houses, these streets, the whole town is obviously very old."

"Beg pardon, sir. I should have said, 'It takes eyes like yours to *see* the obvious.'"

This sounded like an insult, yet the man's expression was placid, innocent.

"Why did you say that it's beneath notice?"

"I'm sorry?"

"A minute ago you said that this town, that it was beneath notice."

"Ah, well, yes, as I said, it's a manner of speaking. That's another thing that's faded along the way since I've been here, a way with words. At one time I was respected here for my powers of expression." He suddenly halted. "No, not here. Someplace very much like here, though." He inspected his surroundings carefully, looking puzzled. "Frankly, I'd be hard put to say what the differences are."

They turned another bend in the road and before them a kind of walled-in bridge stretched above the street and, passing under its arch, they came into a large square with the usual features: A large central fountain, ornate municipal buildings in different architectural styles, chair-stacked tables scattered in front of inns or cafes, shuttered booths before which was strewn vegetable refuse.

Crossing the square, they entered an age-blackened building most of whose façade was occupied by an enormous horological device—a two-story-high ellipse set with signs of the zodiac, golden arrows, jagged azimuths, Arabic and Roman numbers—and just before they entered, the device commenced to make a noise, perhaps chiming, perhaps playing a tune, though one that was both atonal and arrhythmic. They stood looking up, watching doors high on the clockface spring open. Life-sized figures (magi, apostles, peasants) emerged, moving smoothly, then jerkily, and then smoothly on circular rails extending from the building's face.

Vaughan stepped back into the square to get a better view of the horologicon. He'd seen something like it before, in an engraving or maybe in a film: he remembered passersby moving in an Old World market square. The figures rolled back into the clockface and the doors shut behind them. One of the enormous golden arrows hitched forward a notch along a half-moon

inlaid with long golden ticks. Below, a sinusoidal hand spun once inside a circle cluttered with Hebrew letters.

"A truly remarkable piece of work," his companion said wistfully.

"What is it, some sort of astronomical clock?"

This seemed to surprise him. "A clock? Why would it be a clock?"

"What else would it be? Anyway, it's apparently a machine that measures..." Vaughan was unsure how to put it. "That measures the movement of..."

The other man waited with an air of respectful attention. After a long silence, he said, "Doubtless you're correct, sir. Someone built this machine to keep track of various events happening as you might say in different ways. Possibly its purpose is to align them, to seek harmony."

Vaughan watched the clockface, which was now completely still. Here and there it shone and glinted, even in the distant light of the widely separated streetlamps. At its nadir a rooster glowed. A little above it a scarab glittered. Inexplicably, Vaughan's heart lifted. The clock, or whatever it was, was evidence of purposeful activity. More, it was an emblem, he suddenly understood, of recollection.

His companion said: "Let's go in now, sir, and rest a while."

Within they climbed steep wooden stairs whose risers gradually dwindled until they were in fact the rungs of a ladder. Above him as he climbed Vaughan saw the interior machinery of the horologicon, with the ladder disappearing amid two enormous gears, and a moment later they were scrambling upward amid the clockwork itself. He listened for the noise of machinery starting up, the telltale grind of the thick shafts through which the ladders wound, the creak of the threatening gears as they were set in motion to crush him like a noodle in a pasta machine. His companion's bootheels meanwhile progressed steadily and confidently from rung to rung a foot or so above his face.

Surely there was no place to rest within this labyrinth of machinery. But Vaughan resigned himself to following on—through dead and icy streets, on subway cars infested with cartoon demons, down fiery pits that turned out to be not fiery at all but to contain villages from a Christmas scene in a department store window. Eventually the ladder led to a platform-like hallway at the top of the building (in fact, given the amount of climbing they'd done, the building had to be much taller than it appeared from outside: Perhaps they'd somehow clambered sideways into an adjacent structure). There was a small door at the end of the platform, and his companion placed a key in its lock, and they entered a garret that was so evocative of French nineteenth-century novels, so much in fact like a set in a production of *La Bohème*, that Vaughan gazed steadily into the darkness at the end of the room, expecting to see an orchestra pit. There was the obligatory narrow iron bed pushed under the sloping roof, the spindly wooden chairs pulled up to the scarred table on which were set a raffia-clad bottle, a hedgehog-shaped loaf of bread, two glasses smudged with fingerprints. His host pulled aside a ratty sheet strung before the room's sole window (obviously set into one of the hipped roofs he'd seen from the street) and lit a candle. He filled the glasses and cut two dry wedges from the hedgehog. Finally he slumped into a chair, heaving a very long sigh, like a beach toy forcibly deflated at the end of a summer day. Vaughan sat down in the remaining chair and experimentally sipped whatever had been in the bottle—in fact chianti, which he greedily then drank off in one swallow. He turned his attention to what he could see through the window.

The crescent moon hung neatly boxed in the top left pane. Like all crescent moons, it shone intensely between its own sharp points, within its two perfect curves, its surface evenly suffused with pearly light, and yet it shed no light onto the inky backdrop, as would for example a full or half-moon. And therefore, as with many crescent moons, you could clearly see

a companion star pricked in the blackness below the crescent's upper horn...like a celestial Islamic flag.

Vaughan felt that something was missing, something hadn't happened. After he'd drunk off the glass of wine, his body had complacently awaited the amiable suffusion that his old comrade alcohol had unfailingly awarded him. Well, probably his attention had wandered even from this, his old solace. He poured another glass and drank it quickly. Nothing happened.

His companion suddenly spoke up from within his apparent slumber. "Don't expect anything to happen. It's only the memory of wine you taste. And the bread, too. You start to chew it, but you end up grinding your jaws on nothing." He looked at the ceiling, as if he were searching for the right expression. "The bread and the wine...they're..."

"Symbols," said Vaughan.

"Yes, you're perceptive," the other said, "no one can deny that. It took me a long time to come to that conclusion. But what do they represent? Answer me that."

Vaughan knew quite well that among the living bread and wine were instilled with all sorts of meanings. Everyone knew what they stood for, but at the moment Vaughan could only think how basic they were. "Foodstuffs," they were called. People called bread "the staff of life," and wine was sometimes called "the water of life." How strange, Vaughan thought, that living things grew from the inanimate earth and that people harvested them, prepared them, and that bread and wine became part of you. They *were* you, from a certain point of view.

"Perhaps," Vaughan said, "they represent the essence of life." Yes, that was exactly right. He was pleased with himself, and he proudly repeated the last phrase, "the essence of life."

"Very good. You *are* quick. I spent I can't remember how many years before I realized what question I needed to ask."

"Which question was that?"

"Why, the one you just expressed so succinctly, if I may say so, sir. 'What is the essence of life?' Bread and wine, yes. But from whence do bread and wine come? What gives them *their* essence? The answer was staring me in the face. I was a teacher, a student of the cosmos, I should have known all along."

"You were a scientist?"

"A scientist?" He considered this. "Yesss...But a man of God, too. Principally, a man of God. You had to be, during my time among the living—delving into the world's machinery—there were endless quacks, and worse. In short, you could do great harm. They burned witches and magicians, yes, but maybe those ignorant people—those sly peasants—maybe they were right! I know that afterwards fashionable people scorned witch-burners, but fashions don't last forever...Witch hunts serve a purpose, and people know that. You can't go on endlessly repressing ignorance and cant and blind faith. And do you know why? Because they're vital spiritual components. All that healthy prejudice...It's a wonderful part of each person's heritage. It's part of what it means to be human!" He grinned widely.

"That's despicable," Vaughan quickly retorted. He tried to think of something more to say—something that explained just why activities like witch hunts and burning people at the stake because some dolt thought they looked funny, just why these were wrong. Surely hundreds of books, thousands of articles, had been written condemning that kind of contemptible stupidity, and what's more, Vaughan himself, as...as a historian, he'd had an important part in scrubbing every blotch, every scut, from the gleaming chromework curve of Progress.

Suddenly he drew a blank. What did it matter if “magicians” were drawn and quartered? if innocent women were tied down and held underwater? It all came to the same thing.

The other man interrupted his train of thought. “You can take it from me,” he said, “science, magic...It doesn’t matter what you call them. You get too close to the ‘essence of life,’ as you were pleased to call it just now, the outcome can be...horrible.”

Chapter Ten

Like a ghetto of the dead, the old graveyard piled Jews one atop the other, whole layered families to a grave, the tombstones thick as the teeth of a comb, yet the graveyard afforded the only open space within the Old Quarter, from where late at night leaving the synagogue, I could gaze past the rooftrees of the tenements, beyond the Moldava and above the glacis to the Castle walls, and see Tycho, or Kepler maybe, staring through their telescopes to the heavens, and I thought bitterly that as I cast my gaze upward and descried men, they looked out into the stars and saw God. I imagined anyway that they were searching the constellations for evidence of God, but who knew what they spied through their instruments, for possibly closer up the heavenly bodies revealed their actual shapes, angels or geometric diagrams or letters spelling the infinite names of God, and from time to time Tycho or Kepler would turn away from the eyepiece and make motions of scribbling. How could I tell standing in the distant graveyard of the despised Jews?

Resentfully I turned away and walked zig-zagging through the unlit alleys, feeling my way surely around the blunt shapes but stepping occasionally in something soft that released the predominant fumes of the Ghetto, chiefly rotted cabbage, human or animal feces, or the sulphurous silt of the Moldava woozily clinging to the piles supporting the close-packed, high and narrow buildings, and the graveyard too, which each time the sextons unearthed a spot for a new dead Jew to rest, provided evidence that the same stew of vegetable and animal mud ran in a vast layer cornered in the river's bend where the Christians had at last shoehorned us.

I thought angrily, "If the gentiles – those arrogant so-called scientists living by the king's favor up at the castle – if they only knew: The wisest man of all Prague, of all Europe!, lived here in this low ghetto, my father-in-law, Morenu Harva Rabbi Loew, Our Teacher the Master Rabbi Loew, the Maharal."

But even if his wise men didn't know, King Rudolf knew Rabbi Loew, and the king knew the power that was in the Maharal, for one day the king's carriage passed the rabbi as he walked out on the Charles Bridge, and the king stopped the coach to see this leader of the Jews. Rudolf began to speak to Rabbi Loew – who knew what he wanted to ask? – but the thoughts clogged in his head and his words turned to heavy pellets on his tongue. Rabbi Loew waited courteously for the king to speak, but soon it became apparent that the king had lost the power of speech. Rabbi Loew continued to stand solidly on the bridge awaiting the king's pleasure, and he was a short man but very broad and immensely strong with a head the shape of a stone bollard and eyes like golden coins and a long black beard and the shining skin on his hairless pate rippled with knobs and other corrugations. Eventually the coachman, realizing his master was paralyzed by the Jew's magic, drove on. These were the days of the blood libels, when gentiles knew that Jews harbored every manner of power, which however we inexplicably never used to save ourselves when they periodically sought to expel us and to disperse us once again across

the landscape, abandoned to the whims of deranged peasantry driven even crazier by travelling armies of homicidally religious Christians either of one sect or another, bent on their own internecine killing sprees and having no qualms whatsoever about murdering Jews.

Yes, Rabbi Loew was a man of power, but from whence that power came only a very few gentiles knew. For who else had mastered all that lay hidden in the Cabala? Who else understood all that the Cabala encompassed, every chapter, volume, commentary – tiny books smaller than the palm of your hand, hand-lettered found in an Alexandrian souk, or giant folios grandly illustrated with plates showing the ascending spheres of enlightenment and the descending worlds that devolve beneath zero, leathery pamphlets printed by Dutch lunatics within which one key mystery nests amid ravings. To say nothing of the Cabalic satellites – scholia, exegeses, annotations, corrections, tracts. More than this, Rabbi Loew carried all these things in his head, for he needed to read even once any Cabalic mystery and thereafter he knew it, and, more, he knew how that knowledge might be used in the world.

For myself, I was nothing. I was named Yitzhak ben Shimshon ben Cohen, but since boyhood the Prague Jews universally called me “Jackdaw” because I patrolled the banks of the Moldava looking for objects of interest, egregious productions of nature that had in their forms the appearance of deliberation, for I was avid to catch God thinking, to catch Him planning how He decided to make the tesserae of a sturgeon’s backbone, the perfectly machined sockets drilled into the umbel of a reed, a pebble’s drop-forged oval. I might easily have become one of those technicians then beginning to journey from city to city, the lens-grinders and die-casters and artificers of gears, counterweights and balancers, the secret crafters of mysteries the fruit of which was gathered by men like Kepler and Tycho. The temptation was enormous, to know causes and thus to know the one Cause that flickered like an ignis fatuus beyond the farther marshy banks of the frozen river – some One Reason that could start the fissure that would build to a crevasse in the river’s solid surface, breaking up the vicious and frowsty world we lived in. Except for a few wisemen like Rabbi Loew, we Jews and Gentiles were abysmally and typically stupid about what caused things to happen: *How* were effects, especially the effects we wished to procure, how were these effects brought about? All the sages that King Rudolf gathered to him, the scanners of the heavens and the delvers into the orifices of the earth, devoted themselves like any anchorite to discovering that one cause that caused to happen that one wonderful effect crackling in their hearts’ eyes like the saint’s vision of her God. There were those, like Tycho and Kepler, who sought titanic causes for huge effects – the rise of princes and the fall of empires – in the murmuring and numeric movement of the heavenly bodies. Others deliriously probed that most emblematic question of our age: Where did gold come from? A question that extrapolated itself through every science like a thriving infestation of intellectual lice until nothing was left for intelligent people to discuss – poems or metallurgy or the actions of kings – that wasn’t defiled in the retorts of alchemy, until eventually even a Post-Alchemical School arose apostasizing the “hegemony of lead” and the “privileging of sulfur” or proposing the “indeterminacy of quartz.”

“Gelt!” the rabbi exclaimed to me. “Rocks! If men made all the gold they wanted, what would it be worth? It would be as common as shit!” This had never occurred to me. “So, Yitzhak, what would be a true achievement? What accomplishment would set the world on its ear?” My jaw dropped, my eyes glazed, his learning stunned me like an ox. “*To create like God,*” he whispered. “Who knows? To make a moth,” I felt weak, “or a *man.*”

Tycho and Kepler and all the emperor’s sages, with their feeble aspirations born weak and deformed, creeping into the very outermost edges of the light – to tear down just a tatter of the firmament, to comprehend why one sphere moved as it did during one moment of its arc

through space...To manufacture precious metals in a laboratory. Contemptible! The Maharal knew all this and more: He knew *why* the spheres moved, he knew the mystery of creation.

Now, I was at his side at all times, in case he needed me for some great Cabalic spell. Oh, I knew that to work wonders the Maharal didn't actually need Yitzhak Cohen to help, but it was difficult to know what the old man was thinking, and I didn't want to miss the moment of terror and revelation that, I was sure, approached.

"You didn't marry me, you married my father!" said his daughter, my wife. "Every moment you're with him – at home, on the streets, beside him in the synagogue." It was true. He might say something, something so momentous my whole soul would be changed. "Go ahead, climb into bed with him, listen to him mumble in his dreams. Bah! As a married man, you're a schmiel!"

During this time of the blood libel, the danger waxed and waned, although we were never entirely out from under the threat so that on any day a mob of gentiles might show up burning and breaking and occasionally killing. That winter the priests of Bohemia grew more than usually weary of slandering, bullying and assassinating one another, and for relaxation, turned their attention on the Jews, particularly those of us who lived in the lovely, idiotic, murderous countryside. Yet there was a priest in Prague, Thaddeus, who each week as the winter nights grew longer preached a pogrom against us city Jews, his gales of laughter reverberating in the stone chambers of their cathedral as, lost in his own grisly vision, he pictured to his congregation Jewish men split like chickens on the wheel, Jewish women horribly impaled, Jewish children broiled in bonfires that used our hovelled homes as fuel – the whole ghetto a slaughterhouse, the temples killing floors, our doorsteps chopping blocks, the stinking alleys brothels specializing in rape and homicide. Crude graffiti, specializing in the pornography of dismemberment and execution – stick figure goyim slicing engorged noses from stick figure Jewish men, glee-ridden gentiles driving enormous penises through a balloon-like Jewish woman, end to end. And eventually killings did happen, sneaking, dark, invisible – but murders just the same, and we knew that it was only a matter of days before these solitary crimes blossomed into the open, as a pogrom.

While the emperor, who yearned to be viewed in the wider world as a partisan of enlightenment and as among those kings in Europa known for their scientific tolerance, put in an appearance in our celebrated Market Square nearby, directly beneath Prague's famous astronomical-horological-diurnal – I hesitate to say "clock" for the giant instrument installed on the facade of our Town Hall did much more than boringly telling the time of day. In any case, there he stood beneath the wonderful device, the crushing crowd straining to hear his speech, which was mostly drowned out by the whirring-chiming-whizzing of the clock, and which we learned afterward was delivered on the topic of civic pride, the polyglot and vibrant mix of cultures (as he put it) that made modern-day Prague the envy of every up-to-date metropolis, not least for its live-and-let-live attitude where Christians and kikes lived warily but usually without violence, and in any case, consider what the Jews have given us (he admonished us): banking and Moses and...other things too numerous to mention. Only a bumpkin (he reminded them), an ignorant rube and not a sophisticated inhabitant of the Athens of Mitteleuropa (as he phrased it handsomely) could gullibly swallow the ignorant notion that Jews employed the blood of Catholic babies in manufacturing gold, when any educated person knew that gold, the Emperor of metals, could only be approached by alembicating lunar salts through an admixture of the Three Supreme Elements and – and here he launched into a highly technical alchemical exposition that no one could follow, so that gradually the crowd dispersed into the surrounding lanes. And whether by chance or not, many of them flowed into the ghetto where they smashed shops and battered into insensibility several innocent bystanders, both Jew and Christian.

Meanwhile Rabbi Loew was praying in the Old New Synagogue, within which even on the sunniest day a holy gloom gathered in the ancient rafters and clung in a dim yellow gleam before the candlelit Tabernacle, and the banner given to the Jews of Prague by a previous emperor and celebrating our Charter, hung motionless above the *bimah*. He intoned the psalms and the Prophets, swaying, removed high above apparently from this world in the transcendence of his devotions, but in reality petitioning the Holy of Holies for worldly guidance, for wisdom to protect his congregation. At this time I also prayed to the Lord God of Hosts, yet to intervene for His people as He done in ancient days, by pestilence and conflagration and whatever other kind of destruction it was in His mercy to think up against His people's enemies. Eventually, however, I had to sit down, exhausted as I was by fury and impotence.

I fell asleep to the rabbi's intonations that sounded like the sound-toy children whirl above their heads on a string, now faster so that the noise makes a keening tenor ululation, and now slower so that a moaning *ewwwwwwwwwwwwwww* vibrates in the air. The lamps had gone out in the synagogue when I finally awoke and Rabbi Loew's chanting had stopped, and indeed I sensed that he was no longer there in the temple and that I was alone. I was overcome by the irrational notion that people were sitting outside the tabernacle looking in through the tiny windows the women used so that they could follow the service, and this conviction that someone was secretly watching horribly frightened me, so that I ran from the tabernacle out into the adjoining corridor which was of course populated only by freezing drafts, yet the staircase at its end seemed less dark than the hall itself, not indeed light but perhaps the suggestion of light. So I timidly crept to the base of the stairs and silently began to climb, and as I went I saw that in fact a sliver of candlelight slipped down the old stone steps through a crack in the attic door. Now, the Maharal kept secret things there in the attic—incunabula, manuscripts, rolls, maps, records, ancient editions of pagan authors weighted down by navigational instruments, closely printed sheets interspersed with woodcut pictures of New World elephants and crocodiles and three-legged aboriginals, a Chinese sandalwood jewelcase (battered and without jewels) containing the tiniest book in the Western World. Yet chiefly the attic was where the rabbi shelved the books of the Cabala, the core texts as well as the diaspora of commentaries, expostulations, lists of spells, methods of transcendence, prime and subsidiary numerologies—volumes too forbidding, too unbiddable, too incendiary to be in the hands of lesser scholars. Some students propounded the belief that even collecting together such volumes in one place was likely to spark instability in the fabric between the visible and the invisible, that mortals would suddenly witness angels unwittingly manifesting themselves, possibly in the midst of private angelic activity which mortals were ill-advised to witness.

And there amidst his books and instruments Rabbi Loew sat reading a slim tract bound in red calfskin with four golden Hebrew letters printed on it, and as I watched the master absorbed in his study, on the cover appeared a face that gazed directly at me and at first wore a quizzical, appealing expression which altered then to grinning contempt, and it occurred to me that the color of the book was like the hide of sacrificial calves, the color of raw steaks. And then the rabbi looked up and said:

"Heaven has provided us with the remedy to our woes and a curb to our oppressors, gentiles and even Jews, and a certain and safe defense so long as we remain righteous. While I was praying there in the cold tabernacle, and my breath forming mist, the mist sweated beads like powdered gold sliding through the air as gold-dust slithers in a jeweler's pan, but it made words in the air. Clearly a message." The Maharal fell silent, then muttered a prayer, a psalm, a petition for resolve, but I was beside myself with anxiety.

"Oh, but Rabbi," I moaned, "what did the heavenly message say?"

"The message?" he looked at me sharply now, as though only now seeing me, acknowledging that some other mortal stood there with him among the books of the Cabala, and that now he measured me, as if to determine whether I were adequate to his mysterious commission. "Yitzhak, Yitzhak—I take all responsibility although I nevertheless require assistance because I am obviously not God, the Unitary Creator, and our work is indeed Creation, but not of gross elements nor of fine elements, gold or silver, but of flesh itself, born from clay like the first man Adam, requiring the remaining elements—air, fire, and water."

"I am your man, Master," I said vaingloriously but nonetheless honestly, for I believed in the Maharal nearly as much as I believed in Elohim Himself, for at times I even wondered whether Rabbi Loew were the Messiah come at last. Still, I had no idea what he was talking about.

"You don't know what I'm talking about, do you, Yitzhak?" he sighed, his scarred, folded, weary face lapsing momentarily into pity for me when that expression vanished and awe replaced it. "For we need a third man, Yitzhak! Yakov Levi, who was born with the power of fire, like I was born with the power of air, and you of water—despite the fact that none of us has known this power until now when the Holy of Holies has revealed it to me." Yakov Levi was my cousin, several years older than I, a baker, a man always sweetly smiling because he understood so little of what was said to him—in a word, little short of an idiot. Who knew, though? Between baking and fire there was certainly some kind of relationship.

The rabbi bid me fetch Yakov, who being a baker had of course been already awake for several hours and in his shop nearby, and swore us to secrecy, telling us that on the seventh day (for the seventh is the day of Creation) we would see a great wonder and in the meantime he gave us several koans on which to meditate as well as a large number of instructions about what we should and shouldn't eat. Yakov listened eagerly, but it was highly doubtful that he understood any of this, yet he loved the Maharal. And when the night of the seventh day was come, we gathered in the attic of the Old New Synagogue, and Rabbi Loew led us from there to the banks of the Moldava. Ice had begun to form at the edges of the river, but the cold water still moved noisily in the mainstream with a cold, high fog veiling the stars, and so because there was no moon, all was as dark as a sealed tabernacle in the forbidden hours, and we stumbled behind the Maharal, our steps sucking in the slime and Yakov slipping from time to time until he and I held each other up and wondered what it was for which the rabbi sought, or whither we were going. And he stopped and whispered to us, "This will do." Only then did he bid Yakov to light a lamp in that we were now a good way from any habitation, and anyone who happened to see the light would naturally assume the undead, or some nonhuman phenomenon equally unpleasant, was busy on that part of the riverbank and would of course give him a wide berth. We were standing in a particularly greasy stretch of algae-covered clay—with which I was in fact fairly familiar dating back to my river-combing days, where I often found unusual half-dead crustaceans, and which in fact I couldn't quite keep myself from searching for even then as I scanned the mudflat. Yet the rabbi was now on his knees, already slathered in river scum and patting and pounding the reddish clay. He called to Yakov to help him, and whether Yakov did or did not possess the gift of fire, he certainly had the gift of pounding and kneading, and between them, Yakov and Rabbi Loew began to sculpt the figure of a man lying supine on the mudflat. Holding the lamp, I watched them shape first the legs like the trunks of two pines growing side by side, and then the great slab of the torso from out of which sprouted arms like heavy boughs nearly as thick as the legs, and finally the head, by which time they had fortunately grown a little more used to their medium. Still, the clay-man's face was only that by courtesy through acknowledgment that a slash meant "mouth," a vertical wedge "nose," two adjacent pits "eyes" and a pair of flaps like latkes bracketing the curbstone-shaped skull. Yakov

and the rabbi, now slime-slathered twins of the mudman, stood up and stood back to survey their handiwork, and the Maharal, standing at the figure's highly conceptual feet, leaned toward me, tugging me by my sleeve to his right side and then beckoning Yakov to stand at his left, and when he was satisfied he turned to me saying,

"You first, my son, will walk around this body seven times counterclockwise." I nodded that I had understood, knowing that this most esoteric and pivotal number *seven* was a most basic tool in the Cabala's toolkit. And he told me to recite four sacred letters while walking these seven circumambulations, and which through magic I promptly forgot as soon as I had spoken them. And when I had done this, Rabbi Loew told Yakov to make seven circuits also, except clockwise and saying different letters, which I was unable to hear as the rabbi whispered them.

Now we were back in the original position, standing at the feet of a kneaded, rough simulacrum of a man, and the rabbi ordered me to extinguish the lamp, and I did, and we gazed down at the even vaguer lump stretched before us on the riverbank, but as we gazed the river clay started to glow as though it were a hollow vessel firing in the hottest kiln, shining softly and rosily like a young girl's lips and then deeply and brightly like a cherry, and when the clay had achieved this latter state, the Maharal straddled the mudman and with the index and middle fingers of his left hand he pried open the mouth gash and in the long fingers of his left hand he held a tiny slip of parchment that he pressed within the gaping hole, and lastly pressing the mud mouth shut.

"Do you know what is written on the *shem*?" the *shem* being the slip he'd inserted in the figure's mouth, and he asked us formally, liturgically, as he might for instance ask, 'Why is this night different from any other night?'

And we answered humbly, "No, Rabbi."

And the Maharal said, "On it is written one of the names of the Holy of Holies, each one of which has its own purpose, and the design of this name is *breath*, or *spark of life*, or *Emesh* which is the jointure of fire and water."

And when the figure had turned from cherry then to rose then to pink and then to white, it began to stir first the right leg twitching a bit and then the right hand flopping like a fish drowning in air, and finally the lips closed tightly forming flattened pads that soon took shape and the lips opened and were in the form of two perfect bows. The eyelids which had been two crude knobs opened and now were thin, rounded and magenta, like the skin tightly sealing a blueberry, and the eyes themselves were milky white encircling inky irises instinct with sparks of life and understanding. At this point, the being rose from the mud and I was reminded of the Creation of Adam by Adonai; it sat up and looked about, then looked up at us, and like any man reached out its arm for help to rise, and not knowing what else to do, I took its hand (which now was no longer damp and frigid but dry and warm) and assisted the creature to its feet, where it looked about, first at the Moldava now emerging like fine gray ash scattered among the darker chars made by the distant bank and a line of pilings like blackened pegs, and then at each of us in turn, taking his time and wearing an expression of bemusement as though he knew us once and were trying to recall our names. Then Rabbi Loew said,

"You shall be called Yosele and you will do everything I bid you, neither turning to the left or to the right, but following me in all things, so that you will be like David, a burden to our enemies and the destroyer of our oppressors."

The rabbi turned toward the ghetto, never looking back, assured that Yosele would follow us as indeed he did, Yakov and I bringing up the rear. Then we entered the Old New Synagogue one after the other, and the rabbi first went to the high altar and prayed in a loud voice and when he had finished he turned abruptly about and ran into Yosele who had been standing only a hand's-breadth behind him, in fact breathing down his neck. Now, at this early

hour only a little after dawn was the only time that a broad stream of light poured into the temple, and I saw clearly how Yosele was formed—he was slim and straight and his face comely as a maiden’s. This was surely not how we had shaped him, rather slapdash and crudely, and also his skin was no longer brick-red and slick but had the buttery finish, the white and rosy flush of a shepherd youth whose complexion had been perfected by the crisp mountain winds. In short he seemed to grow more handsome by the moment standing in the dust-moted morning beam like Adam himself on the first morning, his eyes as innocent too of any worldliness, being in fact rather empty, statue-like. Only then did it become obvious to us that he was unclothed, so Yitzhak ran to fetch some clothes. The rabbi did his best to teach Yosele how to put these on, even at one point partially disrobing and leading by example, but when Yosele himself attempted to dress—first jamming his feet into his shirtsleeves until the fabric started to rip—we were obliged to dress him ourselves, as though he were a small child. Then Rabbi Loew beckoned Yosele to follow him, and we returned to the attic, where the rabbi pointed to a pallet he’d prepared and gestured to Yosele that he should lie down there and rest, which he did, gazing dreamily (I imagined) upward at the rafters and breathing very softly, and then his eyelids fluttered and shut.

Strangely, his sleeping was to me of all miraculous things that had happened this morning, the most miraculous; it was proof that the Maharal really had created a human being and not merely an animate slab of earth, a simulacrum of humanity.

I wondered if Yosele dreamt.

* * *

Since the reason that the rabbi had made Yosele was to protect us Jews from the pogroms pustulating across the countryside and even at the gates of Prague, we could not hide him away forever, and so the next day when Rabbi Loew produced Yosele to the astonishment of his wife and family and of our elders, he was called upon to make some explanation.

“This poor, mute child of the Lord,” he said to them, “I found wandering by the river in the early dawn while I was walking and meditating. But even though he can neither speak nor apparently reason, he is still beloved of Adonai, maybe even more cherished because he is innocent. Yet I find that he is also terribly strong, and as you might expect from someone who is witless, utterly fearless and loyal, so that he may be a scourge for the Jews and our protector!”

Everyone ogled Yosele, amazed at his supernal beauty, but they were also suspicious; How could someone so exceptional-looking escape notice even in our large capital city? Maybe he’d wandered into Prague from the surrounding countryside, but if so, how was anyone to know that he was a Jew? Possibly the Rabbi had satisfied himself that Yosele was circumcised, yet that too seemed odd—A surpassingly handsome young idiot suddenly appears in the ghetto, and the Rabbi has him lift his robe to inspect his male organ? This was dubious. The word began spread through our congregation, then through the ghetto and outward into the city at large: the Maharal had discovered an angel of the Lord, fallen from the firmament, dazed and wandering along the banks of the Moldava. Of course Yosele was an idiot, for how would an angel (with the unpleasant exception of dangerous and unpredictable emissaries like Raphael or Michael) understand the world of men?

Yet like Raphael or Michael, like all angels, Yosele clearly was powerful in the Lord, a mighty weapon, a fearsome sword or flying projectile. Several of us wanted him to start in avenging the Jews right away, beginning with the priest Thaddeus and sweeping away our persecutors to the right and to the left, neither looking on them with pity or hearing their horrible pleas and gurgling death rattles nor seeing the gushing red blood pour from their many angelically inflicted wounds. Well, this was only to be expected given the grief that the gentiles

had inflicted on us not only in the ghetto of Prague but throughout all of Europa, and not only now but in distant ages.

“‘Vengeance is mine,’ saith the Lord,” said the Rabbi however. “This young man was not given to us as a means of petty revenge or back-stabbing but as a defensive measure only, to protect us and to dissuade the Christians from any pogroms or other criminal projects they might be planning against us.”

And by night Yosele would patrol the ghetto as a vertiable guardian angel, watchful for gentile malefactors creeping close in darkness to murder or burn, and by day, he would be by the Rabbi’s side to serve him and the congregation.

Yet Yosele’s arrival was by no means an unmixed blessing, and in fact his presence among us posed a number of unforeseen difficulties, for one may plan to do evil and this is the simpler way, or evil may arrive in a complicated and treacherous way and the opportunity to sin may arise unforeseen and disguised, so that no man—no, not even the wisest, like the Maharal—can think out his course in advance. Indeed, wise men (especially men wise in their foolishness, like me) sadly ignore the simple fact of sin which is known to many dull minds, that is that sin ariseth in the heart and grows strong therewith. For what else was it than the prompting of our hearts that thrilled us to know that Yosele—this puissant and gorgeous angel—was in our power? How exciting to know that another sentient being will do whatever you order him to do: Sexual hunger, angry vengeance, hurtful pleasure, swollen and malicious pride—this knowledge soon sent a hundred roots of temptation down deep into our souls.

One day the Rabbi sent me and Yosele to the Castle Quarter to fetch back some books a Christian scholar had borrowed, the first time that I’d ever been alone with Yosele, to have him entirely at my command. As we set out first through the ghetto and then along the river to the bridge, people who hadn’t yet seen Yosele stopped and stared, and I couldn’t keep from glancing up at my companion, admiring him and thinking how like a god of the pagans he was, and then the thought would come to me, “He is a branch of *me*, my unconquerable right arm.” And I set unashamedly got to thinking in my secret mind of all the things I might do using Yosele as my instrument and of all the insults I’d received from gentiles, especially gentile women, and how easy it would be to put paid to those insults.

The crowds thickened as we approached the Charles Bridge, we were jostled, and someone jabbed an elbow into my ribs, another stepped on my toes. Every other time I’d crossed the bridge, I had meekly endured this arrogance and in fact I’d long ago ceased even to notice the buffeting of the mob. And as I considered this reasonably, I saw that everyone—no matter his rank or religion or age—was treated the same. Here was one indignity for which Jews were not singled out, yet this didn’t matter to me because now I wasn’t simply a lump of flesh among so many other lumps to be poked and shouldered on the thoroughfares of the city. My secret heart was gleeful, and my brain was filled with images of rude, beastlike citizens being heaved willy-nilly over the bridge’s balustrades into the filthy water, of Yosele’s heavy fists pummeling their stupid faces into borscht. There they went, moronically trudging along, witlessly caroming into better men! I was excited, like a bridegroom as night falls on his wedding day, and I turned to Yosele.

“Clear my way,” I commanded him. And Yosele obeyed. He swung his arms like flails, threshing the countercurrent of people before him, and if they weren’t thrown clear enough, if they stumbled before him, he grasped them by a hank of hair, the collars of their gowns, or he simply gripped by their throats, and tossed them aside as though they were bundles of twigs and dried leaves. And some floated airborne for several moments, and some were driven into other passersby who in their turn stumbled and cursed, and some he simply heaved over the stone railing of the Charles Bridge into the river. Looking about at the trail of bruised and

outraged citizens that Yosele had made, I was appalled; by now of course the oncoming crowd had seen what this golden boy was doing, and they shrank back from our path, but all the time grumbling and cursing him and me. So then I said:

“Run, Yosele!” And at once he shot off like an animal of the forest, like a deer or wild pig, quickly outreaching me, and so I shouted, “Stop, Yosele!” and I caught up to him, and in my desperation to get clear of the bridge, I ordered, “Pick me up, Yosele!” and when he had done that, “Now run, Yosele!” And away he sped again, running no more slowly than he when he was free of my burden, and I didn’t order him to halt until we were halfway up the castle heights, lost amid a jumble of narrow streets.

Naturally, this episode was rapidly known throughout Prague, and even before we had returned to the ghetto, everyone there had heard of it, and some swaggered and were vaingloriously proud and others scurried home and shuttered their doors and others, the wise ones, brooded and silently contemplated the probably dreadful future. As for me and Yosele, I slunk home, not even having bothered with retrieving the books, not exactly knowing what the Rabbi would say to me but knowing nonetheless his grave disappointment, which already afflicted me so that I yearned to fall upon the ground and crawl home, like a worm. If only indeed I *were* a worm! Surely worms had no awareness of what they were or what they did, and if they were crushed underfoot by a human, they didn’t care.

So as I trudged reluctantly along, I looked up at my shining companion, untroubled and captivating not like a sentient creature (I now thought) but rather like a spectacular feature of the earth, the snowmantled peak of White Mountain, whose pure lines glowed in the freezing January dawn. By now we had come to the river’s edge, past the bend with only a little river traffic passing, skiffs or a mossbacked barge, in fact not far from where the Maharal had summoned Yosele from the slime, and I ordered him to stop and I gazed at him for a long time, finally saying, “Speak to me, Yosele, for I wish to know what you think.”

“Yes,” Yosele replied, in his sweet, deep voice.

“I know that you dream. Tell me about your dreams.”

“Dreams...” he said, and I noticed that the incised lines of his face softened a little, and he narrowed his eyes, and one small crease appeared down the bridge of his nose.

“What happens in your dreams?”

Poor Yosele. I had made a command he couldn’t obey, and I started to rescind it when he opened his mouth and began to sing. I don’t know whether the words he sang were the language of the angels, or whether they were the language we all spoke before Babel, or whether the sounds he made were only notes, perhaps the music of the spheres. As we stood by the river—flowing olive, black, and silver like the feathers of starlings—I thought of one thing and then another, like a feather floating on a brook of dreams dividing around an islet, foaming over boulders, swirling in a pool, upheld by Yosele’s sweet singing. Across the river were the low buildings of the ghetto with the churchlike tower of the synagogue rising above their greenish-gray roofs, and then beyond the river’s bend to my right, the castle heights rising, rising like a sword to the pointed spires thrust up by the Cathedral, with clouds racing overhead casting fast blue or violet shadows on the hillsides, and as the shadows passed, the cheerful little squares of butter-colored houses climbing upward on Prague’s hills. And all this time Yosele sang.

I will not say that through his singing I could conceive his dreams, or even that when he stopped singing I could recall what had gone through my mind as he sang, for I remembered not with my mind but with my senses. My skin knew what Yosele dreamed, my tongue could taste his dreams, and the smell of his dreams was like the sweet, warm scent a beautiful woman leaves on her pillow moments after arising. Therefore, when he stopped singing, I pressed my lips against his, then slipping my tongue between his lips as though the delicious notes lingered

in his mouth to be tasted. Innocent that he was, Yosele of course was unconcerned by the kiss, and when I stepped back, and dark and clumsy words started up again like oafish soldiers in the weary ground of my awareness, I was relieved to find that I didn't regret the kiss, which was surely passionate, certainly exulting in the flesh yet not mired in it—in fact, the sort of kiss (I imagined) that a young man in love plants on his young lover's lips. Having never been in love, I couldn't say.

This mood sustained me past the anxious, furious, brooding faces of the elders standing about in the synagogue's doorway, and it supported me as Yosele and I stood before the rabbi, who neither recriminated nor lamented what I had done, but only said,

“Well, I should have expected it...”

As for the havoc on the bridge, I no longer felt like a worm because in truth I did not any longer know who I was. The Maharal sent both Yosele and me to the attic, as though we were both now freaks to be hidden, and as we sat together on sacking amid the old books, I took Yosele's hand, and there we remained in shared content as the single beam from the attic's tiny window dwindled and darkness came. I saw a bottle of wine on the rabbi's reading desk, and I thought that a little drink would boost my spirits, and I went and got the wine, pulled the cork, and took a healthy swallow, then passed the bottle to Yosele, motioning to him how he should drink from it, which he did. His eyes widened, he pursed his lips, he coughed, and he handed the bottle back. Who knows how long the wine had been sitting on the rabbi's desk, placed there by some well-meaning person to refresh him in the long hours of the night as he studied, but of course the Maharal would never have noticed the wine, much less drunk it, so it was partly soured. Yet each mouthful tasted to me better than the one before it, and I drank faster and faster, occasionally passing it back to Yosele, who although he at first resisted also I think began to acquire a taste for it, and soon the wine was gone. Shortly thereafter, we both fell asleep.

Spit like cobbler's glue sealed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, like a sole to a shoe, charcoal dust ground into my eyeballs, and my temples had shrunk against my skull. I lay in the dark, eyes shut, not really knowing at first where I was or caring, while from outside I heard cries and screams, first in the distance and then all around us in the ghetto itself. I opened my eyes and saw the coming-and-going of firelight playing on the rafters. Loud animal noises seemed to rise from the street, as if someone were killing the animals or frightening them, yet as I listened more carefully, I realized that these sounds were much nearer at hand, indeed to my astonishment, there had to be animals right there in the attic, not far from where I lay in my stinking, aching drunkenness, and probably the animals hadn't disturbed me so far because I lay so still in my stupor. I saw them now, struggling together across the floor, and heard their moans, and soprano peels, and grunts.

But of course no animals had fled up the ladder to the attic of the Old New Synagogue, or if animals, these were only ourselves, lecherous mad apes. I soon discerned two or three naked female bodies in forced and gruesome postures lacking any grace or even prurience that might have provoked lust in me, and in their midst I saw Yosele, also naked, who was the object of their bestiality. For a moment between the buttocks of one and the squat thighs of another, I saw Yosele's face, his skin like hot lard and his face petrified in an expression of immense exertion as the women called frantically to him to increase his efforts, his servicing of them. For several moments I did not understand what I was seeing, the frustrating opposite of the visual illusion you see in a Christian church where a painted saint seems to turn her head as you walk by; instead the tableau of struggling flesh only a little way from me was at first impossible to disentangle. What were they doing to one another?

As their individual motions however became apparent, and as the shattering crashes and crackling outside became louder, I was transfixed by these acts I had never imagined, and I

witnessed them coldly, shamelessly, and I became excited, my male member hardened, and this happened not because the lust struggles of Yosele and the women heated me, but on the contrary, my gutted heart and soul thrilled me, this utter stoniness and wasteland that spread about where my feelings had been. I felt nothing so I feared nothing, no not even God. Anyway, what had my God become? The rabbi and I had made a man, and if humans were made in His image, then we had made if not God a reflection of God, a part of God, and who knew what fastness we humans might next assail, what divine secret we would force from earth or water, from the sky, from the heavens. Kepler, Tycho, the Maharal, Emperor Rudolf, Yitzhak ben Shimshon ben Cohen, we'd rattle the gates of heaven, and shake down everything there was to know, we'd be done with this slavery to being human, to knowing love and pain and death and shame and reverence and kindness and cruelty.

I was content to watch them, then, as a new God spying on his creation which knew no shame and wouldn't ever know it because this God would forbid men nothing. And as I felt I were on the verge of sexual release, or of some joy sipped from this enlightenment I now experienced, the door on the far side of the attic opened and the rabbi entered, and behind him, down the stairs to the sanctuary, I could hear shouts and cries. He too was transfixed for a several moments as he tried to take in who was in the attic and what they were doing, and then recognition darkened his face and tears in a flood like I'd never seen on a person's face flowed off his cheeks plopping loudly on the floor—supernatural tears, they were, like the tears of the Pharaoh's servant in the story of Joseph, but Yosele and the women never stopped their churning, rolling activity, nor their whistling and hooting and groans.

"Yosele!" cried the Maharal in a thundering voice, albeit broken with weeping. At once their collective lust dissolved like bread in water, sodden crumbs quickly sinking, and each person, but for perhaps Yosele, left holding in her or his hands the disgusting wet decay of sin, the knowledge of which Adam paid with death.

The women, their hams shaking, their breasts swaying like udders, their skin putrescent in the raw red light, crawled into distant corners into the darkness like cockroaches scuttering from the light, while Yosele stood now alone, looking about him, and for the first time I thought I saw on his face a human expression, one of mild astonishment. Was he surprised by the rabbi's sudden command? Or that the women had vanished? Or was he perplexed as we all are, by what we know not, and in this way, was he truly becoming a man?

I waited for the Maharal to chastize us, to condemn and damn us, but I was prepared for rebellion because I was still chilled by calculation and intoxicated with domination.

"Now is your time, Yosele," the rabbi said steadily, now dry-eyed. "For this you were created." And he turned and went back down the stairs, Yosele still naked following him, and I gladly anticipating violence, trailed behind.

At first when we emerged from the synagogue, the street seemed empty, and the only flamelight was that cast by a single lantern high on a housefront, but all at once the scene shifted as on a stage when all at once the play begins, perhaps a historical drama with civil strife and internecine struggle, only here the torches and the knives were real. From an upper window someone launched a flaming table into the street, followed by four burning chairs and a tablecloth that was a veritable sheet of flame turning slowly like an incinerating moth in the air above the massing people, some Jews but mostly gentiles armed with peasant's weapons, farm implements and tree branches, scything and clubbing the Jews before them. I looked about me for a weapon of my own and I saw nearby Avram ben Levi, a butcher, clinging to his cleaver as he lay panting and oozing kidney-colored blood from somewhere in his midsection, and I took the cleaver, gripping it tightly. Then the Maharal ordered Yosele:

"Drive them back, Yosele, drive them from the ghetto!"

Yosele stared at the rabbi for a moment, not as usual as though he needed time to understand the Maharal's command, but for the first time as though he were considering whether he should obey it, perhaps whether it was in his interest to obey it, or even whether the rabbi had the authority to make it. Then I drew close to Yosele, and gripped his strong arm tightly and hissed in his ear, "These are our enemies, my friend, these are goyim who deserve to die—destroy them." And on *my* command he acted at once, and I thought fleetingly that my power now supervened the rabbi's, that I was now the Magic Rabbi of Prague, and henceforth a new, grim, reign would begin, one where Jews need no longer be only tolerated, but where we would take into our own hands punishment and vengeance.

A little way down the street, two blunt-headed, pig-eyed men were assaulting a slim youth, and still holding tightly to Yosele, I pointed to them, and although I clasped his arm with my own unearthly strength, he slipped from my grip as from a small girl's and went forward to the men and grabbing a hank of one man's greasy hair Yosele yanked him high jerking him along until his scalp separated from his skull and he started up a falsetto scream, and Yosele turned to the other man who had by now stopped abusing the boy and was staring at Yosele, and Yosele grasped this man's throat with one hand and gripping the top of his head with his fingertips, he twisted the man's face around until he gazed, astonished and now dead, at me. And meanwhile with my cleaver I had hacked off the forehead of the scalped man, and Yosele and I continued down the street amid screeches and moans, finding our victims who were easy prey as they too were intent on the pleasures of hurting, maiming, and the orgasmic finale of killing, so that they never noticed their destroyer Yosele moving up on them until they'd been caught. And Yosele who in his innocence and ignorance had no conception of how men injured or killed their brothers, prompted by his enormous strength, always took the simplest way, which mostly involved radical dismemberment. We rushed onward, the bonfires so close they scorched my clothing and Yosele's skin was red and nearly blistered, each of us sweating and by now splattered with blood. And our next victims were a group of men drunkenly raping a girl, Yosele now wading in among them simply plucking arms, hands, heads, feet, legs from the pile of men as if he were a vintner clearing dead vines in spring or a householder cleaning his storeroom of lumber, and as easily separating limbs with a sucking *plup* or *cluck* when joints and sinew popped from the torso.

Oh, Lord God of Hosts! I felt like Joshua or David and Yosele like Samson, and the ancient days had come again when Jews were mighty warriors among the nations who blanched in terror at our collective glance. I shivered in ecstasy, for by now we had come to the Charles Bridge and across the water was the quarter where the rich gentiles lived, where the castle mount swept upwards, and now as the pogrom crowds had a fair view of us and what we were doing they fast dispersed, running away from us, so that nothing now stood between us, Yosele and me, and our own pogrom! the crushing of our tormentors!

Suddenly I thought of the rabbi and looked back at the way we'd come, and he was there, appearing at the entrance to a street searching wildly for us, and then he saw us and charged toward us vigorously for a man of his age, calling to us as he drew near, howling and lamenting. What must I have looked like? slathered in gore and grinning widely, he who had bent his life to prudent spiritual calculation and maintaining so great a pitch of sobriety that every sip of tea I took, every time I urinated, I acted with deliberation. What folly! Now I had created, now I had wielded power, bringing forth life and taking it away and keeping at my beck another man who was my instrument in anything I could dream up.

Surely the Maharal saw all this in my face, and more, and he stopped and wore an expression of such bereaved compassion that all at once it was as though I had rolled head over

heels down from the castle walls, down the glacis and down the castle mount and down the river banks into the old, foul Moldava.

* * *

I was overjoyed to be sacrificed. Someone had to be, some Jew, and many people had seen me that night, butchering and blood-soaked, so there was no mistaking I was guilty enough to answer for any number of murders, even guilty enough to atone for Yosele who in any case had disappeared. When the Maharal returned to the synagogue with him, he ordered Yosele to open his mouth and the rabbi removed the shem that said "life" and at once the clay-man, the new Adam, slumped to the floor and reverted to his gelid, lumpish origins. And when the authorities came to the synagogue, seeking justice, I was at the door and delivered myself into their hands with as I say great contentment, and I was condemned by the emperor and publicly executed in the market square beneath the great clock as it struck and the saints and devils rotated from the doors in its face and the moons of Jupiter revolved in its lower quadrant and as the rising sun gleamed on its gilt and brasswork. And as the ax soughed above me a moment before my head departed my neck, I thought how wonderful was the handiwork of man.

Chapter Eleven

Yitzhak sighed and teased apart a pellet of bread. Vaughan watched the tiny hillock of crumbs mount upward. Faint ringing tintabulated somewhere in his skull, and he tried to identify the aftertaste lingering on his tongue – not wine but some herb, faint and evasive, with a scent like anise maybe, or carroway seeds. He thought about the phrase “to feel numb,” asking himself if you were “numb” how you could “feel” that way. It seemed more reasonable to say that you either were numb or you could feel. At all events, he was no longer nauseated, or leaden, or dizzy, neither hot nor cold, neither weary nor lively. He only wondered that such a small ball of bread could go on providing crumbs for the hillock building up beneath Yitzhak’s long fingers. Vaughan stirred himself to think of something to say.

“So it was out there in the square outside that you died?”

“What?” Yitzhak blinked twice and glanced quickly around the attic. “Nooo...At least, I don’t think so. But now that you mention it, this place is awfully like the city where I was a living man. I admit that I couldn’t tell where the difference lies, if I were forced to say...”

“Surely the clock is the same. And aren’t there other similarities? Do you recognize any of the streets, for example? Is there a river nearby?”

“Yes, there is a river. It has bridges.”

“And the other side of the river, isn’t there a hillside with a castle on top?”

Yitzhak sat straighter in his chair and blinked faster and more alertly. “Of course, just so! There’s a bridge, too, with stone horsemen, and cherubs and lanterns that shine down onto the river’s surface at night. How romantic it is!”

“And isn’t all this exactly like your city?” The idea that this place of the dead was identical to Yitzhak’s living city reanimated Vaughan, in whom hope was stirred by the possibility of this correspondence, for if the Afterlife (as he dimly suspected) strove, however feebly, to mirror Life, then there was cause for...Well, he couldn’t exactly say. At any rate, Death was reluctant to travel off on its own, departing from the familiar and homely assurances vouchsafed to the living. If he hadn’t actually so far met anyone he knew in the past, while he was alive, that didn’t mean he *wouldn’t* do so, eventually. Who could say what could happen in eternity? Probably everything.

“But we have to get moving!” Vaughan shouted, jumping up from his chair and knocking it backwards.

“Yes! Certainly we must!” agreed Yitzhak, equally enthusiastic. Blowing out the candle, he clapped on his peaked cap and both men rushed toward the door and tumbled down the ladder. Now there was a kind of explanation, new and comforting in the way it resolved every discrepancy, every dissonance. Why, it would nearly be like life itself regained! Not exactly life of course, thought Vaughan, but perhaps something just as good. As they raced into the street (where snow had again begun to fall), they were seized by the conviction that if the bridge

toward which they ran *were* the Charles Bridge, or anyway more or less *like* the Charles Bridge, then all would be confirmed. A new existence would be proclaimed. And things at last would make sense.

However, they began to skid and slip on the icy cobblestones, and rounding the peculiar angles of the ancient corners was difficult. Fortunately, no one was yet in the street at this hour, probably because a frigid early morning wind was blowing. The faded signs swung on gimbals over the planked double doors of the shops. The street began to slant downward—obviously approaching the river!—and it began to be even harder to keep one’s footing. Finally, first skating unwillingly on one foot, then dancing in place, and then kicking his feet up into the air, Yitzhak fell solidly on his back. For many meters, Vaughan was unable to slow himself. He halted beneath one of the arched passageways between buildings and looked back at his companion lying still at the end of a long trail of skid marks. So great was his yearning to see the Charles Bridge that he nearly turned away and ran, but reluctantly he retraced his steps, his excitement fading. Maybe Yitzhak, like Klee, was now doubly dead.

But he was not dead. He didn’t even appear to be in any pain but lay calmly on his back gazing up at the zinc-colored sky, occasionally blinking away snowflakes big as tea saucers. Vaughan also looked up and noticed that the flakes weren’t exactly falling from the sky, coming down and down thousands of feet from impacted January clouds. Instead, the air itself seemed to produce them. They clung to Yitzhak’s cold face, unmelted and looking like small lacy doilies.

“Are you hurt?” asked Vaughan, somewhat resentfully.

“I fell,” Yitzhak superfluously replied. “Help me up.”

Vaughan pulled him to his feet, retrieved his cap, placed it firmly on his head, and helped him brush snow from his jacket.

“Maybe we should proceed more slowly, my friend,” Yitzhak said. “After all, we are grown men, eh? A little dignity is in order—and the bridge isn’t going to run away. Ha!”

Vaughan forced himself to moderate his pace. Still, he had to stop every block or so and allow Yitzhak to catch up. Whether it was because they were walking more slowly or because the character of the town was indeed changing, Vaughan now noticed that the narrow cream-colored housefronts with their gentle and irregular plaster waves were fewer. The ancient buildings gradually were replaced by taller, broader, grayer ones until at last they came to a block entirely dominated by one enormous structure pierced in the center by a tall arched driveway. Through the arch Vaughan saw a large, square courtyard, pallid beneath the sparse light reaching down the many-storied shaft. Several automobiles were parked there: their drivers, muffled in ankle-length black overcoats, stood by them, looking up and glancing maliciously at Vaughan and Yitzhak as they passed.

“Maybe we should walk faster after all,” mumbled Yitzhak.

“No, wait. Who were those men? Do those cars actually get driven somewhere? Why haven’t we seen any on the street.”

“They don’t...Well, yes, actually, they do...But that’s not something...”

Behind them someone shouted. “Hey, you two. Stop!” A couple of the overcoated men had emerged from the courtyard and one of them was signalling imperiously. Yitzhak moaned. He turned and plodded toward them. After a moment Vaughan followed.

“I don’t suppose you have any papers?” Yitzhak whispered.

“What if I don’t?” Vaughan replied combatively. “They’re only chauffeurs...servants. What right have they to ask us for identification?”

“That’s not the point,” said Yitzhak, who as he approached the men, bent lower at each step until he looked like a stooped old man, wheedling and rheumy-eyed. So startled was Vaughan by this new metamorphosis that he wasn’t able to attend to the first questions the men

now asked. Vaughan reluctantly switched his attention from Yitzhak to the driver who was shouting at him through his unusually wide, liver-lipped mouth, a mouth that seemed to take up two-thirds of the man's broad, high-cheekboned face. By contrast, his tiny eyes glittered like specks of bituminous coal on the shelving of his fat, cherry-colored cheeks.

"AwaawaawaawaaWHOA!" Bigmouth bellowed. Spittle fell and froze on Vaughan's chest. Vaughan glanced at his comrade, who also was a kind of Daumier bureaucrat made flesh, a living caricature – with a long, horsey face and large equine teeth which he clapped noisily together in approval of his friend's rant. Vaughan struggled to contain his anxious laughter. He vainly tried to stifle this untoward laughing, he strained to recall how Klee had dealt with the demons on the subway. He had faced them down summarily, but how? Naturally, Vaughan's badly suppressed guffaws made the men even angrier. The sounds coming out of the mammoth-mouthed chauffeur grew more raucous and bestial.

"Yagggggg! Aggggggggg!" Suddenly he produced a large pair of calipers from the interior of his greatcoat. A flake of snow happened to fall on their tips and was instantly evaporated in a steamy hiss. They were red hot! The demon's braying made no sense, but what did that matter? His gesture was instantly meaningful, far more eloquent than any spoken threat. Vaughan understood not only the peril intended by the lurid pincers but also the world of delirium and misery they symbolized. Worse yet, he saw himself actively participating in his own dementia, assisting in the torture and dislocation of his reason. What use now was his vapid intellectual pride? It was no defense at all against the fever dreams rapidly gathering about him.

His shoulders and hips, those balls of bone, sinew, tendon, and muscle, were baking at their cores, and they spread their heat into his arms and legs. His head was swollen as though it had been bitten and sucked by marshbred mosquitoes; it ached with infection, and penny arcade hallucinations streamed at the periphery of his vision. He vomited on the man's thick-soled boots.

Everyone looked down at the bile-covered insteps. Suddenly Bigmouth said, quite clearly and calmly, "He's been sick on my shoes."

Horseface said, "It's not as messy as it could be."

"That's because he hasn't eaten anything."

"Oh, undoubtedly. He hasn't had a thing to eat." Horseface turned to Yitzhak. "How could he?"

"I haven't given him anything, sirs. Or very little...I don't even know him." Here Yitzhak faltered, as though he'd forgotten exactly where he and Vaughan had met. In truth, Vaughan thought, their meeting seemed to have taken place long ago, before death, in another life. He saw Klee's body lying among the cinders, and recalled how brave Klee had been, but the memory quickly faded as a new wave of physical distress swept over him. He staggered against a buildingfront and slid to the ground. Bigmouth still held the calipers a little way from the skirts of his greatcoat, flourishing them at Vaughan.

"Do you know what these are?" he asked in an unpleasant stage whisper. Vaughan vaguely shook his head, hoping that the tongs had some ritual purpose, one that had nothing to do with him personally. But Bigmouth continued relentlessly, "They're for things we do *here*."

"If you come here, you should know what this instrument is used for," added Horseface indignantly. "It's your responsibility to recognize these devices. Or otherwise their full potential is wasted."

"He's deplorably ill-informed," mumbled Yitzhak. Bigmouth and Horseface turned as one to gape in surprise at Yitzhak, who took off his cap and shyly inspected its patent leather

bill. "That is, my opinion is of course worthless. Still, I've observed him carefully, and when someone is as ignorant as he is...well, even I can tell..."

"FARKMASS! GARANGIOLA!" bellowed Bigmouth. He and Horseface edged closer and closer to Yitzhak until they finally stood over him, spitting forth a stream of bestial sounds.

They were in fact so wholly distracted, Vaughan realized, that he had a chance to escape, so he climbed to his feet and backed slowly away. He wished a crowd would form, helping to impede pursuit, but he knew by now the apathy of the dead, who in any case knew it wasn't in their interest to be drawn to situations that were none of their business. Backing carefully away on the slippery pavement, he came to a corner and sidestepped deftly around it. He turned and walked as quickly as he could, given the wet street and the trembling ague that still afflicted him.

He saw a doorman loitering a block or so down the street before him, and as he walked, he saw other doormen ranged at intervals for some distance. He was a little dismayed. Were they officials or merely functionaries? Vaughan kept up his courage by telling himself that they, like all bureaucrats, could usually be intimidated if you kept your head and treated them like the nonentities they were. Yet the first one he passed hissed at him. Vaughan walked steadfastly on, but the doorman caught up to him and clung to his sleeve.

"It's me!" said Yitzhak, for it was indeed he or someone identical to him, which wouldn't have been surprising, all officials being essentially indistinguishable.

"So what if it is," replied Vaughan. "Get lost."

"They let me go."

"They let you go so you could spy on me." Vaughan blurted this out, at the same time realizing it was true. Yitzhak stopped, opened and closed his mouth, then rushed to catch up.

"I won't deny it," he said placatingly. "I was ordered to accompany you – but not to spy on you. To *help* you." They walked on silently for a while.

"How can you or those...demons help me?"

Yitzhak glanced at him curiously. "Why do you call them that?" he asked guilelessly.

"Because that's what they were. They were like the ones I ran into earlier."

"Oh." peeped Yitzhak fearfully. "You've actually seen demons? Where?"

"Oh, fuck. Where else? Here. In hell."

"Hell?" Yitzhak asked slowly surveying the street. "Why do you think this is...you know?"

Vaughan stopped short impatiently and grasped the ridiculously wide lapel of Yitzhak's overcoat. "Just stop it, all right? I know what's happening to us."

"No, you don't understand," Yitzhak said earnestly. "All of that – what you're thinking – it happens Elsewhere."

Vaughan felt a portion of himself within split off, like some island continent coming apart, one half going its own way with all its life proceeding on a new and quite different evolutionary path. What moiety of himself was it? It was as if he'd now be lacking his nose or his sense of humor, something he'd always believed was essential about himself, without which he wouldn't be Albert Vaughan. The vital features in the geography of who you were: Whole sierras of will and memory could melt, canyons of regret and forgiveness silt up, steppes of candor and boldness be eroded to flatlands. After life, nothing in oneself was impervious to alteration, and even in life, he now understood, you could instantly lose some prominent landmark of who you were. That was crucial – that to change, you had to dump something essential to your identity. A chain of words suddenly snaked through his mind like one of those incongruous phrases at the end of an eloquent dream: *You gotta lose to win*. Yet, like the dream-koan, this didn't make

immediate sense. Or, rather, like many dream epiphanies, this one in the light of day was childishly obvious.

When Julia died, he'd become somebody else. He was different after she was dead. So what? Actually he hadn't gotten a new identity but had only reverted to the previous Albert Vaughan, pre-Julia. His original, miniature self. Julia hadn't made him into somebody else but had only ameliorated Vaughan, like slum improvement replaced broken windows and painted the doors while the same dank, dangerous hallways still remained inside.

Now subdued, Vaughan said, "I always imagined things would be different."

"Of course. And things do turn out differently in the end. I mean, different than one expected."

Vaughan glanced at Yitzhak, expecting to find on his face an expression of fatuous complacency, but instead Yitzhak gazed back earnestly.

"That's universal, isn't it?" Vaughan asked. "Nearly everyone must feel that way at first."

"It's something we carry with us—it doesn't matter, life or death. But it doesn't necessarily mean that everything turns out badly."

All at once remembering Lipsky, Vaughan uttered an abrupt, bitter laugh. "How disappointed he'll be!"

Yitzhak looked at him quizzically. They walked in silence for a way. No longer were handpainted signs hung above many-paned shopfronts, no more timbered fronts, no cobbles, no houses leaning conspiratorially over quaint alleys. They would arrive at no river, certainly not at the Charles Bridge.

No, these streets were painfully familiar. Around them rose the funhouse-glass walls of corporate towers, although these buildings seemed higher, their summits cloaked in clouds or fog. It suddenly didn't matter what kinds of devils—demons or simple business toads—popped out from behind the faux-granite pillars, blue-suited or ones with rubber faces. Content to distort passing cloud formations, the buildings' heartless mirror faces turned coldly away from the mortals passing on the street below.

Yitzhak paused before a brass-mounted revolving door set under a kind of overhang at the foot of one of these cliff palaces. "We can go in here. If this isn't the exact building we want, it doesn't matter. There'll be a passageway."

Most of the lobby was dimly lit by greenish haze, as though you were wading in a shallow pond scummed with algae. Yet corners of the lobby, near perhaps an invisible ceiling, were sunlit. Above, cornices, vaulting, stained-glass windows shone in dust-moted air. Other areas, again the uppermost portions of the lobby, seemed to lead to balconies, perhaps to entire annexes off the main structure, and these were joined in a web of arches and columns and buttresses.

A clerk sitting behind a battered steel desk studied them carefully, then spoke into a tube which rose up behind him. Almost immediately, two weasly-looking (but not particularly demonic) men appeared by Vaughan's side and diffidently nudged him toward an elevator.

They ascended swiftly, halted smoothly, and Vaughan and his attendants stumbled from the elevator in a sort of awkward synchrony, as though they were bound together in a six-legged sack race. For a while they walked down a bland hallway, but soon they were making their way across spaces nearly as large as the lobby, where people worked at their video monitors, the violet glow mixing with livid patches on their faces. They weaved around desks, tripped over cables, stumbled over low pieces of furniture.

The atmosphere continually altered, sometimes nearly a vacuum—in deference perhaps to the changing needs of massed cyberware—sometimes fetid and heavy, almost tropical,

perhaps to assist the growth of a forest of small, potted tropical trees. They arrived at a kind of furniture oasis amid the workstations. As a unit, Vaughan and his attendants turned and sat in small row of leather slingchairs. Yitzhak sat across from them. No one said anything.

Vaughan openly inspected his "escorts," who were virtually identical: black stubble covered their gaunt faces up to their bulging cheekbones; black, brillantined hair; white, abundant dandruff spread over the shiny gabardine shoulders of their shabby Central European suits; the laces of each man's left shoe were untied.

Vaughan looked at Yitzhak, Yitzhak looked at the escorts, the escorts gazed past the vista of cream-colored monitor cases and glossy green plants.

"So are we waiting for something?" asked Vaughan

Yitzhak looked at his toes. He cleared his throat.

"Probably . . ." he said. He lowered his voice and hoarsely whispered. "I assume we're waiting to see a member of the staff."

Vaughan wanted to ask "what staff?" but Yitzhak had suddenly taken a profound interest in their surroundings: he carefully studied the leaves of a nearby ficus. To Vaughan's surprise, he produced paper and pencil and began to sketch these.

"Put that away," one of the attendants rasped.

He returned the drawing materials to an inside pocket of his coat.

"This always happens," Yitzhak said. "It doesn't mean anything."

"It reminds me of being alive," Vaughan said. This appeared to make everyone nervous. The escorts shuffled their feet in unison, as though they were about to burst into a seated softshoe, Yitzhak tapped his fingers on an armrest.

"All I meant," Vaughan continued, "was that you spend a lot of time when you're alive just sitting around in hallways waiting for something to happen."

One of the escorts began to sob quietly.

"It's not a particularly pleasant memory of life, when you come to think about it . . . if that's what's bothering you . . . In fact, a lot of life was like that . . . waiting . . . not knowing what's coming next."

But this seemed to make matters worse. The escorts looked deeply depressed.

"If only we could be sure we were doing the right thing," Yitzhak said after a moment or two.

"But I thought you knew what you were doing," said Vaughan with exasperation. He rose with difficulty from his low seat, shrugging off an attendant's half-hearted effort to detain him and sat down next to Yitzhak. "Look," he whispered to him, "if this isn't getting us anywhere, why don't we just leave? I doubt these two would do anything to prevent us."

"I ask you, sir, then where would we be?" Yitzhak replied in a tone of rancorous entreaty. "You haven't many chances. I wouldn't pass this one up if I were you."

"Chances for what? Why can't you just explain what we're doing here? If you'd only do that, I'd be content to wait."

"At this rate, I'd rather be sleeping. It's been a long time since I've dreamt. That's what I'd like to do. Dream," Yitzhak said.

He and the attendants sighed.

Then the fronds in a nearby screen of vegetation parted. A head emerged, long-haired, heavily bearded, thick goggly spectacles hung crookedly on a long, narrow nose. The head coughed, mumbled, and Vaughan and the others strained to hear. Around them the clicking of keyboards ceased as workers raised their rapt gazes from their screens and stared encouragingly, hopefully, impatiently at the leaf-wreathed messenger. He tried again to speak, raspily, as though his throat were infected. "Karl's ready for you," he croaked.

Everyone rose, rushing toward him.

"No, no!" he said, the already magnified, egg-like eyes enlarged with alarm. "Just them..." He pointed toward Vaughan and Yitzhak. "Karl can see only them." The head beckoned, and Yitzhak began to shove through the foliage, turning sideways and bending back a large branch so that Vaughan could sidle past him. They reached the end of the maze and proceeded down a shabby corridor at the end of which was a baize-covered door. The attendant opened the door.

Inside were two men, one seated behind a desk and the other standing at semi-attention to his right. The man standing wore an expensive, well-tailored, entirely nondescript suit of the sort that university deans and politicians wore in life. He was deeply tanned. In fact, he looked as though he'd been browned in an oven and oiled. Despite his alert posture, he gazed blankly though happily into space, smiling warmly at the opposite wall. He looked very much like a popular television cowboy puppet of Vaughan's early youth.

In contrast, the man behind the desk (whom Vaughan assumed was "Karl") peered into a large ledger which lay open before him. His wiry hair crackled out from his large head as though a small electric current were pouring out of his brain into his scalp. Vaughan had an odd momentary impression that he had recently shaved off a thick beard. Perhaps this was the effect of suggestion, for behind him, hanging on the wall between the windows, were three portraits of bearded men.

With an effort, his eyes reluctantly detaching themselves from the page they'd been reading, Karl raised his massive head and slowly focused on Vaughan. The tanned man also turned his passive, composed and clearly partial attention to Vaughan. Their faces were notorious—Karl's closely set eyes and bulging nose, the other's puppet-like, pompadour-mounted visage. Yet Vaughan's limp memory failed to pull the usual mugshots from the part of his brain where celebrities were filed. They were famous. That was all he knew.

The three of them might have gone on like that for many earthly hours, each lost in his thoughts and memories, or the lack of these, but summoning his will, Karl finally spoke.

"Well, I am seeing you. And you! Unscheduled, of course, but nonetheless here. Natürlich! What? Am I not telling you this? No, I predicted it. Ach, not you individually, but you as a class, as historical necessity, as the inevitable vanguard of a certain motion in technological change. Gradually, then faster and faster, healthcare improves, the standard of living improves, the industrial base broadens, all kinds of people get plumbing and kitchens—that on for a while goes—the little germs, what happens to them? Poof! Eradicated.

"What's death? A disease simply. History, making very fast, cures it. Then you, or someone very much like you, like you it is to say, comes along, comes along unscheduled. The ruling class Elsewhere are unprepared in their . . . in their . . ." Karl halted, looking confused. He signaled to the man next to him, who bent over. Karl whispered in his ear. He straightened.

"Their lack of foresight," the man continued. "Naysayers and doomsayers. Nervous Nellies. Leadership demands. . ." Karl interrupted.

"As Dutch says, and also their lack of foresight." He stopped, glared at Dutch, and then looked intently at Vaughan. "So what have you to say of this?"

"What?"

"For yourself speak." Karl smiled thinly, as though to encourage him.

"Freedom of speech is the most cherished gift we have. *But it cannot be abused...*" said Dutch.

"Ja, well. By these outmoded ideologies, Dutch remains preoccupied. Forgive him." Karl sighed. "So, Dutch, are you thinking: Here is this man. What can it be? Maybe the vanguard of death's new proletariat?"

Dutch smiled vaguely at the portraits over Karl's head. Karl looked closely at Dutch for a moment and again sighed.

"Dutch, Dutch, Dutch. Were you listening, Dutch? Did you a mental record make, Dutch?"

"I miss my horses," Dutch replied. He smiled at the other men one by one, slowly toasting them in his good will, gazing frankly into their eyes. "Please accept this confession as evidence of my sincerity," he said.

Rising, Karl came around his desk and drew Vaughan to a corner of his office, out of Dutch's hearing, although it seemed to Vaughan that Dutch was beyond paying attention.

"My conviction," he whispered, "is that Dutch is a kind of humor they're making Elsewhere. The job of Dutch is to be my clerk. Sadly, Dutch none of the abilities possesses to be an efficient clerk. His memory is missing."

Karl returned to his desk and looked musingly at his assistant, who continued slowly to maintain eye contact as his benevolent gaze slowly scanned an imaginary crowd.

"Dutch prefers to stand. Pay no attention. Please to take a seat." Karl pointed to a shabby armchair.

Vaughan was pricked by the vague suspicion that Karl was less clownish than he seemed, that he did indeed harbor knowledge, however trivial, of the workings of the Afterlife. If that was so, Vaughan concluded, then he'd need to be cunning, circuitous. He'd have to trick Karl into revealing...whatever he had to reveal.

Yet before he could frame a sufficiently indirect line of questioning, Karl asked, "What can we not learn if carefully the results we study?" He leaned across his desk and fixed Vaughan with his conspiratorial gaze.

"What...what results?"

"Exactly. Which results? You are here – that is one. Possibly Elsewhere, an unexpected result. So what, Elsewhere, do they do? First must you be found. Next must I be alerted. Finally must you be here to brought. What is my deduction of all this?"

"I have no idea."

"Certainly you don't. Then I will tell you. I deduce from these results conflict. Conflict and more conflict. What you would say *eternal* conflict. And not recent conflict, not by a long throw.

"Let me illustrate." From under his desk, Karl produced a machine that looked like part of an automobile transmission. He signalled to Dutch, who stepped forward, blinking. The room darkened, the machine clicked, a ragged screen fell from the ceiling, a brilliant square of light flickered. The screen was soon filled by scratches and hairs, cilia that quickly resolved themselves into Hebrew letters.

The projector ratcheted in the dark, and Dutch began to speak. His voice was smooth, modulated, well-paced – the voice of a veteran actor.

Chapter Twelve

In the beginning . . . Actually, nobody knew *what* was in the beginning. But *soon after* the beginning, there was order, peace, and a common aim: All Creation sang God's praises.

[A football stadium appears on screen, the camera panning down over rank after rank of blurry celestial beings, mouths opening and closing in unison.]

The business of Creation was creation, and business was good.

[Celestial throngs thronging Heavenly avenues: gilded halls filled with desks, angels clutching papers, angels conferring, angels bustling in and out of doorways.]

A neverending supply of divine capital poured into the creative marketplace, creating evermore cherubim, seraphim, thrones, principalities. [Long shot of golden landscape, glittering towns rising on clustered hilltops.]

A wealth of heavenly works projects, such as the creation of stars, improved real estate throughout the universe [Legend on screen: "Prosperity Fueled by Technology."] A time of growth, of excitement.

[Medium shot of middle-aged angel, being interviewed, angel's name and title superimposed below angel's chin: "Buster Kairos, Systems Analyst."]

"Lots of times, we put in six, seven eons at a stretch, particularly with the red giants. You'd be on the road rounding up stray hydrogen atoms—you'd forget what your bedroom looked like. Still, nobody minded: All of them in my ministry, we felt we were doing something, contributing. If you were involved in construction, you didn't pay much attention to politics. You'd be in the lab, out in the field dealing with some problem in the space-time continuum, then you'd come in to the home office and sing praises. [Buster laughs nostalgically.] We didn't have time to brush our teeth.

"[Buster grows thoughtful.] I guess I knew there was some kind of agitation going on. I remember thinking that outsiders must have been involved. I suppose I was naive: where the hell would outsiders come from? Still, what did I know? I was just an engineer."

[Narrative over resumes.]

At first, discontent was remote from the majority of heavenly citizens [More shots of angels, singing praises, thronging streets, passing papers.] Later, reports of agitation in the provinces began to filter in. [Angels hanging around heavenly gate, faces turned up toward public-address speaker. Fade to marching crowd, waving placards.] Grievances took a number of forms.

[Cut to balding elderly angel, cauliflower ears: "Harry Telos, Dissident."]

"We were pretty young—the general feeling was, we looked around, we couldn't figure out what the point was. Instructions came down from on high, nobody was consulted, nobody knew why we were supposed to do what we were doing. [Youthful angels engaged in acts of petty destruction—overturned trashcans, pushing and shoving of older angels.]

“The thing was, everybody was so . . . complacent. Everything was going according to plan. God knew best. All that middle-class smugness. It drove you nuts.”

[Narrative resumes.]

As random acts of violence began to take focus, a leader emerged. [Tall, well-tailored figure on balcony, speaking vigorously to unseen crowd below.]

The career of former Prime Minister Tony Astramonte, whose star had risen early, had been shrouded in mystery. Dismissed soon after the Beginning of Creation for abuse of office, Astramonte formed an increasingly vocal opposition party, The Popular Front for Getting Some Sort of Explanation. As widespread discontent spread, the party’s demands were summed up in a slogan that became a rallying cry for dissident elements: “Creation for the Creators.”

[Sweeping shot of Popular Front agitators scuffling with angelic guardians of order.]

As violence mounted, the universe halted. Strikes and bloody riots multiplied [Montage of trashed celestial halls, empty bleachers, candy wrapper blowing down empty heavenly thoroughfare.] Chaos ensued. Astramonte, who by now had adopted the nom de guerre “Lucifer,” incited his followers to revolt.

[Lucifer on makeshift platform, haranguing followers. Lucifer speaks.]

“. . . and for any of these reasonable and just demands, is there an answer? Of course not. Just where is He, our so-called *Heavenly Father*? Has anyone heard from him? [Shouts of “No,” “He’s *never* around.”] Let’s face it: He hasn’t got an answer. He thinks He’s too good for us.” [Wild cheering.]

The result? Revolution. [Montage: Armored vehicles rolling down streets lined with shattered buildings; machine gun barrel protruding from hole in wall, firing; angels, bent low, hurrying to get under cover; incoming mortar rounds.] Since no one could actually be permanently killed, the war promised to go on indefinitely.

[Close up of broad-faced, deep-jowled old man. “Miles Gloriosus, 1003rd Angelic Foot.”]

“Fighting in the clouds was the worst. Sinking in up to your knees, stray lightning bolts going off and making your fillings hurt like hell...And then you’d lose your footing and fall...So I didn’t see much. Just this once, two archangels – I’m not saying they was Michael and Lucifer, but they was really big guys (and I mean *big*, about ten thousand feet high) – these two wasn’t far off, and all of us foot soldiers just ceased fire and sat down on a cumulus and watched the show. Oh yeah! [Buster grins widely.] It was mano to mano, brother!

“But seriously, it was an even match, no holds barred – gouging, biting, kicking. It must of went on for epochs.”

God intervened. [Silent flash of light fading into mushroom cloud.] During a bout of particularly fierce fighting around two of the Heavenly Gates, several nearby stars exploded, paralyzing all combatants. Popular Front partisans and Celestial Guardians lay about the battlefield indiscriminately mixed, everyone feeling as though an enormous bronze bell had been lowered over their heads and then hammered repeatedly. The Heavenly Sky flooded with silver light; bloody streaks ran from the zenith to the horizon. The sky spoke.

[Close up of cloud formations forming into giant lips.]

“I created this. I can destroy it. All rebels will immediately lay down their arms and await processing. Loyal forces will prepare for removal to outlying districts. No answers will be forthcoming, since there will henceforth be no more questions.” [Shot of crestfallen rebels piling weapons; tattered angels straggling back through Heavenly Gates.]

Time, a novelty, passed. [Calendar pages flipping away in the solar wind.] A new, outlying branch of the eternal kingdom opened among the living, an independent subsidiary, operating via an obscure set of regulations. [Slow pan of rain forest. Sound over: Howls,

squawks, hoots as from jungle adventure movie. No sign of human presence.] Angel hosts watched events in this new realm, bemused. Was this really where He was investing resources? Puzzling experiments were evidently taking place, experiments with contradictory outcomes, unpredictable results.

[Buster's voice returns.]

"If you looked close, you could see them moving around down there in that tick-infested swamp. Some of us said they looked like us, others weren't so sure. They were a lot smaller. But there was a time when if you wanted to know where He was, He was with them, talking to them. It's pitiful really, when you think about it. Maybe He thought if he could start fresh, teaching them little by little, filling their heads with only things He wanted them to know.

"But it was no use. That didn't work any better than it did with us. The trouble was that the humans kept on thinking, sort of, willy-nilly. When He wasn't around, they made up their own things to think. [Close-up on Buster. He pauses, frowns meditatively.] As time went by, we had to admit they weren't all that different from us. *Except that they used things.*"

Yes, it was this apparently natural inclination of humans to "use things" that set them apart from the denizens of heaven. They used branches, bones, sticks, and rocks. More repugnantly, they used parts of their own bodies, particularly organs that angels had up till now considered (if they considered them at all) as vestigial parts, or perhaps artistic additions serving some now-forgotten and bizarre aesthetic. They decorated these regions with tasteless ornaments, but far more shocking, they used their bodies as implements to couple with one another. Naturally, He was outraged.

Meanwhile, Astramonte sulked with his coterie (who were unfortunately numerous) in the recently demilitarized zone, which was fatally adjacent to the colony where the humans lived. Sad to say, Astramonte and his Popular Front supporters were welcomed by the humans. [Astramonte arriving in jungle paradise bowing and smiling to no one in particular, accompanied by angelic cast-outs wearing wraparound sunglasses.] Whenever He wasn't around, there was Astramonte, or one of his representatives, shaking hands [Adam and Astramonte happily wrapped in manly abrazo], kissing...not babies because there weren't any babies – not yet! – kissing his fingertips and making speeches.

[Astramonte precariously balanced on fallen trunk of baobab, making extravagant gestures with arm and fist, spittle flying. Two humans, a dog, and a grazing donkey stand a few feet away]

"This is a free nation, my fellow humans! Our brave forefathers travelled here to escape from the tyranny of kings and priests and taxation without representation...Have *your* needs been taken into consideration in this new land? Certainly not! And what about the laws and regulations? *Mostly, we don't even know what they are.* And the one law He sees fit to deliver is pointless, illogical! Now, I ask you: What does that say about the present administration? You are threatened with exile and other punishments made more horrible because they're only hinted at, and you can't even say what it is you've done wrong!

"Friends of liberty! Fellow outcasts! Elect me and a new era of prosperity and freedom will ensue!" [Adam smiles and nods; Heva squirms and flutters eyelids; dog barks; donkey stares contemplatively.]

Steps taken to suppress the rebel leader were unavailing. Since his fall from grace in the Heavenly Kingdom, Astramonte had if anything widened his political base and increased the number of his followers. [Montage: Astramonte reviewing troops, descending hillside nodding and smiling with Adam, private moment playing with pet snake. Newspaper headline, "Poll Shows Astramonte Popularity Skyrockets."] At the same time, conditions in the Celestial City deteriorated. [Angels wearing shapeless cloth caps and shabby overcoats stare blankly as they

wait in line; back shot of angel trailing shopping cart with once-gilded, now-tarnished possessions.] And changes took place. The shape of heaven subtly altered. Where once were sleek avenues of beaten gold, now common asphalt roadways oozed up.

The residents of heaven suspected that Someone was shifting the locale of Paradise. Clean air, safe streets, plenty of consumer goods—they'd all migrated to the suburbs, namely Earth. [A sheet of newspaper tumbles down the center of a heavenly Main Street, past boarded storefronts and empty sidewalks.]

[Buster's voice.]

"I'd moved up in the world. A lot of good it did me! I was a planner by then, but all the development resources were going to the humans. Even so, with all the support in heaven, I couldn't have kept up with...I don't know what you'd call it...With the sprawl, I guess. [Airborne camera zooms over acre after acre of fast-altering paradisaic landscape. Cloud bumps deflate and flatten into vast, treeless public squares paved with cracked concrete. Rowhouses, tenements, asphalt-shingled duplexes, three-story brown-brick office buildings fall from the air, landing with cracks and splats atop crystal fountains and streets lined with gold. Huge cranes and looming ironwork ring the horizon.]

"Oh, I know Heaven has no beginning and no end, but before, you sort of knew where everything was. You never got the feeling you were lost.

"Now everyone was *always* lost. You learned it was better to stay put, even if you didn't exactly like where you were. Public transportation was provided, of course. Like lots of people, though, I couldn't figure out how it worked—you could end up anywhere and getting back to where you started was impossible." [Animated diagram of interwoven colored lines punctuated with tiny flashing bulbs, apparently showing transit system, lines continually multiplying and tying themselves into knots.]

Although Armageddon (or something very like it) no longer threatened, small-scale wars and violent outbreaks persisted, adding to the impression that Elsewhere they still hadn't gained the upper hand. At times, the Popular Front denied having a hand in bombings, kidnappings, ambushes, while at other times, they boasted of their complicity. Pandemonium? Not really. Obviously, Astramonte and the Popular Front also lacked control over the growing disorder.

Simultaneously, conditions among the living had also deteriorated. Mainly this was because of a series of Executive Orders. The first was merely an eviction notice, but soon other, more dire ukases followed, beginning with the "Work not Welfare" guidelines and climaxing with the Death Clause, formally creating a new order of sentient beings, the mortals. [Medium shot, legend "Son of Toil"; the offspring of Adam are seen earning their meat with the sweat of their brows. Montage with legend, "Seven Ages of Man," commencing with squawling infant and finishing, predictably, with gasping ancient on deathbed.] Explanations from Elsewhere (making good on its warning) were not forthcoming. All parties of angelic hosts—Loyalists and Popular Front—were aghast.

[Angels in shirtsleeves, ties loosened, hair ruffled, sit at cup-littered board table in smoke-filled meeting room. Tony Astramonte, looking resigned and careworn, speaks in cigarette rasp.]

"These high-handed, autocratic actions from Elsewhere must cease. We demand that humans be accorded the same basic rights as anyone else. I know I speak for everyone here [Astramonte momentarily halts, acknowledging general nodding, thumping of tabletop, approving shouts]—I know I speak for everyone when I say that capital punishment has never been, and never will be, the policy of the Heavenly Kingdom! And to enforce this barbarous edict on a whole race, without exception, why *it's genocide pure and simple!*"

[Three angelic pundits in canvas chairs flank angel moderator on brightly lit set with black backdrop and low cup-littered table front.]

[Pundit One, ascetic male, wan face, steel-rimmed spectacles welded over eyes.]

"They had compensations, I believe. They had...food. That's not something we had, and mighty happy they were to have it, too! Imagine: tasty fresh fruit, sizzling chops on the barbecue..."

[Pundit Two, female, crisply bloused, crisply haircutted. Interrupts.] "...They didn't have barbecues. They were invented in hell."

[Pundit One gazes silently contemptuously at Pundit Two for several moments. Continues.] "They had the joys of family. Little ones running in, running out of those...those places they lived in..."

[Pundit Two.] "...hovels."

[Pundit Three, a patently angelic liberal, sparse hair adhering to bald, speckled scalp, expression of well-meaning concern on mild-mannered face.]

"Yet there was sadness, too. Mourning. All gone in the wink of an eye! I don't know how they ever got used to it. I know I couldn't. But they did. They coped admirably, turning a *disability* into an *ability*."

[Moderator, slender, well-suited legs indolently crossed, wearing look of barely concealed condescension.]

"But wasn't all that ancestor-worship, their perfectly lethal allegiance to their ridiculous families – wasn't that the source of most of their problems?"

[Pundit One.] "Of course it was! They lost their individuality! Their *laissez faire* spirit. Adam started out admirably. Look at his invention of language, all that hard work invested in naming, but he didn't capitalize. He just gave all those names away when he had a natural corner on the market."

[Moderator.] "You think then that was the reason for government intervention? Because, you know, after that He stepped in and spurred them on to build that...what was it called?"

[Pundit Two, impatient.] "...the Tower of Babel. He *had to* intervene. Why can't you understand that? There had to be curbs for their own good."

[Pundit Three.] "I agree with Theodosia. The ethical marketplace, well, it's a contradiction in terms, isn't it? The market in human behavior is amoral. It's not their fault, of course. The Garden of Eden, those totemistic talking animals, sex: They couldn't cope."

[Pundit One, clearly fuming, half rising from flimsy chair, rattling table and overturning cup.] "Was that a good reason to create chaos? Did that justify supporting Astramonte and his crowd of thugs? And what purpose did all those protests serve, hmmm? Riots! That's what I call them!"

In fact, mortals were doing their best to adjust, but they were badly handicapped by one simple fact, a fact they've never been able to grasp, despite their otherwise ingenious (although generally wrong) solutions to the riddles of nature. The fact, well known to even the most clueless immortal, was this: There are six things that it is possible to think.

[Large "6" appears on screen.]

No more, no less. This had an odd result among the living. Age after age, all too predictably, one of the six things occurred to someone, who resuscitated it, just like the five million people before him or her, to whom the same thing had occurred with the regrettable belief that nobody else had thought of it.

Of these six things, by far the most popular among humans, and the oldest, has been the conflict between dark and light. Some experts hypothesize this has to do with having to sleep;

others suggest that mortals got the idea from living around stars. In the typical scenario, a “chosen” mortal might get out of bed in the morning, feeling thoughtful. He believes an idea’s hatching, and he sits with his bare feet on the cold floor staring out the window at the sun coming up. His wife says, “Come on, get up. It’s time to go to work.” But he can’t hear a thing because he’s too busy trying to figure out what it is poking through his semiconsciousness.

Then he has a revelation: Sometimes it’s dark, and sometimes it’s not. Dark and light. And, wait a minute, he thinks, if you look at it in the right way, these are two *forces*. There’s a pause, and then the revelation: “I’ll bet these two forces are having a *fight* . . . Why, that explains Everything!”

“He runs into the kitchen and announces his discovery to his wife and kids. They’re not interested. He goes to work, and remembering the response he’s gotten from his family, he casually drops his revelation idly into conversation while he and the other shepherds are standing around watching the sheep. His colleagues think about what’s he’s said and it seems reasonable.

“You know,” says one of them, “you could start a religion with that.” A religion! And he can be the head of it!

Before long, he’s peddling his doctrine (by now a little polished up) from town to town. Maybe he gets followers, lots of them, whole nations fall into line.

Then he dies. Afterwards, his enemies, who have come up with one of the remaining five ideas that it’s possible to have, charge him with heresy. The enemies kill all the people who believe the dark-and-light-are-in-a-struggle heresy. Centuries pass until some other mortal wakes up in the morning and thinks, “Wait a minute: Dark and light are *forces* . . .”

Meanwhile, humans inevitably, dismally kept dying. No exceptions. [Long lines of perplexed, frightened, stunned humans snake back from various entrances to the Afterlife. Montage of signs: “Sortie, Huit Clos; Welcome to Paradise Valley, Form Line on Right; Entrance, Everlasting Bliss – No Shirts, No Shoes, No Service”] Nevertheless, in an access of disinterested altruism, immortal beings rose to the occasion and met the needs of mortals. Processing was orderly. [Angel in peaked cap stamping papers. Colleague enters names of dead in folio volume.] Everyone was accounted for, everyone was assigned his or her position in the Hierarchy of the Holy, or alternatively, Unholy, City.

And there were ample gradations. No spiritual condition went begging in the Afterlife’s vast armature. [Long shot of dwarfed angel standing with pointer at base of towering organization chart whose rectangles and branches fade upward into the heavens.] The Afterlife was organized on the premise that mortals felt most comfortable with people of similar dispositions, and souls were assigned “working groups.” The fact is, however, sub specie aeternitatis, all mortals are stultifyingly identical so that placing them among the tenuously differentiated clans, cliques, states, and astral planes was an enormous headache. Understandably, occasional mistakes were made: Someone who had been a *despoiler*, for instance, could easily be mixed up with souls who had *despaired*, resulting in the assignment of a plunderer to some Slough of Despond, where he occupied his time pulling up cattails and slinging mudballs at the Depressed.

[Female angel seated in black-leather swivel chair holding slender cigarette between enamel-nailed fingers, carefully upswept hair, large, painful-looking silver earrings. Legend, “Yolanda Ergothanatos, designer.”]

“The carefully wrought distinctions among transcendental gestalts were always difficult to maintain in equilibrium. This is to say nothing of pressures from Elsewhere to crudely sort these as ‘Punishments’ and ‘Rewards.’ I wasn’t trained as an engineer after all! Torture devices are not my *specialité*. [Giggles] Well, not in *that* sense anyway...”

“You couldn’t get these people to stay *put*. It’s a popular misconception that once you were dead, you were consigned to one of our *tableaux* for eternity. Well, I mean you *were*, but who was going to stop you from wandering off? They weren’t *cages*, after all, we weren’t going to string tacky *fences* around them. That’s one thing we learned very quickly about mortals: They were as curious as little monkeys. To what end, I’m sure I have no idea. Probably they just had a low threshold for boredom. They’d get tired of drinking nectar in, say, my Old World Scented Garden and want to go sink themselves in an Early Victorian Pit of Burning Pitch. Anything for a change, anything for a thrill!

“But Elsewhere put a stop to that aimless roaming, let me tell you. I detested all that expansion, those unoriginal neighborhoods *that looked exactly like Earth*. It wasn’t any of my business, but why kill them at all if they were only going to end up in the same sort of dreary, uninspired setting they had when they were in whatever you call it...life? It got them worried, though, the mortals: Once they strayed off their assigned tableau, they were well and truly lost. Homeless. Displaced. For *eternity*.”

[Music up, strings swirling in sweetly discordant minor key. Rainswept asphalt, blurred patches of color, possibly neon signs, hanging in mist above, two or three pedestrians wrapped in trench coats. One descends subway entrance in sidewalk foreground, one stares meditatively into unseen storefront window, one walks unsteadily into fog and disappears.]

History. Pointless change. Souls flitting about in the Afterlife in boundless Brownian motion. No, this wasn’t the Heaven we knew and cherished. The old songs, the wholesome banquets, the amnesia—they’d faded away with the golden clouds and tinkling harps. Even simple, old-fashioned eternal torment... gone.

Never was the old saying truer, “In death we are in the midst of life.”

[At this, film breaks, making slap-rattle-slap-rattle film-breaking sound.]

Chapter Thirteen

The screen went black; in the dark chairs scuffled, and then the lights went on.

"I love the movies," Karl said. "If in '48 we'd had them, what a difference . . ." He sighed. "Of course, in the movies they simplify. What we have just seen, for example, may not to reality correspond. When Dutch makes this movie . . ." Karl nodded toward Dutch, who smiled shyly, ". . . he sends it Elsewhere, to confirmation make. But, alas, no response is forthcoming. We were not surprised."

"Even so," Vaughan said, "I'm not sure...The point seemed to be..."

"Oh, well, as to that . . . Several conclusions may be drawn."

"Such as?"

"That questions are pointless," Yitzhak said bitterly.

"Rebellions are evil," Dutch added.

Karl seemed to lose his composure.

"You must consider your sources." He gazed meaningfully at Dutch.

"That's what you have to do with politicians," Yitzhak burst out, "listen to their self-serving diatribes and then sort out what seems reasonable from your own experience."

Karl and Dutch looked annoyed.

"Many politicians are fine men," Dutch said pettishly. "Why, I've known statesmen whose patriotism, whose honor, whose genuine humanity were truly awe-inspiring. These were men, like our very own Floundering Fathers, men who made every sacrifice, went that extra mile, all the time thinking only of their subjects, and the flag—that glorious symbol of freedom and justice—which some unpatriotic, dishonorable, inhumane weirdos hold in contempt . . . these . . . these . . . these . . ." Dutch spluttered to a close. "I've lost my train of thought."

For a minute everyone was silent.

Karl propped his chin on his hands and looked intently at Vaughan.

"Tell me, sir," he finally asked, "what was it, your conclusions?"

"God changed His Mind," Vaughan replied.

"How else do we explain the fact that we don't hear from Him anymore?" added Yitzhak.

Karl considered this, then said, "He could be busy."

"Does it make a difference?" Vaughan asked.

"This explanation is not satisfying. Historically," said Karl. "Conflicting forces make predictable outcomes. Such forces, dark angels and light angels, producers and produced, human peoples and divine peoples, the dead and the living . . ."

"Good and evil," added Dutch.

"Ah, well, those are subjective. Of objective forces I am speaking. Such forces in their dance over eons and eons. In a word, Dialectics!" He looked around the room, wide-eyed.

"Dialectics? Is not dialectics a contribution? Is not these a historical necessity? Are my scientific predictions not without errors?" He'd grown very agitated.

"What's this got to do with science?" Vaughan asked.

"Science is number six of the six ideas that it's possible to have," Karl retorted angrily, but at once his face fell and his expression became contrite, puzzled, introspective.

Everyone fell silent. Dutch walked to the window, put his hands behind his back, and opened his mouth widely, but said nothing. Karl tapped the desktop with his fingernail while turning the pages of the book opened before him. Vaughn closed his eyes.

"This is getting us nowhere," Yitzhak said. "This gentleman here, although he doesn't have an official status, he hasn't been registered...To put it briefly, *His time hasn't come*. Nevertheless he wishes to call on whatever resources you, or your department, or some other department, may grant to assist him in...in..."

Karl peered at Yitzhak earnestly, waiting. "Yes, to assist him. But, it is, we must ask, how?"

"It isn't decent," said Yitzhak, inconsequentially. Then he said, sullenly, "Something's going to happen."

Karl gazed at him even harder. "Yes? Such as what?" Karl shook his head. "I have no instructions."

"Let me speak frankly," Dutch said to the window, "let me be perfectly frank. Let me speak to you as friends, as neighbors. The news is good." He turned from the window and looked at each of them in turn. "For reasons of security, for security reasons, God can't always be as frank as He would like . . ."

Karl stared at Dutch, waiting for him to continue this interesting line of thought, but apparently there was no more to be said.

"A personal observation I have," Karl said, reluctantly returning his attention to Vaughan and Yitzhak. "Keep your friend out of the public eye."

"Oh, for heavens' sake," blurted Yitzhak in an access of frustration, "there *is* no public. There aren't any workers. There aren't any constituencies. There aren't any representatives. Don't you understand? All of that—the governments and leaders and systems—it was ridiculous enough among the living, but now we shouldn't have to put up with it. It's intolerable."

Aghast, Karl and Dutch gawked at Yitzhak. "*No leaders?*" they said in unison.

"Oh, come now," Karl went on, "dead or alive, people must be led."

"Wealth confers responsibility," said Dutch. "Successful men know how. Fatherhood!"

Vaughan interjected. "What does that mean, 'Keep your friend out of the public eye'?" Karl, Dutch, and Yitzhak turned to him, collectively nonplussed.

"You're a troublemaker," Dutch said.

"We are in a postrevolutionary period," said Karl. "The time for violence is not yet at hand. Or possibly it has passed."

"It doesn't pay to draw the attention of the authorities," added Yitzhak.

Vaughan again remembered Klee, how he'd looked, caught in the sodium glare of the searchlight, the look of soiled recognition on his face before falling backward. He saw Klee's body stretched on the tar-spattered gravel between the disused tracks, and began to prick out a still-distant understanding, which nonetheless slowly approached stagefront in this new memory, a memory of events within death.

"Why was Klee killed?" he asked.

"*Wer ist dieses Klee?*" Karl asked Yitzhak while cautiously watching Vaughan out of the corner of his eye.

Yitzhak drew himself up, as though he were coming to attention, and firmly, grimly met Karl's interrogatory gaze. Unable to bear his unflinching attention, Karl looked away and cleared his throat, and using his thumb and index finger, nervously smoothed his mustache. Slowly Yitzhak said, "He claimed to be one of the Originals, according to this man," nodding at Vaughan.

"These are mythical," Karl muttered.

"Speak up," commanded Yitzhak. "We can't hear you."

"Bah! The solace of the poor. Little kindertales the dark to explain away."

"He most certainly existed," said Yitzhak.

Disregarding this byplay, Vaughan, who was now entirely absorbed in Klee's fate, asked again, "Why was Klee killed?"

"Answer him," demanded Yitzhak.

Dutch came forward, arms extended as though to embrace Vaughan, although he stopped short of doing so and instead raised his palms to his cheeks, which he massaged vigorously. His face glowed even more ruddily, his moist eyes softened. He laughed conspiratorily. The laugh was rich and anodyne.

"Ha ha ha. What can we do to you, young man?" he asked Vaughan.

"What can you *do to me*?"

"No, no. Ha ha ha. What can we do *for* you, I mean. Everything is at our disposal. Would you like a ranch? A horse?" When Vaughan didn't reply, Dutch repeated the question, drawing his words out slowly, "Would...you...like...a...horse?"

Vaughan was certain that something definite was meant by these words, something quite other than this insipid offer, that in fact Dutch threatened him with some punishment so horrid that it could only be spoken by indirection. Vaughan instinctively understood that he was beyond the power of his torturers as long as he didn't infer meaning in Dutch's ominous generosity. Yet despite all he could do to force back recognition, he felt the answer looming in his mind, forming itself into some unbearable penalty.

In the end he was saved by Dutch himself, who began to weep.

"Oh, my horsies," he sobbed, "oh, my ponies. At day's end riding the chapparral, the odor of sage rising up about my chaps, mesquite flowering in the orange sunset, my silver badge glittering like the Morning Star..."

Again he raised his hands to his cheeks, but now he rubbed his skin until tiny capillary nets swelled on the surface and burst, smearing his face with thin streaks of white cream smelling vaguely of coconut oil.

Karl, teary-eyed, clasped his hands in a kind of appeal and then knelt. He embraced Dutch about the knees and keened softly, while Dutch, calmer now, gently lay his open hand on Karl's pate in benediction. Karl snuffled between Dutch's well-tailored thighs, and Dutch turned toward them a face transformed by rancid, spiteful, vituperative grief.

"You fucking anarchists," he hissed. The white fluid, like an actor's mask of cleansing cream, now covered his entire face, and he bent toward Vaughan. "You don't belong. You're...you're *history*."

Karl moaned. "Ach, history, my beloved, my mistress. I miss it so."

"Now, now," soothed Dutch, "it really didn't love you. And it was so *old-fashioned*. Eventually it was just swept away by progress when the world became one big wonderful consumer." He stopped talking for a moment, eyes glittering and greasy face glowing. "Why, we consumed it!" Dutch gently took Karl's face in his hands and raised it up. He grimaced farcically, as if placating a small child. "Gobblegobblegobble. We ate it all up."

Yumyumyumyum. And that was the end of history." Karl smiled weakly. Dutch protectively drew Karl's grizzled head against his thigh.

"Now you go," he ordered. "Nobody cares where. Elsewhere prefers to assume you're not even here. A man without a country. A displaced person. You're pathetic! No self-respecting mortal *wants* to be here. Only perverts! Voyeurs!"

"All right," Vaughan responded with composure. He no longer felt in the least threatened by these or any other citizens of hell. Moreover, his newly won disinterest was utterly unlike anything he'd experienced up till now, either in death or before it. Before, in life, he'd often known the fake courage afforded by indifference, the shameful sham-bravery generated by his contempt for himself, his distaste for other people, and his sour boredom with living. He sensed that nothing now kept back the full onslaught of some malevolence that would not obliterate him but would instead go on and on tormenting him. Yet despite this knowledge, he had begun to pity the living, the dead, indiscriminately. Feeling this pity was like the moment you suddenly realize you understand people talking to you in a foreign language.

Karl still clung to Dutch. His sobbing had ceased, but Dutch continued to run his fingers gently through the wisps of Karl's long gray hair.

"I'm sorry," Vaughan said to Dutch. "I'm sorry I've disturbed you and your friend." Dutch watched him suspiciously. "You're not responsible for my being here, and I had no right to bother you." Using Dutch as a support, Karl crawled to his feet and, carefully wiping the tears from each eye, turned to Vaughan.

A breast button hung by a thread from Karl's old-fashioned frock coat, and this evidence of material imperfection and Karl's human obliviousness to it, wrung Vaughan's heart. God might see the fall of the sparrow, but did He note all the loose buttons, frayed cuffs, the worn elbows on the living and the dead? Did His pity extend to those tiny and lonely negligences?

"We don't know what's to become of you, young man," Karl said.

"I'll be going now," Vaughan replied. He glanced at Yitzhak, who had been lost in thought and now leaned toward him like Charlie Chaplin tilting into a gale at sea, his feet still fixed to the floor.

"Oh sir," he said, "I regret this is as far as I can go. If it were up to me..."

"I understand," said Vaughan, and he took his leave.

Chapter Fourteen

Vaughan departed preoccupied with a newly awakened sense of fellow-feeling. He yearned to clasp the drowning man or drown with him. An ancient phrase occurred to him, "God's chief property is always to have mercy." But evidently God's chief property was instead transcendence, moving like a vaudeville deadbeat farther and farther from the city of his early triumphs, slipping out of a series of boarding houses of steadily declining quality – first from the World, then from Heaven...and now where? Vaughan's first rude realization in the Afterlife – that blessed oblivion did not come on the heels of death – was now succeeded by this second infuriating realization: God existed, all right, but just try to find him!

Vaughan slowly became aware of his surroundings. The computer terminals and fronds and slick furniture had disappeared, replaced by a simple hallway. Doors set with frosted panes lined the hallway, and gilt names were painted on the glass. Two scallop-shaped wall sconces framed a porcelain drinking fountain set in a niche like a votive shrine. The sconces and the frosted glass suffused the hall with serene, cloistered light. Cool air, smelling of paper and coffee, swirled gently down the corridor. Perhaps there were offices behind the gold-lettered doors, but if so they were sabbath-hushed. Sunday afternoon in the business district of a small city. When he was a boy, his family would go out to eat on Sunday afternoons as a "vacation" for his mother (his father called it). They drove to some downtown restaurant where his father had lunch with his clients during the workweek. The restaurant and the wide avenues outside it and the buildings around it would be deserted, venetian blinds drawn down upon the mysterious residual emptiness inside. As they rode, the boy Vaughan wanted to jump out and walk up and down the vacant streets of this dream city, a beautifully landscaped Cemetery of Business, serene and golden and unpeopled – he wanted to walk about within this hushed sanctuary. He imagined magically opening every door and floating down the perfectly silent corridors and inspecting offices where adults performed their baffled activity during the hours he was in school. In fact, doing as he was doing just now.

He turned a corner and the hallway stopped abruptly a few doors down at brass-doored elevators. A woman stood with her back to him, waiting for the elevators. She held a cigarette midway to her mouth, but thinking better of this last drag, she dropped the cigarette at her feet and delicately, as though she were about to dance a gavotte, pointed one patent-leather-clad toe and stubbed it out. Then she began to walk back and forth, her high heels clicking impatiently. As Vaughan approached, she ignored him, even when in her pacing she passed within inches.

She wore a wide-brimmed hat, tilted a little forward. Vaughan stared at her boldly as she made her short circuit. A thin veil hung from the brim so that her features remained indistinct. Yet he also had the feeling that the woman's face itself had some property of camouflage that rendered it mysterious, hat or no hat. From what he could make out, though, the face was undeniably attractive.

An elevator arrived. Vaughan paused as the woman, still ignoring him, stepped in. He followed, the doors closed, the woman stood primly holding her purse before her, apparently waiting for Vaughan to operate the lift.

"What floor?" Vaughan asked.

"It's automatic," she replied.

"Oh," he said lamely, "it must go directly to the lobby..."

"The lobby?" She turned her head slightly toward him, inclining it a little, then repeated, as if he hadn't heard the first time, "It's automatic."

The elevator descended for a long, a very long time. Vaughan occupied himself with ogling the woman's elegantly shod feet, the small, soft blackish-purple leather toe, the sinuosity of her arch raised up by her high heels, the matching curve of her calf snugly embraced by the smoky silk of her violet stockings, the simple dark skirt outlining her thighs. The elevator was filled with her scent, of old garden roses edged by the unmistakable odor of a woman's arousal. For the first time in a long time, he experienced desire. He'd forgotten the palpability of it, like the abrupt jolts of a fibrillating heart, an intimate organ malfunctioning powerfully and uncontrollably. Desire had been sleeping in him...for how long? He dimly remembered his first moments in the Afterlife, and his realization that he'd lost the capacity for longing. Yet well before, even in life, this capacity for lust had dwindled.

The woman was at ease as he gaped at her. She tilted her head downward, as if she too were appreciating the ravishment of her shoes and stockings and skirt. In doing this, she exposed the nape of her neck. Her dark hair was swept up beneath her hat, a few stray wispy dark curls, the delicate cervical bones gently articulating her creamy skin. She was baring herself, for him! He bent over and nuzzled her neck. He closed his eyes, and he saw a small, enclosed garden, tea roses and floribundas all in bloom, but freshly fertilized, the rich and healthy stench of dead fish rising among the double buds. Eyes still closed, he felt for the buttons running down the back of her dress, loosening the top one and then two more. He felt with his tongue along the interstices between her vertebrae, and parting the fabric, licked the lace edging her slip.

At this, she turned to face him, possibly to halt his slobbering on her clothes, but far from feeling shame, he was proud—well-pleased with his lechery. As for her, he couldn't say: Although she now lifted her veil, her face was a little blurred, as though his eyes were flooded with tears. It didn't matter, though—if she wasn't borne away like him by lust, at least she was unresisting. All the better, in fact. More exciting even than the anticipated act of sex with her (whatever form it took) was her casual surrender of individuality. He needn't consider her thoughts, her feelings, or even her erotic wishes. He hoped that he was equally unimportant to her.

Embracing her hips, he walked her into the corner of the elevator, and like an expert dancer with a clumsy partner she moved smoothly backward. Sliding her skirts past her stockings (silk against silk), grasping the filmy cloth and working it between his sticky fingers, he thrust against her.

This went on for some time. He knew something should ensue but couldn't recall exactly what. His clothing was damp and her face was runneled with sweat. She was staring at him as he opened his eyes, her pupils swollen, hard, shiny. Her hat wilted a little, as though it too had been perspiring. He managed two or three half-hearted bumps, but the drive was spent. He stepped back, and she removed her hat. Her dark hair shuffled softly to her shoulders. For a moment there was a resurgence of lust, but it too soon faded.

"Maybe you'd like me to change position," she suggested. "Or you could bind my wrists...if that would help..."

"Thanks, but it's not that. I think you're very appealing as you are." She fluttered her eyelashes modestly. "I just can't seem to get past this one part." For several moments they were silent. "I know this isn't very gallant, but could I ask you...Could you describe what's supposed to happen next?"

"Ah, I'm afraid not," she replied. "I was hoping you'd know." Her eyes, her ears, her nose, her entire face now assumed separate identity, and, like all specific faces, began to act its part as the usual perplexing and misleading barometer of whatever was going on inside.

They stood with their arms and hips slightly touching out of a need for human propinquity far deeper than sex, while meanwhile the elevator continued to go somewhere—whether up or down or even horizontally was hard to tell.

"You aren't by any chance..." she began hesitatingly, "you aren't, you know, my husband?"

Vaughan was briefly disconcerted, but he was certain that this woman was not Julia.

"No, I'm not," he said gently.

"I didn't think so. But when you started to...you know...well, that's what *we* used to do." She paused to consider. "He even had the same sort of difficulty. He'd get to one place and sometimes he couldn't go any further." She began looking about the elevator, searching for something. "I wonder where my purse went?"

"It's in your hand." Had she been clutching her bag all the time they were embracing?

She smiled sadly. "I didn't know it was there." She opened the clasp and extracted a pack of cigarettes, extending it toward Vaughan.

"No thanks, you better conserve them," he said.

"Conserve them?" She looked bewildered and studied the small, brightly colored package. "But what's going to happen to them?"

"Once you've smoked them all, where will you get more?" Vaughan answered gently.

"Oh." She'd been leaning against the back wall of the elevator, and now, rather surprisingly, she drifted like a cherry petal to the floor. Since the elevator's collateral descent showed no signs of slowing (in fact, it had been going on so long that it wasn't easy to tell if they were moving at all), Vaughan sat down beside her to wait. She composed herself demurely, even though her skirt was still hiked above her thighs, and she folded her well-cared-for hands on her expensive underwear. Vaughan studied her profile. The corner of her eye tilted slightly upward, long-lashed lid folded down. Her jaw was delicate, and the skin, like the skin of her neck, was like porcelain, as though the bone shone through from beneath. Her lips, her eyes, her lashes, her cheeks—everything was exquisitely made up, the rose and violet and bluish shades looked carefully air-brushed about her face. He leaned over to bury his face in her silky, powder-scented lap. She rested her hand lightly on the back of his head and lightly smoothed his hair.

She said, inconsequentially, "My name is Lily."

He closed his eyes. He felt as though they were moving through a slow arc within a giant pendulum, swinging through space, rocking back and forth.

The elevator slowed. Maybe he'd slept, his nose buried in the woman's nether garments. He was definitely stiff-limbed, and his eyes burned a little, as after a long nap. She stood, wiggling and straightening and smoothing her skirt, in the businesslike and innocent way of women adjusting themselves to face the world. She put her hat on, took a mirror from her purse, removed a glove, and flicked a lipstick smear from the corner of her mouth. Then she made an infinitesimal correction to the tilt of her hat and waited.

At last the elevator came to rest, and the doors opened. It was that phase of twilight when the sun, having just sunk, still fully suffuses the sky nearly to the meridian, where Venus

burns hot and chemical, like the last flare of a July Fourth sparkler. Two-lane asphalt, bordered by cattail-choked ditches, ran before them in the general direction of the crepuscular horizon. And all around – forward to the horizon, spread endlessly to each side of the road – was prairie blanketed with dove-colored reeds, clicking and rustling in the cold breeze. The air bore the wetland odor of mud and methane, and far out on the infinite marsh Vaughan saw birdlike creatures float upward like black-paper origami.

People had made very little impact on this landscape, although nearby, in one of the roadside ditches, a rusted automobile chassis was pitched nose-down, and farther up the road to the left was a derelict building. It seemed to Vaughan as though the elevator had opened on to a particular day, as well as a specific place, and he strained to remember the date like a man boggled by forgetfulness in the course of writing a check. What day was it? What month? The month came simply: It was November. And the date was...It was the 11th! How simple! The landscape spread out before them was the Country of November 11. Not that anything particularly notable had happened in his life on the 11th of November. On the contrary, the particularity of this day lay utterly in the dank air, the attenuated light, the dry, oat-colored reeds, the lengthy shadows cast on the cold, cracked road. Even those few aspects of human agency – the junked car, the gray farmhouse with a rusted agricultural machine beside it – looked autumnally defeated. All things here were in recession, flattening like the shadows against the ground, as if to duck the onset of winter.

Lily's bare arms were pimpled with cold, and even in shirtsleeves Vaughan shivered.

"I don't like this place," she said after a long while. "Let's go back."

"The elevator doesn't have any controls," Vaughan reminded her gently. They could only step forward, through the elevator portal onto the road, walking toward the weathered house. Although the air seemed still, the reeds rustled slightly – the only sound other than Lily's high heels tapping on the road.

"It's too bad you haven't got other shoes," Vaughan said.

"What?" She looked at her feet. "Why? My shoes are all right."

"They're meant for city streets, for sidewalks."

She frowned. "Don't worry about me. I can walk fine in these shoes. I've been wearing them for a very long time. I'm used to them."

They reached the house and entered the yard, a rectangle of bare earth packed solid as macadam. A densely tangled tree grew at the yard's edge, throwing its knife-edged, matte-black shadow smoothly over the ground. Now that Vaughan stood before it, the simple, single-storied building might not have been a farmhouse at all – possibly it had been an agricultural extension station, a roadside café, a tollhouse, an impression lent by an illegible signboard nailed to the roof. The tiny porch was littered with spade-shaped leaves, the dried feces of a small animal, gardening implements. Stepping around the turds and the tools, Vaughan mounted the steps and opened the front door. The one large room within was less derelict than he'd expected: The few chairs and deal table looked sturdy, even dusted, and beyond the furniture was a fireplace in which a small coal fire was actually glowing. An uncurtained window facing the twilight sky admitted the last, weary, serene light of day. Lily skipped onto the porch and joined him – true to her claim, she seemed undeterred by her fashionably impractical shoes. She placed her hand in his and said smiling,

"It's like a fairy tale. There should be a pot of porridge hanging over the fire."

"Hello?" Vaughan called, his voice cracking.

They entered, Lily closing the door behind them, and stood looking about them like a vacationing couple inspecting the lakeside cottage they'd rented sight unseen. The slight clacking of the rushes was stilled; the silence was absolute, lacking now even the thump of

blood in living ears. Why wasn't the twilight flickering out? Vaughan wondered. All at once he was gripped with impatience, with anguished restlessness. When would night fall? Outside the autumnal light shone flat across the marshes, like enormous glowing bars weighing down the land. He began to choke, and Lily helped him to a chair.

"Sit down, darling," she murmured. "You've worn yourself out."

"It's true," he gasped, "I've been through too much..."

"Poor thing—nobody should have to go through this kind of strain." And he leaned against her as she stood beside his chair cradling his head against the silky, perfumed fabric of her dress.

Stillness, then a soft *plup* as a coal fell through the grate, then more stillness. The pumpkin-colored dusk lingered. Vaughan remembered riding in the backseat of his parents' automobile along a raised road bordered by just such marshes as stretched around them now. In his memory the road sank and the marshes dried up, and now they were driving past a well-manicured picnic area, a bowl of lawn extending over many acres, circled with trees whose crowns were lit with the final sunlight of November 11. His parents' wedding anniversary! (He now recalled.) They were driving to a country inn to have dinner on his parents' anniversary. No one remained on the grassy picnic grounds, and in fact there was no sign that anyone had ever picnicked there. Where were the stray paper plates spinning under the redwood tables? the soda pop bottle glinting in the sunset? Vaughan had imagined horsemen galloping out of the autumn woods and on to the grassy field, knights arriving for a joust. He rolled down his window and smelled the intoxicating smoke of burning leaves, which bore, whole and entire, everything about this late autumn afternoon...everything—in the way only scent could contain memory.

On the porch a board creaked, and someone walked two flat-footed steps to the door and opened it.

This person, who was clearly amazed by their presence, stopped abruptly in the doorway, and, looking faint, he leant hard upon the doorknob. For long moments he stared incredulously at them, and they at him. His black, beetle-like coat and snowy shirtfront looked preacherly, an impression strengthened by his tall, spare figure, sunken gray eyes, and the slatey shadow of his badly shaven cheeks.

His long fingers still gripping the knob, he fumbled in his breast pocket, extracted a pince nez, and hooked this ancient optic on his nose. Lily giggled, which served to restore his composure.

"I have prepared myself for demons," he said. "Torments or temptations—it matters not at all. There is a buckler I have put on, a buckler of...of..."

"What's that?" Lily whispered.

"What's what?" asked Vaughan. The man in the doorway seemed dangerous. Vaughan watched him warily.

"A buckler."

"It's something old warriors used to defend themselves."

"To defend themselves..." the stranger repeated. "A shield," he added.

"Yes, a shield," Vaughan agreed. For several moments, no one said anything, then Vaughan asked, "Are there demons hereabouts?"

"Of course there are demons!" the other replied. "Thou art maybe a demon, too!" he said slyly.

Ignoring this, Vaughan asked, "Have you actually seen demons? Have they appeared around here?" This infinite, perpetually sunset bog seemed an ideal locale for devils, Vaughan decided. And, anyway, hadn't he and Lily descended deeply in the elevator? As ludicrous as it

might have once seemed to him, it was entirely in keeping with Elsewhere's sense of humor, and lack of imagination, that hell predictably nested at the foot of an elevator.

The other man made a gargling noise, glanced up at the ceiling as though to check for demonic forces and looked embarrassed.

"Up until this time, no." He paused, then blurted out, "In truth, no has been about this place. Not demons, not humans. Weighing this, I considered that I had been thrust into the wilderness...once more. And for my sins I had been punished with loneliness forever." A tear rolled down from behind the tiny lense of the pince nez. He sobbed, and then added softly, "So you can imagine how glad I am to see you."

Lily's handbag clucked softly as she opened it to retrieve her package of cigarettes. She tilted the pack slightly to release a single cigarette, gently placed its tip between her lips, and extracted a gold-plated lighter, whose top she swivelled so that a small blue flame shot up and hissed loudly. Steadying the cigarette between her slender middle and index fingers, she raised the lighter like a miniature arc-welder. Closing her eyes, she lit the cigarette, held her breath for a moment, and exhaled a sinuous band of silvery smoke.

This process transfixed Vaughan and the man in the doorway. They gaped at Lily's elegantly competent motions, as though she were executing some polished erotic trick, ogling her fingers and the lipsticked-stained tube smouldering in her mouth.

Suddenly self-conscious, she asked, "What is it? Do I look funny?"

"No," replied Vaughan too loudly. "No, you're fine...It's just that you do that so beautifully."

Still unsure that she wasn't being made fun of, Lily asked pettishly, "Do *what* beautifully? I'm not doing anything."

"Oh, but dear lady, you *are*," said the priestly stranger, now stepping into the room and closing the door. "The exhalations of a justified soul are always sweet." Looking benignly and smiling first at Lily and then at Vaughn, he added, "The signs are easy to see, which goodness places in visages contrite and pure, that God may glorify them."

Lily studied the cigarette burning between her fingers to see if anything it was doing warranted this effusion. Except for the fact that it hadn't shortened any since it had been lit, it was unremarkable. Lily extended the cigarette toward the man as though perhaps he'd not seen it very clearly.

"It's a cigarette," she said. He continued to grin complacently at her. "A cigarette," she repeated, raising her eyebrows, encouraging him to understand. She made a dumb show of taking several quick puffs and then sighed pleurably, "Ahhh..."

Vaughan changed the subject.

"We apologize for intruding. It seemed to be getting dark, and there didn't seem to be anyplace else to go."

"Dark? Oh, *darkness*. Yes. Yet it is only the distressing apprehension of night, as when some man or woman, anxiously searching the working of their hearts—how they have fallen—and in those last moments of illumination before evening shuts down on them at last and for eternity, so then...so then..." He paused, cleared his throat, and looked about the room bleakly. "Well, it's like that," he finished lamely.

"As we were sitting here before you came," Vaughan said, "it occurred to me that we weren't so much in a place as a particular time, and I could tell the day and the month and the hour."

"And what time *was* it?" asked Lily and the man nearly in unison.

"I feel silly."

"No, please, tell us! When is it?"

"Well, this can't of course be true, but it feels to me like 5:45 p.m. on November 11."

"Do you know the year?" Lily asked.

"Years don't matter," the other man interrupted dolefully. "They never last. They vanish and you never see them again. But he's right: 5:45, November 11 lingers. It never goes away. A particular hour on a particular day is specific, like a person, with a name, like mine, Edward, and like me, with an immortal soul.

"I have come to that conclusion, that living eternally at dusk in late autumn is emblematic of my state, having cast about within myself to know whether some sinful action I performed during my time on earth were done at this hour, on this day. Yet committing times without number deviltry, viciousness, and crime, in consequence of which I would be astonished if I had *not* done something grievous, for why would that hour differ from any other? Still, I'd like to know. If this was the worst thing I did, I would at least see its face and know that it was the worst thing."

There seemed to be nothing to say to this, and eventually Edward continued, "While I was a living man, I thought that in death, even in hellfire's torment, anyway my sins would be identified and ranked, both in relation to one another and possibly in relation to the sins of others. Alas, I find that even less is explicable in death than in the obscurity that was life."

"It appears we must lower our expectations," Vaughan agreed. Edward sat down across from him at the table. The edge of his high collar was thready, his shirtfront blemished by old stains that had been unhandily scrubbed, and his cheap, shiny tie was limp and ruffled by countless knottings. Close up, his face too looked less austere. In fact as Edward glanced furtively at him, the pouches beneath his eyes and his piscine mouth betrayed the man's fundamental weakness, and along with this, the reflex hypocrisy that had obviously supported him in life, while in death it weighted him down. Possibly the worst thing was that in seeking goodness, you would always sense your own hypocrisy and yet never know it as that, but only squirm uneasily under the will-o'-the-wisp suspicion that you'd done some one thing terribly wrong. Vaughan now understood that doing one thing—no matter how vile or holy—had nothing to do with blessing or damnation. Instead it was what went on and on within you—*how you were*—that had any permanent meaning. The pity of this was that how you were, at least in Vaughan's experience, was in itself a kind of stagnancy, already a kind of death.

Edward had folded his hands before him on the tabletop, and Vaughan tentatively laid his right hand upon them and briefly gripped his fingers in a faint attempt at heartening this kinsman in ambiguity.

"Is there anything to eat?"

"Yesss," Edward replied, a little dubiously. "Some...some bread and something to drink. It looks like wine."

Lily smiled and said teasingly, "Haven't you tried any?"

"To be honest, it didn't seem in keeping with the situation. I speculated that eating and drinking might be a temptation that were a stumbling-block, and lest that this be only a station on my way, and I would have no other chance if I ate and drunk it..." This thought petered out inconclusively. "Anyway," he said nodding toward a kind of pie safe, "the bread and the other thing, they're over there."

"Goodness knows how long they've been here," said Lily briskly as she carried a brick-shaped loaf and a bottle of amber fluid to the table. "It's a wonder the mice haven't gotten to them!"

Now infused with her sociability, Edward sought out a knife and some glasses, while Vaughan studied the bread, which looked familiar. The loaf was sliced, the wine poured, and

they began to consume these things for a while in silence – Lily hungrily, Vaughan musingly, Edward cautiously.

Lily ate one slice of bread and another, and then said, while chewing, “I maff say this brett isn’t berry villing. And it haf a vunny taste. The wine’s all right, fo.”

“I don’t seem to get the benefit of it,” said Edward.

“That’s because they’re only memories,” Vaughan said, remembering. “Symbols, if you like.”

“What?” Edward looked alarmed. “How do you know that?”

“Someone told me. Before.”

“Someone who? Someone dead?”

“I was with him,” answered Vaughan, lost in thought. “We were in his room, high up, and he offered me bread and wine, and that’s what he said. He said ‘they represent something.’”

Dropping his chunk of bread and gripping the edge of the table, Edward whispered urgently, “*What* do they represent?” Vaughan shrugged. He didn’t recall having been told. “You don’t *know*? Think, man! Try to remember!”

“I don’t think he knew either, this other man.” What was his name? wondered Vaughan: *That* was what was important.

Folding his arms on the tabletop, Edward buried his head and moaned, meanwhile rocking agitatedly, like a mental defective, to and fro. Lily stood and gently laid her hand on his head and instantly the rocking stopped.

Head still down, Edward said in a muffled voice, “Your hand is cool.” He sat up. His eyes glittered like wet printer’s ink, his face was vellum-white, like a page. Indeed, with the black, lank wings of his hair hanging like covers bracketing his face, Vaughan thought, he was a nearly literal embodiment of the old saw – “His face was like an open book.” For all that, a book in a tongue (Old Church Slavonic, Late Egyptian) nobody any longer understood.

“The trouble with this place is the horizons,” he said. “You can see them there, way off over the marshes, in every direction. You’d think they were far enough away. But they’re not. If something appeared there – well, you’d know soon enough that they’re closer than you think – right next to you, in fact!”

This instilled in them a common sense of dread, as though this eternally snared moment embodied impending catastrophe. Vaughan and Lily each pictured an enormous, frightful beast emerging above the horizon’s rim, its colossal back rising like a hippopotamus or a mammoth carp from a muddy sea.

“Look for yourselves!” Edward shouted, and before either of them could say, “No, we’ll take your word for it,” Edward had leapt to the door and thrown it open. They followed him onto the ramshackle porch. “Look how distant it seems. Alas, if only it were so...” He stepped down and walked out into the road. Lily and Vaughan followed.

“Let us walk a little way,” Edward said, starting to walk, “discursing of sweet and melancholy things. If we see now only as in a...in a...”

“...glass darkly...” Vaughan said. For a moment, he tried to remember the source of this quotation. Possibly it was part of the title of a film, a depressing Scandanavian film popular in his adolescence.

“I’d feel more comfortable back at the house,” said Lily dubiously.

“We’ve travelled quite a way,” Vaughan added. “She’s tired. We need to rest.”

“Just a little walk,” Edward pleaded. “Just the tiniest stroll. Not far.” He laughed in a barking sort of way, and said, “Not all the way to the horizon!” And laughed even harder at his own wit.

This change from dolefulness to ghastly joviality was unpleasant. Vaughan wanted to insist that they go back indoors, but when he looked over his shoulder, he found they had come too far. And now turning forward, he saw that they approached a woodlot, as though they had now walked over the horizon which had been concealing it. The light too had altered, although only to another mode of November – an overcast day later in the month, on the cusp of winter. As they neared the forest, Vaughan found it hard to gauge distances beyond the treeline: It was probably trackless wilderness within. But Edward's mood continue to brighten horribly.

"You see? No more horizon! Come, let us enter this pleasant wood." His invitation was superfluous: they were already well among the trees. The road had been replaced by a loamy trail half-obliterated by a collage of wet foliage, the leathery scalloped edges of oaks and the five sharp points of maple leaves. About them were the silver-barked trunks of elms, the dove-colored bark of sycamores, the delicate gray of dogwood and redbud whose slender branches were suspended like clouds in the pearly mist that hung a few feet above the forest's floor. Yet the landscape was evenly and clearly illuminated, much lighter in fact than summer woodland, as if in early winter the forest had opened itself to somber and candid inquiry.

The trail rose a little to a knoll, and there they halted. Taking a small breath, Edward said, "You must know that in life I was a sign-seeker, a reader of emblems, of representations and wordless witness. Oh, if only I could decipher how He had written the World, which to my eyes strained at the confines of its muteness. In the beginning was the Word, yet this was the Original Sin under which inarticulate Creation groaned, whose taut skin strained like the womb of a woman with child, whom anyone could see was waiting to be born, on the moment! In the iron November clouds rolling like boulders and mumbling to the arrogant mountains, the hard northern rivers below writing in their alphabet of gashes what that dialogue said. Oh, infinite figuration of the wilderness into which I was born!"

Chapter Fifteen

When I was a boy, I builded a booth in the wilderness. The idea came to me one day as I was hiding in the root cellar, thinking about insects. I relished hiding away in nooks, niches, outbuildings, or caves. I went to find my playfellows who were gadding about in a clearing nearby our settlement. They stopped still, sweating, and awaited what I had to say (I had been always the cynosure of our troop).

"You mean you want to build a fort!" said Tim, the smith's son.

"No, he means a wigwam," Ebenezer, his younger brother, said. And then in case the younger children were ignorant of what that was, he went on, "Like the houses the red Indians have."

"I'm not discussing a fort or a wigwam," I said patiently. "What I'm talking about is a House of the Lord in the savage wilderness."

Looking about him nervously, Tim said, "How deep in the woods have you in mind, Edward?"

"Very deep," I replied, narrowing my eyes earnestly. One of the smaller girls began to whimper. "Anyway, as deep as Parson's Swamp." They looked relieved: Parson's Swamp was but a half a league distant from the village.

"Still, it *is* a swamp...There are snakes in it. And biting insects." This from Lemuel, a very contentious boy, ever bickering with me on every point, ever a blister on my heel. I ignored him.

We builded our booth from boughs and roofed it with leafy branches and caulked it with earth, leaving one window and a door on leather hinges that opened and closed. And there we came in our earnest childishness to repair to the Lord, an unconsecrated chapel but still a temple of a kind, where I *ministered* to my *flock*.

And I would often repair to our secret tabernacle, sitting on my haunches, rocking to and fro, singing, a habit I ever had, to hum and make up tunes to accompany my prayers. One such day as I was suspended like a spider in forgetful meditation, Sara Williams appeared.

"Hello, Edward" she said, shyly. "I thought I should find you here."

"Being in our little chapel is ever my joy," I replied. She smiled and I noticed that her teeth were very small and very white. I gazed at her mouth.

"What doth thou see, Edward?" she asked earnestly, putting her hand to arrange her hair. I was discomfitted and could think of nothing more to do than kneel and clasp my hands and bow my head and Sara did likewise and in this manner we remained some time, until forgetting myself in my soul's effusion to God, I began again to sing. Then I recalled myself and that Sara was there and I was put down, chiefly that she might think I'd sung thinking my singing would please her; when I was all too sensible that I croaked rather than sung.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I fear I forget myself in praise of the Lord."

"Oh no, Edward," she hurriedly replied, "Your singing is a sweet thing for it is unstudied and a frank sign of your devotion. Oh, Edward, you are truly a *good boy*." A single tear overflowed her eye and ran down her pink cheek.

"Don't cry, Sara," I said, shuffling closer to her on my knees and patting her eyes with my kerchief. And then for I know not why, taking the cloth from her face, I planted a kiss upon her cheek.

We had drawn quite near and now I was very mindful that my kneeling leg pressed upon hers. Then, as we were so near and she gazed at me so steadily, I set to akissing her face and, yes, her lips, for so we are born that even children are up to these *old tricks*. Then or soon after, for I don't know how long it was, I felt her tremble delicately and then alarmingly against me. But so these things are arranged, I cared not, nor did I have any power to stop kissing her but went on even harder; and then I sensed some oppression in my fluids and an irresistible inducement inside my loins, abuilding into a surge. Then Sara sprang back, for the moisture had seeped through my breeches and even into her dress, and she glanced down wide-eyed.

"Why, Edward," she cried, "what has happened?" Then, much to my astonishment, she giggled.

I apprehended all in an instant, how like Adam and Eve we were, and how we must ever repeat their error. I fell before her on the earthen floor, flailing and moaning.

"O Woe," I cried, "Now must Thou turn'st thy face from thy servant to bring him low and crush him such as the rattlesnake beneath thy heel, as a fornicator and a impudent lustmonger and whoremaster."

Sara watched me curiously and blushed.

"For shame," she said, "These are no terms for one of my years and sex to hear! Have you lost your senses?"

Lost my senses? no, indeed I had been lost *in* them! Sara fled. I begged God that I might be erased from His roll to be put out of his sight forever.

I went out into the darkening forest, careless where my feet fell, on roots or in holes, and going along that way, I tripped and fell into a clump of great ferns.

I rolled upon my back and stared up at the sky. I visited again in memory my Lapse with Sara but all I saw with my inward eye were her bright little teeth, the plumpness of her lips, the softness of her limbs, and I gloated over these memories like a miser with his greasy coins. I was in turn dismayed for I knew I should be exiled from her regard, and this thought tormented me as though the sensitive parts of my body were pierced with hot little pins. But I thought, Oh! So thou thinkest this lively torture paineth thee! Then what more will be the excruciating pains of Eternal Punishment! *There's no fucking comparison!*

Now I was for it. With my nose pressed into the loam, I smelled for this last time the pleasingly bitter and innocent tang of bark and compost, and moaning lamented that I had ever failed to cherish these simple gifts of Nature, and now, now it was far too late. Yet had it ever not been *too late* for me? At birth, I had been *too late*. At my mother's breast, I had been *too late*. When my father and my teachers essayed to instruct me in Holy Scripture and the lives of Saintly Persons, I had been *too late*. Ever damned, I came into the late world without grace or hope of forgiveness. Oh, wretched boy that I was! My future could only deliver me into more deviltry, more sorrow, more damnation. For what mattered it whether *Judgment* come sooner or later? A couple of years more or less of excruciating torment wouldn't make a hell of a lot of difference.

I was disturbed in these meditations by the sound of men's voices drawing near. By and by I was astounded to hear my father bellowing exhortations. Perhaps he was leading a search party for me, but that seemed unlikely. No one ever bothered looking for me before this. Then

my heart stopped: Perhaps Sara in her shame had confessed all, and the troop of men was come to deliver me to punishment. In that case, I should stand up, but alas I was far too pusillanimous to announce myself, and instead like a lizard I slunk deeper among the ferns.

"Let us disperseth our strength," my father said very loudly to the forest, "and send a Rod out of Zion that sitteth at my right hand and make of our enemies a footstool!" The mob was silent as they strained to understand this and keep up with my father's long-legged stride. His sermons were much admired and little understood, and indeed more improving for that, although his way of speaking did not seem somehow consonant with men walking down a path in the wilderness. "So the heathen shall tremble at the name of Eloi, and all the kings of the earth at His glory!"

"Does he mean *Indian* kings?" another man timidly asked no one in particular.

"They are without government!" bellowed Elisha Delay, one of our elders. "Neither do they live according to any plan or thought. They rankle under authority and each goes his own way."

"Do they not have chiefs or sachems?" asked another.

"Yea, they have those among them who are the Greatest Sinners," Elisha answered, "if these might be named 'chiefs.' They have witchwomen and warlocks and whoever they consider the bloodiest and most ensanguined, them do they appoint to lead them on attacks and murder and rapine." After a moment's thought, he added, "Other than that, they don't have shit."

"It would be a wonder if they were not sunk in evildoing," said Tom Gritch, "for they hold all in common."

"Even their women!" someone shouted. Everyone thought about this for a moment.

"Even their women. They own no property! How then can they know Grace? How can they earn Redemption?"

"It were better that they were dead."

"We'll send them all to Hell!"

Now the men had gone well down the trail, and I could last hear only my father's admonishing no one in particular at the top of his lungs, "Who knoweth the desert ways? For *how can I*, except Someone guideth me?"

They went on like that deeper into the Forest, bucking one another up with choice pieces of Scripture, or anyway Scripture-like remarks, and generally reproving the heathen in case there happened to be any within earshot.

I slipped behind them, unseen, continuing to listen to their improving discourse, and betimes I learned the purpose to their venture, viz. three Red Indians had met with a family coming to our plantation and had murdered the husband and the oldest son and absconded with the wife and small children. My father's band was but one of several now up and down all New England searching out the Mohegans or Nipmucks who were now assuredly defiling Mrs. Smart, abusing and torturing the two children. Their urgent need for rescue explained the haste of my father's party.

Anon the way grew smoother as the party's track dwindled out, for we had penetrated to regions of the forest where all the ground was spread with peat so deep and soft that it was as a Turkey carpet and each tree so great around that six big men, arms outstretched, could not compass it, and whose lowest branches began at the height of ordinary treetops. The trunks of their fallen brothers were the only objects interrupting the mighty prospect of columned oaks and elms.

Yet in this Quiet unbroken it might be since Creation, one of the party upraised the call, "Savages!"

Yea, before us three or four Indians crept through the gloom, seeming like Redmen always did with Whitemen, not to attend to our presence, and moving at their own pace, so we drew nearer. There were two squaws, a bravo, and a half-grown child.

"Hold there," Father commanded, and the Indians stopped and turned as we drew up to them. "We would have converse with you." I crept two trees closer to see what would fall out between my father and the Indians, who watched his approach anxiously or warily or stonily. I saw that one of the women was my mother's age, the other elder, and child a girl about my own age.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" said my father in a weird, bellowing drawl, which frightened me and probably seemed no less insane to the Indians. Even the brave, stepping back a little, looked worried now. "I WOULD HAVE INTELLIGENCE OF YOU."

"Why are you speaking like that?" the Indian asked civilly. The men surrounded the small band. In the usual course of things, these my countrymen were not prepossessing. Nay, they were a pinched-faced, slatternly mess of people who were usually sick and often dirty. I had crept up now and was close enough to Elisha Delay to smell his greasy stench and to inspect the way his scrawny face had fallen in upon itself. A brushy, greasy shock of black hair fell partly over his narrowed eyes. For the first time that day, I stopped being afeared of my own inevitable damnation and apprehended that some greater peril was about to descend upon us all, especially on the Indians. I commenced to learn in this hour that of our fellow mortals those we most have cause to fear are those who most fear God.

"Where have the fiends taken Mrs. Smart?" My father screamed. The Indian man strained, as anyone might have, to take this in.

"Where have friends tooken Mazes Tart?" he asked, seeking clarification.

"See! He mocketh us!" Delay said.

"The Lord our God is made a laughing-stock and a butt!" Gritch added.

The girl snuffled and drew nearer to her mother.

Of a sudden Gritch struck the Redman with his fist, and then Delay laid upon him a great blow that was like to kill him, and then others of them, with my father standing by, set upon the women, surrounding them so that I could not see what our men did to them except that I saw the flashes of knives and hatchets as these rose and fell. The blades were at first silver and then were ensanguined with the Indians' blood and I turned away, and all became quiet. I looked out then from behind my tree and saw my father, his arms hanging at his side, looking cast down, and the men about him panting with the instruments of murder dripping in their hands. At their feet all the Indians—even the girl—lay slaughtered. Their wounds gaped so that the clean white bone shone through, and the sinews like rope-ends bent back over the cuts. And the old woman shook a little still like one palsied, yet no one came forward to finish her.

After a while, the men turned from their killing-ground and went on, not speaking loudly now, nay, nor speaking at all. And having come this far, I followed.

In late afternoon we entered a thicket. Little by little each man went his own way, seeking the path he thought best over roots and under spiky boughs, at all times prepared for a catamount or Redman to pounce. Preoccupied with breaking off sharp twigs and avoiding a nasty trip, I went some way before realizing that the sounds of the other men thrashing through the swale had ceased.

In my sudden great apprehension, I gave over any care I had to conceal myself. "Hallo?" I called. My voice was sopped up by the undergrowth, like gravy soaking into bread. I essayed to retrace my steps, but my former path was disappeared. The greasy red stems of sumac twisted evilly behind me. Caring no more for the brushy clawing of my cheeks and the piercing of my soles, I went headlong through the brake until I tripped. Night was fast falling, and here I

was caged in this coppice. I was too weary and my sight was too obscured to move on. The ground gave up the warmth of the day as a body releases its soul. Only chill and dissolution remained.

Then to my great joy I heard soft voices. I stood up and cocked my head. The voices slipped away and rose again, such that I could not tell from what quarter they came or how near or far. I no longer cared whether devils, angels or mortals were hard by, just that any being at all was with me there in that cold deserted place. Wanting only to emerge from this woody prison and discover those whose voices I heard, I plunged through the thicket and broke free. Yet a sudden fancy prompted me to stay my headlong progress. I slowly inched forward and then one foot swung out into thin air and I teetered at the verge of an abyss. I looked down and saw swallows pursued by a kite. Beneath them, a misty cloud from perhaps a raging torrent rose up. I heard as it were the cries of the birds like agonized souls struggling in Judgment.

"Boy, stay where thou art," said at once a booming voice hard at my heels. Quite likely some dark angel was come upon me.

"I am coming to assist you," said my unholy savior. Then I felt the devil claw grip my arm, and I was lifted up.

"I ma rready, O Susususupreme Adversary," I cried, my mouth ajuttering and my teeth rattling. "I'ma abounden to jjjoin your Evil Legions and wawawreak such havoc 'pon the Good they may wish they'd never neen baborn!" I did not care that such victims would include my blessed mother and father and sisters and brothers and Sara, whom I had led into sin, and on second thought was probably also fallen and could be my quean, which was even more exciting. I began to laugh like a lunatic.

He who had pulled me back from the Abyss now let me go, and when I looked fearfully to see what shape the Old One took, I saw he was a big *Red Indian*. I thought of my people's murder of the Indians earlier that day and wondered fearfully whether he had intelligence of it.

"Are you out of your wits?" asked the Redman (whom I later learned was called Metacomet). "You nearly fell into that gorge."

"It were better for me thus," I said resignedly. Metacomet inspected me. Finally he said,

"A man should hold his tongue if he can't talk sense." Curiously, this seemed the most comforting thing I'd heard that day. "You can't stay here," he continued, "you'll injure yourself. You'll have to come with us."

I was a hostage of the Indians! Who could say what might happen? I could be a *Holy Martyr*. No matter how I was tortured, I would be brave and never renounce my Faith, and learning of this somehow, my family and Sara and all the people of our settlement would say as Sara had done before our Fall, "Oh that Edward, he wert truly a *good boy*, and now he's massacred by heathens." Then they would weep bitterly. Conversely, I might cast aside Custom and Religion and become one of them *and commit one damn sin after another*. Both of these prospects were appealing.

I have no recollection of how we made our way down the dark path, but I awoke the next day's dawn on a couch of pelts—beaver, bear, buckskin. I was warm clear through and breathed the wild but pleasant odor of the furs, only half-conscious of my whereabouts and condition. A verse of Scripture flitted through my mind: "Like the ancient Hebrews, I will sit down by the waters of Babylon and weep." Yet I wondered whether the exiled Jews were at all times miserable but sometimes took pleasure in certain aspects of their Exile, such as swimming in the Euphrates.

Having risen early, the Nipmucks were gone. I shall call them "Nipmucks" as they called themselves, as to signify "The People. Who live on plateaux hard against various small bodies of sweet water bordered by rushes." The breakfast fires had settled to a few coals. I had ever been

accustomed to pray at this hour, yet I was astonished that I could not recite one prayer. I commenced in the ordinary ways so as to spur my recollection. "Oh, most merciful Father," I prayed, "give us...send us...shield us...prevent us..." But I was uncertain what exactly I wished our Father to do or with what or for how long.

During that first morning I weighed severally my various fates among the Nipmucks, but by and by, I came to see that they, like my own people, rarely cared where I was or what I did. I looked about to see if any would hinder my going, but I perceived that I might depart as I chose, that I was not a prisoner. Curiously this depressed me even further. So I soon took to doing in the Nipmuck encampment what I did mostly around my own village, moping about.

Among whitemen, I had lived in two worlds, the settlement and the forest. If one wearied me, the other was at hand. Yet here in the Nipmuck village I knew not where I was. Within the village there was ever something of the forest, and walking a way among the trees I felt I had not in truth departed from the village. I bethought myself again of the ancient Hebrews, how they wandered thither and yon in the Wilderness, how their encampments too must have been rude places with tents, like Nipmucks, how there had been no division 'twixt desert and habitation. Albeit, I said to myself, the Hebrews were guided by Moses and by Jehovah, fed by Manna, with miracles and wonders set as their polestars.

While I was meditating thus, I was astonished to see a small white boy and white girl frolicking about before one of the wigwams. Putting on an amiable manner, I hailed them.

"What ho, little master and maiden!" I called. "Ha. Ha." They instantly halted their game of ringo-rosy-o and gawked at me. "How thou dost disport thyselfes!"

The boy asked angrily, "What're you doing here?" Seeking to mollify him, I said:

"Dost thou know thy Savior and Redeemer. Canst thou lisp thy catechism?" This took them aback and they stood stock still like stumps. Then was I aware that a woman watched us from the nearby wigwam's tented door. She was less filthy than the children, although she looked hard-pressed and weary. And she was white. Unlike the Nipmucks here was one who acknowledged my existence, and in truth inspected me close.

"I heared you was in this camp," she uttered at last. "They say they saved your miserable ass when you was about to get yourself killed."

"Art thou Mrs. Smart?" I asked in wonder. She nodded. "Parties of men have been searching for you all up and down New England. We feared that you'd been murdered by the Redmen...or worse."

"Or worse." She smiled. "Worse than living in a freezing log hut in the dead of winter, eating boiled turnips and potato skins? Hearing days without end people yawping on and on about fucking Justification and fucking Grace and fucking damnation?" I gaped at her. The heathens had stolen her soul.

"These wigwams is warm," she added as an afterthought. "And nobody talks to God."

"Thou art happy here?"

"It's not so bad," She paused and then added: "I don't need nobody to rescue me." She turned to re-enter the wigwam and said over her shoulder: "If you get clear of this place, don't tell nobody where I am."

Now several Indian imps had joined Mrs. Smart's children, and all were playing at tag. My heart went out of me, and I continued my listless pacing through the village, indifferently watching the savage activities. I began to consider whether bands of searchers were combing the forest for me as they had for Mrs. Smart. I knew of a sudden that no one looked out for me, nay, neither my kin nor my friends nor Sara. Why was that? If we white men like the Nipmucks were named according to our deserts, we'd be called the People of Horribly Tedious Inward Carping and Nasty Quibbling. We had ever weighed small in one another's eyes: When small children,

birthing mothers, sickly babies withered away; when strong men perished through gruesome building accidents or arrow wounds; certainly when old people who had somehow managed to survive finally fizzled out—we cast upon all this a cold eye. Why, were we not mortals, whose part was corruption, that one should be surprised when corruption corrupted at an instant? At the twinkling of an eye would we all be changed to corpses.

The day passed for me thus in inward reverie and betimes drowsing off, and when evening drew on, the Nipmucks came together in the center of their camp to take their rest and visit with their neighbors after the day's hunting or farming or lurking. They started a big fire in a cleared space, and as the shades of night cloaked all the forest and the outskirts of the camp, the wigwams were lit by the fire's infernal glare, their naked bodies gleaming handsomely in this unholy light, and withal the murmuring gabble of many Nipmuck voices.

I gnawed a hunk of venison that I'd been given, and drank from a gourd that passed from hand to hand. The drink was clear and burning and it madeth my nostrils to snort and my gullet to seize and my head to whirl. Each time the gourd passed near me, I eagerly took it and finally I kept it to myself, adrinking down till it was empty.

Then I know not how it was but the Word poured from my lips and I began to preach to them. "Ye forlorn and unsanctified citizens of Sodom! Mark me!" I noted with satisfaction that all feel silent, some with curious looks, others with astonished glances, and still others with sour countenances. Then several looked to Metacomet and spoke in Nipmuck, doubtless saying "What doth that inspired White Boy saith?" and so we went on, I delivering my sacred message, and awaiting Metacomet to say over my words in the Nipmuck tongue.

"I was not placed in your ensanguined hands for nothing. Nay, the Great Jehovah who hangs above all men like...like..." Looking about me, I sought some common object to provide a figure to these simple people, "...like an enormous calabash!" I waited for my translator to explain this to them, and when he had, they began to murmur and snort among themselves. One woman made a question to Metacomet, who said to me:

"She's curious why you think God is similar to a cooking utensil. She thinks this is a foolish, ignorant idea."

"I don't actually think God is a calabash," I replied impatiently.

"Then why did you say that?"

"It was to hand. I sought some device familiar to you that you might understand what God is like."

"But it is impossible to say what God is like."

"Naturally. However, you are heathens. To describe the glory of God as we Christians know Him takes much understanding, much learning."

"No amount of what man can say can say what God is like."

He was obdurate in his heathenish understanding. Moving on to subjects far more urgent, I commenced to speak to them of sin:

"Oh that I might make you comprehend what God holds in store for you after death, that unendurable suffering that would nevertheless be endured for that it endures eternally. Perpetual disembowelment! Roasting flesh ne'er melting, that its pain be imperishable.

"Does the Lord our God relish this your anguish? Does He will that even savages be forevermore in anguish? Yes, for most of you, He does.

"Yet there are those few of you who may still scape such agonies..."

Pausing, I passed my eyes over the gawking Indian mob, noting their possible dread and its manifestations, such as trembling and shaking and clicking of teeth. But in the lurid fire's glare, I detected that though they shook, it was with laughter, though their teeth gleamed, it was with grinning.

"Grin now, you fools!" I hollered furiously. "You shall not smirk when your bodies are repeatedly skewered and pricked by imps and demons in the howling, wild Inferno."

Some of them, still chuckling and shaking their heads, broke off and slowly drifted away to their wigwams. I was called to make some sign, some sacrifice, so striding over to a nearby post on which were hung some drying skins, I bid them bind me to it as was their horrible custom, and bank up the fires around me. Yea, that I might be burned at the stake! I hectored them and dared them and poured contempt on them, ever saying, "You crawling, yellow Redmen, you pusillanimous vermin! See how a Christian dies! Do you fear my God that He would punish you that you martyr an innocent? I perish that even one of you may be Saved!" So that after annoying them long and hard, finally Metacomet, said:

"You are mad. Possibly tying you up for the night is wise." So they stretched tight bonds of hide around me until I could not move. And then the crowd broke up and I was left alone.

"Wait!" I called at the top of my lungs, "you forgot to set me on fire! Oh ye heartless savage race, destroy me!" I bellowed. "Destroy me! Destroy me, a worm and vermin!"

Someone stuck his head out the opening in a nearby hut and yelped at me. As I continued to bray, others followed suit, but no one lit a fire beneath me. They were satisfied with casting imprecations on me just as I went on calling down the foulest accusations on myself at the top of my lungs. Finally, one of them stormed forth from his wigwam and I knew my time was at hand. Yet he only stuffed the rag in my mouth and tied it more firmly so that I was effectively silenced for the remainder of the night.

Saying nothing, Mrs. Smart released me from my bonds at first light. I lay sore and heartsick upon the ground. Blood and bile returned painfully to my chafed limbs.

* * *

Now from time to time, families, small groups, or a single man or woman staggered into the Nipmucks' encampment, bleeding, wounded, or carrying their dead. The whites, they said, had risen up and gone to war, massacring children and ancients. No one knew what had maddened them, but they were indiscriminately insane, unmoved by pity or reason or appeals to religion. The whites, said the Nipmucks, were as they had always suspected—savages, without knowledge of spiritual things. I thought upon when the men of my village had butchered the Indian family in the wilderness.

How came it thus? Perhaps Christian people in the mother country were better than we were. Perhaps the wilderness corrupted white men and bent them to violence. For myself, I thought how could it be otherwise? These horrible selvages, void prairies, monstrous trees, mountains, beasts, oceans, insects, rivers. It was a land of Gog and Magog repeated in all forms. The New World was a kind of hell.

We began to journey westward, seeking to keep beyond the reach of the whites. We were gulped down beneath the canopy of trees, treading our tiny way on scratched paths at the roots of giants. In the evenings I watched the ribbon of smoke climb and climb that awful height, and often it would vanish before ever it touched the lowest leaves. I prayed still but now with less faith than aforesaid faith had easily been tricked out.

Winter came on and still we travelled, spurred by hunger and anxiety that the white people, my people, would fall on us, or other strange Indians, over whose hunting grounds we now trespassed, would punish us. From time to time we would see such Indians, two or three hunting, who watched us as we watched them, warily, keeping our distance. Yet even when a family of Senecas or a single Mohegan, withered by the forest's loneliness approached (for even Red Men grow lonely), we could learn very little about the movements of the whites, and still less the farther we travelled, until I was persuaded that we had scaped the limit of all civilized habitations. We followed the course of some great nameless river, now traversing where elk or

deer had crossed the thick ice, now keeping by the thready trail they or some other game had made and on which few men had passed. We now had been many days without food. We walked on silently and even when we camped we had little to say. We but rarely sighted game and when we did, those beasts were huge beyond any proportion of Nature. One bitterly cold day, when dawn came late and dusk early, we entered a clearing deep in snow, where massive deadfall lay, and where a gap broke in the awful canopy, and there a broad and blinding shaft of light shot down like a pillar of some Heavenly Temple, illumining an enormous beast atop a mound—an elk or moose—gigantic in keeping with treetrunks and deadfall and lightshaft. The Nipmucks stood around me in the ankle-deep snow as they were sometimes wont to do, like a rich man's dog pointing fowl, so that their chests did not heave with breath nor their skin twitch and flick the way a white man's does be he standing ever so quiet. They were stopped like a run-down clock. I was fair bid to go mad when the beast tossed its massive burdened head and my companions stirred.

From that time I mark the spells that came on more and more wherein all the world was ceased. I was overcome by the conviction that I stood outside the lives of other men and that I took no part in Creation. Yea, an unseen hand halted human limbs, the fall of snow, the very breath of day—this hand parted me from all.

We walked on but the sense that I was losing my wits grew upon me, making a kind of surety that I was in truth to become permanently deranged. For all that I had faith in—Holy Scripture, the Commandments of our God, the Superiority of Our Race, nay even the Beauty and Modesty of Our Women—all were now shaken and transformed. A crack opened in my brains wherein I glimpsed other lights—the Nobility of the Nipmucks, the Strangeness of the Forest, the Invincible Enmity of Men's Fortunes...which afflicted both White Men and Red equally so that there was nothing much to choose between them. I studied withal how the misery of our bodies without rest or nourishment supervened all else. The very fires we kindled at night seemed scarcely to hold their warmth, the pelts wherewith we covered ourselves were now damp through and through. I drifted to sleep only to awaken pierced through with cold, awake through the deepest hours of night, and then casting to and fro in some place neither slumber nor waking. In early morning snowfall or in the hard bright frost of red winter sunrise we arose and walked on, without sustenance, for how many miles no one could say. And it seemed to me that if only we might stop and set up an encampment, build shelters, let our possessions dry, we would be revived. And I asked Metacomet why we did not do so.

"Consider, boy," he said kindly, "we would starve if we halted."

Yet it seemed to me that if I were once wrapped in a dry bearskin beneath the roof of a wigwam, a dry hot fire burning, it would be a palace to me, and I could willingly drift into death warm and comforted. This was not the weak notion of a puny White boy, for others in our party often fell by the trail and slept so that others must rouse them with heavy blows, pushing them rudely down the trail. So many days did pass like this that soon these fits of mine, wherein all the world was halted and I alone had motion, came quick one upon another. These no longer frightened me. I no longer cared. Yea, the Forest grew more not less puzzling to me, as though when these becalmed moments happened, I were deaf and dumb, seeing the mouths of those around me move and hold conversation but never the wiser of what they spoke.

Then came the time of our last extremity. Numberless days passed when we did not sight the sun so we did not know for certain which direction we travelled. Metacomet and the other elders took counsel but no one could say if we were simply circling back on ourselves. We fed on moss and lichen. Our guts gripped and some one of us was always falling back to empty his bowels in a bloody flux.

We ventured ever deeper in a place where hours did not pass and where each direction was all directions. The Wilderness had lifted its curtain to me, and I saw beyond into its depths—and yet there were no depths. All was depth. Neither did it seem to me now savage desert nor a book wherein mortals read God's will. The Forest was the Forest. It spoke not, nor was it mindful of us. Jehovah didst dwell here in the wilderness, yet bushes did not burn for a sign and angels did not herald His message.

In the end my thoughts sputtered and died like a fat-poor candle. I gazed at the moccasins of the person before me on the trail, or I gazed at my own. The only departure from my smooth passage through idiocy were the spells when all living things were becalmed, stopped.

The spells came faster one on another, and the day arrived when again and again as I dragged behind the main party, I climbed over a ridge or into a small clearing to see the Nipmucks halted in mid-step, and all around them the Forest, fixed and silent, seeming to verge on some great and awful gesture. Then a little before nightfall, the mammoth trees fell away, and in their place were cedars and scrub oak set well apart. We had been gradually climbing all day and were now traversing the broad tops of mountains. It was very cold. As day drew in two stars rose in the clear Western sky. Ahead I heard a cry cut off the instant it left someone's throat, and I pressed more quickly on, and passing through a short defile, I saw the Nipmuck braves in an open clearing, stock still in attitudes of fear or boldness.

Walking among them, I perceived that a little way off were others petrified like them, White men and Red. Near at hand I saw two Nipmucks, with lifted axes against a party of hostile Redmen, whose warclubs were likewise upraised, but fixed in their rush toward the Nipmucks. Two Whitemen had shouldered their muskets and smoke shaped like great white turds hung from the barrels. And in the next instant, I again heard the brief strangled cry and looked about from whence it came, and now the Nipmucks had moved, so that one was in mid-passage falling to the ground. A woman clutched her brow where blood flowered beneath her hand. Metacomet and another warrior were now upon the hostiles. Metacomet's knife was halfway in the breast of his enemy. Metacomet's comrade was turned to land a hatchet-blow on another enemy, who in turn drove his club down close upon the Nipmuck's skull. And then I saw the conclusion of these struggles, for Metacomet was captured in midstride, bloody drops stopped in their fall from his knifeblade, while his comrade lay beside the Indian that Metacomet had stabbed.

Whithal I hurried here and there, to assist the Nipmucks to stand off their enemies, yet each time I ran upon some three or four grappling, cutting, heaving blows, when I reached them, they had ceased and were lying in the snow splashed pink about them, or were halted in some other bloody combat. I saw the corpses quickly dot the field, all at once stacked willy-nilly. Checked screams punctuated the massacre, with ghastly silence drawn out between them, until nearly all the warriors, Nipmucks and their enemies, were kilt, and the women and children and elders too. A final stillness fell, but now brought about simply by death.

I began to think again, after a fashion, but my thoughts were not apt to this scene. I thought, "How shall I bury them all?" and "What words shall I say over them that are heathens?" It seemed hard to me that they were all, attackers and defenders both, gone to hell. And then I uttered a nasty, croaking choke when I considered my own state.

In the end I did not bury them nor say words over them, which I could not do anyway for I had forgotten Scripture, and I had not the baldfaced roguery to pray.

Of my remaining years there's nothing to say. I went on from that place, going Westward. I grew as stealthy as a Nipmuck hunter, so that did I see other men—Indian or

White—I gave them a wide passage. Like the hermits of Ancient Times I dwelt alone, but I was no holy man like them, if they were holy.

I witnessed great and terrible things, earthquakes and hurricanes, which were for me but a little shifting of the earth and a perturbation of the air. I met beasts that few Indians had seen. Animals of all kinds fled from me. I walked so far that I may have finally come to Asia. I had no recollection of what had come before in my life. Except that I minded that kiss in the playhouse. Aforetimes I would have said, “That kiss were a Type of our First Parents’ sin, and like to it, I was thrust from Paradise on a road of woe.”

But now oft I stood on heights that commanded a limitless prospect of peaks and ridges, fold upon fold, right out to the horizon where the vault was sapphire blue. And there two stars would be like points of crystal rising, and a wide band of the whitest blue resting on the bluest green of the farthest ridge, with the sun just set but still brightly lighting the world. The wind might rise, and the unseen hand now touch the bands of hemlock on the countless mountainsides, and their branches bend to its touch like a pelt fingered by traders. The stands of birch gleamed like bones. Birds of prey rode upon the wind.

And I could not think what all this filling up of space was for, nor how I served within it.

Chapter Sixteen

Edward was sweating. The trees nearby had put out small leaves the color of lime pulp, catkins dispensed twirling spikes of fluff, and the more distant forest was even greener. Thick blue shadows sank over dense ferns and brambles. Lily fanned herself. Moist heat rose from the path, which now had widened and was churned as though by hundreds of bare feet, like the sandy outlet leading from a resort town to a popular beach. Ahead the trees parted and hot sunshine tumbled toward them.

Emerging from the shelter of the trees, they were stunned by the brassy disk of the lowering sun—it was still late afternoon but now apparently on a day in midsummer. A little below them fields spread flat and limitless to a horizon lying like a gently curved blade glinting under the white sky. The path led downward amid stalks as high as stepladders. The plants were like corn, but their broad leaves looked too heavy, too glossy to be corn—or perhaps Vaughan had forgotten what cornstalks looked like. Maybe these were big tobacco plants? Whatever they were they held in the wet heat rising from the Nilotic earth and blocked out any sounds at all except for the bonelike rattle of the stalks themselves. All at once, the path broke free onto the shoulder of a two-lane blacktop highway. Looking down the road, Vaughan felt as though they were standing on the path of an enormous maze. The highway's bisecting yellow line glittered. The smell of frying highway tar rose up around them.

Vaughan and Edward dithered, peering down the highway in each direction, then gazing at each other, but Lily chose a direction and strode off. The two men followed. The road curved slowly to the right. The chrome bumper of an automobile came into view. The car was old but not derelict. Its long, boatlike hood, the two big nacelles in which the plate-sized headlights were set, its substantial height and mass, were intimately familiar to Vaughan, whose childhood knowledge of automobiles was exhaustive. This one was a black 1952 Buick Deluxe Sedan. Three little portholes glittered on each side of the hood. The windows were rolled down. Vaughn opened the hefty driver's-side door and got in. He was immersed in the odor of sunwarmed felt, hot steel, ready-to-melt rubber. He could barely grip the fat plastic steering wheel. Something rustled behind him, and as he turned about to see what it was, he sank further into the sofa cushions of the front seat. A comic book was flapping on the floor.

"It's a car," Lily said. Glancing at Edward, she repeated "A car." Edward nodded, uncertainly.

Vaughan disliked automobiles. Mostly, he disliked the way they filled up the world like unsanitary rolling parlors, screeching and thumping about in fumes of fried food and pine deodorizers. He didn't feel that way when he was boy. Maybe there was more room in the world, maybe the cars (like this one) were fewer and more worthy of respect. He badly wanted to drive the Buick. He knew well enough it wouldn't take him anywhere. The car would only

fling him forward further down the line. Yet he needed to jam the pedal down, plunge the heavy car down the blacktop. Maybe they'd break out of ...well, anyway, of this heat.

"Get in," he said.

"This isn't our car," Lily protested. By way of conviction, she gazed earnestly up the highway, as though the weary driver, shirttails out and lugging a gas can, was about to materialize out of the haze.

"This is our car," said Vaughan. "It's our family car."

"Oh, well, if it's *our* car...." She turned to Edward. "Edward, dear, this is our car. You and I will sit in the back. Albert will drive." Edward listened uncomprehendingly and then looked blankly at the car. By way of demonstration, Lily opened the backdoor, slid in, and beckoned Edward to follow, which he did, gingerly.

"Close the door, Edward." She pantomimed grasping the handle and slamming it shut.

The key was in the switch, as Vaughan knew it would be. The Buick's engine ignited, sounding like a father's baritone voice firmly explaining how things would be, where you would go and what you would see along the way. He put the car into gear, and they rolled onto the highway, gradually but irresistibly gathering speed. Vaughan could hear Edward whimpering behind him and Lily softly comforting him.

Now the yellow ribbon unwound, swept under the driver's-side fender. The wind gathered force through the vents, tempering the late-day, late-summer heat clamped down on the fields. The bottom arc of the sun, red and spreading like a spider bite, dipped below his window visor. Crops at different heights threaded by, some thick and squatting, some tall like the ones they'd just come through—but all of them perfectly still, deep blue-green, with broad, poisonous leaves. When the plants were low, enormous corridors opened up to a view of an unreachable horizon. They crossed watercourses: deeply shaded streams moving under arches of willows, rivers two hundred yards wide the color of snapping turtles—all tortuous, bending back in bows, snaking, making up backwaters and sloughs.

The Buick was the single chance element in the Cretaceous landscape. In his American heart, Vaughn knew that nothing could happen as long as they kept on driving. It was the national secret: If you were in a car, moving as fast as you could go, nothing could happen. All that beautifully formed metal, its mass, its velocity—its physics!—nothing could go wrong as long as you were hurtling forward inside. Meanwhile, continuously self-renewing scenery popped up, entertaining you after a fashion. And who knew? you could be going someplace. Yes, you could always be on your way to improvements in your life. Who was to say that this couldn't be true here, in the Afterlife? Although that didn't seem likely.

If only the sun would sink, the evening come on. Driving on into a pocket of night would be blessed, Vaughn thought, as it had been in life. The Junebugs ricocheting and the dragonflies splattering against the windshield. The mysterious odor of cow feces freighted on the nightwind. But the lower limb of the sun stuck at the same place at the edge of his visor.

A weathered farmhouse appeared, the first building they'd seen since they'd left Edward's house. Vaughan slowed the car.

"Why are you slowing down?" Lily asked from the backseat. "We were beginning to enjoy ourselves."

"It just occurred to me that we've come a long way from Edward's house. He'll have a hard time getting back."

"My house?" Edward's voice was firmer now. In the rearview mirror, he simply looked like a man out for a drive in the country, mildly interested in the scenery. "Oh, that was just..."

"It was just a stop along the way, wasn't it, Edward?" said Lily. "A place to hang your hat."

"That's a good way to put it, 'A place to hang my hat.' Yes, that's all it was."

No one said anything for a while. Lily and Edward watched the stalks and rivercourses slide by. Vaughan watched the haze uncoil from the pavement.

"This is quite pleasant, isn't it?" Lily murmured. "Watching the world go by in the company of such handsome gentlemen." In the mirror Vaughan saw Lily take Edward's hand. "An adventure, too. Who knows what may be at the end of our trail? Perhaps a pleasure garden where we can dance under a pavilion by the edge of a lake and watch the moon come up." Lily paused. "Let's have some music." She leaned over the seat and fiddled with the radio dials set into the massive dashboard.

To Vaughan's surprise, the speaker crackled, moaned a little, and then a short burst of music was followed by a deep male voice, not an authentic voice but one that sounded as if something were imitating not only human speech but the use of the throat itself.

"'My Blue Heaven,' with the Empyrean orchestra. And now after this interlude, the news.

"Large blond men led by another large man with a dimpled chin have invaded England and captured Trudy Dark, the noted star of indoors and outdoors. The surprise raid occurred under cover of darkness northwest of...a city.

"Meanwhile, Vim Vigor, noted star of surf and turf, progresses toward completion of the Sistine Chapel despite the interferences of the Pope, played by Sir Nigel Dark, former speech teacher and father of Trudy. Dark said today, 'If he doesn't stop painting the ceiling while we search for my daughter's terrorist kidnappers, I can't be responsible for my actions.'"

The newsreader lowered his voice to a stage whisper.

"Are you listening? Hello hello hello. Can you read me, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea? Good evening. Good morning." The tone was lowered still further, as though the announcer were speaking to someone else in the studio. "What time is it where they are?"

"Where is that man?" asked Edward.

"Shhh," shushed Lily, still leaning over the seat. "I want to hear the news."

"This is just more nonsense," Vaughan said.

"Ah, you're out there," replied the radio voice. "You're listening. You never know sitting here in the dark, talking into the microphone. No one at all could be left."

"Yes, we're here and we need help," Lily said urgently. "Can you send someone?"

"What help?" Vaughan was annoyed. "We don't need any help. And even if we did, no one else can do anything for us."

"I'm afraid you're quite right there, sir," the radio said. "If you can't help yourself, who can you help?"

Lily sat back grumbling. "It's always the same." Now it was Edward's turn to take *her* hand. She snuggled against his shoulder.

"Try not to pay attention," Vaughan said.

"No, please," the voice pleaded. "It's my...purpose...job...vocation? Hard to pin it down. But I'm required to make contact, and it's been ever so long since I have."

"Ask him what he wants," Lily said sulkily.

"You've got our attention, if that's what you wanted," Vaughan said. "We're all ears."

"You're *all ears*? One of you isn't a person?"

"I'm turning this off."

"No, wait." Edward surprised them both by interjecting. He sat forward addressing himself to the windshield. "Do you have a message for us?"

"Maybe. But if I do, you have to guess who it comes from," the radio said coyly.

"Are you...an angelic messenger? From On High?"

"Maybe. But you still haven't guessed who sent me."

"If you're an angelic messenger, you were sent from God," said Edward simply.

"Oh! Oh no! I can't claim that...I would never claim that. I don't even know...Well, I don't even really know what that means. I'm going to pretend I never heard you say that."

"What's he's saying is simple enough," said Vaughan. "He's saying that you must be communicating to us from Elsewhere."

For a few moments they heard panicky whispers from the speaker, then static. Then the voice returned, its earlier poise returned.

"Now it's time for the Countdown. 10...9...8." Another whispering session ensued. The voice resumed. "I mean the Countdown of the Hits. At number forty-three thousand twelve..."

The modulated whine of a steel guitar's high-E string sang through the radio's tin speaker, bending as the notes climbed the fret, and while the final note still sang, a series of notes, a chord progression. A high sweet voice began to sing the blues. Vaughan watched the highway dividing line waver like a wave on an oscilloscope screen. The line looked like it was tuned to the music.

Vaughan saw in the rearview mirror that Lily and Edward were half-reclining in the backseat. Lily was slowly, lovingly kissing Edward's hand, while Edward absently smoothed her hair and watched in wonder. She was crying and the tears rolled from his fingers onto the upholstery. When at last she stopped and looked up at him, he bent to kiss her.

Vaughan stopped watching them. He remembered being a dateless adolescent driving his best friend and his girl aimlessly around the streets on a Friday night while they petted in the backseat. At the time it seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. He hoped that Edward and Lily would between them remember how it went, how you made love.

"Get up early in the morning, hand me down my walking shoe," the radio sang.

Make love. Vaughan pressed the accelerator lightly. The Buick gathered speed. You'd think, Vaughan thought, that you wouldn't be able to do that here, that you couldn't make a machine speed through the Afterlife. They were making time.

On a night in late August when it was hot like this but breezeless, the moon bright in the otherwise hazy, starless sky, he and Julia sat together swinging in a glider on their front porch. As they swung, Julia moved in and out of the moonlight. She was wearing a pale yellow sundress that shone softly in the wristwatch glow. Her hair too looked lighter here in the night, and her shoulders glistened. The strap of her sundress had slid down, and the white line left by her bathing suit looked like a strip of phosphorescence. Undissipated by the heavy air, the odors of cut grass and soap settled around them. He bent to kiss her. He lay his right hand against her moist neck, and his palm slid to her collarbone and down to the top of her breast, and his left caught the nearly weightless hem of her dress and he ran his fingers along the slick groove of her thigh. "Oh," she said. She leaned back and lifted her legs and peeled off a scant tag of silk, and in the same smooth motion swung her leg over his lap, straddling him. Gracelessly he struggled out of his shorts. Julia watched him, smiling, and when he'd extricated himself, she lowered herself onto his erection.

"Keep swinging," she said. When the glider came into its forward arc, he moved deeper within her, and on the backswing he withdrew. He was pushing off with his right foot, and he made the swing go higher and harder. A mosquito was biting him on the neck. A swarm of mosquitoes might have been draining his last pint of blood. He wouldn't have cared. She said, "oh," and "oh," and "oh," until she held her breath. And then she said, "We're making love," and this set them both off. The chain holding the glider was rattling and the ceiling of the porch was creaking. She laughed softly, panting, and said, "Slow down. We're going to fly off the

porch." The creaking stopped. A post-midnight breeze had come up. They were a little cooler, but still very wet.

"A mosquito bit me," he said.

"Me too. Probably the same one. Very intimate." They kissed for a long time. Then she said, "Maybe we made a child."

How hard they tried for so many years. They made love and more love, but they couldn't make a child. And they couldn't make time either.

Hopeful sounds were coming from the backseat. If people could go on fucking right through death. If they could fuck their way through all that was, here and Elsewhere, and never stop, oblivious to signs and portents and this pointless travelling, that was cause for...maybe something better than hope, something that meant that people didn't have to depend on hope anymore. They could depend on fucking.

"It gone keep on walkin till I walk these blues away."

This was better, driving fast down the highway, your body pleased, confidently unconscious, expertly making this big machine plummet through the slipstream, your mind leaving it alone to do its job because your mind was effortlessly moving from picture to picture, recalling minor past events, doing simple numerical calculations, trying to remember the explanation for road mirages. And all the while the wind that smelled like hay and rivers laying a fine layer of grit on your skin. It was a peculiarly American heaven but a kind of paradise for all that: Driving in a 1952 Buick through cornfields while your friends made out in the backseat and you went on into the night.

Except there wouldn't be any night.

They had come to what appeared to be the edge of a village. Vaughan slowed down and pulled over without shutting off the engine. The car ticked and plunked like an old house settling at night. It was much hotter without the slipstream coming through the windows. Vaughan glanced over his shoulder where Edward and Lily were kissing obliviously. If this was a town, were there inhabitants? What kind? Why couldn't they go on driving through peopleless countryside? He sighed, put the Buick in gear, and went on up the road. More low buildings with empty parking lots appeared. Sometimes steel-frame towers appeared partly covered in sheets of plastic and bearing the remains of electric signs. Reading the signs was like deciphering ancient inscriptions worn down by simooms, trying to piece out the remaining letters from the crumbling wires and broken neon tubing of the hieroglyphs perched on top of the poles. Even then what the signs told him was enigmatic and banal: "Parts," "Big Mike," "Travel," "Cold Pathway."

Vaughan was driving very slowly now. A few small houses like Edward's were interspersed among the out-of-businesses, but the town was as unpeopled as the fields surrounding it. The radio, which had been silent for a while, crackled back into life.

"You're not thinking of stopping here, are you?" it peevishly asked. "Because if you are, forget about it. This is none of your business."

"It's none of anybody's business," Vaughan replied

"That's right. None of anybody's business," the radio repeatedly humorlessly. "There's nothing here that would interest you. Long-gone. Moved on. They rolled up the sidewalks."

"I'm thirsty." As soon as he'd said this, Vaughan was angry at himself. It was bad enough to engage in conversation with the prim and clueless radio, but it seemed a failure of will to confess even this small weakness.

"Of course you are. It's one of the conditions. Old-fashioned but time-honored. Part of our countless years of service. Thirst, hot air, fire. Well, not actually fire but pretty damned hot weather just the same."

"So there's no chance of getting a drink."

"Not a chance in hell."

Vaughan leaned down to switch off the radio. "No! Wait..." it said before it was snapped short.

A cluster of buildings was the town's limp crescendo. Vaughan saw ahead a knot of people standing on the roadside. Before them was a kind of three-dimensional billboard, once brightly painted in primary colors and bold lettering, now faded so that its words might have been pictures and its pictures words. He pulled on to the shoulder and stopped.

"It's some people," Lily said with surprise.

"It's not prudent to stop," Edward said. "The people here aren't to be trusted. Anyway, they could just *look* like people. They could be...something else."

"Like what?" Vaughan asked impatiently. "Demons?"

"Yes, exactly like that. We have this vehicle now. We must keep moving."

Vaughan got out of the Buick. No one in the crowd of five or six noticed them. Their attention was fixed on whatever was going on in front of them. He now saw that this collection of painted sidings was a kind of wagon, from which a narrow platform extended. Two people stood on the platform—a man, who was haranguing his minuscule audience, and a woman, standing off to one side. The man's handsome, aquiline features were just short of delicate. His thick, shoulder-length hair was nearly enough to tip him over into prettiness, but his manner was swaggering, masculine. Vaughan was reminded of the celebrity singer-songwriters of his youth—the ones who were too profoundly taken with their own faces to muster the cooperation needed to play in a band. For all that, his expression was alertly intelligent. The woman wore a violet evening gown, off the shoulder and slit on one side to the knee, like a vamp in a black-and-white detective movie. Her hair too was obviously an object of veneration, well-cared-for, glossily blonde, swept over one eye. While the man spoke urgently to the people in the road, the woman performed elaborate, graceful gestures, like an Asian dancer whose hands summoned a narrative for those who understood the code. Occasionally, she nodded enthusiastically at the audience, smiling, encouraging them to endorse what her partner was telling them:

"...hat no little cost to me. No not in money, friends, not in fings of this world. But in spirit and in the years I've spent of the brief lifetime we are vouchsafed by fortune. The soul is ard-pressed to endure such initiations and ordeals. It is sorely tested by fire and sword. I tell you, chums, this knowledge is ard-won."

The woman sighed loudly and gazed upward, then downward to see what effect this was having. Their audience was a shirtless old man in overalls, two middle-aged women in housedresses, a young man on crutches, a teenage girl. The women looked dubious, the young man was angry, the old man impassive. Only the young girl watched avidly.

"I hask you, brothers and sisters: What would you give for the answer to your prayers? Are you prepared to give up all you possess? Are you ready to search for the Kingdom of Mystic Power which is within you? the one that hopens up the gates of Eaven?"

"Well, I did, chums. Yes, I spared no expense to seek out every Oly Man, guru, saddhi, fakir, monk, magician, freemason, and hanybody else who had a reputation for Knowing What Was What. It was very tiring, I can tell you. And ow many of them actually Knew Anything? Just one, and e wasn't easy to understand.

"I am ere to offer you your fondest art's desire, what you yourself probably don't even know you want.

"It ain't no erbal remedy, ladies and genelmen, and it ain't what they calls a mantra. Hit's better than those, my friends, sumfin that world-weary artsick men and women ave been searching throughout the millenia. And you can get it just by haskin for it. Yes, *knock and someone*

will answer the door; ask and your wish is my command. That's what they say, friends, and it's the truth.

"Now is there any amongst you that's sick or old or lame or poor in spirit? Cause if there is, I got the healing and."

The tiny audience stood stolidly watching him for a few moments, then the girl timidly raised her hand.

"I am, sir. I been ailing."

Smiling warmly, he knelt on the rickety platform.

"Tell me, dear, what affliction in are you abiding in your sweet young ...young ...person?"

"I don't like to say, sir."

"Just whisper it in my ear."

"I'm like embarrassed by all these people."

"Then just come round, dear, to my consultation room where we can have a discreet chat. It's in the back." Straightening himself, he pointed helpfully to the rear of stage. His assistant seemed to have lost interest in what was going on; she folded her arms beneath her heavy breasts and gazed thoughtfully down the road. Just as he was disappearing behind the curtains draping the rear of the stage, the crippled boy spoke up.

"Hey, where are you taking her! What's back there?"

"Why nothing is back there, son. You can see for yourself that there really isn't anything in back at all," said the female assistant. In fact, it did appear as though stepping through the curtains would mean falling off the back of the platform, yet when Vaughan moved around the side of the wagon, the magician didn't emerge. He walked to the rear. The girl too had gone. Edward joined him.

"It's as I thought. He's vanished, with that poor young girl. You wouldn't listen to me. You had to stop. And now we're party to black magic."

"I don't know what you're talking about. That's what people do when they're dead. They disappear. It keeps happening. This is no different."

"Didn't you *see* him? Weren't you listening? His face kept altering. It was gruesome." Lily joined them, and Edward turned to her for confirmation. "You saw it, Lily dearest. You saw how that man did at first assume human form but then revealed himself as a fiend."

"How do you mean a 'fiend,' dear?"

"With those fiendish ears, for example, and that nauseating tail coming out of the seat of his trousers."

Lily cast a quick puzzled glance at Vaughan. Neither of them said anything.

"Well, didn't you see that? That, and all the subsequent metamorphoses too terrible to describe?"

Finally Vaughan said, "We didn't happen to notice any of that."

"But you have a sixth sense for evil," Lily quickly added. "Probably you can detect those kinds of things better than we can."

"I don't understand. Anyone could see what was happening."

At this point the female assistant parted the curtains and let down a small set of folding steps hinged to the rear of the platform. She started to descend but nearly toppled off, her glamorous costume an impediment to free movement. Vaughan mounted the first step to help her down.

"It's always a pleasure to see that there's gentlemen still about." Her hand, cool and remarkably small, lingered in Vaughan's. At a distance, on stage, her features were boldly handsome in the overblown way of aging, aggressively made-up actresses, but closer at hand,

the outline of her face was gently irregular, slightly out-of-focus like a starlet's close-up. Her eyelashes were long and heavy, her eyes dark and moist as though tear-laden, and her lips were carefully sculpted in thick lipstick colored deep crimson, a shade he hadn't seen women wear since his boyhood.

She looked fondly at Vaughan. "My name is Helen, dear." She let go his hand. "My real name. Not so to speak my *nom du theatre*. Helen is what my friends call me."

"Where has your confederate taken that young woman?" asked Edward.

"Hmm?" Lost in thought, Helen gazed fixedly at Vaughan, occasionally flicking imaginary dust from his shoulder or smoothing his shirtfront, as though he were a doted-on younger brother.

"I'm very serious." Edward was beginning to shout. "I mean to find out where he's taken her."

"What's he on about, dearie?"

"He's under the impression that your friend has done something to that girl he left with."

"What? You mean Si?" She chuckled prettily, sounding three or four notes, like a diva singing laughter in a Mozart opera. "Come off it. Si's been at his pitch so long he believes it hisself. And the young ones go along with it easier. Which ain't to say that the geezers ain't gullible. Some of em'll swallow even more than the kids."

"Believes what?" asked Edward impatiently. "Don't try to distract me. It's not right that he just disappeared like that. It's unholy."

"Ah, well, as for that. It's pretty much in the line of wonder-workers, in'it? — popping in and popping out. They all do it. Good uns and bad uns."

"I don't care about that. I want to know where he's taken her."

"I don't know what you're making such a fuss about," Lily said.

"Too right, darling. What's he on about? What's it to him where Si's gone? Anyway, that's im standing over there, isn't it?"

Across a large patch of cracked cement stood a wide glass-fronted building. Three derelict shopping carts were strewn on the pavement in front. There stood Si and the girl. Her head was bent, and he rested his hand on her shoulder. From time to time she nodded at his exhortation.

Vaughan thought the sun had gotten closer, close enough that the corona and the core were indistinguishable. It was impossible that night ever came to that sky. It never cooled and it never darkened. Instead the solar flares and gaseous eruptions spread across it like boils and sunburn on a sweat-stained farmer's neck. A rolling dirty border swelled up from the stifling earth. Vaughan fleetingly recalled a landscape of mills and gasometers and a forge-reddened vault. Where had that been? Bits of gravel and pieces of discarded paper wrapper lay about them, each piece casting a long and distinct shadow, each shadow exactly parallel to the others, each the same opaque sliver of blue-violet. He tried to think of some way to escape the heat. He was willing to adopt any recourse at all, to pray to the Authorities for relief, or to indulge demons with unholy sacrifices. If he could only sweat. They could take off their clothes and lie down under the wagon, but the thought of his itching back naked on the gravel and broken glass was loathsome.

A summertime drink would be heavenly — the gorgeous bitter iciness of a gin and tonic, the sweet petroleum tang of a Cuba libre. A cold bottle of beer.

"That's enough now, Albert," Lily said softly. Vaughan was brought back to the present, such as it was. "You were saying that over and over."

"Saying what?"

"'Bottle of beer, bottle of beer.'"

"I was thinking how nice a cold drink would be."

"Yes, we'd all like one, Albert."

"Not much chance of a bleeding drink here, dearie," Helen said. "That's the last thing they'd ave on offer."

"They frown on vices," she added.

"It's right they should," said Edward. "In a place consecrated to...to death, it goes without saying that decorum..."

"Yes, well, that's one point of view, I'm sure," said Helen. "Still, in my experience some of the most eminent people in the holiness line, they didn't have nothing against a wholesome, old-fashioned knees-up."

"At least that's the way it was in Decapolis."

Chapter Seventeen

This wedding they hired us for was way out in the provinces, but you wouldn't of thought it if you'd seen em pouring in since sunup. Where did they all come from, I thought to myself, and who was to feed em? The poor bride's dad didn't look half put out. These was the old days when hospitality meant something. It wasn't polite to say, Who invited you, chum? you ain't on the invitation list. Why, anybody in the neighborhood could show up and know he'd get a good feed and plenty of booze, and the way people was already packed into the wedding tent and flowing outside and everywhere around the premises, they were only "neighbors" by courtesy. Some of em even had gotten into the house and was strollin around picking up choice objets d'art. The bride's mum wringing her hands.

I was sitting on our trunks in the courtyard watching the show when the pub owner drove up in a big wagon loaded with kegs. Dad must of had second thoughts. He already had wine laid on back of the tent and stacked up against the house, but with all them thirsty so-called guests, the River Jordan full of pinot noir wasn't going to wet their whistles. Dad and the publican argued a bit, the gist being that the publican was topping up the price cause he knew Dad was in a ticklish position, the publican saying it was his best soave and all that. They was yelling at each other by the end, but nobody paid them any attention, the noise of all them visitors and their camels and asses and kids sounding like bedlam.

Si and me was to do our usual turns—prestidigitation, healin the halt and the lame if there was any about, and then at the end Si doing a bit of prophesying. I always thought finishing up with a prophecy was old-fashioned, but the locals liked it in their rustic way. I wasn't from the neighborhood, having come from a Greek town, a civilized town, up the coast. Which accounts for my name, "Helen," the one what had the phiz that sunk a thousand ships. I couldn't claim *that* of course, but I had good legs, a cute figure. All the time Si was doing his pitch, the chaps would be ogling me. That was part of my job, to make sure they wasn't watching too close. It's not like Si wasn't up to real magic. He could do a fair turn, even when we was just youngsters starting out. He had the gift, which if you ain't got it, then there's no place for you in show business.

First time I saw him was in the agora there in Lydia. It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was gadding about with a couple of me friends. We was good girls but lazy. And flighty: It didn't take nothing to distract us. We loved that marketplace. There was always some new attraction. I specially liked them that did the bona fide supernatural, not just sleight-of-hand but the authentic Mystic Spark. You could tell right off that Si was one of those, and he wasn't half good-looking neither. Just 17 or 18 but he already had that hypnotic gaze with them big black eyes and them long black lashes. One glance at some poor farm girl and she'd keel over like she'd been poleaxed.

He was serious about his work too. He wasn't one of them that just picks up wonder-working as a trade. "Magic's me life, Elen," he'd say. He was always on the look-out for some geezer to give him more training. Most of what he knew he'd picked up here and there, or just came by it naturally. But he knew he needed more if he was to hit the big time. Even back then he was searchin for the Real Thing.

"My spirit will not rest, Elen," he used to say to me, "till its fire's quenched by the Troof of Troofs."

Before me and Si and the other acts, of course, there was the marriage itself, but it wasn't easy getting the citizenry to quiet down. The male relations went around, hollering and as necessary thwacking the rowdier ones. It didn't take the happy couple long to tie the knot. They crunched some glassware under foot, as was the heathen custom, and then the guests got set for the floor show. The menservants carried in long tables and put em down under the tent roof and all around the farmyard, and the womenservants set out the breadbaskets and the first course, which was curdled cheese and honey, so you knew this was going to be a quality feast, no expense spared.

A warbler came on first, a little bit of a thing but with a voice that rattled the pottery. She sung a teary piece about when the newlyweds' heads was turning silver, it'd still be like today when they was first hitched. But while she was musically expatiating on how they'd be eternally planted side by side, the waiters came through with the first pass at the wine. No sooner did they get to one end of the tent than the diners clamored for refills, so they had to go fill up their amphoras and make another sweep. The singer flounces off since the audience wasn't paying no attention to her when-we-grow-old-dear-heart no matter how she bellowed out them high Cs.

Dad kept sending in the servants with platters of fried mutton and millet, trying to get people's minds off the booze. By now it was midday and people from the really outlying territories was coming in, and the guests was helping themselves to the wine. The dogs had got loose and was disputing underfoot. At the head table, the bride's mum was rubbing Dad's temples, and the bride looked like this wasn't what she'd had in mind. The groom wasn't paying no attention. He was tossing back the vino with the rest of em.

"See if you can distract em," Dad says to Si. "I'm running out of wine and vittles, and they'll be hell to pay."

So Si says to me, "Let's give em the Elevating Lady turn, Elen. That'll make em sit up and take notice." This was where Si puts me into a trance and ever so slowly me feet come off the ground and swing up orizontal, and I'm floatin in midair, no strings attached.

"Ladies and gents!" hollers Si. "My lovely assistant and I is about to bring you a demonstration of the Power of the Mind. These Secrets as been wrested from the Mystic Traditions of a dozen nations, from the Swamis of Babylon to the Terrible Virgins what inhabit Delphi. I won't tell you what hit's cost me to become master of these mysteries, but few men as learned of em and lived. A exhibition of Mind over Matter. The Escalated Lady!"

Si made two or three passes and I went right under. I was especially susceptible to trances and Out-of-Body experiences which beside my looks was the reason Si had made me his assistant. Up, up I went, steady as you please till I was flat out. As predicted the rubes was dumbfounded. Si invited the groom to take a stroll around me beautiful suspended body.

Then Si swings me back to the vertical and snaps his fingers and I shakes my head with a bewildered look in my big brown eyes and a pretty flush on my cheek, and the guests give us a big hand.

After that there was nothing for it but Si had to go into his star turn, Talking to Demons. There ain't nothing more difficult in the supernatural line. First off, you got to know the devil's

there. You and me, we may *suspect* some wanker's got the devil in him, but that's just a way of speakin. Si could tell em right away, though. And once you got the demon identified, then you got to provoke him. It's a highly sensitive situation to summon a devil what's raving and answering back and spitting out horrible curses. It takes a professional to keep his head and avoid the hazards, such as if the demon makes up his mind to pop over and possess *you*. This all makes for first-class family entertainment.

Si scanned the crowd looking for a likely candidate, but as often appens when a demon knows he's toe to toe with a real opponent and not just some amateur backwoods preacher, he just throws all caution aside and reveals hisself. Right off a bloke starts flippin and frothin up to the front of the tent, doing different voices and hollering all manner of frightful obscenities, some of which was in tongues nobody there ever heard. He was as ugly as, well, sin—skin the color of lard, his beard all slick with who-knows-what, boils poppin out, his hair chopped close and standin on end. Course, your ideal in such cases is a bloomin young damsel, or failin that, a small child. But Si never faltered just cause his subject was unappealin. All the better for him, he'd say, if the tortured soul was cryin out from the depths of Hades. It was all the more a terrible and edifying spectacle.

Si pulled hisself up: "I summon thee, foul spirit, whether thou be djinn, afreet, or succubus! I order thee in the name of Astarte, Apollo, Jupiter Capitolinus, Mazda, Yahweh and the local authorities at once to vacate, depart, and desist lest I call down up thee frightful agonies and excruciation!"

The bedeviled wretch was duckin and dodgin and sobbin. "I am not a criminal," he says. "She accused me to the police. She reads me mind. I can't get no privacy. In the desert she makes the birds elp er."

"Old im still," Si says to two blokes standin by. Si pinched his nose hard. Right off you could see the effect of the invisible vibrations.

"No no no no no no," he bellowed. "Not no man. *Is* there no man? Where is the Son of Man? I took my medicine. Oh please give me better medicine. You can walk this big wide world and never see is like."

"This is a grievous case," Si shouted over the babbling. "A nasty devil is screwed like a tick on this fella's soul. My mystical incantations and perjurations ain't gonna pry im out. I ain't got no choice: I got to wrestle that demon down."

So Si threw his arms round the man's head and puts him in a hammerlock and the two of them fell to the ground and Si keeping his grip tight around his neck, threw one leg over and grits his teeth. "Come out or there'll be ell to pay!" The possessee went limp. The crowd started to get nasty.

"Oh, let im up," somebody said. "That ain't doin no good."

Si saw the way the wind was blowing. He got up, dusting hisself off. Spit trickled from the poor man's mouth and piss streamed from under his cloak. He passed gas. Naturally, the audience started to break up.

It took the heart out of me to watch a fellow human being come so low. He didn't seem crazy anymore. All he was was weeping, not loud nor wild, but moaning in steady little puffs. Grief, it was, no frills. There was a demon in him, but it was a long and weary demon, sick to death, and Si didn't have no way to catch hold of him.

The crowd having departed, there was only Si and me and two or three others. One of these blokes stooped down to give him a hand up. Well, that's a kindly gesture, I thought, being as most people would naturally be put off touching him. But while this good chap was kneelin, he leaned down close and whispered.

"See ere," says Si indignantly. "There's nuffin you can do here because I already tried."

The good man looked up at Si and then turned back to the sick man. The sick man turned his head. Then the good chap said out loud,

"Stand up."

"That man ain't getting up no more," says Si to the bloke, but sort of uncertain. "It ain't within the realm of possibility."

The good man smiled, not at Si but to hisself, and says, "What's possible don't matter, friend. What's ailin this bloke ain't technical."

And the sick man propped hisself up on one arm. The good chap encouraged him: "That's right, brother, take it slow. But stand up now. That's what you got feet for." And the sick man's eyes cleared and weren't so sick no more, but he couldn't look nowhere except at the man tellin him to stand. Nor could none of us, when it come to that—all of us starin at this fella telling us to stand up, get up.

Then when he had the sick man finally up on his feet, the good man took the end of his own cloak and wiped the sick man's face and pinched his nose with the cloth. "Blow," he says.

"Okay now?" the good man asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay now." And he reached out to shake the good man's hand.

"You better get cleaned up," the good man says. The healed man looked down at his filthy clothes.

"I guess I better," he says, smiling.

The healed man walked away. At the edge of the tent, he stopped and rubbed the back of his neck and looked out at the countryside, with the shrubbery and the wine barrels in the late afternoon sun. He shook his head and started off to wherever maybe was home. Meanwhile, the good man and his friends went back to the party, laughing and talking with the other guests.

"E wasn't really possessed," Si grumbled.

"Whatever he was," I says, "that chap fixed him up."

Si didn't say nothin. But he sat down at the end of the table where the bloke and his pals was, keepin an eye on em. There wasn't much to see, just working men takin a holiday.

As for the wedding celebration, nobody looked like they was ready to go home. The servants already slaughtered a flock of sheep, so they was now down to the goats. And they was well and truly running short of wine. In those days you couldn't holler "The party's over" and expect the guests to fold up and go home. It wasn't decent and nobody'd pay attention. Anyway wedding guests were like they always been—they can turn vicious on you in the wink of an eye. A year or so before this, the guests at a big wedding over at Antioch had burned down the family homestead when the hosts ran out of finger food.

Dad and his steward was having a serious confab down at our end of the table. Sitting right by was a pretty little woman, whip-thin and smooth-boned. She looked like someone who was always on the alert, always listening. It appears she'd come with the healer and his friends because she leaned over and said to him,

"These good folks has run short of wine, Yesh." He didn't hear her since somebody was telling a joke at the other end of the table and he was laughing along. She tugged his sleeve. "Yesh, the wine's run out," she repeated.

"What wine run's out?" he said, distracted like, still trying to hear the funny story.

"Our host ain't got no more wine and the party's still got a long way to go."

The story teller had got to the punchline. "Well, then, what you got the goat for?" It must have been a good joke. The good man and his friends laughed hard.

"Would you listen to me, Yesh?" the little woman persisted. "I know there's something you can do about it." Wiping his eyes, he turned his attention to her.

"Do about what? What's that got to do with me, Ma?"

"You know. If you wanted to... You could just ask..."

"Ask who? The man who sells the wine? Or maybe you want I should go and stomp the grapes myself."

"That's no way to talk to your mother."

"I'm sorry, Ma, but I can't ask that. It's... it's trivial like."

"There's nothing trivial a family has to tell the guests they're out of wine on their daughter's wedding day. Her father's a good man. There'll be gossip."

"Let them gossip. It don't have nothing to do with me."

Now Yesh's friends chipped in. "Oh, go ahead and get the wine, Yesh," one of them urged. He shook his head like he couldn't argue no more.

"Okay," he said, giving in, "But no more parlor tricks today. Tell them to fill the jugs with water and wait a few minutes."

Yesh's mother went up to Dad and his steward and told them what her son had said.

"This is the one what helped out with the bum?" Dad asked. "Can he get us some more wine?"

"He can do anything he puts his mind to," she said, like a mother.

"I don't get it," the steward put in. "What's the water got to do with it? He wants us to wash out the jugs first?"

"I'm just telling you," she said, "whatever he says he'll do, he'll do. If you fill the jugs with water, I'm guaranteeing you you'll have wine quicker'n Bob's-your-uncle."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," said the steward. "Let's get serious."

Then Si stepped in. "No, wait a minute. This fella squeezed that demon out of the bum slick and clean. E's probably put a kind of spell on them jugs."

"A spell," said Dad, respectful like. Then he turned to his steward. "Do as he says. Fill up them jugs with tap water."

So the jugs was filled, and we waited. By now the guests had twigged there wasn't no more wine and was getting restless.

"Try it now," said Yesh's mother, and the steward dipped his cup in a jug and it come out dark, dark red, and he drunk.

"It's Jordan Valley ought-six," he says, wonderin and smackin his lips. "Or maybe something better." Then everybody tries some and it's like the steward says. Yesh had done filled those amphoras not with any old jug-wine but with quality 60-sesterces-a-bottle vintage cru.

Si was preoccupied later that night as we got ready for bed in our little wagon.

"Elen," he says, "I'm a umble man. I'm never a man to say, 'I got nuffin to learn from another bloke.' On the contrary. I've spared no expense and trouble to learn from the very best there is in the trade, isn't that so?"

"You got a true hunger for mystic education," I said.

"Now, take that bloke what done the ealin today and filled up them containers with wine. My paranormal intuition tells me I could learn something from im. E ain't no run of the mill mountebank. Why, e didn't ask nuffin for fillin them jugs..."

"He was even sort of reluctant."

"Yes, reluctant." Si was thoughtful for a long time and I'd almost drifted off to sleep. Then he said, "That's the true Secret Wisdom, that is."

For a time after that, Si and me had more engagements than we could play. People wanted Si to work their weddings and bar mitzvahs and birthdays. All over the map, we was, with the venues getting better and Si getting a name for himself as a consultant so that finally he said,

"It's time I set up shop as befits a professional, Elen. No more of these one-night stands and anging about with these sordid carny types. No, I got to devote myself to my true vocation, ealin and prophesyin and penetratin the arcana."

Which wasn't to say he didn't have competition. They was everywhere back then, magi and soothsayers and mountebanks. There was even rumors of a prophet, a real one, Joe the Dipper, who worked the rivers when he wasn't performing amazing feats of self-abuse in the desert. They finally cut off his head, though. It's all well and good being a prophet, with lots of high-level converse with the deity and all that, but it's got its risks, as when the authorities start paying too much attention to your doings. However, prophesying was really by way of an ethnic specialty, something the Jews and Greeks done. It didn't take no self-discipline, Si thought.

So we settled down in Samaria with a suite of offices, the waiting room always full of unfortunates. But Si couldn't take no pleasure in it. He said he'd come as far as he could through his own efforts. He was halted at the Great Portal, as he put it—the Threshold of the Other World.

"I feel like a fraud, Elen," he said to me.

"There ain't no one who can touch you, Si," said I. "Why, consider how you roused that high-grade demon from them siamese twins. That was a real tour du force. Nobody else could of done that."

"Oh, Elen. Them's parlor tricks. Spells, tarot cards, Odylic Force—they're all good in their place, but I'm speaking of life and death. And not just your everyday Communication with the Departed. No, your true adept of Mind Science won't rest content till e's pulled aside the Veil twixt this life and the next."

So as well as we was doing, Si was restless. He wanted to take time off, for a sabbatical to confer with the top men. We visited the most famous specialists in the necromantic and thaumaturgical sciences. We sailed down Mother Nile so's Si could confab with the priesthood of Isis, Egyptian hierophants what had the most ancient pedigree. There was the terrible Mysteries at Delphi, which as a line of business was a thriving concern—but as for their horrible secrets, Si said, it weren't nothing more than a gaggle of clueless sods in a temple basement.

We journeyed east to the Persian magi, and nearly got thrown in prison because they got in their heads Si was a Westerner out to corrupt their pure religion, which however they wouldn't explain to outsiders.

Si was discouraged.

"The troof of it is, Elen, that I'm chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. All these so-called necromancers is just quacks."

"Maybe the living ain't supposed to inquire too close about the dead, Si," I said timidly.

"If everybody ad that attitude, there wouldn't be no progress in the mystical sciences."

But there was something to perk him up when Si got home. One of our long-time patients was a tax assessor by the name of Rufus Flavius. Si treated Rufus for scrofula and jealousy, the two conditions being related. One day Rufus came in as usual for Si to exercise his second sight to see if Rufus' wife was dodging around behind his back, said back having broke out in an ugly rash. After Si searches the wife's comings and goings with his Mental Eye and finds nothing amiss, Rufus got a bit chatty and says,

"It looks like you got a bit o competition these days in the bewitchment line, Si."

Si, thinking he meant the usual two-bit itinerant mountebank, says, "That sort of thing don't worry me none. Those chaps asn't any real talent. It's all smoke and mirrors."

"I don't know I'd say that," replies Rufus. "These Nazarene fellas looks pretty authentic. Folks are putting a lot of faith in em."

"What Nazarenes?"

"That's what they call themselves. Good name, huh?"

"It's a crime the way these himpostors play on the trust of simple folk."

"The ones I'm talking about ain't asking for contributions. They're doing it all gratis. And besides the usual healin and exorcism, they're handin out the gift of bloomin mental health."

"Now ow can they claim that?"

"Simple. These blokes is guaranteeing immortality. Plus as an added bonus the lucky few acquires first-rate skills in a foreign language, what they never ad before."

"I knew they was confidence artists," says Si. "That's the oldest swindle in the book. I'll bet it's an elixir, that's the usual dodge."

"No such thing. They just touch em and it's a fate accompli."

"So how's they know they're assured of everlasting life, then?"

"They just believe's all," Rufus says. "Once they had the hand laid on em, they don't have no doubts."

This news put Si off his game. He couldn't concentrate on business. He kept on about these other fellas queering his pitch. The authorities oughta do something about these impostors, and so on.

"Look, Si," I finally told im, "you got to face your anxieties. These blokes either is or is not competition, but you ain't going to know sitting around here fretting."

So we went along as we had been, me taking over basic sortilege and prescribing over the counter potions, leaving Si for the chronic cases. These was few and far between. People was all aquiver with the Nazarenes, and the word got round that a high priest was payin a visit to initiate the Elect.

Right before the visitation, Si went to see his advance men and requested a private consultation with the high priest, whose name was also Simon. They agreed being as how Si was a serious student of the Spiritual Mysteries and all.

So came the day for the Meeting of the Minds, Si and Simon the high priest. You could have knocked me over with a straw when it turned out that this Simon was one of the blokes what had been at the wedding.

"So how's your pal," Si asks, "the one that accomplished that amazing dispossession?"

Simon looked a bit upset. "He died." Then he brightened up. "But he's still with us." Si said something about always keeping good pals alive in your memory, but the other one interrupted him. "I ain't speaking metaphorically, friend. I mean he's still around."

"You mean e ain't dead?"

"Oh, he died all right, but that didn't take. He came right through it and out the other side."

Si perked up. This sounded like what he'd been searching for, Transcending the Portal, Penetrating the Veil.

"E's back from the dead, walking around and all? Can I talk to im?"

Simon peered at him for a minute, obviously weighing his words. "It's hard to explain. It ain't quite like that, young man."

"I got to know," Si said in a low voice, "did e find out the Secret of Secrets, has he made the Ascent?"

The older man sighed. "That don't matter no more. What he done...well, it just don't matter no more." Maybe he didn't want to give away no more secrets, or maybe he was just tired. Anyway, he said, "You come on by this evening, son, and perhaps you'll see him."

They needed somewhere big enough to hold the crowd that showed up for the revival, so they held it in a meadow on the edge of town. Crops was coming up in the fields around , the air was warm and breezy, smelling like cut hay.

People lined up for Simon the high priest to lay hands on them, which he did along with a few words to the effect that the party in question was now signed, sealed and delivered. Then he shook their hand or clapped em on the shoulder. There wasn't much to it. But I paid real close attention, and something was different in each one. They was the same people all right but it was like there had been someone else inside sharing the same personal real estate all along and now it was his time to come into possession of the lease. That was the main thing, I guess. Oh, there was a bit of babbling in foreign tongues, but Simon didn't pay it no mind. When he was finished, there was a field full of different people, smiling, talking quietly to one another.

The local church ladies had set up a little tent where Simon and his assistants could rest and have a cold drink away from the crush. During intermission Si and Simon went off to the tent. Simon was getting on in years and I could see he was bushed. He set himself on a little stool and said to Si, "Well, young man, go ahead and ask your questions."

"I don't fairly know where to start, your Mystical Holiness. I see you done something to those parties out there but I can't get round it. Was there demons dwellin in all of em?"

"They only had in em what we all got in us. We're mortal humans and that ain't much to work with. It takes outside intervention to push that all aside. My job's just to clear the way."

"Clear the way for what?"

"Clear the way so the person what has faith can get a new start, one without the liabilities of being mortal."

"The chief liability to being mortal is ending up dead."

Simon don't say nothing for a long time, just gazing at Si like he was waiting for him to go on, and when Si didn't add anything, Simon said, "That's it all right. Your philosophy and your theology and your high-tech magic don't add up to much, do they, if you can't overcome that?"

"You said it," Si was inspired now. "I been on a quest for that particular Spiritual Treasure ever since I set up in this profession. You got to take me on as your apprentice. You ain't going to find no one, Master, that's more dedicated than me."

"It ain't nothing you can train for, son. You don't come at it like that."

"If it's a question of remuneration...I realize that a chap's got igh overhead searching for the Troof of Troofs. I'd be proud to make a generous donation."

Simon's assistants was obviously put out, grumbling about heathens and devil-worshippers. Si didn't appear to care. All his attention was focused on Simon and whether he was going to admit him to the Secret. With all them bodies in that tiny tent, it was hot. Simon was sweating more than the rest of us, maybe because he was old.

"We only got one key to it, son, and you can't turn it for yourself. All you can do is hope and try to have faith."

"What's that mean? specifically speaking."

"This ain't about perfecting technique, son. You can't apprentice yourself to God."

"Now see here. I don't think you're being square with me, your Oliness. I seed what you done with them pilgrims tonight. Don't tell me you ain't learned the technique somewhere. You could pass it along. Ain't nobody deserves it more than me."

"Don't say nothing more. You ain't doing yourself no good." Simon snatched Si's wrist and said very slowly, "You're edging off to the dark."

"Can't you do nothing for me?" Si pleaded. "I know you could if you wanted."

Simon's old face softened up. He looked at him for a while, maybe deciding on what to do. Finally he said, "You was there at the wedding where the hosts run out of wine, wasn't you?"

"I was there," said Si.

"You remember what my friend done? You remember what he said?"

"I remember all that."

"He said, 'Get up on your feet.' He said, 'Stand up.'"

" 'Stand up?' Is that like a mystic riddle?"

"You got to get rid of them preconceptions you're carrying around, son." Simon looked at Si for a minute and then he said like he'd made up his mind about something, "I got to back to my work."

Si and I walked back to our place. The streets was empty being that everybody was still at the revival. Even the kids and dogs was absent, so there wasn't a sound but our sandals slapping along in the dust. It was one of those evenings the night sky seemed to slip over the day sky like thin linen, with something shining through, and the stars close like bright clouds, the half-moon coming up from the east. I took hold of Si's arm and leaned against him as we went along, not saying nothing. I thought how crazy I was about him.

"There's one thing about magic, Elen," he said after a while. "There ain't no end to it."

Chapter Eighteen

“I’ll say this for death,” Si said, “I’ve matured.”

The young girl had wandered off, the crowd had dispersed. Si had been listening approvingly to Helen for some time.

“In course, anybody’d be improved by it. And if a chap as ankerings after the Unknown, why, you couldn’t find yourself better situated.”

Hankerings, Vaughan thought, something he had to do, something from life, its last moments, a goal he had to attain. Why was he here? As a question, that was familiar and tedious enough. Perhaps he was as deluded as he’d always been. In life too he’d had the sneaking suspicion that he had a task to complete. One without instructions, it was true. He felt like an office boy working day in and day out in a complex and specialized organization—say, a marine insurance company—forever filing documents in Latvian (bills of lading? blackmail letters?) or delivering awkwardly shaped packages to anonymous offices and disused warehouses. If Si wanted to unravel cosmic mysteries, he thought, he should start with what the hell they were doing here.

A borning recollection pecked through its fragile shell and shuddered: His goal was to return to life, after his journey in death, with knowledge to be taken back to the living. On the other hand, what sense did *that* make? Who was the recipient of this wisdom? They’d be expecting something ineffable and this was as plain as day, common as pennies, as Helen might say. Anyway, the authorities would have to keep it all secret—not because it was too heady for ordinary mortals but because it was too discouraging.

“So what is it then, what you’ve learned?” asked Vaughan. Si was nonplussed.

“I’ve discovered...lots of fings. All manner of formerly unresolvable riddles and paradoxes. Major segments of the Arcanum. The thousand and one unspeakable exsufflations. The runes, the symbols, the seven-league boots.”

“So you’ve been in contact with Elsewhere?” Edward said. Mildly startled, they all turned to him. “You’ve been instructed in the manner of banishing demons and of gaining admittance to the thrones and cherubim?”

“Well, old chap, I wouldn’t go that far. That’s hasking a lot, that is. I aven’t got no clearance for *that* level of security. I reckon you got to be a longtime resident.”

“Never mind that,” interrupted Lily. “You couldn’t conjure up a cold drink, could you?”

“That’s simplicity itself,” Helen replied. “Si can do that wifout breaking a sweat.”

“I don’t know, Elen,” Si mumbled.

“Oh, give it try,” Helen urged. “I know: Use the old pentagram method!”

Glancing unhappily at his assistant, Si bent over and began drawing lines in the gravel. He straightened and inspected the result—which looked like a hopscotch court—and then erased it with his toe. He tried a Star of David and a lop-sided box and spiral.

“It has five sides,” Edward said. “Thus the name. Pentagram.”

“It’s been a while,” Si mumbled. He drew a misshapen pentagram and stood within it. “I beckon thee...beckon thee...”

“Try Ondine, Si. She’s always good for mundane pleasures.”

“I beckon thee, Ondine, O dynamic nymph, to quench the thirst of these thy servants. Cool their throats with icy beverages.”

“Now, if I’m not mistaken, we’ll have a demonic manifestation,” Edward said in an instructional tone. “However, we are prepared in the Lord and tempered in his fire.”

Vaughan watched a single sheet of colored paper tumble toward them. It blew for a moment against his leg and continued on its way, catching itself in a small tree—a crabapple or dogwood—in the front yard of a house adjacent to the parking lot. Meanwhile, no goddess bearing lemonade or a pilsener appeared.

“Let’s at least go sit down under that tree,” he said.

Lily and Edward followed him to the yard, whose lawn, surprisingly, was grown up in thick, succulent grass. They sat beneath the tree. The grass was slightly damp and quite cool. Vaughan lay back and looked up through the branches of the tree. This was nearly as good a cold drink. He felt sleepy. He drowsily thought about going to get the comic book back in the car. He would return here and lean against the slim trunk and slowly turn the pages, first inspecting each of the frames—its paradisaical background of simple shapes and basic colors, the carefully schematic expressions of the characters—all the way to the end of the book, without reading any of the balloons. Then he would start at the beginning and read the story. Perhaps it was a Mickey Mouse comic, his favorite as a child, or the Flash, the fastest man in the universe. Stories in Flash comic books were always ingenious. The people who thought up the stories must have understood physics. Yes, all those gaily colored pages jumbled together in a cardboard box, sitting within the circle of enchanted shade under a tree by the sidewalk in summer. Mothers with strollers out for a pre-lunch walk, other kids who wanted to come and play, but he wished only to lie there in a shady pool with the comics that he’d already read a dozen times, making them that much more a reliable source of contentment. That was a *true* spell, *that* was an enchanted circle.

“Wake up, Albert. Edward and I are going into this house.” Lily was standing over him. He blinked. “We don’t want to sit down in the dirt. Anyway, maybe there’s something to drink inside.”

He stood and felt dizzy. He closed his eyes and waited for this to pass, and when he opened them again, he felt as though he were in an immense, airless room. He watched the leaves on the lower boughs of the little tree: They were as immobile as glass. He couldn’t remember hearing Lily and Edward cross the wooden porch into the house. He hadn’t heard the door close. He had heard nothing for many moments. Perhaps replacing sound and motion, an odor—the rising scent of cut grass—pervaded the yard, the street before it, for all Vaughan knew, the entire town. He felt electrical prickling up and down his legs, which had gone to sleep. He had trouble walking up the steps and shuffling across to the screen door, which noiselessly swung to as he stepped into the hallway. Here another smell, equally strong, replaced the scent of grass, but one that resisted naming just as the most profound memories were beyond description—not memories of honors and kisses, but the true stuff of recollection, the sudden recall of all that surrounded and penetrated you while you sat under a crabapple tree and read comic books.

To begin with, this odor was compounded of old rugs, bacon, newsprint, dog, lawn sprinklers, and hand-washed laundry hanging on clothelines. In a word, it was the smell of his grandparents' house. Along with the scent of Julia's breasts after a bath and drinking cider by a pile of burning leaves, this particular odor was the meridian of delight. His dizziness returned but this time pleasurably. His feet tingled. A big oval window was set high in the wall to his right, through which was fixed a standing shaft of sunlight. Dustmotes, at first suspended within it, began to bob and twinkle, while at the same time certain facets of the hallway's odor momentarily displaced the others—the smell of bacon, for example, was so powerful that he was convinced his grandmother was cooking in the kitchen beyond the staircase that rose to his right. He awaited her appearance at the end of the long coat-hung hallway, in the cool pink and gray shade. She was on the verge of calling out to him, to tell him that breakfast was ready. She would call him now.

The dust stopped dancing in the shaft of light. Vaughan strained to hear his grandmother's voice. She would be the first one, the first of the dead that he knew, and then one by one he would find the rest—it didn't matter how long it took. He laughed soundlessly. Of course it didn't, here. And then, eventually, there would be Julia. Standing there with plenty of time, mildly intoxicated by the smell of the house and the permanent shaft of light permeating the hallway, he took pleasure in the reasonableness of this dispensation. At last it made sense: Of course the Authorities couldn't just line up all the dead people you had loved like a heavenly reception line. You'd find them here and there, in the places that were proper for them. What was Julia's proper place? he wondered. A city street in autumn, he decided; at noon before a bustling bar and grill in London or New York, and she'd be wearing a chic suit—with a short skirt to show off her pretty black-stockinged legs! She would laugh to see him come around the corner, as though it was always doubtful whether he could remember their meeting-place. When would he come to such a place here in the Afterlife?

It was impossible to tell how long Vaughan indulged in these pleasant musings. Perhaps a very long time. Ultimately, however, it occurred to him that he should have been hearing Lily and Edward moving around the house. His grandmother, meanwhile, hadn't appeared.

He walked down the long, redolent hallway to the back of the house where there was a room that once may have been a kitchen—lighter patches in the paint showed where gas fixtures and pipes might have gone—but now the room was simply a large, empty space floored with faded pink linoleum. As he left the hallway, two doors stood to his right. One led to a basement, and the other was a back staircase to the upper floors. He climbed the steep, dimly lit stairs. At the top was a long, many-doored hallway. Many of the doors were open, and the hall was lit by sunshine coming from the rooms. There was good light in this house, Vaughan thought. Plenty of windows in the bedrooms. If they were bedrooms. The house remained still, and as he walked along a worn hall runner, the floorboards beneath his step were silent. He stopped at the first open doorway and looked into the room. There wasn't much to see: a high, narrow bed covered in a ruffled chenille bedspread, a badly painted white armoire with two bare wire hangers within, a bedsheet incongruously hung from the ceiling. The room next to it was much the same, with the addition of a kitchen table on which were set a small stack of books, a child's writing tablet, and a yellow pencil. Nothing was legible on the tablet's pages, although many looked as though someone had erased long passages of pencilled markings. He picked up a book off the top of the stack. He found when he opened it that he couldn't understand the characters in which it was written. He tried to concentrate. It wasn't as though the book were written in Chinese or Coptic: The book may have even been in a language he had once understood. The problem was that he couldn't bring his mind to bear on the icy words. It couldn't gain any traction on them. The harder he bore down on the slick little markings—markings which after

all he had spent most of his adult life deciphering—the more easily his attention slid away. He impatiently threw the book to the floor, where it made a distant, barely audible thump. He went over to the room's high window. Outside a treetop came nearly to the sill. He couldn't look directly at the tree, nor could he see much below in the yard, because the light falling on these things was dazzling, even a little painful. He stepped back into the hall which was filled for a few moments by dull, pulsing circles, obscuring his vision. When he could see clearly again, he felt as though the layout of the hallway had altered. Perhaps the doors had been closed. The house wasn't at all the kind of simple, upstairs-downstairs, back-to-front house that he had at first thought. There were other *places* in this house, not innocent rooms gullibly revealing themselves through plain doorways opening on to apparent rooms, stairs, halls, but annexes, secret storeys, niches hidden away in the architecture.

Vaughan perceived a disturbance in the silence, not a sound but where a sound would be if anything could make noise within these multiplying spaces. He looked into the next doorway he came to. The sunlit room momentarily blinded him, but when his sight cleared, there wasn't much to see: Only another old-fashioned bed with rumpled sheets. But then he saw that a couple was wrapped in the sheets, making love. All at once they looked up, as though he'd stepped on a creaking floorboard as he entered. The man propped himself on one arm, the woman twisted toward him. These motions were like the half-developed frames of an old kineoscope, each superimposed upon another, their lifted bodies ghostlike against their original supine embrace. As they made tiny shifts from one pose to another, Vaughan saw through their gray, diaphanous shapes.

The lovers were Edward and Lily.

Edward moved his lips, Lily appeared to be weeping. Edward's words and Lily's sobs did not pass through the intervening ether and enter Vaughan's ears, but then they did not need to, for Vaughan felt them resonate loudly, within his thorax perhaps, or in his face.

Edward said, "Look. You have made her cry." And Lily's sobs mounted. Yet at the same time they continued to kiss and caress each other in bedclothes that tangled about them like shrouds. Edward went on repeating himself, "Look. Look. Look. You have made her cry."

Vaughan backed through the doorway. He couldn't watch them making love. It wasn't right. They were dead. He walked quickly down the hall, dreading the vision of the two dead souls fucking. It was unbearable because...he couldn't at first make it out. Then it came to him: They were ghosts. He was trapped in a haunted house.

But of course they were ghosts, he told himself. You've just chosen not recognize that everybody *here* is a ghost. They've all been ghosts all along. Where the hell do you think you are?

Knowing this didn't improve matters. Now that he acknowledged that he was moving among spectres, things were much worse. Ghosts were likely to manifest themselves all at once, anywhere, and indeed he began to see shapes emerge from the spotted wallpaper. They took a few steps forward. Some of them made uninterpretable gestures. They receded. They were old and young, female and male. He was proceeding slowly down the hallway, yet he couldn't tell whether he was moving under his own power. At times he felt as though his feet hung a few inches above the floor and that he was simply willing himself forward, slipping through the bright air. At other times he was halted as some anesthetic was pumped into his spine turning his hips and legs into alien meat, and he was stuck in place with Edward shouting, "Made her cry! Made her cry!" and Lily keening and the ghosts like negatives developing on the walls.

When he reached the end of the hallway, Edward and Lily and the wallpaper spirits faded. A short flight of stairs led upward to a poorly lit landing. Despite himself (because he knew that only by going downward could he escape this house of the dead), he climbed the

stairs, and when he had reached the landing he found an iron ladder leading to a kind of trapdoor in the ceiling. All at once he realized why the ghosts had not pursued him here: This was the hidden place that existed in all houses, among the living or the dead. The place where you shouldn't go, the room that every child knew existed, and every adult met from time to time in dreams that were forgotten even in the deepest sleep. Now a new word shaped itself in Vaughan's heart and echoed against his bones: *Forbidden*. Oh, he didn't want to go there. No one did. Yet he must look. He would just climb to the top of the ladder and lift the trapdoor and peek in—Not long enough to register anything! Oh no, not that! He would look away so fast that he couldn't know the secret. He didn't want to know. He wanted to know.

He climbed to the top rung, his hand cold, the metal rung warm and sweating. The trapdoor was pushed back. Perhaps he'd opened it. He couldn't tell. Now he would quickly sneak a peep over the edge. If anyone were there in the hidden room, they wouldn't see him. He would be gone in a flash. Or if there were something for example to read there, some legend written in horribly evident pictograms, why, he wouldn't look long enough to understand it. But he had to see.

Rather than popping through the floor like a sickly jack-in-the-box, Vaughan was surprised to find himself looking down into a two-storey room from a kind of gallery. Mullioned windows ran from floor to ceiling. The walls were covered in niches, perhaps shelves, perhaps he was in a library, but he couldn't quite see what was on the shelves, whether books or surgical instruments or busts of famous persons. There were long oak library tables in neat rows beneath him. The tall windows lit up the big room, although the light was gentler than the shining beams in the hallway from which he'd just come. His sight wasn't dazzled, and he saw clearly that several elderly people were seated about a central table looking up at him. He saw to his relief that there wasn't anything threatening about them. In fact, their expressions were mild, possibly even welcoming. One old man raised his hands and made a motion as though he were pulling a rope fastened invisibly somewhere near Vaughan's head. Vaughan interpreted this gesture as beckoning him to descend. What did he have to fear from this collection of senior citizens? He was chagrined that he'd been so terrified of the hidden room. It was peaceful here, and if it was not actually a library, it certainly partook of all libraries' ordered calm. There was a time that he escaped to a library as to a refuge, but he couldn't recall where that had been. Why, even the view through the Gothic windows was kindly and decorous, perhaps a college garden with arbors for out-of-doors reading and a statue of Athena nearby. The air would be mild, May-like, lilac-scented. It would be late in the day. First he would walk along to the end of the gallery to see this civilized study-garden. Then he would go down and meet the old people. Maybe they would offer him tea.

There was no garden outside the windows, although a lawn stretched to the foot of a perfectly curved grassy hill some distance away. Other identical hills spotted the landscape beyond. That was all there was: lawn and smooth hills. No trees, no rustic outbuildings, no arbors, no interruption of any kind to the grassy carpet.

"It is a Mound of Venus," said a rasping voice behind him. A tall, emaciated old man had somehow ascended to the gallery and quietly approached. "You know, a pudendum." He clutched Vaughan's shoulders and turned him brusquely to the right. "Look, down there at the base of the hill. It's a little clit." With some difficulty, Vaughan freed himself from the painful grasp of the old man, who was obviously senile. But if the old man's statement had been meant to be lecherous, his expression was now blandly pedagogical. The old man took him by the hand and they sailed over the gallery railing and floated to the floor below.

"Of course it's not a real cunny," an old woman said rising from the table. "*That's* a little cunt," she said, pointing to the body of a naked girl lying stretched upon the library table.

Something was wrong with her. Someone had stroked blood across her forehead. Vaughan could see the smudge of a fingertip at the end of the streak. There were other splotches of blood on her right breast, on her left thigh, and incongruously, on the soles of her feet, as though she'd walked in blood. But Vaughan could see no wounds.

"Go ahead, touch it," the old man said pushing Vaughan forward. Touch what? The girl's corpse? the blood? "You know, touch *it*."

The old woman said, "He means you should touch her little thing. That's why you did her. So touch it."

"I don't want to touch her." Vaughn drew back. "I did nothing of the kind." Yet he was unsure. Maybe back in the hallway, in one of the rooms. He at once became sexually aroused and he felt sick. I could do something here, he thought, I could have wanted to do something so bad that I couldn't admit it to myself, but when the opportunity presented itself. In the warm bedroom, a girl in a bed. She was dead anyway, a ghost. They were all ghosts. What did it matter what was done to them? Cruelty made his prick harder.

Now he recognized who this collection of ancients was. It had been a very long time since they had died, but now he began to see the resemblances. They looked at him expectantly: The old man who was his grandfather, the old woman who was his grandmother, the sexless one who was his great aunt, and all the others stretched down the table—all his aunts and uncles and grandparents. The whole dead family. Then it was natural that the other two, the only two, would come from the shadows under the gallery, his mother and his father, his parents, who stopped at the far end of the table, on which lay a stack of papers clipped together. His father slowly reached out for the papers, ceremoniously raised them and turned them toward Vaughan, as though to show him what was written on the top sheet.

There was a question that Vaughan must ask. He opened his mouth and he felt the muscles at the base of his tongue strain to form vowels and he struggled to force breath through his throat. He choked and then gagged and then made a noise like a dog who first hears a siren in the distance. And finally he asked, "What does it say?"

"Itsawrit," his father replied. "Writwrit."

"Of what does it accuse me?" Vaughan was proud of this question. How calmly and well it was put. Then he realized how despicable it was, how very much it confirmed what he was—a sadist, a secret pervert, masquerading as a...a scholar, with his smug speech, his loathsome "*Of what does it accuse me.*"

He was also a coward. He did things in secret. What he did to the girl was so secret that not even he could remember, although he knew if he tried, if he faced himself...But of course he could never face himself, and still more, he could never face his punishment. And his punishment was upon him if he didn't escape. There seemed to be no retreat via the gallery and the way he'd come. He went to the windows, which proved to be latched. The latches were rusted shut. He looked about for something to pry them loose. A knife lay on the windowseat. He inserted its point between the latch and the leading, pulling forcefully. It seemed as though the blade or the windowglass would break, and he would cut himself. That didn't matter. In a moment his dead relatives would understand that he was evading his punishment, and indeed as he turned to see what they were doing, each of them was ranged round the library table pointing hieratically downward at the dead girl. He couldn't bear to have their hard, brittle fingers clawing into him, holding him down until the authorities came.

The authorities! Why hadn't he thought of them until now? Surely they must be on their way. He redoubled his efforts, leaning with his full weight against the makeshift lever, and the old latch broke. He pushed the window open and looked out. It was difficult to gauge the drop. At first he thought he must have been near the top of the house, in a kind of attic, but now he

saw that he was nearer, although the ground seemed to see-saw beneath him. He leapt from the window.

He landed on the soft, undulating lawn, still holding the knife. It must have been the weapon he used to torture and kill the girl. He had to hide himself from his pursuers, but he understood that here nothing was hidden. Nothing was secret anymore. Everything was out in the open, and even as he thought this, he turned the corner of the house and saw the highway. As he ran up the road, he looked between the houses, but there was no sign of the sexually charged hill and the infinite lawn. Something was different though. The light had dimmed considerably. That was a relief. He was, however, thirstier than ever. Why hadn't he gotten a drink while he had a chance? The taste of blood was salty, like seawater, it only made you more dehydrated. Maybe the sun had just set. That's what it looked like. Or rather, it was a rarer quality of light than that, light you only saw once in a decade, like the midnight sunlight of an eclipse. Night wanting to be dark but the darkness failing, day wanting to rise but the light failing.

He ran scuffling through the gravel on the highway's shoulder, through the dishwater-dank dusk or evening or darkness at noon or whatever it was. The ghosts he'd left behind him were compelled to remain there in the house they haunted, imprisoned souls. So what was pursuing him? He couldn't look over his shoulder and see. For one thing, it was too hard to keep any sort of forward motion on this crepuscular track where his toes tripped on chunks of asphalt and his heels caught in ruts, if he weren't to fall down from dehydration first. Chiefly though he couldn't look. No, there weren't ghouls chasing him, halloween goblins, or even demons. He knew well enough what was coming after him. It was his nemesis. It was his own crime. What need had it of a name? He knew well enough what it was called. What he was called. He fled not so much to escape punishment, as dreadful as that might be, as to suppress what he had done, his crimes against innocence—for they were many and manifold and repeated and rejoiced in. This last atrocity—the mutilated, violated girl who might have been his daughter—was only the cap on his hardness of heart.

His flight had been aimless, but then he saw the Buick, placidly parked where he'd left it, and he ran forward in a last burst of temporary joy. Sitting in the driver's seat, he was turned round toward his pursuer, but that didn't matter, for he now he was pulling out and speeding down the highway.

It was difficult to see the road in the gloom. Then he remembered to turn on his headlights, and the black pavement lit up, the yellow band glowed. A cigarette was burning in the ashtray in the dashboard. He knew that some good genius had put it there. I haven't smoked in ten years, he thought, and now at last I can. It was a simple cigarette, a tube of paper stuffed with cheap European tobacco. He felt gassy rapture fill his head and brim up past his eyes, and he blew smoke out into the slipstream where its lovely scent roiled about the car. He was still very frightened, though. But he was excited, too. Perhaps he had a chance. In the fine old tradition of American criminals, he grew convinced that as long as his big automobile raced down blacktop, he might escape the cops. In this case, of course, there weren't any cops.

Then he had to swing the big wheel hard as he fought the fishtailing car around a switchbacked bend in the road. He was beginning to relax as he regained control, when he was forced to jam hard on the brake pedal. A few yards ahead, a striped bar blocked the road. Grim-looking men stood by it.

Chapter Nineteen

A concrete gatehouse stood on the side of the road to the right of the striped swing-pole gate. Around and behind the gate were five men wearing business suits. They looked distinctly out of uniform. No weapons were in evidence, but that seemed a momentary oversight, as if the machine-guns and automatic pistols were laid aside. All of the men were smoking. Perhaps they'd put their guns down while they lit cigarettes. Two of them approached Vaughan's car. One opened his door while the other leaned through the passenger-side window and inspected the interior. Neither man said anything. Nevertheless Vaughan understood that he was to get out of the car without having to be asked. The car, the gate, the gatehouse all lay under a dome of pure light, which seemed to emanate from all directions. Nothing cast a shadow. The men were now inside in the car, one in the front seat and one in the back, while Vaughan stood awkwardly in the road. The remaining three men simply watched him, without expression. It didn't matter. They all knew that there wasn't anything to say, that everyone of them, including Vaughan himself, had participated in his capture. The only thing he dreaded now was the moment when he would be required to name his crime, to describe it. If they could just assume that he'd done what he'd done and mete out his punishment, then he could be at peace.

As it was, he felt as though he were floating on the surface of the omnidirectional light, white as a sheet of paper, from time to time sinking beneath it, and then bobbing up. On the surface he felt narcotic fatality, relief that he would be buoyed along through a procedure ending in a clear, requisite judgment. It was only when he sank temporarily below the surface, that he panicked. Here dread overcame him, and part of his fear was that he would slip from the hands of his captors. Fortunately, these moments were quickly over and he returned to the anesthesia of the condemned man. He was growing a little impatient. Why was the search taking so long? Two of the men behind the barrier stood looking up and down the road, perhaps looking for other cars to stop, the third continuing to stare at Vaughan. As if finally making up his mind, he approached. He was considerably shorter than Vaughan, and when he spoke, Vaughan reflexively bent down to hear. But the small man's voice was deep and resonant, a singer's voice perhaps. Indeed, he looked like a performer of some kind, dark-eyed, cleft-chinned, high-cheekboned. His thick black hair was swept back in careful waves.

"Is this your car?" he asked in his handsome voice. If this man was heading up the investigation, then all would be well. Vaughan was certain that the nonsensical bureaucracy to which he'd been till now subjected would cease under the direction—the leadership!—of this civilized man.

"No, it isn't," Vaughan replied. He thought this answer was *de rigeur*, neither obsequious nor insolent, but plainly honest. The inspector would see that he was a

straightforward suspect, ready to cooperate when cooperation was undertaken in a spirit of cooperation.

"Oh. Then do you know whose it is?"

"It was parked by the side of the road. No one was around. We...I just took it."

"You had travelling companions?"

Vaughan was reluctant to implicate Edward and Lily. He was jealous of admitting them into the process, into his interrogation and judgment and punishment. Why should he? Unlike him, they hadn't committed truly heinous crimes. Oh, they were sinners all right. Big deal. Who gave a damn about sins? It was crimes – horrible, violent felonies – that really counted, that showed you were a professional. This train of thought carried him away, and he forgot what the inspector had asked him. He asked that the question be repeated, which the inspector politely did.

"You might say that I gave a lift to a couple of people, but I dropped them off before anything bad happened. They weren't accessories."

"Something bad happened then?"

Vaughan was dismayed. He thought the inspector would be above all that, the disingenuous and shifty dialog.

"I'm not going to talk to you if you're going to ask questions you already know the answer to."

"What did you mean 'they weren't accessories'? How can people be accessories?"

Vaughan didn't answer. One of the searchers turned away from the car clutching a knife, which he delivered to the inspector, who said,

"Oh. This must be what you meant when you said something bad had happened."

"You knew all along I was guilty," Vaughan said bitterly, despite his resolve to remain silent.

"Guilty? Well, of course I knew you were guilty. You did it, didn't you? Those things you did. They were inhuman."

What things? thought Vaughan. Had he committed multiple atrocities? More than the horror he felt at himself for committing violence on the innocent, he was ashamed that he couldn't remember details of those acts. To be without memory of when and how you'd killed, except for the meager conviction that you were a murderer, that was loathsome – worse, it was embarrassing. The inspector could clear it all up if he chose. The inspector and his men had made a study of Vaughan's crime. Perhaps there were photographs. Material evidence – blood-stained clothing on which he'd ejaculated. The trick was to find out how much they knew without giving away his despicable ignorance. Once he knew everything, then he could concentrate in peace on his punishment.

"You seem to think I know more about you than I do," said the inspector.

"Don't you? Isn't it your job to define what I've done?"

"To define it....I'm not sure how I would do that. Maybe you have a suggestion?"

"It stands to reason that there's something badly wrong with me. After all, I only have a subjective viewpoint. You on the other hand must have an objective view, a professional view. I'd be interested in hearing what it is."

"We'd have a conversation."

"That's not exactly accurate, is it? Isn't 'interrogation' the right word?"

"Ah, that," said the inspector. "If that's what you'd prefer."

"It's not up to me. I'm only the object of your inquiries."

"Then I suppose we'd better to go someplace more appropriate for that kind of thing." He nodded to the others, who returned to their places standing around the gate. Someone switched off the light. The inspector entered the hut.

"Aren't you coming?" he asked.

"Aren't I supposed to be escorted...in handcuffs?"

"Probably. But I doubt that's necessary in your case, is it?"

This wasn't working out as he had planned. A terrible thought occurred to him: What if nothing happened to him? No questioning, no trial, no condemnation. He would simply have to go on at liberty, free to know that his victim had suffered without retribution. Surely they weren't going to let that happen to him, here of all places?

The interior of the hut smelled of new-milled lumber and was softly lit by a table lamp sitting on a carved Chinese chest. A large four-paned window was let into three of the walls, too many for this small a space, but the windows were very well-constructed, clean and freshly painted. In fact, the total effect was of a playhouse built by the hand of a loving and handy father. Even the table and the chairs on which they sat were a bit playlike. Vaughan's knees pressed against the table's underside. The chair (painted in bright red enamel) creaked. To complete the doll's-tea-party atmosphere, a miniature stove merrily heated a teapot behind the inspector.

"How about some tea before we start?" he asked.

He accepted the inspector's offer. Maybe the tea would ease his thirst a little. Although the teapot was whistling behind him and the cups sat nearby on the Chinese chest, the inspector did not himself pour the tea. Instead he called two of the men standing in the road, who crowded into the hut. They jostled each other, spilling tea, looking as if at any moment one of them would pour hot tea down the inspector's neck, but eventually (and laboriously), they set out the cups and saucers and poured the tea. Vaughan unceremoniously gulped his down and held out his cup for more. He didn't like tea, which always tasted to him like bark soaked in rainwater, but this beverage was quite palatable. Perhaps it was some sort of herb tea, he thought, the kind of weird fruity hot water that many of his colleagues had taken to drinking, peculiarly convinced that this would aid their health. Whatever it was, his throat felt much better. The inspector offered him a cigarette. He dimly recalled that earlier, when he'd been given food and drink, there hadn't been any savor, but now the tea and the cigarette were revivifying. He felt alert, ready to undergo any sort of interrogation.

Yet that wasn't the point. Didn't he *want* to confess? All he wanted from the inspector and his henchmen was that they assist him in plucking out the miserable truth lurking in him. All he needed was help to see the outlines of his crime, a place to start—where he'd committed it, for example, or evidence of the steps he'd taken to conceal it.

Vaughan noticed that the inspector had several days' growth of beard, and this seemed at odds with his well-cut suit, his neat features, his glossy pelt-like hair. His large olive eyes too looked wearied. Vaughan decided that he must have been awake for a couple of days, on Vaughan's track, pursuing leads. Now the murderer had fallen into his hands.

"Where would you like to begin?" asked the inspector mildly.

"This is your interrogation. You're the expert in prying the truth from suspects. Every bit of it."

"You give me too much credit. All we can hope for is a facsimile, a clumsy metaphor. It isn't the real house but the house a child draws, with notional windows and a pig's-tail of smoke curling from the giant chimney." He looked reflectively at his surroundings and then said, "This hut is rather well-built, don't you think? But it's too small."

"I need to tell the truth, but I can't do that if you don't help." Vaughan paused. "I know this isn't what suspects usually say."

"Oh, but it's what they *always* say."

"I feel such dread. If I was always so evil, why wasn't it evident from the first? Why did it take me so long to give in? Or maybe I did those things over and over and I was overcome by my dementia and never remembered them, those crimes." He melodramatically rested his forehead in his hands and melodramatically moaned, "Oh, tell me the truth. Are there other crimes? How many innocent children have I hurt?"

"Let's begin with your name."

Vaughan looked up, indignant and a bit startled.

"What? Don't you know my name?"

"How would I know your name? You haven't told me what it is."

"But what about my file? How can you keep a dossier on me if you don't know my name?"

"A name has nothing to do with that. It's optional."

"I see. Of course.. They keep the name Elsewhere. In the Great Roll, the Domesday Book."

"That's nothing to do with me," the inspector said angrily. "Whether they keep such records or not is beside the point as far as I'm concerned."

"Surely there's some sort of centralized databank? It's not very efficient if you don't exchange information."

"Why are you avoiding telling me your name?"

"It's Albert Vaughan."

"Is that last-first or first-last?"

"What? No, it's in that order. Albert first, Vaughan last."

"And is the car registered to you?"

"You asked me that earlier. No. It's not mine. I stole it. What does that matter in the face of what else I've done?"

"I'm simply trying to establish the extent of your guilt. If you want to discover the 'truth,' as you put it, then we need to work synergistically. We have to work as a team. We place the highest value on teamwork. Why, you might even say we worship teamwork. For myself, I think 'synergy' is a far more workable goal than 'truth.' You can have a vision of synergy, a mission statement: 'Throughout eternity, the underlying ethos for the immortal soul will be synergy, working with other departments to achieve a team environment.' All sorts of strategies follow from that, don't you think? Alas, that isn't how things are organized. Instead, there's 'truth,' a poor substitute."

"Look, I don't care about generalities. I only want to define the evil *I've* done. Can't we skip the stolen cars and the countless lies and the bad faith?"

"By all means, let's especially gloss over the bad faith."

This sounded patently sarcastic but the inspector looked sincere.

"Or, well, what I meant was all of that led up to what was truly vicious."

"The venal entails the mortal."

"What?"

"Since we evidently won't see any real progress until you get this off your chest, let's get it over with. So start with your victim. How did you come to know her?"

Vaughan had hoped that the inspector would begin by hinting at just this sort of information. The most insignificant fact might prod his memory into producing the whole story. By way of cloaking his appalling ignorance of his own actions, Vaughan drank some more of the

tea, which seemed to be more stimulating than he'd first noticed. It also produced a pleasant flutter in his extremities and a soothing numbness around his lips. He took another sip and looked about the hut. The inspector sat patiently, smoking one cigarette after the other, without however staling the air. Vaughan wondered how that was possible. Such a well-constructed edifice must also contain excellent hidden ventilation, he decided. And how lovely the light was—as though they really were in a prettily built dollhouse. He was content to admire his surroundings.

"Are you thinking?" the inspector asked gently.

Vaughan started. The girl. How had they met? He strained to recall the image of her pale body laid out on the library table. There was blood, but he couldn't envision the wounds from which it had come. He wondered whether he had strangled her. He tried to imagine plausible scenes of the crime—a basement, a woodlot at the edge of a suburb at sundown, the backseat of an automobile. It was no use. He couldn't even picture her face, although his body, his hands and his arms, remembered the feel of her struggle, which had been pathetic. She was only a frail girl and he'd had the cruel advantage of strength fueled by the lust for killing. The next thing he knew it was all over. A very brief glimpse of her crumpled body, curled like a sleeping animal at his feet. There were other parts to the crime, though, ones for which there was no mental image at all, although the horror of those actions made him weak and ill: He was going to faint, to soil himself, to vomit.

It occurred to him that the tea was drugged.

"I can't recall anything that led up to it," he said with an effort. "I don't even remember the means...that I...how I..." He had to put his head down and close his eyes. As sick as some parts of him felt, other parts were intoxicated, the top of his skull, for example: It tingled delightfully and floated a few inches above his body. Somehow it had separate knowledge of what was going on the room. The inspector stood and was swaying side to side in a dignified way as he slowly circumnavigated the table. Someone else was humming.

"Don't tell me you can't even remember how you killed the poor child," the inspector suddenly said, quite sternly. Vaughan jerked upward and stared at him. "That's really the limit. I can't accept that. If you do nothing else, you're going to tell me exactly how the murder was committed. Every detail."

"Oh, please," Vaughan begged, "that's what's so dreadful. It's so frightening. I've suppressed it, I think. When I try to remember, something starts to surface. She was struggling...I was gripping her..."

"Of course you were gripping her," the inspector said disgustedly. "She wasn't going to stay there with someone like you if she wasn't made to." Vaughan retched. The inspector watched him coldly, and moderating his tone, he continued, "Try to recall if there was anything in your hand, a knife maybe."

"Yes, there was a knife," Vaughan replied. The inspector handed him a handkerchief. He wiped his mouth. "Your men must have found it. It was in the car."

"Try to imagine what must be going through the victim's mind."

Fear, ephemeral as a snapshot, flashed on Vaughan's mental tv screen, and as it quickly faded what remained was the consciousness of himself as its object. Try as he might, he could not turn away from the fact that someone, helpless and weak, feared him and with good reason, that she anticipated the inevitable likelihood that he would maim and kill her. The realization bludgeoned him. The room flashed and he smelled the stink of a blow to his nose, a memory of childhood. The constellation of tiny bursts impaired his vision, but he dimly made out the inspector's assistants preparing to strike him again. If they'd only hit him with something more solid—a billy club or a pipe—then the work would go more quickly. He'd soon

be unconscious. Nothing. Nothing. As usual, though, you were never beaten into insensibility when you needed it. Sure enough, his victim's despair blurted out once again, and once again he cried out.

"Yes, that's right," the inspector murmured, "you've got the idea." He rose through the rosy nimbus now surrounding him and came around to Vaughan's side of the table. With one hand he pinched Vaughan's nose and the other he held over Vaughan's mouth. "You're hyperventilating, my friend," he went on softly. "You need to stop breathing. Like she did. Try to get the whole picture."

Vaughan was dismayed. He expected to be professionally and quickly clubbed into a coma. He certainly deserved his punishment, he tried to cooperate, but no one could sit still through being suffocated. Your body wouldn't let you. The strobe flashes and starbursts and pastel haloes went off all over the room, punctuated from time to time by the click of a black shutter as if his consciousness were taking snapshots of his last moments. Huffuh, huffuh, went Vaughan's lungs in a ridiculous imitation of breathing, huffuh, huffuh. The stink of a ham-fisted blow delivered hard on the cartilage of his nose behind a meat locker on a February day. What had she done—she had never done anything to harm anyone!—that this man was killing her, violating her?

Vaughan was now making a variety of bestial noises, kittens and pigs and seagulls. He had fallen from his chair, the inspector kneeling beside him as though to succor him, his hands still firmly clapped over Vaughan's mouth and nostrils.

"Now you're dying," he said encouragingly, "now I'm killing you."

Vaughan urinated.

"Oh, fuck, he's pissed himself," said one of the assistants.

"Now, now," the inspector admonished the man, "it's only natural, isn't it? It'd scare the piss out of anybody." The assistants laughed good-naturedly. Releasing his hold, he whispered in Vaughan's ear, "Get up now, little one. Come on, get up."

As his lungs swelled and his head cleared, Vaughan wondered if the inspector was the good man in Helen's story, the one who had rid the crazy derelict of his demon. But now Vaughan was the man possessed. How stupid of him not to have seen that the inspector was helping him. The inspector was exorcising the evil that he had done, which after all wasn't really a part of him at all. Along the way, one of those demons had somehow raped him, inseminated him with that loathsome crime, to which he had no choice but to give birth. Severe measures had been called for, and the inspector, that good man, had used them!

"I'm very grateful," said Vaughan tearfully as he sat down on the warm, wet seat of his trousers. "I couldn't have done it without you."

The inspector sighed. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms, and when he took his hands away, his eyesockets were larger, the skin around them the color of bruised raw steak. Vaughan could barely make out the dark wolfish eyes sunk back within them. The struggle had drained him. Vaughan was humbled by his great goodness.

"So you see it clearly now," the inspector asked.

"Yes, but it was difficult. Naturally, there are various parts that I still don't understand...But, yes, I know why I did what I did."

"Shall I tell you what happened?"

"Oh, please do. I know you won't shrink from the most deplorable detail. And yet I'm sure that you'll recite the events with dignity, giving due...."

The inspector interrupted him, "I'll try to do it justice." He paused to think and then began. "If one can imagine himself in your place, I'd say that at first you didn't especially notice the girl. She was an ordinary girl, temporarily attractive thanks to the usual short-term loan

from the bank of adolescence. Maybe for the sake of clarifying our vision, we can postulate that she was dark rather than light, olive-skinned rather than ivory, slim not buxom, and so on. In short, a girl typical of her time and place. But in one thing she was not typical. This was her longing for—ah, how embarrassing nowadays to say it, but there's no other word for it—for purity. Foolish child. Couldn't she see that she was as pure as human beings are allowed to be? But she wanted God to spend just a little more purity on her. As usual, God, being rational, was unwilling to do so. Herein we older, wiser heads already foresee a deplorable end to her story. For the girl prayed and prayed (yes, she really did) that she might be made more innocent, that she might speak with angels, that she might be exactly what God wanted her to be, and that finally, as a logical consequence of all this, that she might be dead.

"But since the girl was already as good as God could make her, an instrument was needed to fashion her into something...let us not shrink from it...into something blessed. And since the algebra of the universe dictates that good people can't make other good people any better, a bad instrument was needed. Many such bad instruments are at hand. Where would heaven be without us? Why, nothing at all would happen! We are the true instruments of grace. People like this girl would simply go on being pure and passive, and the eternal tragedy would drain away, and nothing would happen in the Strategic Plan we must assume has been put in place by—or at least has preliminary draft approval from—God. Where was I?

"The girl. You, or I for that matter, for no evident reason one day take notice of her. Possibly we too are striving to be better than we are. It's impossible to tease out the backlash of our emotions when we finally consider this girl, when we recognize her goodness. As usual we want to fuck her, but hastily shoving that discreditable piece of mental furniture offstage, we suffer a dizzying array of other feelings—reverence, aesthetic satisfaction, the ludicrous hope that we may share in her grace. For I too want to be good! I too long for God's approval. And, well, because of that, I'm also jealous and hurt. After all, I've worked so hard to be good."

Chapter Twenty

The devil, that son of a bitch, kept ruining my concentration. "Oooh, look at that one," said the devil, winking and nudging me as my cousin Veronica approached the bier to kiss my deceased parents a final time.

I steadfastly gazed on my parents' faces and tried not to glance at Veronica. Were they peaceful? No. They were the faces of dead people which by definition express nothing that living people feel. What did I feel, about my parents, now that they were dead? I prayed for their souls, I prayed that their deaths would drive home to me the fact that I too was mortal and that death could come in the next instant and I'd face my judgment, so I had to prepare myself. I had to. I closed my eyes and prayed, "Oh Jesus Jesus..." One sin I was committing was that I couldn't shed tears for my mother, but why should I, since if anyone was in heaven, she was. Even so, I struggled to be sad. I was bereft. Both parents struck down by the same disease! Well, it was common enough.

This was the seventh day I'd been praying for the souls.

"This is boring," said the devil. "They were boring."

"You being bored is the reason for the world's sorrow," I told him.

"I can't help it," he said. "I have attention deficit disorder."

Two men came to seal up their coffins. They straightened the edges of the coffin lids with their fingertips, carefully aligning them, and then hammered in the nails. Boom boom boom boom. Four blows, quick as you please. No missed ones. I was woozy walking to the graveyard through the main street and up a little hill. Sometimes I stumbled. Someone behind me in the cortege said, "Poor boy. He's starved himself, the good soul." Veronica was walking in front of me and turned around, smiling sweetly.

I'd hardly slept all that seven days of watching over my parents. I ate nothing at all, taking a few sips of water from time to time. I didn't pride myself on it. I had a talent for watching and fasting. It wasn't a real sacrifice for me, but the devil got bored when I starved myself. We'd come to the hill and I watched Veronica's back moving firmly up it.

"I like them sort of petite," the devil said, "like that Veronica. That way you can move them around..."

"Shut up! I don't want to hear any more of your sick fantasies."

"They're not *my* fantasies, Larry. I wouldn't have them if you didn't invent them."

"I never invented them. I could never think those things about Veronica."

I was trying not to look at him, I hated his face so — those big fat apple cheeks and bristly red hair with that stupid crew-cut and those enormous teeth, like a pony.

"You're not kidding anybody, Larry. You ain't pure in thought and you ain't pure in word and you ain't pure in...whatever. I forget."

"Deed."

"Yes, *deed*. And I know what deed *you* want to do, Larry, just as soon as you get her behind the barn." He had his face bent over close to mine and I felt how hot his head was. Hot from hell. As long as my soul was corrupted, so long would this devil, or worse ones, keep showing up, with his bad grammar and body odor and disgusting porn and his invasion of my personal space.

Now that Mother and Father were dead, I had no further worldly responsibilities. I was free to give away their property. God would take care of my younger brothers and sisters. God would do whatever was necessary, finding homes for them or taking them into His bosom. I signed over our large house in the middle of town to the church presbyters and moved into one room in a shabby house owned by an old woman, an aunt of my mother. I sold all of our family's furniture, clothing, cookware, farm implements and livestock, giving the proceeds to the orphanage. On a day announced in advance, I stood on the steps of the city hall and distributed the family savings to the poor. Yet my spirits weren't lifted by this lightening of my material load.

Giving away all I possessed, like fasting, wasn't difficult for me. I'd always had holy talents. As a child, I knew I would be a great spiritual athlete, even though the golden years of the great holy celebrities had passed: Macarius, who held that nourishment should come from oneself and for sixteen years subsisted on his own vermin and recycled urine. Syncletica, who was blind and lame from dwelling in the holes of badgers and the dens of foxes when the badgers and foxes were still resident. Timidius, who at age eight forswore walking upon the earth and slept, prayed and performed other bodily functions on a tightrope strung between two carob trees for the remainder of his short life.

In the shadow of those role models, what could an ambitious youth do?

"Do something to impress girls," advised the devil. "Do something to impress Veronica."

I was proud that Veronica, who was herself so obviously blessed, looked up to me, revered me, but I had to be vigilant for myself, for my soul's sake. I couldn't let Veronica's admiration pump me up, harden my masculine heart with pride. I thought of her delicate chin and enormous eyes, her soft hair brushed back from her high, intelligent brow.

Mortification was the key, ingenious and painful. A youth with holy ambition was bidden to discover some ascetic practice that was original, that had metaphorical resonance.

"There's nothing wrong with ambition, son," the devil said. "God doesn't despise a person with a healthy sense of his own specialness."

"Humility is a virtue."

"Oh sure. I'm not saying it isn't. I'm just saying that if you're seeking spiritual growth, you can't beat up on yourself. God doesn't want that. That's dysfunctional."

It was comforting being alone. I was nervous in Mother and Father's big house, with all my brothers and sisters and relatives busy, talkative. I often longed to be in some much smaller place where other people couldn't fit, somewhere so small that I'd hardly be able to move, perhaps no bigger than my parents' coffins. It would be utterly silent there, and no one would be nearby to brush by me like my younger brothers did, or to hold my hand like my sisters, or hear their breathing.

I decided I would test myself in a preliminary way, embarking on a regimen of extreme fasting. The important thing was to reduce my intake to the very minimum without actually dying. That was the fastest way to achieve ecstasy and visions. I tried to imagine what ecstasy was like.

"It's like having an orgasm that doesn't stop," said the devil. I wondered if he was right. I thought he might be. That was something to work for, a perpetual orgasm in communion with angels. "The angels are probably beautiful virgins. Just think of that, Larry."

I started with a few radishes and I reduced the number of radishes I was eating each day until I was subsisting on one radish at two meals. That year we had the hottest summer in anyone's memory. I could hear people talking in the street outside. "When's this heat going to stop?" they asked one another. "Brother, I don't know how much more I can take." If you think this is miserable, I thought, wait till you feel the fires of hell.

I couldn't sleep much, day or night. What with the heat and thin diet, it got harder for the devil to make me think lewd thoughts. Actually, it got harder to think *any* thoughts, which was exactly my aim—to achieve a state of thoughtlessness. To assist with this process, I decided to repeat some Gospel phrase, over and over. For some reason, the one I remembered was "But if the salt stops being salty, who can make it salty?"

I repeated my saying under my breath. I concentrated on its hidden meaning at first, but gradually the words I mumbled were just something I did to keep my mouth occupied, like chewing betel. It was hard to concentrate. I had heartburn from the radishes and mostly I had to lie down to keep from falling over. The flies settled in shiny crawling mittens on my sweating hands when I lay in my cell during the middle of the day trying to nap. Everything was so dry. "But if the salt stops being salty, who can make it salty?" I began to repeat the phrase even in my sleep, and my dreams took strange shapes: Once I was called to a banquet in Rome and I was couched with the emperor, doing my best to understand the strange foreign etiquette, but I wasn't eating the things that the other distinguished guests were eating. The waiters put unidentifiable objects on my golden plate. Was this a fish or a large insect or a baked root? I bit into it and it didn't taste like food. It wasn't good and it wasn't bad. It just wasn't food. So I asked for some salt, but the waiters panicked, murmuring anxiously, and the emperor demanded to know why they were upsetting his guests, and they told him that something had happened to the salt—it didn't taste right. And the emperor began to cry. An imperial prostitute tried to comfort him by licking salt from his member, and when that didn't work, she salted mine. I woke up. Maybe my mantra was working, maybe it had punched through the wad of sins clogging my soul, like a healer lancing a boil, and all the evil pus was broken and outflowing. Soon the stream of my thoughts would be clear and holy.

The wall at my feet changed colors, from deep violet to yellow to orange. I thought that my death was at hand. I wasn't worried. Soon I would be with the angel virgins.

I had another dream, an innocent one this time. I dreamt that I was at my mother's breast. She had returned from the dead to nurse me. Her milk was lukewarm and tasted like sweet butter. She washed my little baby face with a warm wet linen rag. She took my dirtied linen from around my loins and cleaned me.

My cousin Veronica knelt by me, gently washing my neck with a wet rag. When she saw that my eyes had cracked open, she used the rag to wipe away the dried crust that was sealing them partly shut. The light from her shining countenance hurt.

"Dear cousin," Veronica said, "thank God that he has so assisted you with his grace you are come back from the dead." She went on like this praying fervently, and I went back to sleep.

Over the next few days she fed me on salted gruel. After the radishes, it was like manna and quails. "If the salt stops being salty, who can make it salty?" I knew the answer now: "If the salt stops being salty, Veronica makes it salty."

I was downhearted. In my very first professional contest, I'd been forced to withdraw ignominiously. One good thing did come of it, though: all during my illness, I hadn't heard from the devil.

Alas, this didn't last. I was out taking a walk through the city one day, recuperating my strength, when there he was, by my side.

"You're a very lucky man, Larry." I tried to ignore him. "That Veronica, getting her as your nurse. When you were out cold, she bathed you. All over. I bet you didn't know that." He sighed. "You had your chance. With her smearing that washcloth around your private parts, you could have pretended you were delirious..."

"Shut up. Close your goddamned mouth, you pervert. Veronica saved my life, you son of a bitch. She risked everything, not just her life but her honor."

"That's what I'm talking about, Larry. She already got a bad reputation. May as well go the distance."

Enough was enough. I fell to my knees right there on the thoroughfare and commenced to pray out loud. "Lord of Hosts, hear me: Send one of your warrior angels right now out of the clouds in blazing armor with a spear of flame to pierce this repulsive demon right through the head."

"Oh, Larry," the devil sadly remonstrated.

Two gendarmes, who were standing a little way down the street, stopped talking and watched me critically. I knew what I was doing: Public displays of spiritual fervor were likely to be dangerous if the authorities happened to be anxious about their deities. Sometimes the heathen treated their Thothes and Minervas and Astartes like dead people with dead people's minimal interest for the living. Yet at other times, struck by god anxiety or a Senatorial race resulting in the election of particularly repugnant and pious members, the Senate demanded that everybody propitiate the gods, early and often.

So as I knelt there praying loudly, a wonderful idea began to spring up in my mind. I had been wasting my time in outmoded asceticism, but now I knew what I was going to do with my life.

I directed my prayers at the gendarmes, willing them to interfere with me. I prayed loudly to the Only God, I poured contempt on the pathetic crowd of plaster deities the pagans hypocritically "worshipped" with their laughable sacrifices. I prayed that God the Father would rain down terrible knowledge on the gendarmes and on the men that gave them their orders and the Hypocrite Emperor who oversaw this ridiculous masquerade. I felt the bastinado slicing the soles of my feet, the flames already burning the hair on my groin, the straps plucking the ball of my hip from its joint.

I was meant to be a martyr! God hadn't intended me to spend years conditioning myself. Instead I was to be consumed in a flash of glory. What did it matter half an hour on a griddle or two minutes being eaten by a rhinoceros? When it was over, the tedious itches and torments of earthly life would vanish in the twinkling of an eye. What a relief.

I clasped my hands and lifted them to the heavens and exhorted God at the top of my lungs and watched the gendarmes out of the corner of my eye.

"Thou knowest these foreigners are vipers, Oh Lord, a pile of malodorous shit rising to Thy Nostrils. They deal in worldly abominations, interracial marriage and pornography. They go with whores. They practice birth control. They worship weird gods. Their women are whores. Their mothers are perverted. Their children practice unspeakable rites."

"Here, here, quiet down, you." Said one of the gendarmes as they approached me. "Watch what you're saying. There are ladies and small children about."

"And that's enough about people's wives and mothers and kids," said the other. "It ain't decent."

I heeded them nothing. "Foul them, Oh My God. Rain down your choice of plagues on them and their so-called leader and his beard."

"All right, that's enough. Up on your feet. We're bringing you in." Each took an elbow and lifted me to my feet and along we went to headquarters. A small crowd had gathered. Some of them applauded, others laughed.

The prison was so crowded that political prisoners like me were put outside, leaving the dungeons for the regulars. Among my fellows there were many who like me eagerly longed to be put to the test, so that we each lovingly vied to do outdo the others in what we might endure and hoped our own trial would in some way be more excruciating than that of the others.

We awaited the next official persecution with pleasant anticipation, and when the day came, we went off singing happy paeans and congratulating one another on our good fortune. They marched us to the local stadium where were other witnesses to God. I was annoyed to see these additional aspirants to martyrdom, but I decided that most of them would give in at the first opportunity, leaving only the truly dedicated. The magistrate appeared.

"I'm not going to waste anybody's time," he said. "You all know why you're here. God knows we've been through this enough times before. All you have to do is leave off public displays of piety. That and make a simple sacrifice. Remember: We don't care *who* you make the sacrifice to. The Emperor and the Senate subscribe to a policy of multicultural tolerance. We just need a little sign from you that you're willing to make a minor concession to civic order. Simply include the emperor in your prayers."

I stepped forward. "That's blasphemy," I bellowed. "My prayers are mine alone."

"I don't see how it's blasphemy," the magistrate said. "You're not taking the name of your god in vain. You're just including the emperor in whatever benefits your god choses to bestow, if any. Look, we're not going to have police standing there. You can pray silently."

The magistrate gave everybody a few minutes to talk among themselves. Then he said, "Those of you who wish to take advantage of the empire's leniency, step forward."

It came as no surprise to me that most people docilely took the step. That left twenty or thirty of us standing defiantly alone.

Meanwhile the stadium stands were filling up with all kinds of spectators: the morbidly curious, the prisoners' families and friends. I spied Veronica standing in the front rank searching the faces in the arena. Up till now I had been utterly confident that my course was the only one open, but now as I looked at her I had misgivings. I knew at that moment that Veronica was capable of infinitely more than I. I was only capable of suffering.

"See? She loves you, Larry," the devil said.

"She loves God," I said more to myself than to him, and strange to say, this remark, plain as a mud wall, shut him up. The devil and I were equally frightened, as men and demons must be when they face their Veronicas.

The cowards had been marched off the field, the magistrate had gone up to his private box, and only a few heavily armed men now stood around us. I went on watching Veronica as she leapt nimbly onto the low parapet edging the arena and leapt down onto the sand. She ran up to me before anyone could stop her.

The magistrate stood up and shouted to the armed men. "What's that girl doing? Get her out of there."

"You haven't any business here," I said to her angrily. "You're too young to be sacrificing yourself to God. Leave this to the professionals." She wasn't listening.

"The Emperor's only a mortal like the rest of us, and a pathetic one at that," she called out to the magistrate. Then she added as an afterthought, "He kisses little boys." We were all little taken aback by this last insult – martyrs and officials both. Nobody was quite sure what it meant. Probably it referred to the Emperor's tiresomely rumored pederasty, which Veronica had

somehow heard about secondhand and childishly filtered. The magistrate stormed down the steps.

"You be quiet, young lady, before you get yourself in trouble." He turned to the sergeant-at-arms. "What are you waiting for? Get her out of there. She's disrupting the process."

But Veronica was not to be deterred. "I call upon all believers in the One God to revolt and defy the pagans and their gods and their phoney Emperor!" Once again everyone fell silent, but this time because we knew that she'd crossed the line: This was unmistakable sedition. The magistrate couldn't ignore her. Shaking his head, he turned and climbed back up to his box and signalled to his men, who herded us to the center of the arena.

"Oh, Larry" Veronica clasped my hand. "This is what I've prayed for. Now that we're about to be martyred, I can at last tell you how I admired you, how I've wanted to be like you. You've always been my idol. I never thought I'd actually be with you at the supreme moment."

Not far from me, a guard was examining the edge of his swordblade, while his comrade tested the point of his spear. Their faces were expressionless.

"Get it over with," the magistrate wearily called to them. Veronica smiled as she watched the men approach.

"Wait, stop," I shouted. "This is a mere child. You've got to let her go before you start." No one heard me. The people around us were making a lot of noise.

I stared at Veronica's hand holding mine. Her fingers were childlike, her fingernails shaped and polished. I thought it touching, this small vanity. And I thought that her well-kept fingernails and her childish fingers and her small vanities and her courage and the bones of her face like the graceful curves of blown glass—all these would in a very few moments perish. For the first time in my life I doubted Providence. Perhaps all that there would ever be of Veronica was standing in the arena awaiting permanent dispatch. Perhaps the magistrate would change his mind. "Halt!" he would loudly call to his men, "Remove that girl. She's not supposed to be there!" Thinking this, I maneuvered Veronica before me toward the edge of the circle so that he could see how small and pathetic she was. One of the executioners strode purposefully toward us. He was one of many men that our conquerors recruited who came from God-knows-where. He was much taller than we were, and quite fair. And what I read in his face was, I know my business.

The blade of his sword slipped in and out of Veronica's heart so quickly that all I could at first feel was the admiration you have for a piece of consummate workmanship. Veronica cooperated, dying instantly and neatly. She sank to the ground like a square of floating silk. Her dress ballooned a little and a halo of dust puffed about my feet.

I felt the same bloody blade slip between my ribs, and I was content that Veronica's blood and mine would be mixed.

* * *

I felt the strength in the hands of the good soldier as he lowered me from the cross, how he eased me down so that the lacerations on my limbs wouldn't re-open. When I'd bled after being killed, I was so sick I willed myself to faint. Better pain, better bad burns or crushed knuckles, than this dizziness and cold sweat and wanting to vomit but not having the strength, not having the strength in your legs to let them fold under you. All I could do was stand there bleeding as the soldiers went past me, wading into the crowd. I couldn't look at my wounds. I knew how they were from looking at the deep gash across Veronica's throat. There was something inside her there, dull white and pink, small and delicate, which God had cleverly made for some living function. Now she was still upon the ground, and I was at once upon the ground beside her as man and wife in their marriage bed, and my eyes closed. Now, I thought,

now the heavenly angels will bear us up to Paradise, Veronica and I, and we will see the face of God.

I waited. The soldier's big hands carried me and lay me on some soft bier. The pain started to flare in patches, above my elbow and then across my breastbone and then down my side. This pain was hard to classify. It ached like broken bones and stung like thorns and burned like sputtering oil spilled on your wrist. I needed to run from it despite my grave injuries, and I did get up and I tried to run. It was dark and my agony exploded into the darkness. As I ran on I perceived the suffering of the universe, and not some satisfying-to-think-about existential suffering. No, what I knew now was the plain hurt laid on all Creation. A phrase flashed across my path: *Creation doth heave and cry out as woman giving birth.*

The sun when it rose made it impossible for me to keep moving and I lay down in the shadow of a little hillock. Later in the day when the sun moved into the West, I went around to the other side and slept until it was dark. Watching the setting sun, I thought of the old ones, the pharaohs, the persecutors of the Jews. I thought of the pictures they made. When I was a child, people took excursions to their monuments with the pictures painted on the walls in dry colors—clay-pot pink and worn-linen blue—of their demons and the ancient ones themselves marching stiffly off always to the right, toward the setting sun where their hell was when they died. When night came, I arose and made my way slowly into the desert. At that time I did not think of Veronica.

I lay down at sunrise under a tamarind tree expecting that at nightfall I too would travel to the Western Land with the sun going down.

But I didn't discover how the hell of the ancient people might have been because before nightfall Poemen found me. His hands were as strong as the soldier's when he lifted me. He talked to me in his hut as he worked on my body.

"Faugh, these wounds stink!" I heard him say.

I imagined that Veronica again nursed me, except that now mere nourishment couldn't cure me.

There was a blessed side to this. I was rid of feelings. Loving mothers, doting fathers, comradely friends, envious rivals, hateful enemies, pathetic beggars, passionate lovers, comical puppies, comforting hearths, inspiring landscapes. To hell with all of them! *That* was all Satan needed! the entire train of importunate, whinging, mendacious emotions.

But alas this did not last and the devil came back, bringing with him picture shows of Veronica's martyrdom.

"It was heartbreaking to watch, wasn't it, Larry? That poor little girl on the edge of the crowd, defenseless, those brutal men bearing down on her. You were right to push her forward. Better get it over quick, eh, Larry?" His tone became despicably sweet. "Like oo'd wanna hep a wittle animul. Put it out of its misoowee."

"Go away. I'm dying."

"No, no, Larry. You're going to be perfectly okay. Healthy as a horse, that's what you are. But Larry? I think you should watch this."

Before I could shut up my imagination, I saw Veronica on the morning she'd been murdered. I saw the way she began to turn her head to look at me as the sword met her neck. I saw the wisp of grayish film that sealed her eyes.

"What d'you think she was feeling, Larry? Probably something real uplifting, knowing that kid. What a trooper! God's proud of her, I'll bet." He paused. "Of course, He may not be so happy with you, Larry."

From then on, I revisited Veronica's death, but from a better perspective, for now I was her murderer. I didn't want to kill her. I *tried* to stay the momentum of the blade, and when I

couldn't do that, I willed the blade to rust, but the blade wouldn't rust because I hungered too to slice her throat. Then the steel shone along the edge where it had been filed, and the blade cut through her soft neck. I understood that the fragile contraption within the wound was her windpipe, where formerly her soft voice had burbled up. But I shut her up, right in the middle of "Oh, Larry, how I admire you."

All day long I heard the clicking of the dry reeds as Poemen wove one basket after another in the doorway. As he wove, he prayed, inwardly and at times aloud, starting in midsentence, with the crescendo of a kyrie coming up out of a whisper and dying down into his head again. I did my best not to feel anything about this. I did not want to like Poemen or hate Poemen or be grateful to Poemen, and Poemen seemed content that this was so.

He'd assembled his hut on a salt flat. God knows where he'd gotten the thatch for the roof. The floor of the hut was gray sand. As my health returned, I sat sifting the sand through my fingers. I imagined the sand was made from mummy shrouds. The two sounds of that place were the wind when it rose and the critch-swish, critch-swish of Poemen's weaving. The two lights of that place were the infinite blaze of the sun and the hut's shade. My gristly young body and Poemen's whittled old body were the two ways to be human. But there was a third among us, the noisy voice of the devil, talking about Veronica.

"I wonder what she looked like underneath her clothes. I think she probably had nice little breasts, fully shaped, you know, but small. You could have married her. You could have had sex with her every night. It was just a damn waste, her dying like that. That pretty face in the dirt, that juicy little body ruined. Dead flesh, that's all she was. You can claim what you want, Larry, but I say the only good thing is life, hot blood running through warm flesh. After that, it's...well...all shit. You're dead. If you didn't get any while you had the chance, too bad."

I didn't care anymore about what he said. It didn't interest me. I thought his monologue droned on for my ears only, but I was in for a surprise. One day Poemen said,

"Your devil's a nobody. He's boring. You should be ashamed of yourself."

My apathy faded a little. I bristled. "He's not *my* devil. I didn't invite him to share my life. I don't have any control over his obscenities."

Poemen looked up from his weaving. "Of course he's yours, Larry. If you were doing something right, you'd have hell to pay and a roaring demon to collect your dues. As it is, you've got a cheap imp, a trashy salesman."

What Poemen had said didn't amount to much, but that was the point, wasn't it? Anything anyone could say about me didn't amount to much. Besides, I'd never paid attention to what was said to me. When I read the gospels, I'd decided in advance what they were going to tell me. And when somebody, like Veronica, said "Being with you is what I've prayed for," I thought, "Of course it is. I've got it coming to me," and I didn't listen to what came next. It had been ludicrous for me to try to win God's attention because I was myself attending to nobody.

The baskets Poemen made were simple. I learned how to weave them by watching him one morning, and then I took my sheaf of reeds and set to work that afternoon. Had I still been able to speak of blessings, I'd have called this work a blessing. Its fruit was dismay, and as the dismay built, I found I didn't need to think about Veronica. This dismay was the first thing in my life I fully understood. I wasn't required to acknowledge the dismay by talking about it to myself, for it had settled down inside my face and in my knees and bladder and lungs, where it was cold and unavoidable. It made my eyes see funny, so that the unremitting blast of desert light was now ashy. When the sun went down, it set into nothing, and it rose into smoke.

I suspected Poemen was holy. Maybe I should have written down episodes and what he'd said, holy parables. Now I simply thought, So he's blessed. What's that got to do with me, who is dismayed?

Several nearly undetectable desert seasons went by.

Usually, when I opened my eyes in the dark before dawn, Poemen was already in the doorway weaving. Then one day he wasn't in the doorway. He lay on his pallet.

"Are you awake, Larry?" he said to the ceiling of our hut. "I don't think I'll make any baskets today." Then he added as an afterthought, "I'm dying."

I lit a little oil lamp we kept for special occasions and came and sat by his side in the dark. As dawnlight began to filter in, I could see he was right. His face wasn't a deathmask as my mother's and father's had been: Theirs had turned a shade of light green like overwatered leaves. Poemen's face was simply a little more bloodless than it usually was, the skin a bit drier. The biggest change was in his eyes, which had grown enormous, like a beautiful young woman's eyes, like Veronica's. He took two days dying. I didn't know what to do so I simply sat by him, giving him a drink every once in a while, which he neither asked for nor refused. Now that he was dying, he grew chatty. In this atmosphere of new-found intimacy, and knowing he hadn't much time, I told Poemen about Veronica, how she had died, and my part in it. It was harder telling him the rest of it—how she had "admired" me and wanted to be martyred by my side. I explained how I escaped. I described how it was that I had engineered Veronica's murder, how the magistrate and his men had simply been my instruments. I explained the kind of person that I'd been, my disgusting self-sacrifices, my nauseating prayers, my loathsome self-denial. The only real thing I'd accomplished—because it was the only thing that bore a resemblance to who I really was—was having that devil attach himself to me.

"Yes, that devil," said Poemen, ruminating at the ceiling. "You're right, Larry. You deserved that devil. But he's gone now."

"He's taken leave of me before. He'll be back."

"No, he's gone for good. You're a different kind of person now, so you get a different kind of devil. Who knows? Maybe a better one."

"How do you know? What's different?"

"It's your dismay, Larry. It does you credit."

I didn't understand. My dismay had been created by my lifelong absence of mind. I could not pay attention because there was an empty pocket where my soul might have attended. At least real sinners could feel regret, remorse. These actual sinners had really failed. Through their own fault, they had lost something that had been given them. But I was like a man born not just ill-countenanced but horribly disfigured, catching a glimpse of himself in a roadside puddle and being filled with dismay, for that was the way he was. You could argue with him otherwise, but the truth was it was his fault.

"I thought I was keeping my dismay to myself," I grumbled.

"There's nothing in the world harder to hide than dismay. Nothing harder to bear."

"It's not as hard to bear as sin." I was sitting with my back against the wall and I beat my head against the mud bricks and clenched my fists. "My ambition to be a holy man was just ridiculous. I can live with that. All I'm asking now is to be hardened sinner. But it's too difficult for me. All I can feel is this shameful dismay."

Poemen then turned toward me and said, "It's a start, Larry. Dismay, embarrassment, unrelenting boredom—all of those you can begin with."

I don't know when he died. Being Poemen he didn't do anything dramatic, no rasps, or ecstatic delirium, or pithy last words. After a while I just realized he wasn't breathing. It was noon, but I didn't see any point in delaying the burial. I spent most of the afternoon searching the neighborhood for large stones to pile on his grave so it wouldn't attract hyenas. Then I began to dig as the sun set, and for once I was able to endure this astronomical event without thinking

about what it meant, or what it didn't mean. I was too busy cutting through the hardpan. I put him in his grave in the middle of the night.

"If the earth should lose its salt," I said to the stones I'd piled over him, "who shall make it salty? Veronica will make it salty. Poemen will make it salty."

A few nights later, an angel of the Lord appeared in my hut as I was getting ready for bed.

"Hail, Larry," said the angel, "I bring thee great tidings!"

"You've got the wrong guy," I said, settling my cloak on my pallet, "There isn't any reason for angels to be bringing me tidings or anything else."

My naked back felt cold. My fingers were freezing. I quickly got under my cloak and looked up at the angel, who no longer glowed. Far from it: he looked like nothing so much as a hole in the night, but a hole wearing an expression of infinite wisdom and pity. A serious angel.

Out of this hole he said, "All right. What'll you give me if I remove your dismay?"

For an instant I felt the dismay lift from me and when it fell back, my veins and my heart and, I suppose, my soul were filled with something different. I'd forgotten what sadness was like, and it was irremediable and heavy as if I were lying alongside Poemen under the boulders and chunks of hardpan at the bottom of his grave. I was astonished that grace could be so immeasurable.

And I thought, Now maybe I can begin.

Chapter Twenty-One

Vaughan's lips were sealed. His mouth had manufactured some sort of musilage that held them together and pasted his tongue to the roof of his mouth. Also his eyeballs had been scoured, his scalp plucked, and the entire network of his nerves had been badly rewired. A headache originating in the bones of his temples made it impossible for him to maintain consecutive thought. His thirst had taken on independent life, a dybbuk inhabiting not just his gullet but various organs. His liver was parched.

The inspector sat across from him, saying nothing, looking thoughtful. Vaughan tried to clear his mind.

As he opened his mouth to speak, bits of skin pulled free from each lip. "Do you know where Veronica is now?" he asked.

"Where do you think she is?" the inspector answered. "She's dead."

"This is the place of the dead. I just thought you might have seen her...since you've been here."

The inspector dropped his head into his hands and was for some time apparently lost in pensive grief, or so his occasional sobs seemed to indicate. Vaughan maintained a respectful silence. Eventually the inspector looked up, the reddened skin about his eyes glistening with sweat and tears. Vaughan felt the hot inflammation of his own face. His lips were raw where the skin had come off. His gums were bleeding and the blood stung the raw patches in his lips. The worst sensation of all was when a switch tripped bundles of synapses and a bolt of nervous electricity bounded through his sacralia or down his thigh or up his neck into his already throbbing jawbone.

Why had he gotten so drunk? Once again he'd gone beyond sodden anesthesia. On the other hand, when exactly had he been drinking? As usual he couldn't even remember getting drunk. Earlier he and the inspector had a tittle together, he supposed. Probably he had been drinking while the inspector made his confession.

The inspector had confessed his role in the death of that young girl, Veronica. But that didn't explain Vaughan's own culpability in her death, or the death of someone like her. Who, though? he thought. I had my punishment coming. At once he saw this phrase literally enacted, treads clanking, iron plates creaking, cannon poking from a turret, banging rapidly over an empty steppe, and he was naked and without an avenue of retreat, about to be violated by those iron treads, and he gloried in his unavoidable immolation, a nearly orgasmic feeling—his punishment was coming.

"Jesus, you're disgusting," the inspector suddenly said. "You just keep going on and on like that." The inspector turned his head and puked at the foot of his chair, spitting once or twice to clear his mouth of the vomit. He didn't bother to move the chair out of the pool of filth now at his feet. "You're luckier than me, though. You're getting the benefit of execution."

Now it was happening at last, as it happened to...to his friend...earlier, on the tracks under the bright lights, when Vaughan didn't think you could die in death. How much he had forgotten! How much he now knew! But after all he *didn't* want to die, no matter how much sense it made, how much it would clarify things, and what a great relief it would be. *Because things could get worse.* Yes, that was one of the things he now knew. Things could get worse.

Leaving the inspector head down on the table as if passed out, his feet swimming in bile, two of his men lifted Vaughan from his chair and dragged him out the door and around to the back of the hut, which was bathed in the sodium glare of searchlights. A pocked wall made of cinder blocks was there. They stood him against it.

"I don't think you want to be tied up," one of the men said, not unkindly. "It'll go worse for you that way." Vaughan couldn't exactly understand how any variation could make what was about to happen much worse, and yet the man's words seemed reassuring, sensible. Vaughan was certain that he didn't want to be tied up and then shot. All he had to do was summon enough courage to plaster himself against the wall for a few seconds, until their heavy bullets had plowed into his chest and head. He thought he might taste the flavor of metal and that there might be golden pain. Yet that would be over quickly. The pain he was now feeling, this last agony of hangover, was unbearable enough. He was so frightened, though: Oh, to die, to die! All at once he remembered the books he had bought as a poor graduate student, how much they had meant to him, especially a little classical dictionary worn out when he'd bought it. That little book would be thrown in a box and forgotten, and this seemed to him far more poignant a notice of his own final demise than anything else he had done. If they wanted some one good thing, Elsewhere, to note about Albert Vaughan, it was this: He had bought that book, seeking knowledge for its own sake, when he was a poor student. He began to cry, over himself. He would never see Julia. He did not deserve to see her.

The men stood outside the pool of light, and he heard the crisp rickrickrick of the bolts on their automatic rifles being pulled back. They understood that his tears of self-pity were not really so despicable. Had there been any body fluids left in him, he would have urinated on himself again, or shat himself, but now he was like a dried cystalis at the end of August clinging to old bark. He wanted to blow away. Wasn't that enough? To scutter away now from their riflshots, from the shame of execution. He would be badly, badly hurt while shame was squeezing his heart and from his dry mouth he would be calling for Julia.

Why didn't the firing squad step into the light? He saw their silhouettes clearly enough: matte black shapes on a glossier black background, as though they were holes in the night. He wondered why he couldn't at least see glints from the receivers or barrels of their guns. He noticed for the first time that they were standing on pavement, and at the very moment this fact registered, curiously one of the men from the dark said,

"This is called the Pavement."

"Thank you," said Vaughan, "I was wondering."

Another odd visual item, he thought, was that although the rifleman were black cut-outs surrounded by darkness, the hut behind them was illuminated as though from within, a homey yellow glow suffused the thatch. But then the corn-yellow suddenly turned to orange, and bits of red at once flared up among the straw, and then the entire roof was ablaze. Vaughan saw the inspector come to the window and lean out, as though he were calling to a neighbor, except that in the next instance he too was on fire. Not a sound came from the inspector, possibly because the roar of the fire was now too great, or possibly the inspector, that misunderstood man, was too stoical to demonstrate weakness in this, his last agony. Speaking of agony, Vaughan thought, maybe I can run away. Yet for a moment he was transfixed by the spectacle of the

flaming man in the yellowy orange window, his hair on fire, motionless as the silhouette men ran jerkily about against the coruscating background of the burning hut.

He looked for the best way to escape, but he couldn't see into the absolute darkness surrounding the fire, and so he sprinted off to his right expecting every moment to fall into a concrete barrier, or fly headlong into barbed wire, or trip an antipersonnel mine. The ground was firm and free, however, and at first he ate up the earth with long, joyous strides, the fast lope of adolescence. After an initial shock, his body no longer felt pain, as if he'd burned off the hangover. He ran occasionally looking over his shoulder until the burning gatehouse was only a glow on the horizon. He stopped. He understood that he hadn't been running through the night. He knew what running in the night was like—the moon perhaps shining or perhaps not, with the stars, at least some of them, glittering, depending on one's distance from heavily infested areas, the chirp of various insects, the odors, the echoing footsteps of a solitary walker. And so on. He had been running through pure darkness. Even the shining blip of the fire on the horizon, his last landmark, had faded. It was very hot. The reason he had flown over the ground was that he'd been running on a manmade surface. He bent down and felt it—it was smooth like asphalt. He crept along, trying to determine whether he'd somehow managed to stay on a road, but no matter how far he went in any direction, the hardened surface went farther. It was as if he were standing in a vast airless parking lot in Mississippi or Texas, releasing a stored day of August heat. He no longer felt like running. No one would pursue him here.

He sat back. Nothing happened. Nothing happened outside him and nothing happened in his head. It took a while for him to realize this, given how weakly his mind was working. Only now did he begin to comprehend how much mental effort went into remembering. Even the sound bites, video snippets, recollected affect, false sensory signals—the whole ragged panoply of memory involved with his recent near-execution—that was barely available to his mind.

He hadn't any idea how long he'd been sitting on the asphalt of the black hot parking lot when something finally happened. Two cones of light approached in the humid darkness. A moan issued from somewhere right behind them. "Wo, wo, wo," it went. "Woe, woe, woe," it went. Then it went, "Stickakisskiss. Hisssssssss." A voice now came from the darkness behind the headlights.

"Are you getting on or not? Make up your mind."

Vaughan walked through the wall of light and emerged beside a bus. Its door opened and revealed an overweight driver in a short-sleeved shirt leaning over his steering wheel. He called down from his perch.

"This is it, pal. You don't take this bus, you're gonna wait a long time."

Vaughan climbed aboard.

"I don't have a ticket," he said.

"Tickets collected at the destination. Take a seat."

A short set of stairs led to the passenger aisle. After the absolute darkness outside, it was easy to make out the features of the dimly lit interior. Here and there tiny overhead lights lit up riders staring out the window or sleeping or watching him, mildly curious. Most of the rows were darkened, but he could still discern huddled shapes. Many of the passengers were snoring softly or murmuring. The bus sighed loudly and lurched forward, gathering speed. The headlights illuminated a yellow highway line.

"You can't stand there, buddy," the driver said. "Find a seat."

Vaughan climbed the steps. At the front most of the seats were full, but he saw a few empties toward the back. Grabbing seatbacks to steady himself, he made his way swaying with the slow yaw of the bus. He began to feel calmer. The windows were open and the warm breeze

dried his skin. His skin had oozed cups of sweat, which now evaporated from his face and arms and crotch and feet, as though he'd stepped from some artificially heated environment—a desert herbarium, a greenhouse for tropical plants—and had come outside onto the walkways of a park in early spring. His joints loosened, and he felt pleasantly drowsy. He sank down into the first empty seat and slept for a while

When he awoke, Vaughan asked half-aloud, "Then who will give it savor?" He couldn't remember the dream that had given rise to this non sequitur.

The man beside him said, "They will give the earth its savor, for they are the salt."

Turning toward him, Vaughan smiled. The man returned his smile. This man, Vaughan thought, has an old-fashioned face. He did not know exactly what this meant. Perhaps it was the man's guileless expression, curious, ready to be amused. Partly this was the effect of his hat—a tobacco-colored snapbrim—which matched his double-breasted suit and wide chocolate-striped tie and handkerchief, his narrow, square-chinned face.

"When I was a boy," he said, "my folks used to say that about people, that they was the salt of the earth."

"I guess I never knew where it came from."

"Well, that's it. That's where it come from."

This didn't actually explain anything, yet Vaughan was satisfied to think that the saying had come from the collective remarks of generations of mothers and fathers. Perhaps that's where all wisdom came from. He was happy to think so, sitting there with the faint scent of fried chicken and coffee. And diesel fuel, which made him think of a trip he'd taken as a small boy, on a bus much like this one. As a poor young man, too, he had occasionally travelled by bus. He remembered waiting for a connection at a station in a small city. He recalled the diesel odor and the smell of floor wax and perfume. He remembered the slippery wooden benches, the big clerestory windows with their downflowing noonday light making the station feel like a prairie chapel.

The man beside him said, "There ain't no better way than catch a Greyhound bus and ride. You see all the country. Cities you might never go on a airplane." He pronounced the last word the way people of Vaughan's grandparents' generation did: aeroplane. "You see all the little towns, you right there on the land, with the fields and the farmplaces. You meet all kind of people." Then he said, "Name's Bob."

Vaughan said, "My name is...is Al." Maybe this man would give him plain answers. He asked, "Where's this bus going? What's its next stop?"

"Oh, it goes on up the line a long ways." Vaughan's heart sank, another evasion. But then the man continued, "maybe Hattiesburg, down the coast somewhere. I don't suspect it go as far as Gulfport but it may do." This seemed highly improbable but at least it was concrete. The man added, "But I'm getting off at the crossroads." The way he said this it sounded like The Crossroads might have been the name of a particular village along their route.

The bus windows were like sheets of basalt. Anything might have been passing outside them. They rode for a long time not saying anything, except that the man hummed to himself. He hummed beautifully, starting tiny themes, varying them, trying out one progression, then bridging to another before humming a new motif. He read a magazine while he hummed, apparently oblivious to the long, lovely musical thread he was drawing out into the night.

A car passed them coming from the opposite direction. Many minutes went by and then another appeared. Traffic meant the possibility of pursuit. Vaughan craned around in his seat to look out the bus's back window, but all he saw were the receding red dots of the passing car's taillights. His seatmate glanced at him, politely curious.

Anxiety clung to him like a low-grade fever. He wasn't free yet. How could he be? He was still what he was.

Why must it be a crime to be who he was? All right, he hadn't paid attention, but he hadn't been born that way, it wasn't part of his DNA (what was DNA?). It wasn't just a burden but a deliberate sentence. Well, after all it didn't matter much whether or not he was falsely convicted. He'd been found guilty. He had to serve his sentence. That wasn't what his sister the psychogogue would say. You were supposed to dump any personal ugliness as soon as conveniently possible. No fault, no failure, no misdeed actually belonged to anybody. Harboring these things – worse still, considering them part of oneself – was dysfunctional.

Or maybe the main thing wasn't shouldering your personal crate of woes, like a bearer led pointlessly by deranged sahibs over trackless savannah. The main thing was to figure out what was yours and what wasn't. What had the white men slipped into your crate? And of what was yours, could you simply call it by its real name?

"It may not come to pass," Bob said.

"What may not?"

"Trouble may not catch up to you."

"Some kind always catches up to you," Vaughan said glumly. "I was just trying to decide which kind."

"There ain't no point in that. They on your trail, which is all about it you gonna know."

"You think so?" Vaughan had an image of the inspector and his bully-boys hurtling down the borderless pavement after the bus, rapidly gaining on it. "They're not going to let it go. I escaped. They've got to come after me. Bring me to justice."

"That ain't what it's about. The dogs just keep on coming."

Vaughan's fear suddenly made him laugh snortily.

"I'm glad you can laugh bout it," said Bob. "I never seen any relief in it."

"I don't think it's funny either. I can't help it. I see them in my mind."

"That's right. You got a hellhound on your trail. He far off sometime and sometime he draw up on you. I *thought* he coming up on your trail, the way you looked."

Vaughan peered nervously past his seatmate into the pitch-black window. Fluid anxiety now changed to solid forboding. He strained to see devildogs loping beside the bus, with dishlike eyes and yellow fangs. The memory of an endless avenue under orange winter skies flashed onto the bus window. Once upon a time a dog had chased him.

He had to ask Bob, he had to force the words out before his mouth stopped him, he had to know now: "What does it do, the hellhound, when it catches you?"

"Catch you? I don't know he catch you. Anyway, what do it matter if he catch you? It just gonna go on."

"You mean being punished."

"It could be something you never knew you done. That would explain it."

"Yes, it would explain it."

They sat in silence looking forward into the bus's cozy gloom, listening to the soft sounds of people stirring in their sleep. Bob offered Vaughan a cigarette. They both smoked. The humble inebriation spread through him, the homely solace of cigarettes, which did not pretend to erase one's cares but only to lighten that little bit of time it took to smoke them. He realized his hangover was all but gone, though he was still thirsty.

"Have you got anything to drink?" he asked.

"Got some coffee but it could be cold," Bob answered. He fished a dented aluminum cyclinder from the space under his feet and passed it to Vaughan.

The coffee was still lukewarm, and sweet. It was like a kind of food. The first few sips wet the roof of his mouth, moistened his gullet, penetrated his throat. He hardly bothered to swallow, simply letting the coffee flood down. He stopped gulping and handed back the thermos. Bob looked at him encouragingly.

"No," he said. "You finish it. You must need it."

Vaughan sluiced himself with the remaining coffee and finished his cigarette. In his childhood, there were idyllic tv commercials for these products, extolling sociability, alertness, extroversion. The advertisements were right. A cigarette and a cup of coffee—or actually in his case a quart of coffee—were good for you.

As if they too had been energized, other passengers began to stir. Although the world outside the windows was still dark, a sense of impending daybreak rose within the bus.

"I can't remember the last time I had a cigarette," Vaughan said. "My wife wanted me to stop."

"She give you a hard time."

"She didn't ever say anything about it. That's not how she was." Bob nodded and they sat quietly for a minute as if both men were recalling Julia's equanimity. "Lemme have another one, okay?"

His memory spiralled like a swallow descending from a high-stacked cloud over an English university town. He put out his cigarette in an ashtray whose base was printed with a red rectangle stamped with black letters, "Double Diamond," They were lounging, he and Julia, in the tiny garden behind their inn. Julia was reading. Vaughan was watching the birds swooping in and out of nooks cut in the ancient sandstone college walls next door, breathing in the smell of European morning—warm bread, Turkish tobacco, wet slate, bus exhaust, the odor of brick and mortar solid long set before desperate white men had built log huts on their crust of American seaboard. As he watched the birds, he fretted over how much he was smoking. He thought how repugnant he must be with this low vice and its noxious fumes. Oh, Julia would know about him all right—how little able he was to control himself, how self-indulgent he was.

"I'm sorry about this," he said to her. She looked up from her newspaper, smiling.

"Hmm?"

"I'll try to quit."

"Try to quit what?"

"This damn habit," he said, gesturing vaguely at the Double Diamond.

"Oh, that." She looked pensively at the ashtray.

"The stinking fume, the Stygian smoke of the bottomless pit."

She laughed. "Who said that?"

"James the First. When he saw what Raleigh had wrought."

Julia turned to him, leaning across the little table, and took both his hands in hers. Her face was very close to his. And in this English morning in early summer, he felt her wide brown eyes upon him and the scent of sweet peas, the taste of her lipstick. And he felt she was about to say something momentous.

"I don't want you falling into the Stygian pit, that's all." There was in her smiling face such saving reason and joy that when she drew away, still smiling, and turned back to her book, he sat waiting for the exquisite waves within him to abate as he watched her. After a moment, she looked up. "What?"

A loving woman's face close by one's own. Why must she be Elsewhere when all he needed was for the bus to stop, for Julia to board and walk down the aisle and lean down to him, take his hand, and say, "Come with me"? He couldn't get free on his own. She would take him from this place, wherever it was. He strained to fix his position, struggling to lay down

what was near and what was far and where he had been. None of these had much meaning. When he asked his awareness where he was, it answered with how he was, and he was lost. Yet he wasn't after all alone. People were with him, if not Julia, at least there were those, like Bob, who didn't mean him ill.

"Bob, I've been wondering. We're on this bus now, but it must have come from someplace, and all of us riding on it have to get off someplace..." Bob looked at him expectantly. "What I mean is that busses take you to your destination, don't they? You start somewhere—and probably you know where *that* is—and you get on knowing that you will end up somewhere else. That's a good explanation of how it works, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's how it works all right."

"Well, then, in between, where we are...Don't we also know where *that* is?" Vaughan was pleased with himself, feeling as if he'd untwisted some particularly tangled equation in higher math. You just needed to parse the problem into its basic elements.

"We travelling," said Bob. "All you can say after you left and before you get there is you travelling." The bus slowed, hitched, sighed, and stopped. "Anyway, I *do* know where I am. I'm at my stop." Vaughan realized that Bob had been rubbing his stockinged feet for some time, possibly in anticipation of getting off. "Reach up," he said to Vaughan, "and hand me down my walking shoes."

Bob's old-fashioned high-tops were set neatly side by side in the overhead rack. As Vaughan passed them to him, he felt the oil that had been carefully rubbed into them.

"This your stop too, I imagine," said Bob. Through the windshield, the bus headlights lit up the cruciform of two yellow highway lines. Beyond that, Vaughan could see nothing: He feared reentering that stifling darkness. On the other hand, he'd be with Bob. It would be good to have a companion again, even a transient one. And everything that Bob had said so far was simple and unambiguous. That was the important thing now in an interlocutor: No subtlety.

So they made their way down the aisle, other passengers looking at them curiously, wondering like Vaughan where this place was and who was getting off. The driver stared ahead, waiting patiently. The bus whispered.

As they got down, the warm air rose around them, but now a zephyr blew, carrying the smell of earth, and when the bus departed the sky was light enough that Vaughan could follow Bob to what turned out to be the side of the road.

"We best wait till it gets light," said Bob. "I been down to this crossroad afore."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mr. Butcher sleep in the daytime and don't hardly leave his house, but he know what people doing, he got a record of they crimes. He call me to this crossroads just about the middle of the night. When he stand there in the moonlight, you know he look as white as a man can be. When he held out that six-string Resonator, I heard the wind stir up, singing by itself.

"That's right," said Mr. Butcher, "it's ready for you now. It's singing for you, Robert. You just got to say you want it bad enough and it's yours."

I was playing a party in Tupelo when I got the message, Mr. Butcher want to talk to me outside. I did not know who he was. My friend say, Have a care, George W. Butcher not just some usually troublesome white man. Something wrong about him, where nobody want to ask what he done. He was standing in the alley with a blackdog smile upon his face. I start to turn round and head back in, but it was too late. Hey yo, Bob, say Mr. Butcher, you just the man I want to see. So I come up to him cautious. I am George Washington Butcher, he say, and I hear you play many a time. I couldn't figure how he could of heard me all that many times, and I know that I couldn't miss no man look like him standing in the crowd. You are mighty improved, say Mr. Butcher, you are way better than your instrument, it can't keep up no more. Didn't nobody else know that, not even my companions. I say, You a musician, Mr. Butcher? And he smile and tell me no. He got an interest in artists, what they think and how they do. He want to help me with my playing. If I meet him at the crossroads, he going to give me what I need. Then I grow a little bolder and I ask what that might be. Bob, I will give you a new guitar, he say, and I'll ask only one thing of you. I say, When should I come down to the crossroad, he say, This very night would suit me well.

It was past the midnight hour when I came across the fields. He was standing where he said he'd be, and a case was in his hand. Wind was up, clouds like a snake slipping through the sky, pinetops like knifepoints, the road dust stirred. I commenced to make some noise, but Mr. Butcher didn't even turn. I knew he'd heard me or smelled me coming from a long way off. As I come out on the road, Mr. Butcher say, Evening, Bob, glad you could make it, I have that new instrument. I looked back in the trees to see if they was others holding there and I watched his free hand to see if it went back in his coattails for a pistol or a gun. But he took the Resonator from its case and he reached it out to me. That's right, he say, it's ready for you. It's singing for you. You just got to say you want it. It was lonely there, that could not be denied. It wasn't no comfort they was two of us. There wasn't no companionship like you have when two Christians meet on a lonesome road at midnight, but it could have been one man standing there, either him or me. Yet I could not turn down the Resonator if Mr. Butcher's hand was burning pitch, I wanted it so bad. Because it was mine. It had been mine whenever the man that made it thought to put his hand to it. As Mr. Butcher passed it over, the strings raised they pitch and they was whispering when my fingers fretted down an E. Then I played Early Morning Blues and I

played Robin Blues. The Resonator's neck was like a woman's palm in mine, like blood running through it, and I knew I could make any shape I want come out of that body, deep or high, moan or cry. New chords was ready under my hand, sevenths and ninths, I could feel my way clear sometime like a Black Cat cornet or a Kansas City saxophone. It was still the blues but a new kind of blues. And when I lay a bottleneck down the frets, it howl like a hellhound on the trail and Mr. Butcher he throw his head back and laugh and moan loud enough it shake the treetops and rattle the cattails in the ditch. And the Resonator whining and Mr. Butcher laughing make the barbwire sing all up and down the line, so the creatures in the fields and the woods troubled and pick up they ears.

The shadows the moon throw down on the crossroads was sharp and fine. I feel like the world made out of silver, what with the Resonator steel plates and strings and the dust in the road like somebody shaved a dollar and Mr. Butcher's face like chrome and his eyes like headlamps and my heart shaking like a gin. Then a harrow come through me when Mr. Butcher begun to speak.

Now you owe me and you always owe me. Long as you got the Resonator you got me by your side. You going to travel now and you never stop travelling. The women love you but they ain't to be one woman. You mind to have that homeplace but the station gonna be you home, the juke joint gonna be you home. And Mr. Butcher gonna be you companion. I am a supporter of the arts.

I did not care. As I walk back cross the fields with the Resonator in my right hand, I heard breakdowns and bridges and boogie woogie so I can't hold my left hand still, the fingers playing on my jeans.

The next day I caught a ride over to Helena where a man needed a player to open for Bill Tyler. We come over the river in the early morning, and down along the banks the men loading the barges already for three or four hours. I thought about my father. He was a sober man and a righteous man and I thought about he never lay in in the morning all his life. He leave the house in dark and he come back in dark and when he sat down at the end of the day, he too tired to say much. When I was a small boy I would be in his lap and he put his arm round me and his body like rock and sometime I think he was not flesh and blood at all. Work had done that, like he was a mill or a engine, not even a horse or a mule because most people didn't work a horse or a mule till the goodness gone out of him. And here I was crossing the river, taking my ease, and I had the Resonator, doing my heart's desire. I took the Resonator out of its case and I played Glad Day in Heaven while we cross the bridge and when I finish the man driving say, Where you learn to play like that? I say, It's just something I made up. And he say, That done my heart good to hear you play, I think you will make a future for yourself.

I see a change in my fortune that very night. When I finished and was fixing to leave so Bill might play, the people wouldn't let me go. Keep on with you playing, they hollered. The man owned the place he nod, Yes, go on playing. It was a long low room and me up on a little stage, my head almost touch the ceiling, the only light two bare bulbs. The people stopped dancing and was pressed up to me. I was singing Come On In My Kitchen. In this song that early summer rain about to come. The wind rise, blowing mimosa down, the air sweet and cool. You know you need to get under shelter because it gonna be a hard rain. A travelling man working in the yard in the woodpile or in the field carrying off fieldstones, and the lonesome woman look out her backdoor and say, come on in my kitchen. That all she need to say. It was a song about that, about a woman need company and a travelling man, and a big storm roll down on the world and they inside that little kitchen for a while. Every man and every woman listening to that song understand. I don't need to sing about no jellyroll, no eagle rock, that yes

yes yes them juke players sing that can't see in their mind how it is sometime with two people who can't help to love each other. But the people listening to that song know.

That's how it was once I had the Resonator. When I got to working the words over in my mind, they got fixed to what I might have lived or nothing at all that I myself lived through but like a piece of moving picture. You know it had to be true or it might as well have been. So then first I had the words with a little rhythm, maybe two bars' worth, and then a key that would fit only those words and that rhythm. After that I didn't think no more about it. I played it out and my right hand on the frets had a mind of its own, and my left hand on the strings play walking bass or change-up or drop and stop along with it, and didn't neither of my hands need me to think about them. Maybe tune and the rhythm come from me or maybe I can't truly say where the songs come from. All I *could* say was all I ever wanted to do is make those songs and play them, like I was doing.

Some players the men like to hear them, and some players the women. I will say for myself that the men liked to hear me play and the women liked to hear me play. I had a style that pleased the men because they see how it was with them, and it satisfied the women because it ease they mind and they see how someone who played them songs must be a loving man. And I was. Many was the time after I play that a pretty woman take me home.

When I had played all the songs that I had wrote up till then, I begged the people pardon but I had to make way for Bill, so they let me go. I stepped down off the stage, and they was patting me on the back and telling me how fine my songs was. I went to have a drink at the bar. They was an old-timer musician there, a man I looked up to and watched and learned from his playing. I used to think that if ever I could play half as good as Son, I would be contented. It was different now.

You sure got mighty good since last time I hear you play, Bob. You must be practicing night and day, Son say. Where you get the Duolian? That an expensive instrument.

I got it from a friend. He give up playing.

I knew this was sorry-sounding and Son did too. He look at me for a few moments.

You lucky you friend so generous. Son took a drink, then he say, It appears that now I got something to learn from *you*.

Aw, Son. There ain't nothing I can teach you.

No, you turned some kind of corner, Bob. What we been doing is yesteryear, but what you playing is up to date. I suspect it's what all the young boys coming up will want to play now.

That was the last thing I would of thought. All I wanted to do is play for my own glorification, without reckoning what maybe other musicians might do with my songs. I begun to see that Mr. Butcher had give me a gift that had a lot more to it than the Resonator alone.

By and by I wasn't playing second bill no more, but the tonks was vying for my playing. I expect that many a musician would of set up a regular schedule and stayed at each place a few nights. Yet I could not do that. I got a taste for it, moving on, and it was tough for me to remain. So it suited me to play a barrelhouse in Vicksburg a couple of days and go on to Rosedale and cross over to a juke in Monroe. That year I even went up to Memphis several times. It was in Memphis that I got to know Ida James. I guess that was when my luck most turned but I did not know that then nor for a quite while after because every song I wrote was better than the last and every place I play the people could not stand to hear me stop. I will not deny I was from up country but now I was travelling and meeting a different kind, city people like Ida. She never want to leave Memphis except maybe to go to St. Louis or someday to Chicago. Many hours we talked about that, when we would go to Chicago. And she have her business. It hard to love a gambling woman, harder than some women who love whisky, maybe harder than loving a

woman that dope, because those women know they don't got a future. But a gambling man or woman, all they got is future.

There was many swell places on Beale Street, where you could go and have your fun to ape and clown all night long. You could drink till the sun come up, you could go upstairs with the women, you could roll the dice. I played in several of them, but as late as I play, Ida still be in the back room when I am done. I didn't have no interest in games of chance, for it came to me that when I went to the crossroads that night I had throwed my dice and had not yet seen how it come up. Now, it may appear strange but they was many a time I was more jealous of them dice than another man. When the bones hopping along the pit before they came to rest, Ida close her eyes like she done when we was in bed and her breath catch and if she throw lucky, I could see the pleasure fill her up just like I fill her up. And if her luck turn, then I could see it didn't matter just the same, for she was ready to go again. She was tireless, like when we was meant to ride. Ida had a place up top of a big old house there in Memphis. Her bed was in the front room, and I could take my ease and look from the windows out cross this vacant lot and the trolley tracks and then out where the river ran below. It might be noon when we woke up, it might be three in the afternoon, and we roll and tumble two or many times. Then Ida go and fix some coffee and I set up in bed and look out them windows. It wasn't nothing I wanted more then. I was pleased and at my rest. I would pick up the Resonator and vamp from key to key, you know, to see how it would sound, or changing up the rhythm of a sudden, and sounding my voice like different ones I had heard. Ida come in the bedroom smiling at me.

I thought you left, she say, and another man in my bed. Some man sing better than you.

Maybe you think he'd love you better than me.

Maybe he would. Let's give him a try.

We would be rolling and riding and would not stop, hot and slick. Ida had a Elgin jewel movement. I would be ticking from head to toe.

After sundown when our day begun, Ida put on her lipstick and put on her powder and she put on her high-fashion dress. I would walk her down to Beale Street where she worked, and then I would have time on my hands, and I would go into one place or another to have a drink. I might have it in mind that I will nurse a drink or two until it's time for me to play, but I was only fooling myself, for the second drink would always ask for a third, and the third for a fourth. Each drink making me a little more contented, sure of myself, and surely one more drink would make me just that much more contented. For a contented mind is what I lacked. Now it come all over me I could not sit still unless it was I was playing. I would not even remain in one speak to drink but I'd have to go down to another not a half hour pass.

Ida had it in mind that I should always stay by her there in Memphis. She didn't see no reason I needed to go no place else then. Later we'd both go upriver to St. Louis or all the way to Chicago, but for the time I was working all the time, so why should I pick up and leave? I couldn't help myself from needing to move on, though. I look out Ida's window at the river and the bridge, and I think, What's over that bridge? What's up that river? And it was the hardest thing I did not to go down to the station and catch the first train I see. That would be what I was thinking when I first opened my eyes in the morning.

One morning I woke up feeling sick, trembling and chill, laying up on my pillow wishing I had a cool drink. I hear the click of the latch and the doorknob turn. I say, Come in, whoever you are. Don't just hang out there in the hall. My nerves was bad. I tell myself it was just a doorknob turning. The door open a little way, and I waited till I couldn't wait no more and I sprang out of bed and pull the door to. Yet I knew nobody'd be there. I looked down the hall and there wasn't nobody. It didn't need me to look. I sat back on the edge of the bed. I noticed how white the room was, the furniture like it was coffinwood, and Ida's bedclothes on the hook

all winding shrouds, and the walls like tombstones. It was foul weather day outside the window. The river was hid in rain. I was studying the rain. I was shaking now with the chill of the rain and the bone-white of the room.

You can have the blues and be misery. Surely people die from that, and it's bad enough. But this was worse. These blues was outside of me, outside my door. I knew most certain that the blues had got up and walked like a man, and they was walking still, walking back of Bob now, who knows how long it would be? When I lay back down, then I heard the Resonator strings singing in the corner as they did that first midnight. I picked her up and I played a song right out from start to finish, with the words all in place, like I had known it many a long time. Yet I had never known that song. I did not know where it come from, maybe the blues walk up and leave it on my doorstep. I sung the song through three or four times to see did I really did have it down, words and notes, and I listened like it was somebody else play for me. But it was mine sure enough.

When the spring floods come you might see a stream or you might see a river turn its course and the current flow backward. That's how it went with me from then on for my life turn round. As much as Ida meant to me, I could not remain, no, not when she begged for me to stay. Didn't I love her? And, oh, I did. But the blues was up and walking on my trail, there rocking in my hotel room, back of me trying to catch a ride, standing by me to take a drink. When I shot him a glance he was gone, the empty chair still rocking, the door swinging shut. In the world there was a red light. In my heart and mind was a blue light. I was so low I could not lift my hand or take a step.

My songs started to travel without me, all up and down and across the river. Every singer I had known or had ever heard of come to see me play, and I hear what they saying.

How did he come to play that way so? It seem a while back he just a boy trying to make his way and now he the king.

Those songs, the more life they took, it seem the more I am in the shadow, life going out of me. Oftentimes I look out at the people's faces when I play and did not know whether I had not been born or if I die. For I saw right past they faces to some others that hadn't maybe been born and I play to those ones and they hear me.

I always had a drink by me in those days. I drank till I change my mind. And it might be two days and it might be three or four. Whisky seem somehow to be hitched up with making songs and with playing them. They got to travel together. Some nights I could not hardly see. Somebody get me up on the stage and I just go play like a wind-up phonograph. On these nights, I depend upon Mr. Butcher be standing in the doorway at the edge of the crowd, his eyes upon me. I could not deny we was partners and I knew his day was coming.

Then like the first night, he say for me to meet him out back of the juke I was playing, and I feared the worst. It could be he take back the Resonator may as well of been my soul. But he had something else in mind.

Now you have made a name for yourself, Bob, he say. You have measured up to my expectations. I give you the instrument a man of your talent need, but you must supply the genius. There more in you than meets the eye and my eye is pretty damn good.

I look in his eye. They wasn't nothing good about it.

Yet a man may be as some say you are, the king in the Delta, but if his songs gone with him when he is laid away, then he may as well never made them. I had my little flask by me and I took a drink. Mr. Butcher watch me and he say, You drinking a good deal now, I observe. I put the cap back on my flask. Here is the proposition, Bob. A fellow in Texas is willing to record your songs for the phonograph. Now, what do you think of that?

My heart jump. All I could think was if I live enough to put all the songs on some records, then it don't matter none afterwards what become of me.

I rode the Greyhound bus to Dallas. It was early in the morning and I like to slip out of town, keep my head low. Maybe what was dogging me down wouldn't check me, not leastways till I recorded my songs. I had two whisky bottles in my grip, and it was eighteen hours to my destination. Two fifths of rye in eighteen hours, but I never shut my eyes, looking through the open windows at the cottonrows, lining down to the horizon, black soil in between. They weren't nobody working them at that time of the year. Past Little Rock it hill country for many miles and Oklahoma where ain't nobody in the fields because they wasn't nothing could grow in the dust. We shut the windows then, even with the heat, because the dust blowing up along the highway and rolling past them empty fields, those old board shacks that the people had got up and gone. God knows where. Then finally I see a city come up in the distance, and I was never so glad to see it. I felt I had made it through that desert and I was going to have my chance.

Just as soon as I got down off the bus, I knew the man sent to meet me, even in the crowd. I knew him by how quiet he stand, with the people coming off the busses or running to meet somebody coming off, holding they hats and laughing and crying, and he was there like a post, like a cart. No, not like a natural man. They did not see him, but I saw him. He signal me to follow and we went outside the station and get in his Chevrolet and drive to a hotel. It was a white hotel, catering to whites. Yet we went right on past the guests sitting about and the bellboys, without so much as a glance in our direction. Maybe they thought I was working for the man. We went up to a big parlor and by now it was coming on toward evening. They was blinds on the windows, closed, but the light come through enough I could see he had some equipment there. Through a door off this parlor was a bedroom and he open the door and nod toward the bed as to say I should get some rest. I was bone-weary after the ride.

It was long about 3 a.m. when I awoke and I didn't have no idea where I could be. People was stirring in the street below and I thought "I must be in Memphis." Maybe Ida had not come home from work yet. I listened for the river traffic. The door to my room open and the man step in and then I remembered where I was. He sit down in a armchair and commence to smoke a cigarette, looking at me all the while. Finally he say,

So you the golden boy, huh? Thousands of em caterwauling in juke joints and he pick you. Butcher say you his Choice. I sat up at the foot of the bed facing him and didn't say nothing. Ain't nothing to say, is there? Fortune get laid on you or it don't and there ain't no point in discussing it. But what kind of fortune is it, do you reckon? Had you thought about that?

He pass me a cigarette and I lit up and commenced at once to feel kind of woozy. The red light off the hotel sign lit up the room. When I come to study his face, I was surprised\ he was younger than I first took him. Maybe when we come from the station his hat was pulled down or I was too wore out to pay him any mind. His face was hard for a man that young, plain cold and homely, thin-lipped and dry-eyed, smooth cold skin. He got slicked back red hair and a few freckles and that white, white skin go with it.

You want some bucking up, chief. Come on in the parlor. A bottle of whisky was on the table, and he crack the seal and we had a few drinks. They didn't do me any good. I just felt most light-headed.

Why, what's the matter, Bob? he ask me like he was concerned for my welfare. You look like you was fixing to faint on me. Maybe it's not whisky you want. I got some other kind of Texas medicine that will fix you right up. So he roll up some reefer and we smoke that and we have a couple more drinks and now the morning light was coming through the cracks in the

blind and I commenced to feeling better. From time to time he say things to me, but I was lost in thought and did not pay him any mind. His face didn't look so icy no more. As a matter of fact, he appeared kind of funny to me, just a freckle-face boy and all.

I lay back on the sofa and ever time I close my eyes a moving picture start to roll with that little man, that Charlie Chaplin. Old Charlie up to some tricks and I laughed till I cried.

Now, Bob, you got to get a grip on yourself for it's about time to go to work. I open my eyes and he order up some breakfast and we ate. I wanted to lay back down then, I was that sleepy.

He say, Now you need a pick-me-up, and he shake some powder out of a little cut of paper. Then I lost track. It was have a drink, smoke some, take some more cocaine. When I picked up the Resonator it feel awkward in my hands like it got a shape that my hands don't fit. The steel plate and strings cold like the edge of a sink. I played an E chord but I was way off key.

Let me tune that up for you, Bob. It just take a minute. And he take up the Resonator like he know his business, tightening a string and going on to the next, never needing to hear had he got it tuned. He just got the pitch right first time.

When I took up my instrument again, it settle down under my arms. I feel the strings hum in my fingertips. And when I lay the slide against the fretboard and my pick strike the notes, the song get up and speak for itself. Baby don't you want to go? The machine play back what I sung. I was a ghost and there was something got its own life in the recording machine. They was many men there, near one for each song, and I was most surprised. And then besides just as soon as I hear a song on the recording, I heard a different way I might do it, a different break or a different key. I was impatient to try that one out and then hear that new record man sing it.

So that is how we went. Me singing and listening and changing the songs. It's true I was drinking whisky and kicking the gong, but it wasn't like the usual. I was consoled all the while. I had carried them songs around with me. If I didn't sing them, they wasn't there. But now I give them up, they somewhere else, nothing I did could help or hurt them, and I felt I could take my rest. So I had to shut my eyes for a while. He say, yes, go on, you deserve to take a break. I lay on my bed and before I go to sleep, it appeared to me that if I wanted to take my leave, I could. I thought about what my mama sung those many years ago, going way over Jordan. I did not know what she meant till right then.

When I waked up I hear me singing in the other room, and I lay there and listen for a while. I thought how someday soon my voice would sing in someone's parlor. My imagination begin to take me away, and I saw my records playing in a big Memphis music store. People stop on the street and say, That sound like Bob who used to play down on Beale Street. Ida would hear them, and smile and think, That is the man I love and he singing for me. I thought about all the people put money down on a phonograph and they buy my record that would speak my word, that would carry my life.

I got to wondering about that man in the next room. I hadn't had no contract to sign and didn't nobody mention what I might earn from recording my songs. Yet he didn't seem likely somehow, that he was a businessman, I mean. In that respect Mr Butcher and him was cut from the same cloth. I begin to have a shaking chill that he watch me as I sleep and have a way to see what I dream. I was convicted he was the one rattle my doorknob and blew past my dressing gown. I thought he some kind of blues was walking. The blue light man.

So I had to get up only to stop thinking down those lines. I took a drink off the bottle on my dresser, and I took another. I open the window and look down the street where there was three young girls waiting at the busstop. They was dressed most alike, with that smart little hat and them white, white collars, with high heels, such as women working in the office would had

on. Still, it was a warm evening and they drooping a little. They was right below my window, I could just about hear them say a word or two, but they may as well of been in China, I was so far from them and the life of any Christian soul. A person might be good or he might be bad. But as far as I was concerned good or bad didn't make no difference now. I was out of that. It was the songs that made me so. Where did they come from? Not from Mr. Butcher or from Mr. Butcher man out there in the parlor with his open eyes studying the lights coming over the city. He wasn't doing nothing when I entered the room, and it took him a while to know I was there. He look at me slowly like he don't know who I am, and then he say, Well, Bob, I hope you have a good rest. You ready to get back to work?

Then I started back with everything, with playing and with drinking and doping too. And the first string burn my fingertip and the sixth string sting like a honeybee, and when my fingers jump to a chord, they come down on that sweet spot in the fret and they fly from chord to chord, and my right hand playing chord and note fast, smooth, and slow. There was times the Resonator hear my voice and buzz back like a hornet. Oh, it wasn't nothing in my life like that. Singing that day took up my life, all that I'd done and thought about doing. And when it was over, there was nothing anymore.

We both knew it. That's all for you, Bob, he say. You may as well catch the Greyhound bus and ride. I didn't much care. Someday I would hear my voice and the Resonator on a phonograph. Who could say where it would be? Before you leave, Bob, he say, I have one favor, since all this time I ain't seen your face. I say, What you mean you ain't seen my face? I been sitting right across from you all this time. What you been looking at if you ain't been looking at my face? No, he say, I could not see it while you was playing for you turn right to the wall. I thought you was probably shy, which is understandable.

I was most struck dumb, looking into his eyes thinking, You must be blind. So as I studied his eyes, I come to understand that, yes, maybe he truly don't have no sight. He couldn't see for the light.

So I put away my instrument without no farewell. I walk through the door and hope to Jesus I never see him again, I never meet him in the light or in the dark.

I returned to Memphis, went back to the place where Ida live. The landlady sweeping the porch as I climb the steps, but she say, Ida done moved, Bob. I went downtown to the place she worked. The man there don't want to tell me nothing right at first, but by and by he come round. I hate to be the one to tell you this, Bob, but Ida just up and took off one night, with a white man name Butcher.

I didn't see nothing for it but to keep on travelling right on down to Tupelo.

The bus rolled in early in the morning and it already hot like the sun straight up overhead. The street dust look like bones and I think how all bones must be white. There was misgiving in my heart. What could I do? I was that low in mind I did not think I would get well anymore. I took thought about my songs. I thought, They on a record by now, and maybe they be playing them in Memphis and they hear them in St. Louis too. Shortly, they be listening to my songs along the Delta shores.

Then I knew it would not make a difference to me because I would be travelling in that passway. Somewhere else. And I did not know if I would be alive or if I would be dead. Out on the town square, just a early-rising farmer on his wagon waiting for the feedstore to open and a man like me sitting on the curbstone a little ways down the street. He could be coming home or picking up to leave. It was much the same, for him or me. How come some men so blue? It ain't like the storm that passes, that go along its way. In my life the blues stand up and walking at my side. I was not worried by hell and I did not mind dying, but living this life seem a high price to pay.

I walked to Mr. Butcher neighborhood. The ice wagon come along with a man I know, Sam Doolittle. Sam stop the wagon and lean down and say, Bob, this a little early for a man of your color be walking through this neighborhood. I got business with a man, I say. Sam tap his hatbrim and gee up his mule. I kept walking till I got to Mr. Butcher house and I went up on the porch and knock two or three times before somebody come to the door, one of his servants. Why you coming around this front door, she say. You want something, you need to go round to the back. I told her I have business with Mr. Butcher, it don't matter where I appear. While we was talking she got the screen between us, and I look through it and I see Ida cross the hall. She got a way of trimming down when she move that I could not mistake. Ida, I called out, and she turn her glance toward the door. I knew she saw me. I push past the maid and come into the hall but Ida was gone. I told the maid, Please go find Mr. Butcher, tell him Bob is here. I could see she did not want to leave me by myself, and she most certainly did not want to find Mr. Butcher and tell him some black man demand to see him. Yet I suppose the way I look, down and out and meaning business, she didn't have no choice. She went to a door down the hall and go in. When she come out she say, Mr. Butcher can give you a minute or two.

It was his office there, a pretty big room that run from the front of the house to back, lots of windows, with the ones in front shaded where the morning sun coming in. Mr Butcher sat behind his desk, as some men do like there was a fence between you. I studied his face, his pointy chin and his pointy ears and them eyes with their squint-wrinkles, slick and white like muskaroons. I wouldn't trade my skin for his could I wish it so.

You back now, Bob, he say. It went pretty well, I understand.

I am easy in my mind, I say, my songs is on record. But I am troubled in all else. My heart's got out of me, and I don't see how that might change. Yet I thought I have one thing left for my consolation, and I hadn't been thinking about nothing but Ida. So how was it with her that she was there in his house?

It appears to me the last deal gone down, and it is time for you and me to reckon up what you owe.

I was coming to that, I say, What will be my compensation for my songs?

You are badly mistaken. When you put those songs on the phonograph, they come into my possession.

It ain't in the nature of things for them to be yours, they are my blood and they are in my bone.

Natural ain't in it, Bob, he replied. When we met at the crossroads, I put a lien on your body and mortgage on your soul. Then he call, Ida! and she come and she look down at me, not turning away, and she stood right by his side and he turn in his chair and place his hand right there between her thighs. And he say, This is my contract. You tell me if I am mistaken, Ida, and she nod no he is not mistaken.

I had my straightrazor by me, and I took it, meaning to put my end to her or to myself since this day was now our last. Mr. Butcher pull away from her, and Ida quiet and how she looked at me just for the moment I saw she pity me, and I was around the desk, the razor in my hand and the tears running down my cheek. Mr. Butcher come up with a .32-20 and dropped the hammer on me, and I went to the floor.

Then it was early in the morning, but I was sinking down. A song was singing. If I had a day or an hour I could finish it. Then I thought to myself, Where was my Resonator?

Mr. Butcher standing over me. He say, Now it come to this, I hope you do as a I tole you. I couldn't clear my head. My mouth was dry.

A song was singing and what did it say? It say, All my love in vain. There was a sweet smell on the air come from the kitchen. Bacon and biscuits and hot coffee. Hot water and soap

and clean sheets. Sun coming round the side of the house and warming up a patch of honeysuckle. Ida step fresh out of her bath. There was a song about all of them. I could clearly see my opportunity. I would make a song every hour for the rest of my life and wouldn't it be grand? I saw how they might all come out so one fit to the next. And when I was finished that would be who I was. The songs I done till then weren't nothing to the songs I would sing, especially when they all come together into one. Then people know who I am, then people recognize themselves. I could hear the Resonator strings humming like high wires on a windy day, and there a man coming down the road, dust blowing all in his shoes. The children jump up to meet him on his way. You can see he got a story. And he says to the country people all assembled in the dooryard, I got stones in my passway and all my roads seem dark at night.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The moon was down but the asphalt cross was plain to see. Some sort of celestial phenomenon was wiped across the meridian, not stars exactly but a broad aureate swath like a galaxy, like the Milky Way. Vaughan knew the hour, the last illumination of night and the distant refraction of the sun, and as affirmation the morning star, Lucifer, burned its coherent point in what in life might have been the East.

Bob was singing. His song was the blues. As long as he could hear Bob's low, clean voice, he knew what he was listening to. Vaughan was bone-weary. How often in death had this weariness afflicted him. He'd nodded, drowsed, sleep-walked, snoozed through long stretches of his passage, right from the beginning, when he'd first been plunged in the Afterlife. Still, this exhaustion, it wasn't like the other times: His bones felt weary, he felt sore in his shoulders and his neck, and his feet had taken up residence exactly where they were and had severed relations with his legs. He was listening to the blues, then. And he was tired out, ready to go to bed, for he'd been up all night. His chin dropped to his chest.

Bob stopped singing. "Say, partner, you can't go to sleep here. There's some way you got to travel yet."

"I've got to take a nap, Bob. I'm at the end of my rope. I can't make my legs go any farther."

"You forgetting. They still on your trail."

Vaughan *had* forgotten. "But surely, now that daybreak...." He could make out Bob's face clearly, he could see the roads and the fields beside them, although everything was still a soft shade of gray, like a postman's uniform. Bob's skin and his snapbrim hat and his still-well-pressed trousers (he'd carefully folded his jacket and laid it on his suitcase) were all the same color. Bob's expression was mild and pitying.

"It's true that you might see them coming better, but you still on their hunting ground. It ain't going to be harmless till you get free. You need to keep on a while, my friend."

"Oh, I can't," moaned Vaughan. "I'll just go to sleep. If they find me, then it'll be over quickly. They'll make short work of me. I won't even know..."

"You still thinking it'll be finished then. But it won't. You got to remind yourself of that."

A sob caught in Vaughan's throat followed by a burbling stream of sobs. His weeping grew louder and louder. Nearby bushes and small trees were uprooted by it. A bird fell out of the sky because of it. He thought of nothing while he wept. And perhaps this respite was why, when the stream had slowed to sniffles and hiccups, he felt not unafraid exactly, but clear-minded. A pale glaze, pricked with ice, now spread across the sky. One by one the ice crystals began to glitter and the glaze faded, replaced with hypothermic blue streaked with pink and rose and scarlet, like white skin reddening with the return of blood. Vaughan heard in the

distance the mechanically assisted rush of air, the intake of great engines, the hydraulic roar of ailerons. His eyes had burned with lack of sleep but now his eyes had gone away, and the frozen air from thirty-five thousand feet rushed down from above and through the empty sockets.

He was standing in the place where four roads met. Bob was by his side, looking at him expectantly. The wind bent the trees along the fencelines and laid down the tall grasses in the fields, as though it were a comb running through a young woman's thick hair. There was the smell of a young woman carried through the air. The private, fixating odor of a young woman's sex was on his fingertips, and crushed grass where they had lain, and the unstudied scent of a young woman's skin, sweet like fur and feathers.

Now the topography surrounding him was in light. Long soft hills curved like hip and thigh, rising and rising. Behind were individual clouds (the glaze had dissipated now) stacking in a blue sky the color of a maiden's skirt and rising up over the highest point of the hill ridges.

"These are all called lady's flowers," Bob said. The flowers dipped and swung in the temperate breeze. With the coming of the light, the rushing wind had abated.

"Let me help you up, brother," Bob said. He reached out and Vaughan admired his long-boned hands, carpals and metacarpals like reeds, thin and supple wrists. The skin was the color of old polished oak floors. His hand grasping Vaughan's as he raised him to his feet was strong, and he swept his arm outward as though he were sowing seeds for the lady's flowers, and he said, "That is the place where we're heading, and it won't be long to get there, I promise you."

"The...place...we're...headed." The flowers bobbed against his knees. The marrow in his bones suddenly evaporated, his heart (if he still had one) winked once and went out. All throughout him his substance was escaping, rushing down his body and apparently out his feet, like gutters in late August gulping down a late-day thunderstorm.

So at last death had come upon him, he thought. Here in the giant meadow under the contrail-streaked sky cold as dry-ice and wrapped in a wind from the mildest May. By his side was his companion, his guardian, the singer. Not only could he not imagine what would happen next, now he also could not conceive of the Future, that starvation ration of the living.

"Oh, my friend, what has become of me?" he said, not knowing what he meant by this. Bob took Vaughan's hand again, both his hands, in his own.

"It don't matter, brother," Bob said, "I am with you."

He was with another, someone who spoke with him, listened to him, who strove for some inexplicable reason to shape himself to Vaughan's fears and questionings, so that he might understand them. Oh, with what little hope! but that did not matter. Before he could stop himself, Vaughan began to think nobly. He thought of all those uncounted dead that had gone before him, and all the uncountable living that would succeed him, and he thought of all those others who had lived on Earth when he had lived, riding on the fulcrum of these armies of souls, sharing their short living hours with just those few billion living bodies, knowing just this time and no other. So it was. Here, wherever this was, and possibly Elsewhere as well: We are here for our mutual comfort, which is (like pretty much everything else in the universe) beyond our understanding.

Bob had put his jacket back on, and Vaughan stroked the weave of its cuff. He stared at the gaudy pattern of Bob's painted silk tie. He studied the spit-shine on Bob's carefully-kept shoes and the painstaking creases in his brown wool trousers. The raiment of angels must be cast-offs compared to this.

Bob had gotten him moving. It wasn't easy. For all their pliant bobbing and rustling, the flowers were thick, and pressing through them required as much effort as his hollow carapace could summon. He knew that if they halted, his body would soon lift up and blow downwind.

He glanced at Bob beside him. He too was straining against the dense nap of stems holding them back.

"Look, Bob, just stop a second. We don't need to do this. We can take the path of least resistance. We could let the wind carry us." Bob now shoved him rudely forward. He would have stumbled and fallen had the mat of vegetation not been impenetrable. "You don't believe me. But I can feel it, Bob. I know if we'd just stop plunging through all these..." Bob's expression changed horribly. His eyes were tight, his skin was ruthless. Illimitable charity had seemed so much part of his expression that this new fixity, even anger, remade his face. He drew near and hissed at Vaughan.

"I am going in this passway, Al, and you going in this passway. We ain't going to wait, and we ain't going to stay." Seeing Vaughan's horror, he relaxed a little and said, "Look, we only got to make it over that rise."

That was easy to say. The ridge in front of them wasn't very high and it wasn't very steep. But climbing it was excruciating. Fucking typical, Vaughan thought. Certainly muscular agony was missing – he didn't *have* any muscles – but trying to walk uphill with husks that used to be legs was worse. He would have blown over had the flowers clustering around him not held him up. When he wavered, Bob would push him. In the end, as he neared the top, flopping and tottering like a ragdoll propelled by a demented child, Bob had to kick him once or twice.

"You can take a breather now," Bob said when they reached the top. Bob spread his arms and fell backward into the flowers, which caught and slowed him, easing him gently into a cutout of his own body. Bob must not be hollow, Vaughan thought, to crush their stems like that. He was sure that he himself would slip over the petals like paper skidding down a street before the dawn wind. Gingerly he tried bending a knee among the stems, which obediently gave way. He lay on his back.

Stately clouds were scattered about overhead. They bulged outward and upward. They were very white. After a while he also noted that they were moving, so that after studying the shape of one directly overhead, another eventually replaced it. Clouds—like stars, trees, animals, apparently all natural objects—had categories and terms that went with them: Of course he couldn't remember these types and names, not for the clouds anyway. Probably not for the trees anymore, or the animals, should he see one. Yet he remembered quite well the childhood pastime of imagining what clouds looked like. Like stars, trees, and animals, in fact. Also people. Historical figures and sports stars. If he was lucky, he might see a hawk, a real one, not a cloud shaped like a hawk. You needed keen eyesight sometimes to see a hawk at a great height circling. It could see you much better, naturally, but still you had the satisfaction of knowing it was thousands of feet above, seeing you watching it. Often a great river flowed nearby the hilltop where you lay watching the hawk, in the season of hot noons and cold drinks.

He sat up. He'd wanted a cold drink for ever so long, but now he didn't. How could that be? Had he gotten a drink? When? Who had given it him? There had been that other torment as well, besides thirst, which had been its complement. Pursuit. He forgot about what the clouds were doing and got to his knees. He saw the trail that he and Bob had made upslope. He looked beyond to the meadow, and past the meadow were two intersecting roads looking like graphite streaks. Dust rose on one of the roads, a sign, an anxious indication. What could this be but pursuit? He needed to call Bob's attention to what was happening there on the road. His jaw swung open, he made it swing shut. But opening and shutting his jaw didn't produce sound. At first the dust stayed in one place. Maybe what was happening was only a minor natural phenomenon which at some other time he could probably identify. But then the whirlwind (ah, that was its name!) changed position. It got relatively nearer, relative to them. Oh, Bob, Bob! he cried. But he didn't cry at all. He simply swung his jaw up and down.

Applying all his strength, and helped out by the loud clicking of his jawbone, he finally managed to blurt out, "Ahhhh....Onnnn," and then he sneezed. This drew Bob's attention. Vaughan pointed to the smudge of charcoal rising from the graphite streak.

Bob stood and helped Vaughan to his feet.

"That's the way it is then," Bob said softly and steadily. "We've got some distance on them, Al. I think we're going to be all right. We haven't got far to go now."

Far to where? Vaughan desperately wanted to ask. But that ability was lost too, along with memory and whatever else his body had held. Speechless, beyond recall, hollow. Only his husk was left for the dogs to crunch in *their* wagging jaws.

They picked up speed as they moved downhill, and when they hit the tiny valley, they were actually running. Bob held his hand, and perhaps it was this that strengthened him, for now he fairly loped through the tall stalks, his emptiness lending him at least speed. It was none too soon: The growl of hounds and the yelps of demons and an immense electric whang, like infinitely amplified feedback, slashed through the meadows, over the ridges, down the hollows, nearly blowing him off his feet. Bob picked up speed, drawing Vaughan with him. Vaughan realized he had not been breathing for some time. There was no breath in him. He was out of breath. Surely Bob too must be unable to breathe. Yet Bob was able to say something to him, quite loudly. He wasn't speaking exactly....It was something else. Bob was singing. Bob sang so powerfully that his song forced the howling and whining and yelping off the wind.

He sang, "The river is wide but I'm going to pass over, stones in the road but I'm going to get by."

Vaughan looked back and saw a pack of hounds boiling over the ridge behind them. The dogs were red-skinned, block-headed, as big as cattle. Their baying roar issued from deep, healthy chests and robust jaws. Ropes of bloody spit swung from their yowping flews. Their teeth flashed like sheet metal in the August sun, their hot breath filled the too-narrow dale separating them from Bob and Vaughan. They would catch him by the ankles first and drag him down; then one of them would close his jaws on Vaughan's shinbone. That's when the pain would begin, like pain's silver burst when you cracked your knee against a table except there'd be the splitting of bone too. What pain would that be? Others would by now have him by the soft parts, pinching the delicate parts of his crotch before peeling the flesh off his groin and plowing their muzzles into his exposed fat.

He and Bob were making their way up a much longer and steeper slope. They were climbing a hill, the hounds in pursuit. The earth bounced under the rush of the hounds as the came up the hill. He felt the drumming of their paws in the soles of his own feet.

When they reached the top, Vaughan stopped and turned, offering himself to the hounds. They would halt to kill him, and possibly Bob could get away. He didn't think of this as sacrifice. It was just the practical thing to do.

The hounds were hounds no longer. They were dogs, much smaller, wild dogs, prick-eared, tan and dun. There were six of them. They ran a little way toward him and stopped, raising their sharp noses into the breeze, which ruffled the fur on their backs. All at once they turned their heads together. Then as though they were a flock of doves or the wind itself pivoting round, they ran as one away back up the facing slope, disappearing below the ridgeline.

Rapid swellings of steel-colored light burst all about him, gradually joining in a single, sustained flash, and then a roughly pointed weapon, like a stone battleax, struck the back of his skull. Concrete had hardened in his throat, his gullet was cemented shut. He heaved and heaved to take in breath. Gasoline fire flayed his nostrils. There was no end to it. There was no end to it.

There was an end.

Chapter Twenty-Four

His hands rested on a wide parapet made of granite. There were gouges in the surface, little troughs enough alike to look as though they'd been machined. Spread before him was some part of an ocean. The sea's core was moss-green, speckled with bone, like a turtle's carapace.

A series of iron poles lined the stone walkway on which he stood. The poles were crook-shaped, fluted, stamped with iron flowers at the base of the curve, which itself ended in a petalled lamp holding a clear-glass bulb. He stared at the bulb, at its delicate stamen-like filament. His gaze travelled from the bulb to the background sky. The quality of light was high and brilliant and familiar, harboring in each object, pouring benignly onto the earth, and this light whose origin was the sky filled him with some lost substance, which now he had found.

His groin began to sing. His head evaporated and his legs pulsed gladly. He became aware that he was losing control of his body, as though it were no longer his responsibility. Perhaps he would swoon. He felt pleasantly nauseated and, turning from the light, he walked down the parapet.

He passed through an arched doorway at the end of the parapet and descended a curved staircase oozing a wet, mineral odor.

At the foot of the staircase, a door stood open, he passed through it onto a beach. All along the horizon, huge banks of clouds swelled upward, far upward, into the flies of some gargantuan backdrop, accumulating themselves in towers into the troposphere. The edge of each mass was terraced, ascending in a series of scalloped balconies upon one of which floated a faint, crescent moon. The moon seemed to him a symbol, possibly the emblem of some storybook country where such clouds always bulked above stone villages clumped on knolls.

The panorama looked like a skillfully modulated watercolor where one color not only blended into the next but seemed in fact to be a variant shade, so that the biscuit color of the beach melded into the purplish rose—like lips bruised by kissing— of the clouds' base, and all the tints of the scene at once ran backward into the sky, which itself appeared to comprise infinitely variable patches of blue.

He lowered himself onto the sand and sat with his arms propped behind him and his legs stuck straight before him. In this position, he inspected himself.

Whitish tubes clung to each leg, ending at his knees. Shorts of some kind. He removed his canvas shoes and inspected his feet. They didn't seem to belong to him. They seemed smaller than usual.

He lay back on the hot sand, wondering to whom these things belonged—not only the trousers and the foot, but sight itself, hearing, touch. If clothing and limbs belonged to someone else, so might his senses. The prospect of sharing these things, or even of having coopted them, did not dismay him. He felt generally contented. He didn't think that he was familiar with

contentment. He dimly knew that he'd doubted there was such a thing. What was it like anyway? Happiness? A sort of pleasant resignation? Now he knew.

He felt like a man dispatched suddenly to some country off the beaten track (an island nation, perhaps). When he arrives, he finds himself immediately at home, at ease, made serene by the island's novel colors and the islander's bell-like language, which he finds himself learning effortlessly, as if he'd known it as a child.

He removed his other shoe and some sort of foot bags, stood up, and walked toward buildings on a point in the distance. Hot sand streamed off his ankles and toes. Drawing near to the water's edge, he inspected the biological rubble deposited by the last tide: reticulated cartilage the color of snow, broken meadow-colored shells, and by far the most numerous, dozens of slick, translucent, iridescent slabs. I know what those are, he thought. Jellyfish. There must have been a storm.

Long, even rollers, topped with foam like greenish-white icing, marched toward land. Fish shot up from the troughs between them, and he thought he could discern even larger fish leaping farther out.

He backed away from the sea's edge, trembling. He remembered a glycerine sea where pastel-colored eels swam. He could see to the bottom of this remembered sea. Whole phylogenies of marine animals teemed and swam, each at its appropriate depth beneath the waves, descending even to the bottom, where blind fish thrived with fluorescent appendages.

This brief vision was at once joyful and inexplicable. Where did this knowledge come from? He noticed a road opening out onto the beach, and he crossed the sand toward it. The road sloped downward between sandy hillsides covered in scrub, and in a moment he emerged onto level ground and started walking down the road.

He drew near a town, which began abruptly, as if it were enclosed by invisible walls. The building fronts were glazed with high, fat panes of glass streaked with colors, like a prism. Like a coral reef, bright colors spilled down facades, gates, vehicles, brick, stone, wooden walls.

From time to time, to his left as he walked along the avenue, the sea put in an appearance, like a dog or a child following his own course, but erratically, disappearing behind obstacles for a while and then returning. A string of...cafes? Yes, cafes. A string of cafes lined the right side of the boulevard at one of these spots where the ocean drew near. He stopped before the huge-windowed front of one of these and looked in.

Tables were spread well apart over black and white tiles, and behind these, running all along the back wall, was a high, wooden counter, behind the counter bevelled mirrors, paintings, bottles. Four enormous blades revolved slowly on the ceiling, as though idling, waiting for the moment the entire establishment would be lifted upward into the light stretching into the infinite, nightless sky.

Six men—four men together, two men by themselves—sat at the tables, and three more stood at the counter: All of them watched as he walked to a table and sat down. He felt a renewal of disorienting pleasure. Sitting in a delicious absence of will and desire, he meditated on the light pouring as if magnified through the plate glass, gradually diminishing toward the back of the room, modulating over and under and around the tables. The light was sourceless, for the world's illumination—golden, gray, blond, bleached, fruit-tinted—seemed to come up out of the world itself. He felt he could wash in it, dip his hand into the puddle of sand-colored light falling onto the table in front of him.

A shadow, like a small cloud passing before the sun, fell over the puddle, and he looked up. A brown man in wrinkled white clothing stood patiently looking down. A waiter, waiting.

He suddenly discovered he was very thirsty and looked back at the bottles behind the counter, but he couldn't begin to guess what was in them. Behind the waiter, on a wall near the

window, was a paper poster. A woman with a large but strangely undefined bosom smiled under a scarlet word. He found he could read the word. "Cerveza," it said as she raised a tall beaker near her curved, teeth-revealing lips.

"Cerveza," he said.

"Cerveza," the waiter replied, smiling. "A bee ra," he continued, as if explaining this to himself. "¿Oost ed ace soofee cyentay vee a o?" He smiled back. There was nothing at all he could answer, but that seemed to be all right because the waiter asked another question, judging by its intonation and his happy, expectant expression: "En lu gar. A jewess bee ra, see? A Past?"

"Past?"

"Pobst," he replied, more carefully.

Smiling at this courtly man was all he could do. Nothing the waiter had said offered an intelligible clue how he might reply. He wasn't even able to tell where words began or left off. He looked about him at the other customers, and became distracted by their clothing, as if they were actors wearing period costumes one had only read described and now saw on a stage—and like stage fashions, these were surprising and a little unsettling, not like what you'd expect.

Meanwhile the waiter had vanished and now returned with a bottle balanced on a tray, placing it in a sort of ministering way neatly before him. A paper label, colored like a flag, its gum dissolved by the sweating bottle, was sliding off its surface. He tentatively put out his hand to touch it: It was so unpredictable! Obviously it had been made by people, yet it lived on with an objective life of its own. He petted its cold and slimy sides affectionately, as though it were the nose of a cute, but mentally unstable, dog. The waiter observed this behavior and was apparently satisfied: He strolled away to chat with two drinkers at the bar wearing identical straw-colored suits. Everyone now ignored him, evidently content that he'd demonstrated his intentions to act appropriately.

He lifted the slender-necked bottle to his mouth (it was surprisingly heavy) and drank. Rather, he emptied half the contents down his gullet and then wondered how this was possible. He finished the bottle and looked around: the waiter was still chatting with the pair wearing identical clothes, the four men were playing a game involving little black tiles which they clicked loudly against the tabletop, and the server behind the counter was inspecting a sheaf of papers the size of a flat pillow—a soiled pillow, covered with ants. Suddenly he realized that the man was reading and that what he was reading was a newspaper.

The server flipped the newspaper revealing a page printed in giant letters above a large gray image. The print read, "El Presidente Wilson," below, in the fuzzy patches of the image, were the precise and weary features of a sick man, possibly El Presidente Wilson himself.

He rose to get a closer look. Leaning over the bar, he read the top of the page, "El Tiempo," it said.

The barman lowered the newspaper and smiled.

"See?"

He saw. He stared at the man's broad face, at the cheekbones bulging like automobile bumpers beneath his reddish skin, and at the glossy black moustaches extending to his chin.

"Una cerveza?" the server asked.

He took the new bottle back to his table and drank it off, and this had the result of further moderating, and at last suppressing altogether, his nausea.

Drinking cervezas, he thought, seems appropriate. In fact, as he savored the gentle anesthesia and playful stimulation brought about by them, he wondered that drinking cervezas shouldn't be a natural and regular pastime for him. He felt freer, and gradually came to understand that he belonged here in this cool, spacious place, with light blooming out of the very air itself, the various surfaces—tile, wood, and glass—shifting color, modulating texture.

Once again he got up from his table and made his way to the bar, and he was proud that no one paid him any attention: They too accepted that he should be here. Tacitly, they were in agreement, the other patrons and he, the waiter and the server—they had no need of words: In this archaic and gentle paradise, they were brothers. Perhaps he could start a conversation with the server, begin to learn the language. He glanced in the mirror behind the counter.

He saw there the broad back of the server and the newspaper spread behind him, and beyond the counter the heads of several patrons, and the waiter smiling down at an invisible joker. He saw all these first before he spotted himself: Where he should have been—upright before the counter, an arm's-length from the mirror—was a pale young man no more than 16 years old staring back at him. He looked frantically around the mirrored room, searching for himself, for his own comfortable reflection. The mirrored counterfeit roughly approximated what he remembered his features to be, despite its youth. Or possibly because of it. Yes, the young man in the mirror could have been him when he was very young. Whatever he'd looked like whenever that was. He couldn't remember. Still, the gaunt youth staring impudently back at him wore a haughty and terrified expression he recalled all too well.

His reason (what was left of it) tried to accommodate itself to the stranger in the mirror. He couldn't recall making a habit of studying himself in mirrors, or if he had, it had been a long time since he'd last peered at his reflection and possibly he'd changed a lot since then. This of course made no sense whatsoever: People changed over time, it was true, but the changes always took a certain form. They got older, mostly.

He was simply befuddled! Ah, that was the answer. He was looking at *someone else's* reflection. He began a series of simple movements, but unfortunately the reflection carried out each of his gestures precisely. These gesticulations became more and more extreme as he tried to trick the reflection into a false move. At this point, the server looked up from his paper. He abruptly halted these attempts. The server watched him curiously, and then, quite gently, he drew another bottle from somewhere behind the counter and slid it toward him.

He took his cerveza back to his table and began to drink it. As an exercise in mental self-discipline, he decided to reconstruct his autobiography, methodically and in detail. He discovered there were significant gaps in his memory. Or rather there were gaps in his general amnesia. These were not the ordinary lapses—the names of school friends or what he gotten for his tenth birthday. He couldn't remember ever having a birthday.

He was suddenly aware that someone else was sitting at his table. How long had he been there? Vaughan watched him out of the corner of his eye, although this immediately made him feel dizzy, so, throwing caution to the winds, he looked at the stranger directly.

But it was hard to focus: The stranger sat quite still, apparently lost in thought. Perhaps he was waiting for someone. He looked around the cafe—there were plenty of empty tables available. Perhaps his seating himself uninvited was a clumsy gesture of hospitality. Perhaps he was lonely. If that was the case, it would explain his silence—a lonely, diffident man, probably, a foreigner like himself, since he was paler and taller than the other men there.

On the other hand, he thought with alarm, he could be...what was the word? An official. And in a moment he would ask him to identify himself. With that, he began to search the pockets of his suit. Why had he not thought of this earlier? He discovered a long rectangular packet of papers inside his coat.

"I'm pleased," said the stranger, "to see you've at last acquired papers."

There was a small booklet in his left hand. On its cover was an emblem, or crest, circled by a phrase in a language he could not read. He opened the booklet and found the face from the mirror once again staring back at him. He turned the page, which was covered in writing unreadably ornate. But to the left of this, in ordinary print, was a series of categories, evidently

having to do with vital statistics. The first word in the column was "Nome," and immediately to its right—underscored, in swoops and curls—was the name of the man in the photograph, "Albert Vaughan."

"Having a hard time remembering your name?" The stranger was watching him, smiling blandly. "Maybe you should change it, like everybody else."

He straightened himself in his chair, cleared his throat, and tried to think of a reply.

"I don't see how it concerns you," he said lamely.

"You don't? Well, it was just a suggestion."

The man stood now, looking down at him thoughtfully. Finally he spoke.

"You're a little young for this place, aren't you? Think what might happen. Think what you might do."

"What might I do? How should you know what I'll do?"

"Be reasonable, Albert," he looked around at the other men in the café, but they were paying no attention. "Let's not draw attention to ourselves But consider that I've been charged with your well-being. Your safety. And really, what of reputation? Not only yours, but mine as well—some of these situations"

"What situations?"

"You're not to blame," he sighed. "I've said it before and I'll keep saying it until somebody listens. None of this has been your....your fault. But it's all come right in the end." Then he took Vaughan's and gently pulled him to his feet.

All at once, that solid grip. It was as if he had been awaiting only that to recognize him, the clasp of this man's hand in his. So long ago.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“We’ll have to walk fast—the station’s halfway across town,” his guide said. They were on the boulevard now, heading away from the beach. Vaughan was having difficulty keeping up with the older man’s long, purposeful strides.

“Wait a minute,” Vaughan said, coming to a halt on the sidewalk. “I need to look at you for a minute. I know you. We travelled together and then they finished you off.”

“Who finished who?”

“Or whatever it was that happened. My memories aren’t very clear. I think something happened to my head. You had a name. I can’t....it was.....”

“My name is Clay, Albert.” He gazed thoughtfully at the bit of the sea appearing between two buildings across the way. He frowned. “It really wasn’t your fault,” he repeated. “It was inevitable. Unexpected things were bound to happen because it goes on and on.”

“What can’t go on and on?”

“Oh, well, some people say there’s an End to it. Optimists.” Clay turned away from the sea, smiling a little to himself. Vaughan’s thoughts flowed on without anything much preceding them—without personal precedents, so to speak—but he was contented with them. He neither knew where he was, nor the names of many of the objects surrounding him. He had certainty. It was that Clay knew enough for both of them.

“I’m glad we’re travelling together again...if we *are* travelling together again.”

Clay glanced at him uneasily. He cleared his throat. “Let’s take this cab. It’s too hot to walk any further,” he said.

A horse stood less than a meter from his nose. Its odor, absolutely unlike anything he’d ever smelled before, filled the air around him. He breathed deeply, remembering. Remembering what? He saw a narrow road as it turned a corner between high, cracked walls, saw it mount a hill, and he saw a horse and cart motionless at the turn of the road. This image had all the earmarks of a childhood memory, but whose childhood?

“Get in, Albert. If he hurries, we’ll be all right.”

He stepped into the cab. He recalled pony rides from someone’s childhood, parents watching anxiously as the weary nag paced its endless carnival circuit. They moved along at a good clip, swaying pleasantly. Outside the open window, the town rolled swiftly by, like a huge painted backdrop cranked by hand—horses and stray dogs, arched shopfronts. Soft, pastel blotches—like strokes of colored chalk—floated past his window.

The road drew near the ocean, and the carriage passed a breakfront, a promenade, a series of docks, finally stopping before a metal-roofed building surrounded by broad verandas on which were stacked piles of luggage, crates, packing cases. They halted and got down from

the carriage, which sank to one side as they stepped out. He noticed that it was harder getting down than getting in. The distance to the ground seemed to have lengthened. He stumbled.

Clay caught him. He brushed yellow dust from Vaughan's sleeve and generally straightened his garments. As he did this, Vaughan noticed how much taller Clay was.

They passed through the shed and stopped before a battered office desk set up near the edge of a platform thrust off the back of the building. Behind the desk sat a visibly nervous man in a shabby uniform. Clay said something in yet another foreign language. Then he lifted the papers from Vaughan's inside pocket and dropped them on the desk.

The official passed them back, saying, "Ya, eer papeer sin in rye in folga." Clay received them absent-mindedly. He stepped out to the platform. The platform was crowded with sturdily made wooden crates, although bruised and occasionally splintered by cartage. The crates were interspersed with leather suitcases and trunks, also well-made. The standards must be higher here, Vaughan thought. Then he thought, Higher than what?

A large crowd of people was dispersed among the luggage.

A railroad train drew into the station. It may as well have been a dinosaur—something so vigorously alive, so capable of dwarfing him. The world around him had grown so large. Nothing was miniaturized, compact, or even lightweight. The train's huge wheels shone, the carriages were wide and lofty. A loud hiss came from somewhere beneath the cars, as though the monster were sighing. Porters descended from the cars. Mechanics bent to inspect the wheels.

A band began to play on the platform. A conductor made his way to the front of the train. As he walked he called out to the passengers. His announcements seemed to be a kind of song, and the cornet and tuba and electric guitar of the band lifted up his voice. The band's intricate syncopation shifted and advanced, its bright music rose over even the chuffing of the engine, the racket of the station, and the singer's voice rose above the band.

The people began to sing.

This was something people used to do—long ago. An old woman had told him that, long ago. That was how innocent people were in her youth, she said, unreservedly kind, unreflectively trustful, dispassionately cruel. Impromptu crowds broke into communal song at the drop of a hat—at evening singalongs in parks or during intermissions at the movies. Everyone knew all the words to the same simple songs. You and your voice were gathered in amid all the others.

The band played an anthem. The people on the platform sang, "Oh glorious highways shining in the rain....Oh ports of entry, sublime in your secrets...Thou ever-watchful lantern shining through thy fleece." What they were singing made as much sense as any anthem. What mattered was that it roused and heartened the people singing it. It strengthened them for the tasks, duties, voyages they were about to undertake.

"*People get ready,*" the conductor sang out. "*There's a train has come.*"

"We're ready," a few of the passengers replied, and then many others took up the response. "We're ready," they called.

Beside him stood a man and a woman and two children, a boy and a girl. "Great train, huh?" the grinning boy said to him. A breeze came off the ocean. He inhaled the mix of salt and diesel, french fries, the women's freshly washed hair. Around him the brass fittings on the passengers' luggage glittered, the olive and gold of the engine's paint gleamed softly. Above him clouds sailed inland. The band played and the singing conductor sang. Vaughan's small hand was grasped in Clay's strong one. They were all going on a trip! He couldn't imagine what they might do or what they would see. All he or they knew was that it was a summer morning and that exciting and memorable things would happen in their way.

How wise of the railroad to choose so fine a conductor! He was courtly with the women, frank and open with the men, funny and talkative with the children. His trim figure was set off handsomely by his stylish uniform. Vaughan wondered why the conductor wasn't wearing a hat. A snap-brim hat, it would have been. What was a snap-brim hat? An image came to him, a man wearing a neatly pressed brown suit and shoes worked to a high polish and long, strongly fashioned, purposeful fingers.

Then the conductor looked directly at him, and he saw that the conductor was Bob. Yes, only Bob could call out like that, music born in his strong lungs, borne on his breath, winding out and around and over them, singing, "*All aboard!*"

The passengers picked up their hatboxes, their Gladstones and their children and moved gently forward. It occurred to Vaughan that maybe Bob needed to see his papers. He tentatively proffered them, but Bob waved them away.

"Don't need no ticket, Al. You just get on board."

People were already settling into their seats in their carriage. Seelight flooded through the polished windows to their left. Well-wishers crowded the platform to see off the travellers. Clay and Vaughan took their seats. Vaughan looked out the window past the rails already hot in the sun overhead, down the sandy road that led to the white beach and the glittering sea.

"This will be different, I think," Clay said.

"Oh? In what way?"

"Maybe not so much different as the same. Yes, that's a better way of putting it. It will be the same."

The same as what? Vaughan wondered. Now that they were settled back in these comfortable seats, the warm breeze blowing under his clothes, he was very sleepy.

"We're safe now," he murmured.

"Yes, we're safe," Clay replied. "That's to be expected..."

Vaughan rested his head against Clay's shoulder and fell asleep.

When he awoke, night had fallen and his head was rattling against a window. Clay had been reading. He lowered his book when he saw Vaughan was awake.

"You slept for ages. How are you feeling?"

"All right," he said, blinking stupidly. "I'm thirsty."

"Would like a drink?"

"Yes, thanks."

Clay went off somewhere to find a cup of water, and Vaughan stared out the window.

They were travelling over a vast plain. At the horizon Vaughan could make out a range of sharp-peaked mountains clearly profiled against the night sky. Gradually, his eyes grew used to the inky middle distance, and pallid shapes began to flicker softly out of the darkness, like hesitant ghosts. He supposed these were small buildings, houses, but throughout this landscape no light shone.

I am out of time altogether, he thought, travelling into eternity. Why hadn't this occurred to him before? Maybe he hadn't been travelling through eternity earlier? No, that was nonsense. Everyone was *always* travelling through eternity. What was it they said? "Eternity is in the moment." Even if people didn't exactly believe this unfathomable proposition, living people at least believed there'd be other moments, on and on and on. Yes, the moment-at-hand, with all its personalized service, might not last forever, but for all practical purposes your own life would keep manufacturing itself indefinitely. Even when the polyvinyl conduits were snaked up your nose and down your gullet and the fanged tubes pierced your veins *there'd always be more*. It wasn't over yet! you murmured as you faded out.

A series of small, abrupt nostalgias pelted him. He couldn't figure out who had sent them, what they meant: The empty aisles of a library. Icy water around his ankles as he crossed a stream. A cheap string of beads on a thin suntanned wrist. The past in its specificity ached in him. Random hours repeated themselves. Around them ran an aura of loss that he did not understand.

The chain of nostalgia began to wither away, a few lingering notes of undefined happiness playing within him. The last bright flicker brought with it the momentary knowledge that he had been—he strained to remember—he had been a historian. And just before the sensation fled forever, he snatched a moment of calm, of the contentment that came with knowing that so much had happened to so many people. This knowledge had always been—what was it they said?—it's own vague reward. Now he saw that this wasn't true at all, for he was at last rewarded with a fleeting instant of compassion. How dearly won was that the crumb of charity he felt, but how dear it now was to him.

Then the infinite and gently detailed drip of other people's years dried up in the face of his own individuality. He briefly felt his own presence within history collapse the thread of events, as though living time were a flimsy sofa unable to bear his weight.

In his restlessness, he got up and headed aimlessly down the corridor. In the next carriage a man lay curled in the aisle, another slept a few feet away, and further on was a family group—mother and father sitting on suitcases, children slumbering at their feet. Coming to the end of the carriage, he passed through a heavy sliding door into the open space between cars. The wind was cold and sharp.

The moon had risen so now he could more easily see the country through which they were passing. Symmetrical bushes, like small, round clouds, scattered the landscape. Occasionally, there were groves of low trees whose skimpy boughs looked like they'd been perpetually blown flat. Whirlwinds of dust moved along the ground, shining like clouds of shredded mylar in the moonlight.

The door to the next car opened and a burst of gay music (followed by a duller burst of smoky light) filled the open space. A tall man wearing a felt hat shaped like a prophylactic device came through the door, nodding to him.

"Braino no chess."

"Hello," Vaughan said, slipping through the closing door.

This carriage wasn't like the one he'd been in. It was ranked with benches—hot and noisy, full of people of all ages. A pig slept under a bench, caged chickens muttered, everyone seemed to be addressing everyone else. But above the din, and below and within it too, was music. It reverberated in his heart and in his lungs and stomach and feet—not in some metaphoric way, but as a physical vibration using his bones and ligaments as rhythm instruments.

A young man and a young woman danced exuberantly around three musicians. Others clapped, shouted, sang. A small child lay sleeping virtually under the feet of the dancers.

Someone had lit a fire in a barrel-like stove in the corner, and a woman was cooking flat cakes atop it. Spotting Vaughan, she scraped one from a pan and offered it to him. He thanked her.

"Grin go," she shouted at him (still smiling). He understood this as a kind of happy dismissal, but as he prepared to walk away, she snatched at his sleeve and, taking firmer purchase, pulled him to her. "You watched the people disport themselves," she said. "You wander from coach to coach seeking the people. And voila! here they are. Dancing. Singing. Just as they should be, eh?"

"Is this how they should be? I don't have much experience."

“With people? If you’ll pardon me for observing this to you, you need not say it. It is abundant.”

A small girl shoved her way between them (the constant movements of the crowded carriage had pushed them slowly closer until they were nearly nose to nose). The cook pried loose a papery cake and gave it to the child. Vaughan was very hungry. He began to eat.

The music reached a crescendo and momentarily blotted out the already considerable noise, with the exception of the dancers’ cries, their rapid, explosive steps. The effect was hypnotic – not merely for Vaughan, but for everyone else in the car as well.

Like any real communion of people, this one was palpable. They touched and smelled and saw in one another simple sanctuary, they tasted their mother’s bread. He remembered riding in a fast motorboat on a northern lake with his father and his mother and his sister. The day was windy, they bounced against the waves, spindrift soaked their clothes. In the stern of the boat his father raced the outboard.

“Now you’re going to get it,” he shouted over the roaring motor. His mother was sitting between his sister and him on the boat’s middle thwart. She hugged them to her in mock horror. They couldn’t stop laughing. The blue of the sky went on and on. His mother’s eyes were bluer than the sky. The white pines bent happily before the wind. In a while they’d have lunch in their cabin.

His whole attention was filled with his mother and his sister and his father. His heart was with them as the boat shook and the wind blew and they cried out in joy. He knew that each of them was just as immersed in the others as he was. And each of them knew each of the others better than anyone would ever know them.

Except Julia. Oh, how had gratitude slipped from him? When they lived together in the same house, he was always aware of her, in the next room, downstairs. He did not need to think of her to attend to her presence. There was a phrase, Presence of mind, the real presence. Why had he not thanked her for her real presence?

Around him, mute acknowledgement penetrated like the bright music and the snap of the dancers’ bootheels. Even as they clapped and cried, they acknowledged his presence, drew him into that human circle. Just as they knew one another as friends and kin, they knew him, Albert Vaughan. At any rate they knew what was important to know. They included him in their shared delight, assuming without question his equal fascination with the dancers, his appreciation of the old lady’s cakes, the ancient comfort of people gathered peaceably in the night.

Maybe the people now surrounding him paid attention to one another because they harbored an inward annex to their personalities, a soul.

He envisioned a sort of muddy crust grown over a faultline: the crust certainly sufficed to approximate a life, but he was sure that beneath it lay a more thorough Vaughan, or at any rate the space where once this fuller part of life might have moved. Having grown accustomed to living along the insubstantial curves of his own surface, he hadn’t cared much one way or the other about continuing this mode of existence, and this of course had had the result of further diminishing the flimsy weight of his life, making it even more imponderable.

The dancers danced on, with no sign of stopping. Vaughan turned and made his way through the car to the door.

As the door to the car slid shut, the music and laughter within seemed to recede as though the car that contained them had been uncoupled, like a train robbery in a Western. As he walked through them, the other cars were comparatively hushed. Many passengers were deep in conversation. Speakers urged gravely or murmured rapidly, listeners nodded sympathetically, silently wept or softly chuckled. This too, Vaughan thought, is fitting. Then he

thought, What is fitting? How do I know? Words spoke themselves in his head. Maybe they were someone else's words.

Two strangers, an elderly man and a young woman, were sitting across from Clay when he got back to his seat. Clay and the man were absorbed in what the woman was saying.

"There you are," Clay said. "I was beginning to wonder." He turned back to the woman, obviously eager to have her finish what she'd been saying. Smiling, she looked intently across at Vaughan.

Clay said, "This is my travelling companion, Albert Vaughan." Turning to Vaughan, he said in a courtly way, "Albert, this lady is Enid Sloane."

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance, Albert." Her expression was teasing, playful, like a pretty young aunt with her favorite nephew.

"And I'm *very* happy to make yours," Vaughan said, blushing.

"This man," Clay went on, with dignity, "is Dr. Lomb."

"Enid and I are also travelling companions," said Dr. Lomb.

"It's important to have a travelling companion," Enid added.

"Albert seems to recall that we got separated earlier," Clay said. "He had to go on alone."

"Not exactly alone."

"Yes, that's right. There must have been others who picked you up on down the road."

They laughed at this, all except Vaughan, who smiled politely but didn't understand the joke.

"Albert is a visitor here, you see," Clay said.

Enid reached across and took his hand. "I knew you were exceptional." All at once, he truly did feel as though he'd accomplished something out-of-the-ordinary. He'd come all this way. When he'd begun, the streets were dark and dangerous, other perils had assailed him, there were treacheries and dire threats, long spells of depression. Loss. Or had all that taken place in life? He was overtaken with the need to tell them what had happened, to him and to the others.

"I didn't know what I was doing," he began. "I can't tell you what it was like, my life. My wife died, that's the first thing. She was killed." Across from him, Dr. Lomb listened carefully. He reminded Vaughan of the only real scholar he'd ever known, a professor in his graduate school days, about whom you instantly felt that for once in your life it was important to actually think about what you said. The old scholar brought his whole respectful attention to every inanity you uttered. Vaughan often felt a fool in his presence. At the same time, Enid's gaze held such boundless and dignified compassion that he suddenly thought, This must be what saints look like. With two such perfect auditors, it was easy to unburden himself.

Saying it, saying that Julia was killed. How could anyone murder Julia? "It's as if I shared in her killing." He felt as though the chambers of his heart were slowly opening their doors. Secret paths spread open. He had been in hiding for so long, on the run. Now that part of himself cautiously shuffled forth, awarded an unearned pardon. Holing up where no one knew him, by highways where headlights strobed through the curtains, solitary meals, roadmaps with multiple destinations. And all the while knowing that after all no authorities pursued him. Even had he been the suspect he imagined himself, his loneliness was a deep enough disguise to protect him forever. In truth forever. If he did not cease his escape.

Maybe he was even trying to escape Julia herself. Maybe that's why he couldn't find her.

"I miss her so badly," he added. Maudlin, heart-rending, sentimental, tragic, melodramatic, unashamed, humiliating, and copious tears followed this declaration. This confession.

He looked one by one at Clay and Dr. Lomb and Enid. Surely they would know the truth and be unafraid to reveal it. "Can't you please tell me now? What are my chances?"

No one replied for a while. Clay seemed to be studying his omniscient hands, which rested on his knees. Dr. Lomb stared into the middle distance, looking as though he were engaged in complex computations of probability. Enid studied his face and then looked away. She appeared to have come to some conclusion about him.

Finally she said, "It's not a question of chance, Albert, not really. I know it's hard not to think of things that way. Or alternatively, to think of them as preordained. But it doesn't work that way."

"Oh God," Vaughan moaned, "*what* doesn't work that way? Can't people at least stop talking in circles? It'd be better if we didn't talk at all."

"Certainly that's a well-tested alternative, not to talk at all," said Clay. "Many good people of my acquaintance have taken that way, and for that very reason: They were sick to death of talking in circles."

Enid didn't appear to be listening. She and Vaughan looked into each other's eyes. After a while she said gently, "Albert, you must accept the possibility that there will be no reunions."

"Why?" he asked. "Is it because I'm not allowed wherever she is? That's it, isn't it? I haven't earned the right."

"Everyone has that right, Albert. Try to remember how love was, what it was like. But maybe that's asking too much. That's part of its essence, being unmindful when you loved. Simply loving. It wasn't any different, really, in life. When a parent died, or lovers parted, or friends grew up, you thought, 'If only it were as it was, then I'd always pay attention to that love. I'd never take it for granted.' Yet love is too simple-minded for thinking about it, or planning. You knew that all along."

"That's why we suffer, I suppose. I guess that explains it."

"Suffering. Oh, that *is* easily explained," Enid said. "Why people should feel joy...that's what's inexplicable." She paused and then said, "Tell me about Julia, Albert."

He and Julia had been a story, the best story, but he shrank from touching his life with Julia. But now the true cloth of their life together rose up, like a banner from the depths.

"Before I met Julia I thought life was cheap. Then with her I realized I was cheap with my life. I hated to spend it." He saw himself again as he had been during the years of their marriage. He hadn't been a different person. Rather, he'd been who he actually was, and this other Vaughan, was a temporary resident, a kind of parasite. "With Julia I wasn't anybody else."

"I think that person bears a chance."

"Do you?" He had a hard time knowing if anyone at all was taking up the space that Albert Vaughan customarily occupied. That person who bleated along with all the other professorial goats, he was gone; the person who yearned to eat the world like a big greedy baby was gone; whoever manufactured the cringing thoughts that barked and snivelled, gone too. That didn't mean he was any better, for he was unsure of who had taken their place. Had anyone? His legs, for instance, seemed familiar but from an earlier version of himself. "I'm afraid the man who was married to Julia is gone forever, like Julia herself."

"He remains with you always, Albert. He is who you are. You know that."

"Julia knew him. That's what I mean, about when we both were living." Another truth pitched from the heavens, falling like a body from a high building on a clear autumn day, plunging through him. "After she was killed, I was well and truly dead. But Julia isn't, she's not vanished. Somewhere she's actually there."

"You thought she'd taken your life with her."

"That she had. Yes. But that wasn't what happened, wasn't it?"

"No. She took only that which she had, an abundance."

"There was something people called it."

"Grace? That's one thing anyway."

"I don't know what that word means."

"That's all right. No one does."

Outside the window once again daylight was soaking into the landscape. They passed through a small town, its main street's row of plate-glass storefronts turned copper and cobalt in the early morning, the edges of the white watertank suffused into the dawn air but with the town's homely name crisply wrapped around it: Galesburg. He thought, neither wonderingly nor in complacency, I am going home.

"How was I supposed to use the time? If we're supposed to know what all those days mean, why aren't we told that from the beginning?" He saw her come through the front door at the end of the day, shrugging off her raincoat before hanging it carefully in the closet, and then they would sit, sometimes together on the sofa and sometimes across the room, the winter dark enclosing the house or the summer light coming in through the open windows. 'This is what that crazy person at work did,' she said, and they would laugh. 'I sat through a meeting that went on all afternoon,' he said. But all of that—what happened outside the walls of their house—served only to confirm that what went on between them was how they really used their lives.

"I would think, 'Please don't let me be unmindful of this.'"

"To whom did you say this prayer?"

"I don't know. Probably Julia. I felt a sense of obligation. I was obliged to pay attention. It wasn't too much to ask."

"So you failed in your obligation?"

"When I came home from the hospital, where Julia was, I came in and sat down at the kitchen table. I looked at everything. The paint on the cabinets, the box of oatflakes, the coffee can on the counter. The newspaper was opened to the Style page on the table. A coffee cup was there, with a little half-moon of rose on the edge. Why is lipstick on cigarettes and cups always the same color? The day had barely gotten started. After a while, the mail came. I put Julia's mail aside. The phone started ringing. It rang all day. I unplugged it, but then another one in some other room would ring, and I unplugged that one. I'd lost track of how many we had. It seemed important to Julia to be able to answer the phone in whatever room she happened to be in. And now I was unplugging them because answering the phone in any room seemed completely unimportant to me. And that's how it would be in our house from now on. The way I wanted it. That seemed the worst thing. It's what had the force to start me weeping. Grief. Not grief for Julia's absence, because Julia wasn't absent. I grieved to be now housed with myself alone. I would spend all the time now with Albert Vaughan. Oh Christ, I could not do that. Why must I suffer that too?"

"But Julia loved *you*."

"It's just that I never understood it. I don't understand it now. Did she love me in the same way I loved her?"

"Perhaps she loved you more. That's what you needed, so she did."

All at once he saw Julia more clearly than anytime since she'd died. The precise position of her head as she turned toward him, from profile to three-quarters view. The line of her occipital bone, her cheekbone, the curve of her cheek with tiny golden hairs against the backlight. She began to smile, eyes wide, a mocking question. The dark bay of her pupils, the chestnut of her irises, eyelashes the color of crows' wings, bright as polished coal brought out of the earth. Now he attended to her, when she was not by him.

"You said you failed in your obligation to her," Enid said.

"Maybe it was an obligation to myself, to pay attention. Anyway, it was wrong. Even if it wasn't in me, it was wrong. That's what I'll be damned for."

"It can work the other way, you know. If you can't stop paying attention. That can weigh you down, too."

Chapter Twenty-Six

This is not my grave. And if it should become my grave they will come and dig me out. Each time a shell hits nearby chalkdust sifts down. One can't help thinking of school. This memory is an irritant. Anything that distracts one's concentration from the matter at hand—the explosions of the shells—is maddening. The detonations are themselves enough to drive one mad. A tiresome observation. But many strong men have indeed been driven mad under barrage. So I am doing well, considering.

This is not going to be my grave.

From time to time I recklessly lean from the dugout. There are not many men in the trench now. There are the dead men fallen back at the moment they went over the top. Instantly dead from some hot machined pellet of metal. I have become quite expert in the noises guns make especially for someone whose experience of firearms extended only to the distant *poom poom* of pheasant hunters somewhere past the wood in August. The insect zing when bullets pass quite close to one is especially infuriating. It is terrifying. Then there are of course the different sorts of shells. The near ones and the far ones and the ones that the Tommies say you do not hear because you have been blown apart. Some make the much-noted locomotive sound through the air, a train driven by demons travelling above your head in the sky.

More living men will fill the trench in a little while, the fourth or perhaps the fifth wave. This has been going on since dawn, men leaving and arriving on schedule as though they had a travel itinerary to keep. The sky began to lighten early and it took its time, with three stars remaining until the ribbony clouds turned bright. The early summer clouds looked chalked on the sky in pink and yellow. The dawn wind came up and blew down into the clammy hole, warming us a little. There was the smell of tea brewing, of hot food which in the end many men couldn't keep down. There were birds, until the guns drowned them out.

We are the servants of the front line. We have all things in common. We are young. I am like the Tommies, nineteen or twenty-one. I am unlike them because I am not here out of national necessity. Britain needs them. Perhaps not for long, perhaps only as long as it takes to step over the top, advance fifteen paces and fall. But it needs them. My mother had "doubts," my being among all these young men, who will be constantly fixated on my person. What sort of privacy will I have among them? Probably none.

But in the front lines I am never to them a particular woman, neither young nor old. Some of them think I am like their sisters. I serve in place of their mothers. Or I am a sweetheart that they might have had and did not have. They hadn't the time. The war was ready for them. There was no time to waste. The war needed us and we underwent preparation. We were groomed and costumed and trained and led in procession to these lines.

I am alive.

But some months before, I sat on our lawn at home and thought, I am dead.

The colors penetrating the grass and the sea looked manufactured, byproducts of a technical process. The lawn was splashed with liquid copper that slopped up into the trees and ran out into the sea like rain from a rusty gutter.

I knew where the lawn went, how it ran through the oxidized shadows along the sides of the house and fanned self-confidently down to the small stand of spruces screening the dusty road. This was the lawn of intimate weddings, summer fetes, games, visits with the neighbors, Sunday afternoon tea. What are these now but the antecedents to silence and death and bad colors?

I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I thought I would see trees, sky, horizon, the neighbor's dock, an island, seagulls, a passing ship. But when I did, the ordinary colors were bleached out, a bluish wash passed over them leaching the world of its savor.

I am respectably dead. The body has been placed on the lawn. My family say to the mourners, We didn't think a casket in the mansion's former pantry was right for a young girl respectably dead. Go right around the side, you'll see her. She's not going anywhere. This is how it is in death: Midafternoon in early summer, small blue clouds out beyond the atmosphere. Paralysis. Industrial colors. Silence.

My father was a physician, and he examined my eyes. The pupils are abnormally enlarged, he said, the corneas were charged with blood. I thought, My irises glitter like mica. My father's colleague visited, a specialist. He said, Your daughter's eyes are *too* healthy. I was confined me to my bedroom, curtains drawn, a weak lamp set off in a corner, a camphorated rag pressed on my eyelids for twenty minutes eight times a day, no reading.

Lying in the darkened room didn't immediately introduce improvement. I could see the tiny porcelain animals on my mantelpiece and the four teardrop petals of the flowers printed on my wallpaper. My other senses began to behave in the same way. Through the window and over the porch roof and well across the lawn, I heard the lazy slopping at the water's edge on hot, still days when the surface of the sea was greasy and bullet-colored. And beyond that I heard the plip of seabirds fishing. Through the walls and beyond the housefront and down the lawn and past the spruces, I heard a boy kicking a can down the road.

This is not my grave.

I climb up into the observation post to observe the barrage. Out there between the lines there are the hundreds of holes and the wire and the big stone cross with Christ hanging from it. The cross is an orientation point for raids and other expeditions out in that place where no one should ever go. Now there are thousands out there as well in all stations along the way from injury to death, from the dense vitality of bleeding flesh to a human body deprived of motion or warmth. With no sense of blasphemy they say about the landmark Christ, Go out a hundred yards and turn towards Jesus.

They are bringing in the wounded. Earlier in the spring I was not stationed in the front line. I was new and my first job was to scrape the mud from the soldiers' tunics and to cut away the cloth and to wash the bodies. I had seen young men's bodies in the fields sometimes, stripped to their waists during the harvest. Now I had contact as intimate as ever a young girl might have with their smooth hard-nippled breasts and hairy legs and hard thighs and sparkling bones and crimson muscles as I cut away the cloth and washed away the mud and blood, as gentle with them as a loving girl with her first very own young male body.

Now in the fair early summer the bodies aren't caked in mud. There is only the blood and torn flesh. Now four months later I am a veteran, here in the front line. Now the cloth is torn away before they arrive. Now I follow the doctor from boy to boy as he quickly, expertly judges them. Those that may be rushed on, behind the lines, who may live. Those that need immediate attention. Those who are in the last hour. He consigns them.

I had a nurse to aid me in my recuperation. It was autumn, nearly a year ago. We walked at daybreak down the lane that ran beyond the spruces and dipped if we turned right, gently mounted if we turned left, going on like that in either direction, uphill and down dale. Mist clung to the windrows. The ground was russet and blond. Anxious pheasants burst from the hedges, startling my nurse, who was called Anne. Anne wasn't skittish, she was not someone who would ordinarily flinch when a pheasant breaks cover. But that is what the Front had done to her.

My father told me that Anne and I were suffering from similar-sounding conditions: I from hyperesthesia, Anne from hypermnesia. We were good for each other, my father said. We were two young women in fact not very different in age or interests or preoccupations. But I was recovering, Anne was not. What I saw and what I heard were slipping back within the normal ambit. Anne was still suffering badly from her similar-sounding illness. Hypermnesia makes one experience certain memories at a greater intensity than sensations that are actually present. Memories *are* present, though, said Anne. They aren't any farther away than the pheasant exploding from the gorse.

I prepare the men going on to the field hospital by giving them morphine. The men who remain here I prepare by giving them ether so they may be cut, dug, and stitched. I cannot prepare the men who are about to die since nothing is preparation for what they are about to receive. A few are quite lucid about their abrupt departure. A few protest, most do not. They are soldiers. Like saints, they are bound to their duty. Like saints, they know their duty will call upon them. A padre makes the rounds. One day he tells me, Jesus was the only realist. These men and his saints are his companions. Jesus commanded saints and soldiers to do what was impossible. He knew what he was asking.

Anne's memories of the Front were what one would expect: Young soldiers, horribly hurt, wanting to be told that something was happening to them other than what was. Do not tell me today that I will die. Tell me some other day about the parts of my body that I will not have in my youth and in my age. Do not say that girls will no longer smile at me as I pass by but wince or weep to see my disfigurement.

There in a lane in the English countryside we heard the great barrages. Anne stopped and listened. They are beginning an offensive, she said. Soon the wounded will start arriving. We must be prepared. You must check that the dressings are ready, that the instruments are clean. Will there be enough beds? No, there will not. The men will lie in the open. You will give them morphine and they won't notice. It will begin to rain and the rain will wash the dirt from their faces.

We turned back to the house. Our clothes were soaked through. What is the preparation for becoming a nurse, I asked. Once you have been accepted, Ann answered, you are sent on a course. In the early days of the war the course took several months. Now they rather rush one through it.

Would they take me?

You?

We turned up the drive to the house, under the elms. Anne stopped and contemplated the ground at her feet. Then she said, Don't think your preparation has been for that. No one can prepare for that.

I understand. But perhaps doing that kind of work, perhaps that is the preparation.

Perhaps, Anne said.

The doorway to the dugout is a bright oval of sunlight. When you turn to see who they are bringing in, all you can see are outlines surrounded by a halo. We work by lamplight surrounded by flies. I suddenly remember words from a poem. I used to like poetry. I am not

sure about poetry now, what use it has. I remember, A fly buzzed when I died. I too have heard a Fly buzz. I have seen a certain slant of light. I know what Saturated sight is.

As my needle sews the eight-inch gash on the arm of a young sergeant gleeful that his arm hasn't been torn off, his head crushed, his heart blown out, I thirst for the obvious words of the poet's tiny poems, the ones laddered with dashes: "glee," "sand," "paste," "feather." How terrifying small words can be.

She would understand this work, embroidering flesh.

We were travelling in a requisitioned farmer's wagon, not a week after I'd come to France, through the raw spring fields of Flanders. The few trees were stunted, their tops looked chopped off. The dark earth had been churned up. Small channels filled with cold, black water criss-crossed the fields and ran out into the road. Was there a battle here? I asked the corporal driving the wagon. No miss, he answered. You'd know was there a battle here. It don't look like nothing like this, not a battlefield. There'd be the orses, for one. What horses? I ask. The dead 'uns, all the dead beasts. And then as you get up nearer, the men too.

No one seemed to know where we were supposed to go. After we left the train, we travelled to Houdebecq but everyone at Houdebecq had moved on to St. Clement. At St. Clement they told us that the hospital was now at Quatre Pattes. At Quatre Pattes it began to rain. I lost my macintosh. Objects dodged about the sullen landscape. I thought at first my vision trouble had come back. I couldn't hold my head up and my skin was hot. My stomach started to hurt, more and more.

When we arrived at the field hospital to which we'd been assigned, I was immediately hospitalized. They removed my appendix but the fever and pain went on. Then they gave me morphine.

After great pain a formal feeling comes. She was right in this too, my poet. Morphine made a circle of living stillness in which I was priestess, at the culmination of her worship, the end to her reverence. I have learned that all blessings come down to this, that pain stops. That is the mystery of morphine's religion, its secret knowledge. You can attain to it only by attaining to it. When you are at last free from pain, only then do you understand that this singular freedom is the nameless and unsought home that you have so desperately needed all along.

The mystery of faith begins in the separation of the body from its pain.

Now the young men come to me. The stretcher-bearers are queued up by the dugout's door. Pain here is encyclopedic, as various as the conditions of man. Regardless, morphine is common to them all. The variety of hurts is united and the greatest agony is diminished by the mere expedient of injecting more. I pray that Christ reach down from his stone cross and bid morphine press its golden hand on the living and the dead lying out between the lines and flooded trenches.

In a few days we creep forward. They are making progress. Our Front is fluid. Our station goes up as the men advance, and we are no longer entrenched. We are in what was once a wood spread on a long knoll, very much like the one in my childhood country, except that the trees' crowns are blown off, their split cores exposed like fractured bone.

It is still July. Small birds flit from splinter to splinter. Mist from high explosives drifts on the breeze.

Now I am looking at Jesus' back down a gentle slope. We are reminded by their distinctive sounds that bullets pass closely by. Some hold that rifle bullets sound like bees or hornets, while bullets hitting tree trunks sound like seasoned logs cracking in a hot fire. Buzzing flies and hearths. We tell one another that Hun snipers do not customarily shoot down people with red crosses on their sleeves, but we don't actually believe this. Not that the snipers are without honor. But war is accident. All of this ground is the meeting place of accidents. Nothing

really happens intentionally in war. You live by accident. You die by accident. That is what doctors and nurses are for: Accidents.

The shooting stops, the shelling starts. Beyond the tangle of fallen and standing trunks out beyond the line, shells from our batteries are falling faster and faster on the enemy. Then closer in, the enemy's shells stride toward us. They make a sound like "ploom, ploom," and very soon the yellow fog comes. The wind blows in our direction. Officers start their panicky whistling. We fumble with snaps on our mussette bags, trying to extricate our gas masks. A medical orderly, a man named Jaspers, crouches beside me behind a big fallen oak. Why has the Army accepted Jaspers? He is tiny, smaller even than I, and I think tubercular. But he is very quick in everything he does, indefatigable. Courageous, but courage like fear is unremarkable here. Courage, fear, boredom, accident. Impossible orders. Go over the top. Take that wood. Overrun those lines. Ascend into heaven.

Jaspers already has his mask on, and now he deftly pulls mine from my bag and helps me fit it on. Each of us here has his particular horror, heavy shelling for example. For me a gas attack it is the most frightening thing.

You do not want to vomit in your mask, although it's hard not to when you have breathed in gas. Even before the gas comes, I am nauseated by dread. The stench of cheap rubber and canvas, the humid warmth of the device itself clinging like a parasite to your face — all my mind is centered on not being sick.

Hiding is pointless. You cannot lie in a hole or press yourself into a niche or crouch behind a wall. You may just as well sit where you are. The gas humiliates you, you must submit to its embrace. The cloud moves slowly, more slowly anyway than bullets or shells.

Jaspers and I sit with our knees tucked up under our chins, our arms around our knees, as though we could compress ourselves enough to evade the globules of poison that now make up our atmosphere, as though we were space travellers in a Jules Verne novel stranded on a very hostile planet. Around us men are choking and retching. Perhaps they were caught unawares, or perhaps they have discarded their masks, or maybe they have vomited in their masks and flung them off.

Jaspers is handing me a pair of surgical gloves. He points to my hand. Together we struggle to pull on the gloves, but my hand already burns terribly. My neck stings, and I find a silk scarf in my bag and wrap it around my neck. I imagine blisters forming on my breasts and on my thighs. The gas penetrates and violates you. It touches all your skin if you let it, and you must let it. I really am going to be sick. I stand up, Jaspers pulls me down. Sounds are coming out of his mask like mumbling at the end of a tunnel. Jaspers lifts his mask and shouts into my ear, You'll be all right, miss, you haven't been hexposed. His loud voice clarifies things. I start to calm down. The smeared shapes of men move back and forth before us like characters behind a screen in a Japanese drama. This sense of watching events on a stage continues as the gas clears and reveals Men's Bodies, Differently Disposed. Some kneel and retch, some writhe upon the ground, some stumble forward arms outstretched in the manner of amateur blind men.

Jaspers and I get to our feet and remove our masks. His face looks damply white like skin long hidden by bandages. Ow do you feel, miss? he asks. I'm well enough, I say, but I imagine my breasts and shoulders faintly burning. I want to strip off my blouse and see. Instead, we move around the field from man to man. Jaspers makes the stumblers sit down, he strips away the tunics on the kneelers and writhers. "Initially treat mustard gas lesions as burns," the nursing manual advises. Simple enough if there is sufficient ointment to cover the yards of blistered flesh. We sparingly sluice the burnt skin with our limited supply of water. There is nothing we can do to salve their gas-scorched lungs.

New shells sail overhead from the Boche batteries and land in the wood. Jaspers and I continue our work, we hear distant shouts, the choked collective cry of the Attack. The Front has risen from its vampire sleep and shifts. Mauser bullets sigh by our cheeks and the factory tapping of machine guns starts again. Little Jaspers and I help the walking wounded behind a triangular compound formed by the largest felled oaks. Officers' whistles penetrate the racket. The bullets come as though someone had ripped open a giant sack of them, they spill around us like grains rattling on linoleum. Temporarily healthy men leap over the trunks into the midst of the wounded.

An officer, only slightly bent at the waist, walks across the clearing and peers down at me.

Good afternoon, miss, he says. You have rather a lot of wounded here.

I say, Why don't we hold this conversation at somewhat lower level, Captain?

Oh. Right.

When he kneels, he looks very much like a picture-book knight, one knee to the ground, the other raised, back straight, as if he were about to receive sword-taps on his epaulets. He says, These wounded men should have been taken back to the lines.

Yes, that's what I thought, too. Unfortunately, we were interrupted.

The counterattack, he says.

He looks in the direction from whence the Germans are apparently firing every working weapon at their command. "

Is there a medical officer hereabouts?

There are only Jaspers and me, Captain.

I nod toward Jaspers who has moved on from the little he can do with the gas-afflicted to the little he can do bandaging the projectile-wounded.

But there are a lot of wounded. He pauses, thinking, then says, Likely to be a lot more. He pauses again. Pardon me, miss, but I have to ask you what you're doing here. His tone is so like a bobby asking a solitary young lady why she's hailing a cab on a dark street after midnight that I smile. He blushes and says, I didn't mean.... I know you're a nurse...But wouldn't you be more valuable behind the lines, in a field hospital?

What is your name, captain?

Denys. Last name Denys, first name Victor.

However that may be, Captain Denys, I have ended up here. I point down the slope to where the trenches are cloaked behind geysers of dirt and smoke and fire. I say, In any case, I don't think there's any getting back there now.

Yes, there *is* that, Captain Victor Denys answers.

The shells fall nearer. One explodes just the other side of the wall of trees. Simultaneously two men standing in the middle of our sheltered space are blown off their feet. The immense explosions are at first closely spaced, but soon there is no separation between them, simply one rolling lunatic detonation, on and on and on. A bank of smoke rolls downslope revealing the Christ. Yes, yes, I see you. I also see an officer standing at the edge of the trenches a mile and a half away, I see the buckle on his Sam Browne belt. The hyperesthesia has returned. It has been knocked into me. Christ has turned the color of wine.

Well, it's not your fault. You can't help representing things. It's what you do. But it's very distracting all the same, trying to decipher meaning when one is amid this incessant....What? Suffering? Noise? Blood?

Zinc. Brass. Iodine. Are they colors? A film of each forms and fades from the edges inward, coloring the slope, the shattered oaks, the people, the downs, the holes. This will not be my grave.

Lines of men rise out of the trenches, crossing ground, coming toward us. The men's tunics wash the scene in khaki. The explosions are khaki, the fires. I say aloud to them, You must stop and go back. The lines of men emerge from one cone of smoke after another. The remnant pass to the left hand of Christ and to his right hand. They make their way up the slope toward the relative safety of our jackstraw redoubt of broken trees. Shells continue to crash down upon them until they no longer form a line. There are now few living men lying out on the slope below the wood. Those that do live cry out. Medical aid is required for them.

I must close my eyes to the wreckage, shut my ears to the crashing coming down around me. Somewhere a German gun crew is searching for me on this field. A shell falls to the right, looking for me, another falls behind me, looking, looking. A shell blows off another nine feet of shattered tree trunk.

I find myself clasping my arms tightly about my knees, my head tucked down, my back tight against the tree trunk. I'm wet but I can't tell from what—blood, tears, sweat, urine. Trembling. Like a girl. I am a girl. These explosions are men's grotesque mistake, whose mistakes lead only to greater errors, fatal errors, more and bigger explosions. One cannot help thinking that the only end to it will come in one's own death.

I have passed your hand. Will this be my grave?

Remember man you are dust and to dust you shall return. We are most of all men to be pitied. What we said those Sundays, half-listening and saying the responses, the verses, the psalms, words now like rubbings of some knight of God on my memory. We are lunatics who make high explosives, pilgrimages and penances. I need to sit up and see. The Christ is still there.

It is the impossibility that matters, He said. I don't know how else to say this to you, He said to his poor bewildered hearers: You must do the impossible. You haven't any other choice. Just as the khaki soldiers rise impossibly up out of their trenches onto the field where steel shares the wind and they brace to cross the field. But one cannot cross that field.

If it is impossible, then what does he have to offer us, at the right hand and at the left?

Mother will not like it that I am here. Thinking this cheers me up, and I say it aloud: Mother will not like it that I am here. Laughing helps calm the trembling.

I need to stand. Several yards away, Jaspers and Captain Denys continue to watch the hecatomb. The sacrifice, the leaders of nation say. The leaders are not, as usual, actually leading here. As usual, leaders prefer to lead somewhere that steel isn't a standard constituent of air. It keeps their minds clear, not being shot at, not having their friends' scalps torn from the parietal and flung in their faces.

A shell makes a splash of earth nearby. A cone of gray smoke with heart of red, like the few live coals lying below the dead ones in your bedroom fireplace at dawn.

I am quite steady. I must be careful, that's all. Jaspers has turned around and is staring at me as I walk toward him. Two shots pass close by my ears.

When I reach Jaspers, he says, What were you thinking, miss? You must stay well down now.

The men need medical attention. And, anyway, standing up or down won't make much difference either way now, will it?

It makes a difference if you want to go on living, Miss Sloane, says Captain Denys.

The shelling briefly halts. Now Jaspers, Captain Denys, and I can see the bodies of the men, uniforms the color of the turned earth, in some places arranged randomly and in others disposed in interesting patterns such as lined up facing the same way or radiating outward from a hole. As the Earth's atmosphere changes back to the ordinary clarity of a July day, we see the patches of pink, the folds of meat, the pelts. Puzzling shapes come next. They're out of context,

but stare for a moment and the picture will come into focus. Everything out there in Nomansland is so very unimpeded. Everyone can see clearly now. Everyone has hyperesthesia. The independent feet, hands, or bowels are defined in every particular. The technical colors wash over everyone's vision. And the reds.

He was made incarnate and He suffered for us under Lloyd George, the Kaiser, Czar Nicholas of all the Russias, the Supreme Bey, the Speaker of the House. Christ's human body bolted to a mechanical device, the dead lying to his right hand and to his left. Being in a body is to be a prisoner. Wasn't that what You were saying?

The men lying out near us are conversing with him, one-sided conversations carried on by different means. A sound like the sighing of a dog. A baby with colic. Bellowing rage. A girl's sobbing. One is arguing, Oh no... Oh no... *No*. Another says, If you please, if you please, if you PLEASE. One very close by says in a low earnest voice, Oh, kill me now. Make me die. Make, oh, make me die.

The edges of things are like razors so closely do they cut themselves away from what they touch. A man's trouser leg is forever separate from the mud in which it lies. All that was once dull now glitters like a bristled brush dragged across my eyes, and all that glitters breaks blisters deeper where I cannot see.

If you would only for once come down. Elsewhere is not where we need you. We don't need you to suffer. If there's one thing we don't need it's more suffering. It is noble and brave of you to endure it. After all this time, no one can fault you. We are proud of you. But come down now and in this sea of mud and help with the wounded. We have done that which we ought not to have done. We have done. We have not left anything of this undone. We have done a thorough job of it. Do not forgive us, however. Not right now. Right now we need some help. They are tearing off the limbs of all the young men in the world, they are making claws to tear their strong sex from between their legs, they are like crows pulling on their pretty eyes.

I believe that you truly want to help. Possibly you don't know where to start. That's understandable.

Then let us begin with the one who begs to die. Cut away the cloth. Using a damp rag, carefully wipe away what blood you can while searching for openings in the body. Ignore the obvious—his shredded hands and feet where shrapnel has pierced them. Look for the mortal entry that is here an inch or two above the os pubis. The abdominal plexus is opened and now I see regular spurts like the burbling of a small spring.

The mystery of faith begins in the separation of the body from its pain.

Miss Sloane! You must come back now. It's very dangerous here. There is... Captain Denys kneels beside me. He looks around, at a loss for a word comprehensive enough. He can only lamely say, They are still putting down fire out here.

I haven't enough time. There are so many here. It's hard to judge who is dying.

They're all dying, Enid, says Victor Denys.

Oh, you must see how their bodies lie on and on. What sorrow to be all-seeing. Even from my perspective here kneeling, how far I can see out over their fallen bodies. Radiating. The thing is to see only what is very close at hand. One by one. Saving works. Saving works singly, if it works it all, and it doesn't.

Can you call some men, I ask, Some people to carry back the ones not so badly wounded?

Carry them back where? Victor answers. We can't get back to the trench line. Not now.

One large shell falls near the old front line. Then one out a hundred yards to its left, another a hundred yards to its right, two and three more crawling up the slope toward us, then four or five perhaps all together. Then there is not interruption between them coming down.

He descends in clouds. Clouds are made of vapor. But here in this heaven they are solid for this is a very solid place. The sounds are solid. The wind is solid with sharp solid things. Fire too. Fire inside the cloud like Moses and Aaron must have looked. His companions fell to the ground to avoid being hit by the shrapnel and the Vickers rounds spraying out of the cloud of dirt and fire that He entered.

With my hand slightly lifting his head this boy stares into my eyes.

What can we do? he asks. I can barely hear him.

You can go on living.

I can't. I haven't the strength. I don't.

Yes you do. We'll get under shelter. I'll mend your wounds. Then we'll take you back to the field hospital and you'll live. Captain Denys will help me.

I turn to ask Victor if that isn't right, isn't it right that we will protect this soldier and attend to him and he'll go on living. Victor is stretched out face up as though he were straining to see past up into the solid fire clouds. And so not being able to carry this soldier back to the trees, I cover him with my body. An ordinary thing. A girl lying beside a young man her breast upon his breast feeling his breath on her cheek. Her right hand holding his left hand. She saves him thus. They breathe together. They breathe together.

The cloud passes over.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Vaughan listened hard. She wanted him to listen, but all he could understand was that she was sad and that he'd like to see her pretty face everyday when he came home, the face of your mother, when he was very young and she was young.

Enid. His mother. Everything about them could be no other way. The color of her dress, cool and neat, dotted with tiny rust-red flowers. Her long fingers that smelled sweet like soap brushing his hair off his forehead.

He longed to change seats and sit by her..

It was cooler now on their side of the carriage. The sun had swung over and was shining hot on the seats across the aisle. Vaughan watched Enid watching the countryside pass by, the simple white houses all by themselves in the middle of the cornfields which stretched forever on each side of the tracks. High stalks, taller than he was, glossy leaves and cornsilk, the kernels sweet between your teeth. Nearby where the train sped by them, they were darker green and then beyond the boxy shadow of the train they went yellow green into the sun.

Maybe she was just thinking. Probably about the boys who died. Mothers worried about their children. There were things that could happen to you that you just couldn't imagine. Parents knew all these things and that's how they got old.

He turned his gaze to Dr. Lomb and then to Clay. What could he give in return for their care? He tried to remember what they expected of him. Maybe it was to become as they were. Enid was kind, Dr. Lomb wise, Clay was brave. Kind and wise and brave. He yearned for chances to be those things. That was the best feeling. To earn – what was it? – the respect of men.

Then something came to him: "You always have to tell the truth," he said.

"Yes. That's the best way. But it isn't always easy," said Clay.

"It's not always easy to tell what it is, is it?"

"It's easier if you keep remembering what's true," said Enid. "You get in the habit."

Remembering. The long beach, white with sand, the wide road into town lined with palm trees, the café, the singing on the railway platform and in the carriage with the warm stove, sitting here with Clay and Enid and Dr. Lomb. It didn't bother him that his stock of memories was so low. Memories didn't seem very important. He didn't have the habit of collecting them. Maybe he'd never remember anything.

"What if I never get in the habit?" he said. "Does that mean I'll never know what the truth is?"

"That's the very question I've asked myself since I was your age," said Dr. Lomb. "When I was a boy, I looked around, I thought, 'This is my house, my mother, my father. Here outside the window is the street where I live. On it there are other buildings where people live, there is a grocer's, a tailor's, offices.' Walking to school I thought, 'I am walking to my school. The bells are chiming in the church in the next street so it must be now eight o'clock.' It would occur to

me that I was in a definite spot in a definite city at a certain time. Or was I in a definite time at a certain place? I wondered whether I could be in one without the other, in time without a place, in a place without time."

"That sounds familiar," said Clay.

"Yes, it certainly seems to have turned out that one can be in such a position." Dr. Lomb smiled. "But which is it? For surely we must have one or the other. Are we without time or without place?"

Vaughan realized he was putting a lot of effort in just listening to them. Oh, the words were simple enough. He could picture a small Dr. Lomb (but still wrinkled and gray) standing in his shorts on the street wherever it was, listening to the church bells. The little Dr. Lomb screwed up his face, thinking hard, thinking harder than Vaughan could, and he thought about how you weren't just on the corner of your street but you also had to be there at some time. It was *your* corner on *your* street, but was it *your* time? You shared it with people like you shared the streetcorner, but you could still say that you all shared in that time?

Places were the easiest to remember. He recalled a sea so clear that you could see to the bottom from the rail of a boat. Waves like tips of frosting lapped against the ferry. Cold spray blew from the bow of the motorboat. He was walking across a city as big as the Earth. Although he couldn't see it happening, the streets ran away like Jack's beanstalk before him, buildings popped up, intersections twined like vines. Way above, the dark blue sky held stars and the stars held worlds, on the worlds the same thing was happening. And he was buried in dark blue space, so small that he may as well not have been there at all.

The train slowed and they passed two big white towers. A giant sign wrapped around one tower. You could only read part of what it said: "...RINA," painted in red and yellow letters and a checkerboard around them. You couldn't miss those towers after the miles and miles of cornfields, stuck out there as enormous as they were, white in the July sun.

Stars and moons and cities and cornfields and giant towers, all without number. What did it matter where he was?

"Allie?" Enid was saying, "are you all right?"

They called him Allie when he was little like Dr. Lomb on the way to school trying to figure out the difference between a time and a place.

"I was thinking that we can't really know where we are. Everything keeps going on...It doesn't ever end. There's a word...?"

"Maybe infinity?" said Dr. Lomb.

"Yeah, infinity. Everything is infinite. Take anything. Take those towers..."

"The grain elevator," Clay said.

"There are probably millions and millions of them in the universe. And that's just the grain elevators. What about planets?"

"What about souls?" asked Dr. Lomb. "Perhaps there are an infinity of them, too."

"You could never meet them all," Vaughan said thoughtfully.

"Oh, maybe you could," said Enid. "If you had enough time. If you had infinity."

Yes, she was right. You had to think of that, too. The universe wasn't only filled to overflowing with things, it overflowed with time. The word you heard in church. Eternity.

"It kept me from sleeping when I was young like you," said Dr. Lomb. "My eyes wide open. I stared so hard at the ceiling in my room that I broke through the ceiling and the roof of our house and I could see the stars scattered down to the horizon. Flaming meteors raced overhead with dragon tails. I imagined I was travelling on a dragon past the planets to other solar systems in other galaxies. Dangers abounded. The dragon guarded me. The farther we went on, the more I understood that we'd only begun. Perhaps not even that—the distances

were so great that not only couldn't you cross them, you couldn't even start on your journey. You were always going backward. All through the night I would never sleep. I was not healthy when I was a child, and this not sleeping did not help. My mother asked, 'Why you are so tired all the time?'"

This was something Vaughan could understand. "You were worried about how it went on so far. Even if you wanted to travel to the ends of the universe you could never get farther than starting your trip."

"Yes, Allie, exactly so. I was terrified of this distance that stopped you at the very beginning and pushed you back in time to before the idea of travelling to the ends of the universe had even occurred to you."

"You were lost," Vaughan realized.

"That was the heart of it. I was lost."

A goblin jumped up inside him. The most terrifying thing about being lost was that you didn't know at first, at first you just suspected, and then suddenly you were already there. Among the lost. Everything looked different—the bars keeping the animals back didn't look very strong anymore, the paths were filled with aging men who gave you sidelong glances, night was coming on. Alongside the terror was the sorrow knowing that the people who loved you had lost you. You were lost but they had lost you. And they longed to have you back, and you couldn't come because now you were in this other land. The land of the lost.

The train was running beside a two-lane road. A car approached heading in the opposite direction from the train. The car was heavy and old-fashioned. As it passed them, Vaughan saw inside. The driver suddenly glanced at the train and saw Vaughan watching him, he looked startled and then the car was gone down the road. Vaughan thought that maybe the driver and his passengers didn't really know where they were going.

Yet within the train, they knew where they were going.

As if she read his thoughts, Enid said, "We're nearly there."

"Getting anxious to be home?" Clay asked.

"Yeah, I want to be home. Where our things are." A thought occurred to him. "When you were out beyond the stars, Dr. Lomb, you didn't have things around you you were used to."

"Nothing was familiar. I had nothing. But I had the dragon. He was something."

Vaughan thought Dr. Lomb might say how he talked to the dragon, how the dragon talked back. The friendly dragon. A children's story. He hoped Dr. Lomb wouldn't start in on that.

But Dr. Lomb said, "I thought how cold it would be. Somewhere in school I'd learned that space was a vacuum. I didn't know exactly what that was."

"Like a vacuum cleaner," said Vaughan. "It sucks up everything."

"All I knew was that a vacuum was just nothing. Maybe it wouldn't even be hot or cold or silent because even those things were something. Then it occurred to me that a vacuum was probably the same as death. I rode the dragon past planets surrounded with rings and moons, past meteors with bright orange tails, past fields of small bobbing cinders, not a living thing among them. Why then didn't the universe seem dead to me? Maybe, I thought, death too wasn't simply nothing. Oh, it wouldn't be like life—it wouldn't have all things I was used to—but it would have other things, things in their way just as interesting. So travelling on the dragon through space, I wasn't lost after all. You couldn't ever really be lost, I realized. It was just a question of knowing where you were."

"And we're close to home," said Vaughan.

"It'd be fair to say we *are* home," Clay said.

"Where everything belongs," Dr. Lomb mused, "the proper place for each thing. The rightness of its fit. But each thing in the universe is moving away from all the other things, each person hurtling away from each other person."

"But at the same time," Enid said, "each of us is always calling back to those he left behind. I'd imagine that even kitchen chairs and atoms and microbes do that—strain back against whatever is pulling them apart."

"It sounds like breathing," Clay said.

Once again, it was getting hard to keep up with what they were talking about.

"That's certainly one way to put it," Dr. Lomb replied. "All of creation takes a breath, eons pass, and creation breathes out. Creation's energy pulls hard at the bindings of things, and then all at once they're released, and it's all let loose, spilling out not so very different from what I imagined looking at my ceiling. Why should we be surprised? It happens all the time in our own lives."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The pain works upon her like a dumb policeman who can't recognize a true confession. Nothing I could say could make him stop. Her bones burned slowly. What is killing you doesn't in fact kill you.

An angel appears bearing a message that she slips into the tube spliced to your arms. The separation of the body from its pain. The mystery of faith. The loose blind slaps in the little breeze. Tap rattle pause slap rattle. Roses and lemons. The long-suspended California afternoon. I am an Old World person, Katherine said. The fruit on these trees is too good to be good for you. But they're ours, I said. Nobody owns lemon trees, she said. If you made lemonade from these trees, you'd know the difference between good and evil. But maybe not in California.

The fruit tree right by our bedroom window, a peel like an orange and flesh like a lemon. Sweet and sour. Grafted.

Like marrow. I see my bones in technical pictures. The spread in the marrow. The morning I got out of bed and the pain in my shoulder, I couldn't pin it down. What was I lifting yesterday? Torn muscle, pinched nerves.

Energy coming together in just the right way you get life. Too much, too little, living bodies have a narrow perch. Taste touch sight scent hearing. How clear the sparrow's chirping in the lemon tree. When I was young the theory was, Plenty of fresh air! Mountain air! My tubercular uncle freezing on a deck chair perched on an Alp hacking bits of lung.

The long suspended California afternoon. The sun constantly benign. The steady breeze. The rattle of the palm fronds. Tap rattle pause slap rattle. Voiceless.

My eyes. Open or shut? I see the room. Four beds, one empty. My two roommates are sleeping. Or dreaming the separation of the body from its pain, like me. Someone who is not dying passes by the door and looks in. Someone living

Life. The next solution. But the answer was one we knew.

It was about energy. It wasn't about paint or politics or the spirit of the age. It was about force living bodies subject to velocity and force. The same elements scattered through the universe yet here in oceans the cooling Earth. Life's energy. Inexplicable. Biology. Then these living cells think about themselves. The mystery of faith.

Lubowsky and I looked at the old painting in the famous church. The massacre of the innocents. So the Christians think they're persecuted, too? I thought. A hundred bodies nailed to a forest of leafless trees a rocky defile soldiers in the foreground looking as they always did bored with their carpenter's tools scattered about and their victims still waiting by the soldier's horses' buttocks. Feverish imagination. Every variation on human bodies nailed to trees boughs limbs high up or lower.

Places of worship, places of cruelty. My parents' protection. You became a man at thirteen. Then you would have to confront it, maybe even be a victim of it or even become one of the torturers. Was it in me to hurt other people like that? I didn't see what would stop me.

I went to the rabbi for religious instruction. I'm disturbed by images of people being pierced their bones crushed. I dreamt of my father dying on the pavement. I bend over him and he says "oof" and his eyes roll up into their sockets. I am disturbed by these images, I said. I lie awake picturing tortures.

Are you frightened of these these things? the rabbi asked me.

Maybe. I don't know. Sad that God wants this.

No. God didn't ask for any of this. We do it of our free will as the Christians would say. Out of what we have done.

To scare people so they won't shoot arrows into each other, tear each other limb from limb. Does that work?

Not much, the rabbi said.

The separation of the body from its pain can't last forever. That is an adequate representation. A nail driven through the bones of the hands feet a spear through the ribs. Not a random metaphor after all.

The rabbi and Herr Braunfels my science teacher who had no children contested for my soul. Without families. Protectors of the holy places, the temple and the laboratory.

The afternoons went by quickly sitting on a lab stool right up by the blackboard. Herr Braunfels poured out everything he'd learned as a prize student a peasant's son.

Theories, laws, principles. Like a condemned man he had to breathe all he knew into me before torturers came. Maybe he did not talk at all. Maybe he only chalked equations furiously filling the blackboard turning to see if I understood. When I had he erased beginning again. I began to think in numbers the numbers taking shape on their own. In the process of becoming. The numbers energy, counteracting forces, forces that bent space and time.

In Vienna everything was crust—crusted braid, crusted sugar, crusted painted plaster—an Empire like vast creaking stage machinery. Cold Berlin gray expressionless built on sand. Heisenberg said you could hear the whistle in the seagrass, the Baltic the highest salt content of all the oceans. Warsaw just beyond the Pale. Central Europe a very temporary limbo. Purgatory as the Christians said. Jammed full of baroque Christian churches like Lubowsky's. Spiky gold rays slicing everywhere. Behind the altar off pillars. In the dim shadows the dark paintings portraying their various tortured holy people red-hot grids arrows. With Lubowsky listening to that strange Latin not like the kind we read in school more like some magician droning. But it was no different really than Hebrew by the cantor in the synagogue except the cantors had better voices. Kneeling piously on the steps to the altar of their gods their Jesus their saint this or that. This is bread? After their priest fed you what do you do? Let it dissolve in your spit? That seemed disrespectful. The aftertaste like you'd been chewing pages. Now you're a Christian! cried Lubowsky coming out of the church. He'd tricked the Jew. I let him think what he liked. I knew it was harder than that, whichever you were. Jew or Christian or Mohammedan.

Your gut wasn't Christian Jew. Carbon molecules. Polysaccharides. Your stomach didn't know. Your bones don't know your Confession. The mystery of faith is in the separation. What your body feels what you think.

It was the strangest setting for what we thought. Einstein Heisenberg Bohr Planck Hahn Schrodinger. Imagination of a different kind. Cool. Not like painting like music. A work of art by many hands conceived in mathematics. Every time you opened the mail you expected it. A new journal came a letter a new revelation. Which divine secret held up to the light of number? Wigner said they danced. That Italian painter who claimed they would paint the visible world

through the eyes of the invisible. But no dancer had that power. And it was only that same paint that made the agony of the innocents. We began with the new century even while it was crusted over still and we broke through it. All the years of that damned century brought us to the same end. Oppenheimer Teller Fermi. Not about paint or politics but force.

Life evolving nonlinear. Inexplicable. The coming thing. Biology.

About energy, force.

There was agony at the end of it.

Energy even in the simplest things. The radio. Modulation frequency impedance. The set my father and I built. Some nights you could hear America, a few minutes of Tommy Dorsey, Jack Benny's jokes. Lux? light? dish meant teller? light for your dishes? The Americans are crazy my father said laughing. Each transmitter a pebble in the pond, the radio like a magic cup catching their waves.

Katherine listened to the radio in the early hours of the morning. Music so close to number. Her fingers pressing strings. With two others violin and viola in the circle of stagelights. Raising their bows a little way above the frets silence and suddenly glorious complexity. Haydn. Braided circlets of yellow hair maiden purity the music. Her small breasts beneath her sweater. I tried to concentrate on Haydn. Her fingers confidently lightly quickly up and down the strings. Her skirt outlined her thighs gripping the instrument. I was twenty-five. I identified with her cello.

I took her to the Herrenhof. This did not impress her. I did not impress her. My friends impressed her. Maybe she doesn't like Jews I thought. I was acquainted with Schoenberg. I introduced her to him. Schoenberg said to her, This young man has a most ungewohnlich mind. She looked at me with new interest. Schoenberg shadchen.

Quantum states memory the leaps. My best work, the twenties and thirties. It was about energy, not about paint or politics or the spirit of the age. I was wrong. The thirties *were* about force living bodies subject to velocity and force. The energies we could not understand until it was too late. The structure of crystals in the lattice. Regularity. We expected it to go on and on. We would do our work. The benefit of mankind. The night of crystals. Breaking the lattice.

Chaos grew popular as the century aged.

Katherine and I watched the brownshirts among the shoppers. The crowd blocked the sidewalk. Two brownshirts using truncheons like pistons, one coming down on the body of a middle-aged man the other coming up. Systematically. All you heard was the puffing sound the man made, *oof oof*, the crowd not even murmuring, the brownshirts quietly going about the work of beating a man to death. The crowd spilled out into the street and blocked the traffic from passing. Quiet, sunny morning. A man being killed.

The California morning. Haydn on the radio. Listen to the life of sparrows chirping in the lemon tree the rising of liquid dew into air the air speeding up within itself and toppling through the rooms. The breakfast room blinds slapping in the breeze.

California always in flower. The scents ambush you. Stop on the sidewalk look about. What is it? There are too many possibilities. Giant bell-shaped petals hanging from stems like bamboo. Orange-violet clusters in masses on big thorny bushes. The young people are scented like fruit, their skin thick and shiny like the oranges. The American campus. The long-suspended California afternoon. The campus tilted like an inclined plane and at the bottom you saw the bay the bridge the city with the long line of fog-wrapped mountains.

The morning lecture hall the rows of American children the constant sunshine pours through the enormous windows. One great translucency. Our minds were utterly clear. It did not come easily to them but they learned. It did me good to show them how Newton thought of light force velocity. Retracing Herr Braunfels' earliest lessons. He disappeared it might have

been during the first or second year of the war. No one knew what happened to him. Perhaps he had a heart attack perhaps he was beaten with truncheons. But he was here now with these strong clean children smelling like fruit.

The small office looked out into a gray courtyard where two men worked on a machine. A pinched man in a brown uniform turned the pages in my file. Clearly the first time he had read them a busy man. I grew absorbed in the men working on the machine. I could not tell what kind of machine it was. I wanted to open the sealed windows and call out to them to find out. The official finished reading. Why did you not marry a woman of your own kind? I thought he meant a scientist. She is a musician, I said, I am a scientist. He was angry that I'd forced him to say the word. He said reluctantly, a Jewess. I was having a hard time sticking to the point. He said, You should reconsider. I said, I'm sorry this conversation is a little confusing for me. If I could have been prepared for this interview. You could have an annulment, he said to me as a physician suggests a delicate operation. Now it began to sink in. I straightened myself in the hard chair. I stopped smiling. As we always did with officials in Vienna I had been trying to ingratiate myself. Now I was ashamed and furious. We love each other very much. There is no question of an annulment. The official looked down at my file. He turned a page then he looked up his pinched face even more pinched with disgust. That is up to you, he said, but it will be difficult here for you in the time to come. I suggest you find a way to leave.

Katherine said, that's fine. This isn't the place for you for your work. Everyone you know will leave soon anyway. That was true many were fleeing. Where will I work? I won't have a job. You don't have a job now, she said.

We had no children. That had been hard for Katherine but now it made things easier. The Germans had not then yet seeped into everything in Europe rotting demanding inspecting. We were lucky the authorities agreed with the official who had recommended we leave and we left. Travelling across Provence over the Pyrenees to Lisbon and on board a Portugese ship new before I was born.

The ship docked in New York early morning. The air was full of light of soot of vapor of odors of strange abundant food of gasoline the indefinable smell of industry and people fast indifferent sharp-eyed. Jew Austrian Viennese class rank education mother's family name father's occupation schools attended. Which would they lock on to? Which would prompt this official's particular prejudices? Have you any money? he asked. We had enough. Next. Glorious New York indifference. You're in America now, you have sufficient money for the time being. Get busy. Get in line get a job get moving. Who cares where you've been what you are. What can you do?

A pleasant young man knocked on the door of our room the evening of the day we arrived in New York. You have many colleagues here Dr. Lomb. Maybe you'd like to meet with some of them explore what you could do here in America find a place for yourself and your wife. He smiled modestly at Katherine the son we never had his well-made mass-produced American suit the brim of his rakish hat the buoyant smoke from his American cigarette. Perhaps you could travel down to Princeton, he said.

The kaffe here it's not like Vienna, Einstein joked. Maybe the Herrenhof should emigrate too smiling at Katherine. They talked about Bach. It's good you're here he said. We need more good workers. I've written a letter to the president.

Katherine and I sat quietly on the train back to New York. Then Katherine said I think we were in the presence of a mystery the way the Church talks about it a mystery of the faith. I said, Einstein is an agnostic. Maybe he's an agnostic saint, Katherine said. I wonder when people met Saint Francis did they they think, How could such a soul all that he was be held in that little

body? It seems a marvelous joke those ideas what he sees balled up in that old man who looks like he sells salami.

I'd met Einstein once before heard him read his papers. His ideas yes, how wonderful, yes this is the direction we must travel now new problems. But as to whether he was a man, why this man and not another that wasn't a question for science. If you are very lucky you marry someone who helps you over the wall of the maze we are all locked into. You leap over and start down a street in a neighborhood you'd never walk by yourself. Katherine was used to these questions Hayden Bach music number. Katherine said the mystery of the spirit.

From the start the work a long-familiar tool in hand the physics a set of problems you entered as you entered your parents' parlor. I have been fortunate Katherine would say blessed to spend my life solving these problems for the sake of the joy in my mind. This path? or this one? if this then this the mathematics was number harmonious and even more the practical problems the materials the fissionable materials their handling. How much plutonium would you need to produce this reaction how did one make it? God made too little of these elements but we would make enough. And like God we would make stars on earth.

Looking back I think the desert was a fitting place with the way its sky spread over you like an American movie a Western on a wide screen. Optics of sunset sunrise even in the Alps you could find something to compare the dawn colors a blushing cheek a wildflower but the American desert resisted anything human. Nature in America was proud and separate. Indifferent. It was a fitting place for what we did.

Some feared we would set that sky on fire the atmosphere taking up the reaction the world would burn above even as it burned during those years below even as human beings burned in the ovens in machines in their apartments Dresden London. The spirit death destroyer of worlds feverish imagination white-hot grids. No it was unimaginable and that sky bigger than all Europe was filled first with silver light leaving shadowless the peaks surrounding holy Trinity illuminated by a dozen suns then golden then the colors of horror purple like the gowns of kings and archbishops blue that never filtered any sky and finally inevitably gray. The bubble at its base clouds sudsing up its slimy sides. The hot wind that blew some of us off our feet. Now we are all sons of bitches somebody said.

Someone in the bunker said sweet loving Jesus. Someone said dear fucking God. Another said an American word that puzzled me crimentely and all I could think was of the crime in the middle of that word. I did not hear anyone say we are become death the destroyer I did not hear anyone say may God forgive us for what we do this day I did not hear anyone repeat quote disclaim quotations from the Bhavadgita the Koran the Torah the Works of the Poets the Classic Authors. It looks like a big juicy boil about to pop someone said.

Before this in the late winter when we knew it would work, the gadget the Americans called it in their Buffalo Bill way, what I thought was that now we will burn up Hitler and we will incinerate the good Germans and we will atomize, literally, all of the spitword killing groups the Wehrwolvencmacht the Gezzzzztapooo the Eiiiiizat!zinnnn go man do. We will fucking kill them with more mercy than they killed Braunfels and the Rosenthals down the hall and the Jewish Boys Clubs and whoever else.

Thank you God of the spiky gold bolts the electron arrows piercing the Germans in every position in which they will be found thank you most merciful Eloi God of David God of Yoshua Redeemer Punisher of my enemies.

But now in the summer I thought the Germans are spared and the Japanese are the new subjects of the experiment and who are the Japanese. I did not know them except they helped the Germans and I supposed they were my enemies too but I did not know how we could

explode this thing on the Japanese Imperial whatever was left they were too near the American troops. We knew more or less where it would be dropped then.

We were happy when many unimaginably terrible consequences of our experiment did not take place. There were no unintended consequences. On August ninth I thought we no longer need to imagine the use of this weapon on human beings. I pictured to myself the hundred martyrs from Lubowsky's church pinned like insects on the landscape the bare trees the buttocks of the soldiers' horses the saint grilling on the gridiron. The rabbi said No not God. No not God but ourselves. God was elsewhere but that is not to say that if only God had been there this wouldn't have happened that the world didn't have God anymore so it really it wasn't our fault we'd been abandoned you see so we weren't responsible. We did not want to contemplate the simple possibility that we'd asked God to please go elsewhere we were busy we knew now what was what his presence was distracting. We needed space to concentrate on how to apply radiation heat electromagnetic pulses to one another's eyeballs skulls lungs throat. The lips of children, you see, their open eyes their pudgy knees.

In September the first German came the first von something or other the first Jew-hating smug sausageprick. I could not be in the same room with him my breakfast would be in my mouth before I knew it. Katherine said, You know that man from the California university you and I must go to that university now and leave this place. You will die here.

For five years I taught the classical rules to ex-soldiers who were glad to learn them. Their faces were older narrower darker than the faces of the schoolboys I had taught before the war. Like me, they were killers and they bore this soberly. And it was a way we had the soldiers and I to put that away for a while when I chalked numbers that showed how the world was put together how that good English gentleman Newton had put it all together. Like Haydn like Bach.

Eventually a day came when a new problem occurred to me. Ever since I had been professing to these young California soldiers and maidens the only things that had taken up my mind were solid bits perhaps like smooth well-milled ball bearings travelling at different velocities imparting force to other globes and doing all this like orderly citizens of Newton's old orderly kingdom according to its laws which were number. But one day a problem arose outside the limits of that kingdom. A wild rover careening about in glittering random places the hardest deepest places whose traces you could only see by not looking right at them.

Slap rattle slap. The separation of the body from its pain. Pain waited in an unused room an importunate but patient petitioner humbly requesting his say humbly hanging about yet never too far away. Who am I to gainsay him? I've kept him waiting all lifelong when a world of people were required to give him audience. Sweet Katherine her pretty face revealed the bones that made her beautiful. My eyes hurt she said I want to close my eyes. Your eyes are closed my love I said. Close my eyes for me my dearest she said to me. Now I am come to that room to which we all come with the appliances the two broken wheelchairs the walkers the rolling trays the gibbets they hang the drug bottles on. My partners in this room do not make a sound they are as quiet as mice living with a practiced cat who will catch them someday when he feels like it.

They've regulated the pain they've portioned it out scientifically. A certain number of hours will elapse not that I will know them but they will elapse a certain number a number my blood should contain to keep the pain at bay will drop. And when it comes that too will have its period but I will not recall much about it. Except that it is terrible in my bones. My eyes hurt I want to close my eyes.

A problem you could see only by not looking directly at it. I could not leave it be. The problem fed me. The problem dripped into my blood like soma like the doorstep to prophecy.

Strange that a problem about the way things are they way the are really to put together in the tangible universe that problem could enjoy the separation of the body from its mind so many months. Still, my body was my good companion like a not-very-bright but loyal friend who listens without understanding to the outpourings of his lovestruck comrade. And how cradled those nineteen-fifties how California's long suspended afternoon wrapped around Katherine and me how soft those nights. An engraving of Schiller I had seen somewhere passed by the problem in my mind going home across the campus in the evening the windows in the college buildings the yellow squares the scholars working peacefully the young the shrubbery that never withered the fat lawns under the pearl moon strong slim American youth holding their books and whispering on the library steps.

On May 2, 1956 I looked at the office wall beyond my desk from two-thirty-six in the afternoon until eight-fifty-one that evening. I know because there was a clock on that wall and I checked it before my brain my mind my soul departed for six hours and fifteen minutes working on the problem. And when I thought yes I think yes I've caught hold of the solution snagged it by the tail I saw the wall again and the clock and it was eight-fifty-one.

We can measure anything Sanborn said to me under the roof that stretched like its own kind of American horizon into the far shadows. The instrument beneath it wrapped American style generously with miles of expensive aluminum paper exotic tape concealing the racetrack Sanborn called it. The racetrack. Yes that was good American for what it was. We did beautiful instruments in Austria in Switzerland in Germany the bronze fittings the sharply engraved ticks the sleek and precisely turned clockwork. Ah but this was precision turned to power turned to American know-how. In America we compelled those wild rovers down the racetrack drove them at unimaginable velocity at uncivilized force together. And by this we found that my solution posed a rule in chaos.

From that we began to see not the light for there had always been light in number quantity force measure. I said to Katherine I would like to take a drive tonight I would like to drive to the observatory. You haven't been to an observatory in years she said. I want to see the farthest object you can see with your instrument I told the young astronomer. Spring was far along in the California valleys but here wet snow covered the paths the object lense was cold against my eye socket. This is the farthest thing right now this nebula he said. Katherine looked at it and said surely this should convince us. Convince us? the young astronomer said. Convince of us of what? For those who need convincing Katherine said. She hummed a bit of something I did not know. Through the telescope the nebula spiralled and shone and had absolutely nothing human about it. My heart perhaps it was overleapt my thoughts. We were not separated the nebula and I. We were not joined in spirit in some godstewed phlogiston the universe was in no sense one and I and the nebula one in it. But we were at play in the same fields the same laws and there was one rule and I had peeled back one small corner of it and my friends had peeled back others and we had done terrible things in the name of all this. Yet we had proven not maybe one final solution nor even some solution but we had proven that there was a law overarching the shape of the nebula and the wild energies at the heart of things. The stars over the ceiling and the boy on the bed.

Constants. Who better than physicists know constants. Hubble. That nebula and every other object I can see through the telescope is drawing away from me everything in the universe is drawing away at a constant velocity even as the strong forces at the core adhere. But we have separated them too. Bodies nebulae elementally the same coming from the same source. Everything is subject to separation while a force a will yearns to adhere one to the other.

I held her body until I felt her bones hard against my bones. Love is the strong force I thought. It will not allow our separation. But I saw the body separate from its pain I saw

Katherine separate from her body I saw her come away from me. She was smiling as she sometimes smiled when she let drop her bow. I do not think she knew how gracefully her bow swept down after she played the last note of something she had played perfectly. She did not ever know really how graceful was all she did. And the bow would come down and her hand was like a dove that had lit on her knee in absolute rest. That is how she smiled when she went from me.

Slap rattle slap slap. The long suspended California afternoon. California. America. Where you can grow anything. Where you can separate the body from its pain.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It had been hard to stay awake while Dr. Lomb was talking. They were no longer on the train. He must have fallen asleep and been carried off and laid in a bed that somebody had put in a field beneath a night sky. Each star was sharp and separate and the stars made designs. Constellations.

"And there's Lo Mein and Giambattista Vico and the Parking Lot," said Dr. Lomb. "Can you see them?"

"Which one's which?"

"Lo Mein is the one that looks like Spain. Vico's the one that looks like a giraffe. And the Parking Lot, well, it looks like a parking lot—see the big silver arrows?"

A serene bartione voice filled the darkness. Vaughan settled back contentedly. He wasn't in a bed at all, but a chair, one that reclined. The voice had been going on for quite some time but now it was finishing.

"And there's much more to learn and to see in this endless universe. For it is endless, you know. Which is to say that it goes on and on. Forever, or until such time as it stops. Ah, but that's the trick, isn't it? [A rich chuckle] Will we run out of time or space first? There's plenty of both! Hahaha. Still, much less is Elsewhere and much more is Somewhere."

The lights came up. The 2 a.m. darkness now faded to dim twilight.

"I will say goodbye to you now, Albert."

"Where are you going?"

"I need to meet Katherine. She's been waiting for me."

"Where is she, Dr. Lomb?"

"Oh, well, as for that. You heard what the man said: 'Much more is somewhere.' That's a harbinger, Albert. A sign that she's not far off. In fact I feel confident in saying that no one is very far off now. Which is something you should take to heart. And anyway, how could you be in better hands?" Saying this, Dr. Lomb looked past Vaughan to someone standing behind him. A hand rested on his shoulder.

"We'll be fine," said the voice above the hand.

Was it that same hand that had held his when they'd travelled through the sunny town, boarded the train? Was it the low sure voice that had been explaining things to him since...when? Maybe the beginning.

Many others had been watching the sky show, and now everyone was leaving, going up the thickly carpeted aisles toward the light flooding in the exit doors. Outside a brisk wind was blowing off a big lake whose shoreline stretched straight before them. The wind rinsed the air, leaving a smell of pine resin and sand and cold water. They started walking away from the lake. Not too far away a city boulevard ran parallel to the lakeshore. Nearer was a bandstand with a scalloped shell next to a fountain. Jets leapt up into the morning air. The bandshell and the

fountain were in the middle of a grassy parkway that separated them from the boulevard. The buildings ran without a break, side by side. Yet you could tell them apart because they were made with every kind of brick: glossy white like paper, dark red and pebbled, sleek and black like a woman's party dress. He remembered another kind of building, taller, harder, made of glass. The people who made these buildings were cruel. The buildings before him were tall, but they weren't built so that people could go up in them and live against the sky, away from other people.

They crossed the boulevard and entered the city itself. The beaming patchwork of morning shadows and sunlight fell on the cross-streets. Strollers idled – couples, old lovers and young ones. Small groups of friends collected to talk, to laugh. Families stopped and inspected whatever was beyond the big windows that ran from corner to corner at the base of the buildings. Yet the sidewalks weren't filled with workday crowds.

"It's a day of rest," the man said. "People are taking their ease."

"Taking their ease...Nobody has to go to work?"

"Well, anyway, nobody has to do what they did to make a living." He chuckled to himself. Vaughan laughed too, not really knowing why.

"But what *do* you do?" The man looked down at him, still smiling, as though Vaughan were kidding him.

"You know what I do, son. What's the matter? You have a sudden loss of memory?"

"I think that's right. I think I've lost my memory."

"Oh, okay," he said, going along with the joke, "so what don't you remember?"

"Is this place where we live?"

"We don't exactly live *here*, in the middle of the city, but we don't live far away."

"Are we going there now?"

"Sure, we're going home. You've had a long trip. Aren't you worn out?"

Vaughan thought about this – about seas and highways and forest trails. How many places he'd been! Though he couldn't give them names. He should be tired. Yet he wasn't. Journeys took a long time when you were young, he decided.

"No, I'm not real tired. I can go a little farther."

"That's good. I'd like to make one stop on the way. Is that okay?"

"What stop?"

"I want to stop at a house of worship. It's not far."

"Okay." He paused. "Why are we doing that?"

"Oh, I suppose because it's a good place to collect your thoughts."

"That's what we're going to do, collect our thoughts?"

"Yeah, pretty much. When you grow up it gets harder to pay attention. So collecting your thoughts gets you back on track, paying attention."

"I guess I don't get it."

"No, at your age it's tough to understand. You're born paying attention and you keep on when you're young. You can go for quite a while, but your attention keeps drawing out, getting thinner. You get old. Maybe your attention comes back to you then. Some people start paying attention when they realize they're going to die. Not everybody does that, though." They walked a little way in silence, and then he added, "You don't have to be old to have that happen. Anytime you think you're going to die, it tends to make you start paying attention."

"People don't just have to be old to die." Vaughan wasn't sure if he was asking a question or remembering something he already knew.

"Many people die young, son. Sometimes accidents happen. Sometimes it's more organized."

"Organized how?"

He wasn't smiling anymore, looking into the distance. "Sometimes fools took over. *Leaders.*" That word was like something foul had got into his mouth, a bug or something, he needed to spit out. "People got talked into things too easily. Sometimes." He fell silent.

"Maybe the leaders stopped paying attention."

"Almost universally, son. Almost always."

"And they talked children into getting killed?"

"Lots of young men don't need any real convincing. They just have to hear the same five or six words over and over."

"What words?"

"They're nasty. Decent men don't say them."

"But what are they?"

"Well, I'll say them but I don't want you repeating them." He lowered his voice. "*Patriotism* is the worst. Then there's *nation, glory, freedom...*a couple of others."

When he said them, Vaughan felt queasy. It was like when you heard a dirty joke some guy whispered when no adults were around, and you didn't understand the joke. The words were like that—they really *were* dirty, like a dead thing in the alley somebody dared you to touch.

"I don't think I'll ever need to say any of those things," Vaughan said. "I don't think I'd want to."

"Good. That's the best way." The walked a little way down the sidewalk, his hand resting on Vaughan's shoulder. He stopped.

"This is it," he said. "We cross here." He pointed across the street to a building that was the highest of any they'd seen, an immense block set on end. But at the top it was crowned by a quite different building—all spires and arches and towers.

The lobby of the building was empty except for a man waiting by the elevators.

"Hello, Noah," his guide said to the man.

"Good day, Bill." Vaughan started to laugh, but Bill gave him a cautionary glance. Noah had an odd smell and his clothes were funny too. He had on too many of them, in layers. Parts of what he had on was what sailors wore. Vaughan wondered what he did that he had to wear those big rubber boots. There'd have to be pretty deep water to need those.

Even though he looked like he should be on a ship's deck, he evidently ran the elevators.

"What floor?" he said abruptly. He was in a bad mood, but Bill didn't seem to mind.

"To the top, Noah," he said as they got on. "I'm showing Allie around today. He wants to see the sights."

"Seems to me that he's had enough sight-seeing already."

"He's curious. It means he's paying attention."

"Oh, he's *paying attention*, is he? He's on the *qui vive*, eh? He's at the top of his game? Alert? Nimble? It must all be all right, then."

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?" Bill replied, laughing. "Some people learn from their experiences."

"I suppose that means that I haven't. '*Look at that pathetic old Noah – all he's been through. And he hasn't learned a damn thing.*' I tell you one thing I've learned—Prudence! Of course, that's an old-fashioned virtue. Nobody thinks much of prudence around here anymore. Nor of patience. To say nothing of chastity! Yes, it's all about paying attention. It's all about curiosity. I tell you where curiosity leads....It leads to questions!"

"What's wrong with questions?"

“What’s wrong with them?” Noah said contemptuously, “What’s wrong with them is...They...don’t...get...any...answers!” He turned his back on them and busied himself with the apparently complicated controls of the elevator.

The first thing you saw when the elevator doors opened was a long carpeted aisle that eventually led to a platform. The platform was so far off you couldn’t tell much about it except that various pieces of giant furniture had been placed around it. At least he thought they were furniture. Walls soared up on three sides of the platform, interrupted by balconies and statues and shadowed doorways so high up he couldn’t figure out how anybody could get in them. Lamps shone upward from the balconies.

The doors slid shut behind them and the elevator sighed briefly as it descended. Bill took his hand and they started down the aisle. On each side of them were wooden benches the color of pencils. There was a smell in the air like pencils too, the scent of cedar it was, like the words on the pencil that said “red cedar.” And there was the scent of candles and furniture paste and the powdery, papery odor that lay over the books in his grandfather’s library. At the distant end of each bench, a thin-stemmed lamp curved from the wall. Below each lamp a tabletop shaped like a half-moon was set in the wall. Books with worn red and blue covers lay on the tables.

The benches were seamless, smooth and high-backed with a slight curve in the seat. A thousand people could sit here, Vaughan thought, maybe ten thousand.

They went up toward the front and sat down. The bench wasn’t as hard as it looked. In fact it seemed tailor-made for his body. He felt sleepy, like he was just waking up and everything still looked a little like a dream he’d been having. Thoughts came into his brain without his having to do anything to bring them there. They just floated in, complete and interesting, from elsewhere. He was collecting thoughts like you collected moths or baseball cards, collecting thoughts, like Bill had said. He’d thought you probably would have had to work at that. It was good that you didn’t. The thoughts were better that way. They did you some good. Why? he wondered.

He glanced at Bill, who was just sitting. He was looking at something far away, even beyond the high and distant walls around them. What did he see? Whatever it was it was probably something Vaughan couldn’t understand, not yet. It was interesting that Bill had come to this place to go somewhere beyond this place. Vaughan studied the shadows cast up on the walls, like high tower walls, above the platform. He looked at the way the lights on the balconies fanned out and ended in shadows. And the shadows and the lights were like voices you heard in a room beyond a closed door when you were in bed. The voices of people who would never fail you, who would never stop loving you. The way your mother laughed like a girl at your father’s jokes. The lights were a kind of beauty. What was that, that people said, beauty? Something you didn’t understand but you might know—if you collected your thoughts. Or maybe it was something you did know after all. You’d never hear the words out clear, but that didn’t matter, like the muffled voices coming from the next room. The words spoken by someone who loved you.

He was thinking along like this, the thoughts sailing in and out of him, when Bill quietly said, “I think about my friends when I’m here.”

“Don’t you think about them when they’re around?”

“They’re not around anymore, Allie.”

“Where’ve they gone?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps elsewhere. It was sudden.” He paused. “Maybe it’s always sudden when a good friend leaves.”

“Are they ever coming back?”

"I don't know, Allie. Maybe. Some day. But in the meantime I have to keep them in my thoughts."

"That's why you come to this place. To collect your thoughts."

"Yes."

"Is that like worshipping, in what you called it, this place?"

"More or less." He nodded toward the platform. "If you pay attention, there's always a chance that God might show up."

The most prominent piece of furniture on the platform was a cloth-covered table. The table was set. Candles burned and various shiny objects—thimbles and scissors and chisels—glinted. Even though they were close to the platform, he couldn't get the shiny objects in focus, like they were still far off. Every once in a while one of these things would jump up in his vision and he could see it clearly for an instant before it jumped back into the distance. One thing especially puzzled him: It was like a railroad spike, made of silver, but sharpened for use. What use? He had an uneasy feeling about it. He was fairly convinced that it wasn't the kind of thing you drove into wood or stone.

"What are all those things on the table?" he asked.

"People left them there. When they went away, they left them there in case anybody else could use them."

"That one thing, the one like a big sharp nail. What's that for?"

"Oh. That. Well, the things on the table, when you look at them, you're reminded of something."

"Of God? How can spikes and chisels remind you of God? Is that what God is like? A chisel?"

"A chisel. Or a nail. Maybe the guy who left it there was leaving a message about what he thought God does."

The bench had begun to feel hard and the fan-shaped lights climbing up the tower walls looked colder now. Too much about this place was way beyond anything he could understand, anything he'd ever understand. He remembered Dr. Lomb's universe, the stars and constellations. The sky didn't protect you. It could let anything in. What would stop it? He took Bill's hand.

"We better get going, Allie," he said. "I think you're tuckered out with all this travelling."

"Yeah, I think I'd like to leave. This place gives me the creeps."

Bill looked surprised but didn't say anything. When they got to the elevator, the door was already open, and Noah stood shifting from one foot to other, impatiently waiting for them. But evidently he'd run out of things to say and they descended quietly to the lobby and left the building.

"We're parked over here," Bill said. He pointed to a big, boatlike car that said "Buick" across the nose of its hood. They got in and rolled down the windows and started off. Bill punched several buttons on the dashboard. The radio came on, the lighter popped out. Bill lit a cigarette. The lake wind billowed through the windows. The Buick filled with the scent of tobacco. They gathered speed. Driving along like this made him forget about the constellations flung out beyond the soft blue sky.

Soon the tallest buildings petered out. They began to pass through a street lined with two-story apartment buildings. They passed a guy washing his car while a young woman leaned from a window above and talked to him. She was excited, she laughed often, and her laughter was borne all the way down the block on the evening breeze. Two buildings over an older woman beat out a rug against the windowsill. A candy store was open in the middle of the

block, and a circle of kneeling kids was playing some game in front. He saw a man and a woman inside sitting on stools at a tiny lunchcounter. The man was kissing the woman on the cheek. Another couple farther down the street were busy planting flowerboxes in front of their building. The man wore big leather gloves and overalls—as though he were farming forty acres of cornfield rather than plugging geraniums into a yardlong box. The woman stood over him giving careful instructions about where each flower should go. There was a restaurant on the corner where a fan blew out the smells of hamburgers and fried fish and coffee and beer. He didn't think he'd been this hungry in a very long time. He couldn't remember when he'd last had anything to eat.

He thought about pancakes and people dancing and the smell of a hot griddle. A phrase came to him: "They shared gracefully." But he didn't know what this meant. Maybe they weren't people at all but heroes or magicians or saints.

"Are the people here saints?"

"No, Allie. They're not saints. There aren't any angels or saints or demons around here. Just people."

"What about in heaven? Are there angels and saints in heaven?"

"Oh, heaven." Bill looked through the windshield. Thready pink clouds were cruising from right to left. They passed a park. A palm-shaped flock of pigeons rose up. The flock shifted directions a couple of times, like a hand sweeping away crumbs from a tabletop. Then it plummeted down again into the park.

The buildings fell away and they drove into the open. Light showered down, smelling like fresh milk and cold water and diesel busses. His eyes were wide open, yes, but then so was his nose. His skin was open, his ears were open. His mouth was open, gaping at how the morning light could carry all those things. They had come to a river crossed by a cream-colored stone bridge. Beyond the bridge was a building that looked like it was made of sugar. Both the bridge and the building were ornately carved. They drove onto a broad road with many lanes. The road ran along a shoreline.

"You never answered me about heaven," he said to Bill.

"This is called the Outer Drive."

"What's it outside of?"

"Probably they named it that because this is as far as you can drive without ending up somewhere else."

"Elsewhere."

"Well, or without ending up in the water."

Vaughan laughed. He decided he wasn't going to get any information about heaven. That was one of the things that fathers did— withhold information. That was okay except it would have been nice to know *why* they were withholding it. Was it dangerous? dirty? secret? Were the things they kept from you more than you could take at your age, like say a drink of whiskey? Maybe the secret facts would make you sick the way smoking a Lucky Strike in the alley would make you sick.

Lucky Strike. That was a strange thing to call cigarettes. When something lucky happened to you, it came from somewhere else. It wasn't something you did to make it happen. You could be lucky for instance if you found a Duncan Jeweled Tournament yo-yo just lying on the sidewalk on your way home from school. You were lucky if when you were born you got good parents. People said you were lucky to be alive.

He looked up at Bill gripping the Buick's big pearl-colored wheel. Bill swung it skillfully as they wound their way down the Outer Drive. When they hit a low rise, Bill would speed up a little and when they came fast down the slope, a bubble of pleasure buzzed up from his crotch

and stomach. Bill's hands were tanned and hairy. There were big veins and there was a long thin scar down from the knuckles of his left hand. His collar was open where his neck was tan too and you could see a patch of black hair curling above his top button. He reached up and touched Bill's cheek, which was rough with whiskers. Bill glanced away from the road a moment and smiled at him.

Then Vaughan folded his arms on the open window and rested his chin and watched the long rollers come off the glittering lake.

Chapter Thirty

The three of them ate breakfast. The mother, the father, the son. The wind came in the kitchen window, and the street outside was still, and the elms bent in the wind, and the wind carried the smells of breakfast and cut grass. Bill's shirt was white like paper and shiny from her hot iron, and Bill when he picked him up as he left for work smelled like washing and Gillette Extra Rich Shave Cream and coffee. Bill's jaw was smooth when he put his hand to it.

"Go play for a while now, Allie," she said, "and then we'll walk over to the store."

He walked up the block to see if anybody'd come outside yet. You measured the block in buildings – the gray two-flat next door where the kid you never saw with scarlet fever lived, the brown six-flat where no kids lived, the house with the Greek family where the old lady gave him cookies, the vacant lot now waist high with with milkweed and prairie grass, the big tan building where three of his friends lived, and the last building, the one where his best friend lived. Each building had a square of city lawn, thick or rubbed thin depending on how much the janitor or the owner walled it off with iron fences or bushes that were like hairbrushes on your shins when you pushed through them. He passed a man cutting one of the lawns, the mower blades turning. He remembered someone saying their street went right on past the city limits, out onto the prairie, all the way to the Western Land.

The sidewalk was cool when he knelt on it to trace with his fingertip what was cut into the concrete, "Emil Babel, Public Works" framed by a box topped by a key. Close up the sidewalk looked like it was made of sand from the lakeshore, big tan pebbles the color of shoeleather and tiny black ones, ones that were almost white and ones that could have been silver like a dime. The trees were called elms. The trunks went up high and smooth, like the pillars around the library. You couldn't climb them. Down here close to the ground you only saw the sky when the branches bent aside and a cloud like it was caught in the treetop. They lived their own lives up there – the robins with their nests hidden in the leaves, the squirrels running fast along the boughs like they had magnets on their feet. When you found the broken blue and pink-speckled shell fallen nearby, Bill said, it was like a piece of heaven had come to earth. It was a message, like when one of them would say, "Hey, look, a skywriter," and they'd stop playing and watch while the invisible skywriter made its own thin clouds, like a kind of miracle, slowly forming themselves into words. "All manner of thing shall be well," it could say, or, "I am with you," or "Pepsi Cola."

If he had a horse like Arch Michaels Frontier Marshal, the palomino Thunder, he'd urge him on, jumping every obstacle, off the sidewalk, clearing the hedgewalls protecting the scrubby lawns. "On, boy, on," he said in his head, and clicked his tongue. His Peacemaker no outlaw wanted to face slapped against his jeans. He checked his carbine in the scabbard in case of savage devils. He sailed over the shrubbery, not even having to try.

When he came to the vacant lot, he stopped and bent to creep down a faintly beaten trail in the high weeds, wounded by an arrow. He fell bleeding and lay on his back and nobody could see him. "It's all right," he said to nobody, "I'll do it myself." He picked up a twig and bit down on it. Then he clutched the arrow close to his ribs and yanked it from his side. He'd get through in spite of everything for the sake of the settlers whose houses would be burnt and tortured. Maybe a message would appear in the sky, "Nobody else could have done what he did."

He stood up and looked back down the block. The shadows were about the same length as when he'd set out. The only sound was the shuckleshuckleshuckle as the guy pushed the lawnmower and high-up the sound of the elms shuttling in the morning wind. The light was the color of early June. The street went on for miles. And in his own block, there were different regions, far apart.

He could hear the clatter of bottles knocking together as the milk truck passed in the alley behind the lot. A tiger swallowtail lit on a fat milkweed leaf near his hand, and a thread of cloud slipped beyond the cornice of the big apartment building. He said in his mind, "It's beginning."

Then the clatter stopped, the butterfly's wings froze, the cloud snagged on the roof. Possibly there really was a savage arrowhead in his heart. Many things were far away. Once they'd been so close he thought he'd be smothered by them, but now he was okay, he was breathing.

The milk truck started rattling, the swallowtail fluttered past, the clouds continued on their way. "It's beginning," he said aloud.

Thunder sailed over the high grass. All you had to do is just glance at some far mesa—you just had to think about it!—and Thunder would take you there in a flash. That's what they said at the start of every Frontier Marshal episode, "and Thunder his miracle palomino swifter than thought!" All at once they were racing past Mr. Feldstein's garage, on their way down the alley, wheeling through the gate and stopping at the backstairs in a cloud of sagebrush.

It was narrow between his building and the next where the kid with scarlet fever lived, too narrow to let the sun get through. The passage was always cool. Any noise you made, the concrete bounced it around.

Sitting on the bottom step of the back staircase, he heard his screen door open two floors up. He knew how the stretched spring creaked and he heard her feet on the boards of the porch before he heard her call, "Allie? Are you ready? We're going over town now."

He stepped out into the gangway and called up, "I'm ready."

Her steps were loud and quick coming down. You could tell she was going to the store because she had her purse and lipstick and a little hat.

"Ha," she said when she saw him sitting at the foot of the stairs. Her eyebrows went up and her eyes got wide and the dimple on one side when she smiled. They could be going anywhere together, setting off on safari, getting on a ship sailing under a butter-yellow sun.

They started down the street holding hands. The patches of grass were sunny now and the sidewalk was blotched with shadows.

"We've been away from each other a long time," he said. She squeezed his hand gently.

"Oh? How long do you think?"

"I don't know. It could be since Christmas."

"That was back in the winter. All sorts of things have happened since then. It snowed up to our windows and that pack of wolves tried to get in. Then I was Queen of the May for most of the spring. Lots of dancing, that was nice. What else? Oh, I had you."

"No you didn't. I wasn't born yesterday, you know. Anyway, that's not what I meant."

"I see." She nodded gravely. "What *did* you mean?"

He felt shy and a little angry. "I don't know. Nothing."

"Tell me, Allie. I want to know."

"It's just that whenever you're not around and I don't see you—I forget...well, maybe I forget how you are."

"How I am."

"Yeah, how you look and everything. It's like something new. A surprise."

She stopped, not letting go of his hand, but turning to face him. She fooled with his hair, which was a habit she had when she was thinking about him, her lips more like a smile than not. "You're a funny kid, you know that?"

It was because she loved him. That's what he remembered everytime he saw her, everytime he saw Bill—they loved him. It was beginning.

He let go of her hand and raced up the walk to the front stoop of a two-flat. He put his feet together and hopped on to the first step and then the second and then he vaulted onto the broad stone bannister and slid back to the walk. There were many two-flats on this block, and he repeated these things on the walks and stoops and bannisters of each of them. When he ran out of two-flats he raced to the corner and back to her three times. The second time took less than the first and the third time took less than the second.

On the corner of the next block was a tavern, the window was painted black and gold, they crossed the street and passed a candy store. It too looked dark inside. In the shadows, all you could see were the white front pages lined up on the paper stand. The drycleaners next door was brighter, with gusts of warm air coming down over the top of the door smelling like Bill's white shirts.

And then there was the bakery, right on the corner, with giant windows running down the street sides, floor to ceiling, like the walls had been cut away and you saw what was going on inside. A bunch of kids sat on a low sill running all along both windows while their mothers stood at the counter. You smelled the bread a long time before you got to the door.

The fan-shaped threshold was made of blue and white tiles bordering a word spelled out in black tiles, "Vita." Moving in between two ladies and their purses at the end of the counter, he saw what they'd put in the cases today—sugar cookies. They'd just come out of the oven. The sweet, warm smell curled around and up and over the top of the case, and he could feel the way the grainy sugar crunched between his teeth.

A baker woman in a big apron came around the end of the counter with a tray of cookies the size of small saucers. She held out the tray.

"Take 'em away. Eat 'em up," she said to the kids. "These are for you." They surrounded the tray, trying to decide which cookie to choose. You had to look at them carefully before you picked one.

Sitting on the windowsill by the doorway eating his, he stared dreamily at the slowly turning ceiling fan. He watched one of the fan blades circle. Chewing on the cookie emptied his mind. A wind blew in the door, carrying busses and cut flowers. A breeze blew out, bearing breadcrusts and icing. The bakery breathed in the street, it breathed out the bread. What was the difference between what was living and what wasn't? What wasn't was dead. But you didn't say "the fan died" when somebody turned it off (if anybody ever turned it off). Food was usually made out of stuff that'd been alive earlier. That didn't make it dead when you ate it. Or did it?

When they left the shop, he asked, "Is bread alive?"

She thought about this. "When you put it like that, I'm not sure I know the answer. This bread," she nodded at the loaf in her shopping bag, "you could call this living bread." They walked on a few steps. "Yes, I'd say that's what it was."

"How about cookies? Are cookies alive?"

"Oh, yes, cookies are *definitely* alive. You'd better watch that one doesn't start eating you."

They made their way down the main street. Each like the bakery had a pulse, a breath. In the grocery they were putting out heads of lettuce, crates of oranges, bundles of celery. He stood in the aisle with ranks of red and yellow and orange colored cans and boxes rising up to the ceiling and the cool, heady smell of the produce all around, and he could imagine the fields and the smell of the soil where it grew. Down the street, bright lights shone on the racks of silky dresses in Otto Fein Ladies Apparel, where there was a room of mirrors at the back and you could look at yourself repeating, one Allie behind another, down a tunnel. If you kept looking, you forgot about the world outside on the street. Their last stop was the five and dime. He went to aisle where they had the china statues like the shepherdess in a book with pink china cheeks and a china dress the color of a blue jay's feather. He wanted to make sure the shepherdess was still there because he was saving his money to buy it for her. A lot of the time something surprised him—she or Bill surprised him. But this time it was his turn. He held the shepherdess lightly and laughed thinking how surprised she be at how he could have a surprise in store, too. And he'd say, "It looks just like you."

They took a different way home which took them by Rosehill. Rosehill was surrounded by a tall chainlink fence. In some places it looked a little like the vacant lot with tall weeds and low trees, but most places the grass was cut and there was even a little woods way off in the middle. You could see water through trees, a quarry where they'd cut the stone for the monuments dotted around the hill climbing up from the woods. Looking through the fence at Rosehill you may as well have been looking at a picture like the shepherdess in a book. You had as much chance getting into Rosehill as you did jumping into the fields with the shepherdess and her sheep. He'd never been inside the fence, nobody he knew had ever been inside the fence. It was a matter of history that no kid ever had been in Rosehill. Maybe some adults had, but since you never saw any—not even a guy with a lawnmower—that was questionable too.

Not that he didn't want to get inside, just once, though it was hard to say what would happen to you. Policemen could have a station somewhere behind the trees. They might come out only if some kid got inside. They'd run you down and put you into an orphanage if they caught you. Still, even that didn't seem very likely. Nothing happened inside the fence at Rosehill, nothing had ever happened.

"How long has Rosehill been here?" he asked.

"Oh, for a long, long time. Before the city swallowed it up. This was all countryside then."

"So what did they do with it then, when there wasn't any city here?"

"It was a cemetery, Allie."

"And when people in the city died, they took them here?"

"Yes, that must have been what they did. No one saw them, but that's what must have happened."

"And the people are all still there on the hill?"

"Oh, no, Allie. Nobody's there. They've all gone home."

"They didn't go to that place...What's it called?"

"Well, they went wherever they needed to. It was a long time ago, and you couldn't see much from the fence. One morning there was a big crowd on the hill. Then they started off and

went down into the woods. After that, they must have scattered. As a matter of fact, they weren't the first ones. It happened lots of times before."

"Why didn't somebody climb the fence and go over and ask them what they were doing?"

"You *can't* climb the fence. You know that, Allie. That's why you never see anybody walking around Rosehill. We can't go in there."

You could sedge all the way to the other side of Rosehill to an alley along which ran the backs of apartment buildings. At this distance, their backstairs looked like they were made of toothpicks and combs. The buildings were shadowless in the noon light, Rosehill's trees cast no shadow, the rolling grass was yellowish-green like the grass at their feet. It could have been a golf course where all the players had come in for a midday break. But it was another place, a place outside the city. The two places really did not touch.

He lay in bed that night watching an airplane's three running lights move from edge to edge across his window. That high the sky was the color of a blackboard smeared over with an even layer of chalk. The people in the plane could still see the setting sun, but in his room it was already night. It took a long time for the night to come in summer. The plane was going somewhere else. Maybe the people who'd been in Rosehill got on a plane. There was plenty of room to land it there. When they'd been dead for enough time, a big silver DC-3 arrived, the crew rolled up the stairway, and everybody boarded. Then they went home. They'd probably died by themselves. So there had to be a way to get back to the people who were still alive. He'd never stop if it happened to him.

But it would never happen to him. They were beginning. They were someplace where death didn't happen. The people he needed were with him, here, in this apartment. He remembered something then, another apartment, hot and dark, while outside the street was broad and cold and treeless, with a red sky above. A place in a bad dream.

He needed to forget that place. It occurred to him that there might be a night game on his radio, a small crystal set he'd put together himself. It only got two channels, but luckily one received play-by-play ball games, at least at night. He put on the earphones and tuned the set. A pinging sound came from what he thought might be the stratosphere, beyond the path of even the airplane, and then the calm, solid voice came clearly through the earpieces.

"...the pitch low and outside. Oh and two. Raphael's had a pretty good season at bat so far. He's been batting two nine seven."

The polite roar of a baseball crowd bubbled up between the announcer's words. The patter was interrupted by the hard *rack* of the bat connecting with the ball.

"It's over the backstop into the stands. Foul ball."

The announcer's partner spoke. "Yes, Dizzy, it's a beautiful night here at Arcadia Stadium. A good crowd's turned out. A meteor shower's going on overhead, and the air's full of popcorn butter and sauerkraut. Every single object in the park—no matter how small—is brightly illuminated, but it's not a harsh light, Dizzy, it's not an unnatural light. No, everybody knows it's nighttime now, and we're glad for it. We're pleased to be sitting in the stands, eating sausage and cake, smelling popcorn and fireworks on the June wind, watching the slow, dignified rotation of the players on the spotless grass beneath us."

"Gabriel's getting ready for the pitch. He's three hundred and sixteen for four hundred and seventy-two for the ages. It's a curveball a slider a dipper high and inside or right down the middle. Gabriel connects. Up up it goes. Santiago's going back in centerfield. He's going he's going. That ball's up there, folks. It's out of the park. It's never coming down. It's up with the meteors."

Chapter Thirty-One

“She’s just your age, Allie. Go on down the hall and ask her. See if she wants to go to the show.”

All day the day before he’d sat on the steps watching the movers. One guy could lift anything by himself. Tables, sofas, pianos, anything. But he didn’t see the new people. They must have come later, when the movers were done. And she hadn’t appeared this morning. Now they’d eaten lunch and he was getting ready to go to the movies.

“Knock on the door and introduce yourself. Say you’re going to the matinee and would she like to go along.”

This was probably impossible. He couldn’t see himself doing that, knocking on the door of some strange people’s apartment and asking about a girl he’d never seen before. Besides, it sounded suspiciously like one of those boy-girl deals, sitting together in the theatre. What would they do afterward? There were all sorts of rules he didn’t know and didn’t want to know.

Bill said, “Ah, go on, son. She’s more scared than you are. She hasn’t got any friends, and you can show her the ropes.”

That seemed okay – showing her the ropes. He could point out which street you took to get to school, who let their mean dog run round out in the alley.

He could tell that her mother really liked the idea by her voice when she turned from the door and called, “Julia! It’s Allie from next door! He wants to know if you’d like to go to the movies.”

He fidgeted in the hallway waiting for the tiny, simpering girl in a pink skirt, blond curls held back out of her doll-blue eyes by rhinestone clips.

Julia sauntered through the doorway, sizing him up. She was nearly as tall as he was, wearing jeans and a red-and-white checked sleeveless shirt. Her arms were tanned and sinewy. Her short, curly hair was dark brown, not blond. They stood in the hallway for several moments, not saying anything, but he could clearly read the question in her bold gaze, “Are you just another boy, or have you got something to show me?” Her eyes were dark brown. Two things occurred to him: he’d never been able to read anybody’s mind before – particularly a girl’s – and he’d never paid this much attention to the color of anybody’s eyes.

“Pleased to meet you,” Julia said.

“Same here.” It wasn’t much of a response, but he was surprised he could get that much out. He was beginning to have doubts about the plan to show her the ropes. He was fairly sure she already knew the ropes. In fact, he suspected that she knew plenty of secrets, maybe even some secrets about him – if only she’d be willing to tell them.

“What movie are you going to see?” she asked. What movie? He didn’t know. He didn’t really pay attention to what was on. He’d watch anything they showed at Saturday matinees.

But Julia obviously *did* think about what was rolled into her head. There were probably whole categories of stuff she wouldn't waste her time on, while he was happy just to goggle at the screen.

"It's cowboy movies, I think. Westerns. There's always a couple of cartoons before." He shouldn't have said anything about the cartoons. She probably thought they were childish.

"Okay, then. That sounds great. Thanks for asking me. I'll get my sweater."

"We used to live in another part of the city." Julia said as they walked to the show, "It was different there."

"Different how?"

"We lived by a big park. And the school had murals on all the walls." What were murals?

"You go by Rosehill on the way to our school," he said lamely.

"Oh? That's a pretty name. Is there really a hill and are there roses on it?" She glanced at him, smiling.

Everytime he looked at her face, he noticed something different. It was as though he couldn't see her face all at once but had to take it in by the details. Now he noticed a small circle of hair that lay against her cheekbone. And next to the black curl were four freckles you could only see close up. They nearly faded out against her tan. Several other freckles spread in a tiny path across and over her nose. He was staring at the long black eyelashes of her left eye when she turned her head away.

"You can't go into Rosehill, Julia" he said ominously, ignoring her question. He suspected she was teasing him about the roses.

"Just grown-ups call me Julia. I like Julie. Why's that?"

"It's another place. It doesn't touch this place." Saying this, he realized how little sense it made. Probably a lot of what he told himself would sound ridiculous if he said it out loud. Anyway, now that he'd started, he tried to explain. "The two places – where we are and where it is – you can see inside, but they're separated."

"You mean you can't get in?"

"I guess you could climb over the fence. But anything could happen after you did."

"Like what?"

"People are buried there a while. Then one day they go home."

"That doesn't sound very dangerous."

"Well, I wouldn't want to get in their way," he said vaguely.

They could now see the theatre marquee up ahead in the next block. Its name was spelled out in lightbulbs, "Paradise," and below there was "Now Playing...*The Jordan Trail* and *The Peacemaker With Selected Short Subjects.*"

The lobby of the Paradise was like the Great Hall of Egypt on field trips. Columns with hieroglyphs rose up several stories to the painted ceiling which seemed to illustrate either the finding of Moses by the pharaoh's daughter or slaves building the pyramids. At this distance, it was hard to tell. Two galleries circled the hall. Kids hung perilously over the red-enamelled gallery railings which were supported by lyres and wreathes. The most impressive thing about the hall, though, were the mechanical statues of winged mythological beings, which reached up to the lowest of the galleries. From time to time, these griffins or sphinxes or seraphim fluttered their wings and turned their massive heads as though they were watching the stream of kids moving through the hall. They did this all at once, after remaining still for a long time, so you were likely to be jolted if you weren't prepared. In fact when it now happened, Julie started and clutched his arm.

When she touched him, all at once he felt at rest and would gladly have stood stock-still there in the middle of the marble hall, kids jostling by him. He happened to be gazing at a poster advertising *The Peacemaker*. It showed a tall, lean preacher dressed in a long black coat. He was standing on a little gray mound that was probably supposed to be the summit of mountain because his coattails were blowing back and his long hair was waving like a flag and behind you could see empty plains stretching off to another set of mountains infinitely far away. Did peace come from a guy like that? Or did it come from the trim, sunburned schoolgirl who had now let go of his arm?

He couldn't remember before feeling like anything was missing in his life. But there was. She was missing. Now he felt as though she'd been away on a long trip, and she was back, living right next to him, down the same hall. It was like the skywriting sometimes said, All was well.

"Would you like some popcorn?" He was very proud that he'd said this. The words seemed particularly well-chosen. He was surprised that he'd asked her what was just right.

"Sure. I love popcorn."

He bought two boxes of buttered popcorn at the concession stand, which met the grand standards of everything else in the hall. A giant plaster cornucopia sat on top of it, pouring out blocks of chocolate, scoops of ice cream, hot dogs, and (for some reason) raisins.

"Is the balcony okay?" he asked her.

"I always sit in the balcony. It's the best place." Did she really like the things he liked? How many things, he wondered? Was that what happened when you grew up and got a wife? You had to decide on how many things you liked together?

Two stairways wide as trucks curved up on each side of the concession stand. They were covered in a rug so thick that kids were rolling down the staircase, cushioned by the carpeting. On the mezzanine there were big curved sofas and armchairs covered in pink-striped cloth.

The theatre itself looked like pieces of various movies had spilled off the screen and been used to decorate it. The thick maroon curtains that framed the screen were taken from capes and ballgowns. The boxes jutted out like the bows of pirate ships, and the balconies were crusted with plaster dolphins and cherubs. Above the boxes and balconies there were gigantic fake windows painted with more scenes, like baby Moses and the pyramids, that you couldn't quite make out. You could tell that there were lots of ladies with bosoms, though, and men wearing swords and stockings and winged horses and wizards with long gray beards.

But the ceiling was his favorite part of everything because it was studded with stars. In some ways it was like the star museum, the points of silver way above, the same ever-dim lights. But the stars at the Paradise were softer, they actually twinkled. They were movie stars, above a balmy Bagdhad Tropic Sea Ancient Roman nighttime sky. You could tuck your legs up under you and slide down and you felt like the faded plush seat was a chariot floating past the buccaneer balconies up to the ceiling stars. He turned to explain to Julie about the stars but she was already looking up. Her skin looked much paler here, and the lines of her nose and mouth and chin looked older. He suddenly knew how she'd look when she grew up. He knew the scent of her skin like brown sugar and woodsmoke. He knew what the thick dark hair would feel like against her back as they danced. He knew her now and as she would be in years to come, how she would be forever.

The lights dimmed still further, the curtains made of ballgowns parted, and a cartoon came on. She laughed more than he did at the cartoons, in fact more than anybody around them. He understood that she would always laugh hard at the cartoons, even when she grew up.

The newsreel began and kids stopped paying attention and started running down the aisles and the kids in the front row of the balcony threw popcorn down on the kids right below. The newsreel guy was going on about people breaking in from what he called the Other Side

and how a few of these people had been lost track of but the Authorities would eventually discover their Identities and send them back. "Spokespeople Elsewhere," the narrator said gravely, "are at a loss to explain what's gotten into these souls. For eons a healthy Fear of the Unknown had kept them Across the River. 'Cosmic anarchists can't be allowed to disrupt the Healthy Balance of Eternity,' a spokesperson said."

But everybody calmed down when the credits started roll on *The Jordan Trail*, with Wagon Master Arch Michaels leading a band of Chosen Pioneers into and out of the Wilderness and finally across (obviously) the Jordan River to the Western Lands that they'd been given by the Great White Father but even when they got there they still had to deal with hellish weather, demonic savages, broken promises and broken hearts. Naturally, they didn't know any of that as they set out inexplicably in the middle of the night in December. They had a couple of rivers to cross, not just the Jordan at the end, never knowing exactly how deep they were, with the sheep struggling to stay afloat (all of the rivers had strong currents), and the men holding on for dear life while the women lashed the horses and the children (pretty much like the children in the audience) cheered or cried. They wouldn't even have made it across the first river if Arch Michaels hadn't known the right place to ford it. Some of the men argued with him, and one of the men went off mad and tried his own route and he and his wife and horses and children instantly drowned.

Then Ruth appeared, who you could tell right away would be The Girl. One morning she came wandering into where the wagons were camped because her family had been travelling in a smaller party that had been horribly massacred. When she finished describing this, she fainted (some of the boys slid out of their seats pretending to faint themselves). Arch and the Old-Timer went to see what they could do, even though it wasn't clear how much they could help out since Ruth had already explained that everybody had been horribly massacred, but this provided an opportunity when they got to the charred, upturned wagons to show a close-up of one person's hand tied to a wheelspoke and the Old-Timer turned violently away and probably threw up. The boys in the audience were interested in knowing more about this, but the plot moved on.

Because it was still winter so they were travelling through a blizzard and much of the time monster dogs attacked them. Arch shot some of them and they bounced beautifully in the snow drifts. "Why, they were Hounds from Hell," Ruth said afterwards. It was pretty much up to Ruth or the Old-Timer to make comments on everything that happened because Arch never said much. In fact this was one of their problems. The two of them argued a lot, or really, Ruth argued while Arch silently listened to her and then strode silently away, with Ruth sputtering something like, "Why, Arch Michaels, you...you..."

Then Monte Star showed up, a gambler who used to be Arch's pardner when Arch was sort of Wild. Monte decided he'd ride along with the wagons until they came to Fort Despondency, dividing his time making Ruth like him and riding off with Troublemakers until he got mixed up with Sheep Rustlers. Torrential rains and tornadoes followed the bitter cold, and it was all Arch could do to keep the wagons and the sheep herd moving forward across the barren landscape. One night as young Joe Pastiche was riding herd on the sheep in rain so bad they was frogs in your coffee, as the Old-Timer put it, the Sheep Rustlers sneaked up and bound Joe head and foot and threw him in a hole for dead and made off with all the sheep. But a bunch of Savages happened by and took Joe captive, and when Arch learned that Joe wasn't dead but a captive, he went off to both rescue him. When the Head Savage wouldn't let Joe go, Arch got so mad that it set off a storm that really did rain down frogs, and the Savages got scared and let Joe go.

By this time they'd made it up into the mountains. Monte was still stirring things up including kissing Ruth whenever he got the chance. Arch knew that Monte was Trouble and told him he wouldn't do nothing to him if just cleared off. But Monte was spoiling for a fight. Everybody in the camp was watching as Arch and Monte paced off a hundred cubits right at the edge of a big arroyo. Then they drew their guns but naturally Arch was faster and his shot knocked Monte clear off the ledge and down into the pit that didn't have no bottom as far as made a difference, as the Old-Timer said.

Finally, they crossed the River Jordan and arrived at Fort Despondency where the Colonel who turned out to be Ruth's grandfather welcomed the Pilgrims to the lands they'd been promised by the Great White Father. To nobody's surprise, though, there was still trouble brewing. The grandfather said that the Savages were still on the warpath and the Rustlers had vowed to take revenge on Arch and had joined up under the big boss hereabouts, Phil Stein who owned almost the whole town of Despondency.

Arch telegraphed the Great White Father about who owned what and the Father telegraphed back saying he'd promised the Land Across the River to Arch and his people. But Phil's position was that a man owned what he could take and hold, and pretty soon he was running settlers off their ranches. Spunky Ruth had got her own ranch that belonged to her massacred family and she was plum determined to make a go of it even though Arch didn't think girls should be running ranches and herding sheep. Phil not only shot all Ruth's hands, he kidnapped Ruth for a hostage and to marry her. When Arch learned about that, he was fighting mad. He laid an ambush at the next place where the ranchers were going to be run off, and when Phil and his gang showed up, there was a big shoot-out.

Arch and his boys were naturally getting the best of it when suddenly the savages showed up, whooping and calling on the Spirit of Monte who was now one of their gods. Ruth managed to wriggle out of her ropes where she was tied to a watering trough and escape. But then Arch and Ruth were stuck in the barn and the savages shot fiery thunderbolts into the chaff, and flames leapt up on all sides and Arch and the Old-Timer and a couple of others were just about out of ammunition. But at the last possible minute when a burning timber had just narrowly missed Ruth and the Old-Timer got an arrow through his elbow, they heard the faint bleat of the Trumpet which grew in volume until its sound was enough to knock the Savages clear off their feet and scare the hell out of Phil's gang. Ruth's Grandfather and his Host galloped up and Arch swung out of the barn on a rope with six-guns blazing and every one of the gang was wounded in the legs or arms or, in Phil's case, his hand when he tried to pull a derringer out of his vest and Arch shot the gun right out of his fingers.

Then everything ended okay with the settlers and their land except probably Arch and Ruth were going to get married.

He got up mechanically, as he always did because it was hard to comback from the place where movies happened. He was thinking that if there was a rope tied to the balcony, he and Julie could swing over the heads of the kids leaving the movie, and if demon savages ambushed him in the lobby, his guns would blaze and the lobby'd be riddled with lead, and then he and Julie would get on their horses and ride off to the Western Lands.

The street's late-day sunlight hurt his eyes. Coming out of the Paradise was startling, with the sudden light. It was hard to come away from that other world inside.

As they walked along home, he realized Julie was watching him. Had he been rude and silent since they'd left the theatre or, more likely, had he been as usual babbling about six-guns and palominos and what he'd do if there were savages lurking behind the fire hydrants? He wasn't completely responsible for what he did when he came out of the Paradise.

"You really like the movies, don't you, Allie?"

"Yeah, I guess." He added defensively, "Everybody likes the movies."

"It must be hard to come back. That's the trouble with having an imagination—switching back and forth all the time between two different places."

"What different places?"

"Well, here," she nodded at a butcher's they were passing, "and wherever else it is you're imagining." He was starting to understand how important it was to listen very carefully to what Julie said because she was a lot smarter than he was. "I think imagination's a lot like remembering. For instance, you could imagine that you and I have known each for a long, long time, or you could just remember that we lived together somewhere else. Can't you imagine that? I can."

It was happening again—the feeling he'd had when she'd held his arm in the Paradise lobby: Nothing was missing. They had begun. Julie was right: He could easily imagine that they'd always known each other.

Chapter Thirty-Two

When he awakened, the breeze through his open window carried the smell of grass and the white flowers that grow on the bushes outside warming in the sun. At once he thought of Julie and how cut grass and flowers were joined to the scent of suntan lotion and the cool zinc and icewater in the soda pop cooler at the corner grocery. In fact he wondered if what he was doing these days could be called thinking at all: Being with her was like doing something that took the concentration of your whole body, like swimming or dreaming. His mind took the world in when he was with her, but the rest of the world was in some way one with her.

There were times she'd ask, "What *are* you looking at, Allie?" And he realized he'd been staring at maybe the cloth of her sundress, the crease in the short sleeve where it met the seam on her shoulder, and the faded buttery color with the yellow four-petalled flowers printed on it. And its smell of ironing and laundry smell mixed with the scent of her skin. When her skin was warme in the sun, like the white flowers it had a different scent than when it was cool—it wasn't like anything else in the world. The smell was a kind of taste, too. He could taste her skin.

Or maybe it would be that he'd been staring at the color of her eyes in the patch of afternoon sunlight where they sat behind the tall bushes that ran along one side of their building. People's eyes were supposed to be blue or brown and that was all. But the brown in Julie's eyes had bits of black and dark red that made him think of fall, the red-brown the leaves turned. Her hair was solid black—black as black leather shoes. Still, as the summer went along, there were strands that turned the red-brown color of her eyes.

In the afternoon the sun slanted through openings in the bushes and warmed the bricks against which they leaned, and the bushes made a robber's cave where he drew ships and airplanes in the dirt, and she drew people. He was better at drawing than she, but often he stopped and watched her scratch the outline of a dress in the gray dust, and the bones in his fingers melted and he dropped his drawing-stick and a shiver would spread down his back. Or as they sat side by side in the cave, their backs against the warm bricks, she would tell him a story. The stories were about her and him, what would happen as they got older, the things they'd do. They'd go to places she'd heard of (but he hadn't)—Bombay and Cairo and Toronto. They'd be spies or centaurs, and she would fall overboard, or he'd be captured by flying giants, and they'd think the other was dead, but after years, they'd meet again. Then they'd live in a pyramid in impenetrable jungle or in an underground city. And after a while there would be only her voice, pouring over his body.

They were good stories, but it really didn't matter about the spies or centaurs because it was the sound of her voice alone that mattered and it said, *Everything will turn out right*. As she concentrated on telling the story, she'd take his hand. And if any words at all came into his head, they were only, Let it go on, don't stop.

He watched her all summer, never knowing if she noticed or not. He got to depending on the way she surprised him. He hungered for it.

There were milestones in his meditation on her, like the stickball game that started in the alley every evening after supper. The first time they chose up, they were on different teams—his batting, hers fielding. She didn't ask anybody what position she should play but walked purposely to the spot between second base and third. She was a shortstop! Not only was she a shortstop, she knew she was a shortstop. When you had a claim on a position like that, you had to be stupid or good.

The game began. The first batter drove the small hard-rubber spudball into center and made second before the fielder got it on a bounce off Mr. Hegenberger's garage door. The second guy struck out, but the third batter bunted and got on first. The guy on second was stopped on third. So far nothing had come Julie's way. The fourth batter was Rusty Hannegan, one of those big dumpy kids who flopped through life, but when he got a bat in his chubby hand, turned into a fast, dangerous piece of machinery. Warming up Rusty fouled the first pitch and was laying for the second h, the bat coming up toward the spud about the time it left the pitcher's hand and snapping it on the sweet spot two inches down from the tip.

The ball streaked off straight and level like it was aimed between Julie's eyes. Julie swung like dancer off her right foot. Nobody could blame her. Personally, he wouldn't have wanted anything to do with Rusty's liner. But she wasn't dodging, she was pulling to the left so her glove could start the arc up and over as fast and as mean as Rusty's swing, swapping the spud down into the pocket. She pulled the ball from the glove as she kicked back on her right leg, throwing like her forearm and wrist were made of braided leather. She whipped the ball to home right before the guy on third touched base. She settled back into her spot between second and third. The secondbaseman nodded to her and the thirdbaseman said serious and low, "Okay," like she was a guy.

She was a lefthander. That was as surprising as anything else.

In the last couple of weeks of summer, the days got cool and rainy. Sometimes they lay on the floor of her room reading, or they played a game on his dining room table. Sometimes they just met in the hall and sat on the stairs, leaning out of the way when somebody passed by. And sometimes when the rain let up, they walked to her grandmother's. Her grandmother lived in the littlest house he'd ever seen, filled with things that came from foreign places, like China: The tall tomato-colored chest that went to the ceiling or the coatrack carved in the shape of a dog-like dragon. Although the parlor was filled with several lamps, their thick red shades filtered the light so the room felt like it was lit by a dying fire.

It was hard to understand what the grandmother said. She had some sort of foreign accent, but also the things she said were themselves confusing. Often these things were put in the form of advice (or what sounded like advice): "You cannot chootz too many!" "Don't lizten to storydellers, zey lie to all Endings," "Take the chanze you might be azleep." But the one she repeated over and over was, "Be mindvul." When she said this she looked directly at him, so he figured that Julie didn't need this advice, or not as much as he did apparently.

"What's it mean, when your grandma keeps telling me, 'Be mindvul, Allie'?" he asked her.

"Well, I guess she wants you to pay attention."

"Pay attention to what?"

"You'll have to ask her that."

The explosive thunderstorms of July had passed, and now the rain came cool and steadily. Her grandmother lit a few coals in the tiny house's tiny fireplace and they drank tea that tasted like sweet carrots and ate biscuits shaped like buttons. They played a game whose

rules he never quite understood, although Julie and her grandmother were obviously experts. First you put together a castle (or maybe a parking garage) made of cardboard with flimsy accordion-like stairways. Then you moved painted pebbles through this paper labyrinth according to what happened when the grandmother spun the hands on a toy clock. There were three windows set into the face of the clock, and everytime the hands went round, different pictures appeared in the windows..

The most puzzling aspect of this puzzling game is that it seemed to also involve fortune-telling. In fact, they often stopped moving the pebbles around altogether while the grandmother spun the hands and explained what the pictures meant. The explanations were like her advice: You might understand the individual words, but they didn't go together right. Mostly the fortunes were directed at Julie, who clearly thought they were important. Usually he'd lose interest in whatever the grandmother was telling her—since he couldn't understand it anyway—and he'd simply continue his study of Julie. This place was another part of who she was, and the Chinese fortune-telling grandmother.

Sometimes he'd simply fall asleep in the deep chair with green Chinese boats floating on its cushions. One afternoon when he'd fallen asleep only for what seem like a minute or two, he was abruptly awakened by the grandmother speaking to him quite sharply.

"Lizen, Allie, lizen to me!" she said, taking his hand and wagging it gently side to side. It was hard to open his eyes and pay attention. In fact, even when he thought he'd finally gotten his eyes half-open, he couldn't be sure. Maybe he was only seeing the grandmother in a dream. Julie wasn't in her usual place across the table. Raindrops covered the window like a second sheet of pebbled glass. Their thrumming was mixed with the grandmother's slurred and urgent words. She was talking too fast.

"Please, slow down. I can't understand what you're telling me." He grew irritated. "Anyway, what is it you want? You're too hard to understand. Nothing you ever say makes sense."

"Think, Allie. Think about how it's been with you. All the time like that. *All the time*, Allie. Now you must be mindful."

He suddenly realized that in this dream, or whatever it was, she was speaking clearly.

"Yeah, yeah. I've got to be mindful. You've told me that a hundred times."

She sighed, and continued in a gentler tone, "Do you remember when you lost Julia, Allie? The first time? When you don't pay attention, everything's lost. You were not mindful. It's terrible to contemplate, Allie: First you lose someone, then you find her, and then she's lost again and again. She wants you for the keeping, but you're ever for the losing."

"She wants me for the keeping...I'm ever for the losing." He was sitting in the Chinese chair, but he was elsewhere, sleeping or sick with fever or drowning at the bottom of a shallow river. It wasn't far to the surface. He could see the tips of Chinese willows dipping down and spreading ripples and Chinese-red goldfish gulping air. The grandmother's words, though, were holding him down like riverbottom silt. He'd never shift the words from his chest unless he said them, filled his mouth with them, but if he spoke the words, the water would come in, and he'd drown.

"I know you're frightened, Allie," he heard the grandmother say from the riverbank. "You've been sinking too long. But now it's time to come up. Come up now, Allie. Just float to the surface."

Julie sat by her grandmother on the riverbank. She dipped her finger into the river's surface and drew a line in the water. "Just concentrate on this, Allie," she said. "Just float like this." He swallowed something sharp and hard and it hurt, but he took it in, and as he did, his

wrists came free and his hands began to flop in the current. His legs rose, and his hips rose to meet them. His chest filled. And he floated to the surface of the river.

Julie and her grandmother were sitting in their chairs at the table, worriedly watching him.

When they left Julie's grandmother's house, the rain had stopped. The air was still and cool. They walked under the elms. The tree trunks and the asphalt of the street were black. Julie's hair was black and tight with curls from the rain. The grass on the parkway was greener than it had yet been that summer.

"I must have fallen asleep at your grandma's," he said.

"When was that? I thought you were wide awake. We were playing the game."

"It was when we stopped. She was telling your fortune the way she usually does, so I can't understand her, and I guess I just went to sleep. And then she grabbed my hand and told me to listen. She said she had something to tell me."

Julie stopped and turned to him. "This is important, Allie. It's important you remember what she said. Can you remember?"

"I guess." She had laid her palm gently on his chest, over his heart. Her forehead was wrinkled in concentration. She was saying something in her eyes—maybe a question, maybe she was asking him to do something he had to do for her—and she was trying to tell him, in her eyes. "She said 'you wanted me for the keeping but I was forever for the losing.'"

Julie looked away, down at the sidewalk. "And did you know what she meant?"

"She said if I didn't pay attention, everything'd be lost. And she said what she always says to me."

"And what's that, Allie. Say what it is."

"Oh, you know, Julie. 'Be mindful.'"

"Listen to me, Allie," She turned again to him and took both of his hands in hers. "You won't be here forever. And you won't ever be here again if you don't listen to what she tells you. You've got to understand it, Allie. I *do* want you for the keeping."

He had never taken her hand before, but did that now, and they continued down the sidewalk without saying anything more. They crossed a street and now were walking beside Rosehill. The chainlink fence between them and the forbidden space beyond seemed only that now—a fence. You could climb over it and jump down on to the imperishable lawn, ancient as bristlecone pines. You could walk through the woods and climb the hill itself. He felt as though he and Julie were opening a long-closed house. And they'd go on opening doors, exploring passageways. There wasn't anywhere they couldn't go.

"Let's go inside," he said.

"No, Allie, it's Rosehill. Nobody can go in there. You said so yourself."

"But *we* can. Nothing's closed anymore. We can go where we want."

In fact, they'd come to a place where the high fence was interrupted by a kind of gate, although it had been chained shut so long no one ever thought of it as an entrance. Who ever went into Rosehill? The lock was rusted, but he could pull one side of the gate open wide enough from them to slip through. Then they were standing on the other side. He wondered if they'd ever leave.

"This isn't right, Allie. I can't go any farther. My legs won't work."

"Are you scared?" It had never occurred to him that Julie could be scared.

"No, I mean that I feel all weak, like when you're going to be sick."

"Maybe I could help you." He awkwardly placed his arm around her shoulder, and she pressed against him, fitting into him so his holding her wasn't awkward anymore. They walked toward the woods. She was swaying a little, so he clutched her tighter to his side. He too began

to feel a little dizzy, but he couldn't think about that. He had to have all his strength to help her. He wondered why they weren't turning back, while at the same time he knew they couldn't return, not before they got to the woods.

He glanced at her face. She had her eyes closed, letting him guide her. Her face was very white against her hair.

The woods was really just a thick screen of trees beyond which was a pond, the one-time quarry now filled with water. Objects of all kinds were, surprisingly, strewn among the low, weedy trees. A lot of people had been here, for there were baby carriages and spoons and open suitcases full of moldy cloth and small bones and stubbed-out cigarettes. Here and there were mysterious little rubber pockets filled with cream and hard, shrunken little piles of cat feces. They were all things, now that he saw them up close, that you didn't want to touch. You didn't even want to have them near you.

So he tried to steer Julie well away from them, and he was relieved when they got to the edge of the quarry, which seemed altogether cleaner. In fact, a brisk early autumn wind was now ruffling the water. Cattails bent at the water's edge. There was even some kind of waterbird gliding around in the middle. He helped her to sit down.

"Open your eyes, Julie. It's better here."

She stared at the pond for some minutes without saying anything. The bird in particular seemed to fascinate her. She whispered something, and he bent closer.

"What...is...that...animal?" she asked. The bird swam nearer. He could see its strong curved neck, its snake-like eyes. It was larger than he'd at first thought and very white.

"It's a swan, I think."

"A...a swan? How can it be? I think it's dangerous." The swan was swimming straight toward them. Maybe it thought they had food. The only way he figured the swan could hurt them would be through stupidity. It looked very dumb. Still, the closer it got, the bigger it seemed. "Make it go away, Allie."

It now looked like a mechanical swan, one of those swan-boats that you saw in amusement parks, except this one was unmistakably alive. The swan's feathers ruffled in the breeze, the beak opened and shut. It lifted its wings away from its body. Perhaps it was threatening them. He picked up a stone and threw it in the swan's general direction, but if anything, this only seemed to spur the swan to pick up its speed toward them. He found a long branch and got ready to repel the swan if it should try to come on land. As it came within reach, he began to stab at it. The swan changed direction and began to patrol up and down the bank.

Astonishingly, Julie began to cry. There wasn't any choice now—the swan had to be driven away. Using the branch, he tested the depth a little way from the edge of the quarry. It seemed shallow enough, so he began to wade out toward the malevolent bird. As it drew nearer on its next pass, he struck out at it, hitting it across the bill. The swan spread its great wings to their full extent and beat the water. Its strong neck whipped about, and it struck at him, snake-like, with its beak. He waded in further, beating the swan as hard as he could, but its huge body easily absorbed the blows. The wind grew stronger, or perhaps the bird's wings alone were creating great rushes of air. All he could hear was the sound of the wind and Julie's crying.

And he heard the whistle of the branch as he whipped it behind him and then swung it out toward the creature's black mineral eye. When the stick struck the animal's eye, it shrank back and for the first time made a noise, a kind of moaning whistle.

The momentum had carried him forward into deeper water and he fell. The swan beat its wings in pain, one wingbeat striking him and pushing him under.

He was under the Chinese river again, the same current pulling him away, the same weight holding him down. He struggled to the surface and he saw Julie through the froth of

water stirred up by the swan's wings. Her lips were moving. He shook his head to clear his ears, and the rushing wind at first muffled her words.

He sank beneath the surface, and as he did, he heard her now cry, "Be mindful of me, Allie. Oh, Allie, be mindful."

Then his body shot down. The water was clear enough that he could see the ledges and cornices of stone that made up the quarry's ancient face. The stone was very white. The water grew warmer as his body sank deeper. He thought in passing how surprising that was—the water so clear and so warm. And Julie so far above.

Chapter Thirty-Three

A small live coal sat on his tongue, pain made worse by his paralysis. He couldn't spit it out. He would have even swallowed it, but it went on burning through his tongue. Another pain supplanted it: The skin on the back of his right hand had broken out with boils. He wanted to scratch them, to break the boils open, even at the risk of infecting them with his filthy nails. The intolerable itch had to be assuaged, however briefly.

In fact he was starting to realize every inch of his skin was in torment. Surely he would burst out of it, this fried casing stretched to its limit. How did anyone fit inside these disgusting bags crammed with thick slabs of organ, spurting juices, snarled nerves? Parts of him were scorched with fever, frigid, congealed, fractured, gunshot, crushed.

Most horrible of all was the imprisonment. The lockdown into this body, this blindered sight, this crawl across the living earth. This entry into hell.

The contorted mouths of demons were centimeters from his ear, shouting blasphemies into his head. They were clanging white-hot bells. They had started up a compressor the size of a planetary body and they were sand-blasting asteroids. A chorus of maggot-colored demons was screeching his name in unison. "Vawowawowa ...nenenenen." A police siren was sounding above the racket, a blating, high-pitched "Yap-yap-yap-yap-yap" – in time to his heartbeat.

There it was, like a small and hostile animal in his chest, pounding away, shoving blood into the various centers and outlying regions: This meaty pulsing that discharged gas out of his lungs, up his neck, spewing from his mouth. Then when that fetid air had been expelled, he sucked in a worse miasma of licorice, alcohol, sweat, and perfume.

"Vaughan!" The caterwauling became coherent. "Dr. Vaughan!" Then the demons' squawking petered out as they fell to murmuring among themselves. They turned down the volume on the hellish machines..

He could hear rain beating down.

Maybe it was beating down on him. He was wet. The demons had slathered him with sticky fluid. This made him feel a little better. The thumping of his heart and the heaving of his lungs slowed. The physical anguish abated, replaced by simple nausea. His fingers twitched.

A seam split in the darkness and a painted screen of chipped and tarnished gilt emerged. A face appeared, an oval face with olive eyes, the face of a Florentine madonna. A cool breeze blew across the screen picking away tiny flakes of gold, one by one, until he could see what was beyond the screen – a mask made of colored patches assembling and re-assembling themselves on a video screen. The patches resolved themselves into other faces.

An entire telephone directory of names ran like ticker tape through his head. Images of castles, icebergs, furniture, oxen, maps, beetles, bottles, gardens, garters flipped across his vision like children's flashcards. Historical events began to compile themselves like museum

displays—Cortez sweating under his armor as he climbed a gleaming ramp of stones, frock-coated Europeans arguing in a paper-strewn hall. Recognition, identity, naming.

He knew all at once who it was who bent over him. It was Lipsky.

“Can you hear me, Albert?” Lipsky was saying. He straightened and spoke sharply to someone behind him. “What’s that geegaw glowing? Poke he’s not rain red.” The meaning of these words was very important to him. He strained to hear more clearly, to understand.

“Brain dead,” said the voice in the background. Yes, those words meant something. Now the question was, *What* did they mean? Then Lipsky spoke again.

“But the waves are starting to look normal. His...” Static set in again. “His bulls is wrong.” No, not “bulls” and “wrong.” It was “pulse” and “strong.”

“In my judgment, I think he’s going to be all right,” said Lipsky, quite clearly now.

A judgment, thought Vaughan. A judgment has been given. He opened his jaws, flapped his tongue in a way he hoped was right, but he couldn’t make words. Maybe that was because his mouth was like the mouth of a corpse. Like a mummy! he suddenly remembered. He was pleased with himself. Yes, every bit of moisture had dried up, his breath was stale from being bottled up for centuries like...Like a tomb! Bone powder flaked from his teeth. The fact that he could remember all these things, even make comparisons, strengthened his resolve. He made another effort, and finally words sighed out of him.

“That is your judgment,” he rasped. Lipsky squeezed his hand.

“Yes, Albert, I judge you’re going to live. But you were gone for quite a while—several minutes longer than any of the subjects before you.”

The last streaks of darkness and guilt blew away. A circle of artificial light, a lamp of some kind, glowed brightly above him and hurt his eyes. He turned his head. He saw plastic tubes starting somewhere beyond the circle of light and ending in his own body. He saw the brushed-metal side of a medical machine reflecting the light.

Now others had drawn near to where he lay. Some smiled, some wrinkled their foreheads and narrowed their eyes in concern, some nodded encouragingly.

“We were worried about you,” a woman said.

“Yes, you gave us a turn,” Lipsky agreed and smiled broadly.

One by one the people surrounding the table touched him, the men like Lipsky squeezing his his arm or hand, the women softly laying their palms on his chest or cheek. One gray-haired woman even kissed him. Then they stepped back into the gloom surrounding him, back to their duties.

Water was coming out of his eyes and overflowing into his hair, down his upper lip and into his mouth. He tasted salt. He was crying. Why? he wondered. It’s because they have received me, he thought then, they’ve drawn me to themselves. They’re happy I’m alive. He suddenly pictured dancers and remembered the scent of a hot stove, of warm bread.

Once long ago he’d gone hiking in the mountains near the sea. Fog had rolled in. He’d had to cross a footbridge spanning a deep gorge, and when he’d gotten midway on the bridge and looked back, the fog completely obscured the mountainside from which he’d just come, and looking forward, he saw the same thing—an impenetrable bank of fog. He said to himself, Perhaps I’ve entered the Void. Now again he stood in the middle of a bridge whose ends were completely obscured: He did not know the place where he’d begun or to which he’d come or to which he might be headed. But he could hear their voices—the words of the living and the dead—each summoning him with gladness. In the meantime, it was pleasant standing here between them, feeling the cool mist on his face, the nausea subsiding.

“I need to ask you, Albert, while everything still may be clear—How’s your memory? While you were gone, were you aware of...Of anything at all?”

Yes, now that Lipsky put it like that, he realized that he could easily remember. After all, he'd been paying attention.

Lipsky felt Vaughan's pulse, shone a light into his eyes, gripped his foot.

"Do you feel that?" Lipsky asked. Vaughan nodded. "Well, I think it's best you get some sleep now. You can answer questions later."

And Vaughan did go to sleep, but the divide between living sleep and waking now hardly seemed worth mentioning. The living always dreamed, he remembered. He dreamed of Julia.

* * *

A caretaker burned a small pile of leaves at the intersection of four asphalt paths. A cold front was coming. Vaughan pulled his scarf more tightly around his neck and watched a red deer lift its head and sniff the air. Snowflakes melted on its rusty coat and dark antlers. Now it leapt, in two great bounds, toward a pen at the back of its enclosure. Perhaps it had smelled a ghostly wolf.

He was a professional rememberer, and for the past few days he'd been composing a history, if something that would have no record could be called that. The important thing was to remember it all while his memory was still able to render each day faithfully, precisely—from the day he first saw her to the last day. He now was at the second year of his life together with Julia. They were about to buy a house.

When Lipsky had released him from the Institute, he returned to their house. Returning there had perhaps sparked it, the history of Julia. Anyway, the story's once-upon-a-time started as soon as he'd stepped through the front door. It had gone on spinning itself the next day as he boxed up her sweaters and her jeans. When he lifted away a soft cloud of her lingerie, he felt the skin of her hip the first time they'd made love. He opened her mail and saw her pen poised above her checkbook. When he gave her tennis racket to a young neighbor, he joked about her bullet-like serve. He called his sister and told her that he thought he'd discovered the appropriate ritual. Laughing, he thanked her. His sister concluded that he was probably reaching a psychological crisis.

He could tell the story to himself now because in its end was its beginning.

Leaning against the zoo fence, he saw Lipsky approaching a little beyond the intersection of the four paths. Vaughan sensed how difficult it was for Lipsky to continue asking him, badgering him for information. Science and nagging weren't compatible. Lipsky looked miserable as he sat down on the bench beside him.

"The old zoo," sighed Lipsky. "Where we had our first talk."

"I think we should form a Zoo Preservation Society, you and I. If you care about something, you should try to protect it. Don't you think so?"

Lipsky tried to smile. "Is that one of the things you learned?"

"Learned when, Lipsky?"

"Learned from death. It's no use, Albert. I know something happened to you. There was an experience. *But what kind of experience?*—that's what we need to work out. Both of us. You're kidding yourself if you think you can understand it by yourself."

"It's cold. Let's walk around." They got up and headed toward the porpoises, who were still careening around their tank like miniature submarines on a racetrack, impervious to winter. "They'll probably take them inside soon. The water in their tank will freeze. Do porpoises live in the arctic?"

"You could at least answer one question."

"What's that?"

"Simply confirm your awareness after you were placed in stasis, temporarily."

"All right, Lipsky, if that'll make you happy. I confirm it."

"And was any of it like what the others described—the light, the departed gathering round—all of that?"

"The departed." Each time the porpoises made the circuit and passed Vaughan, one of them turned its head slightly to watch him. Actually, since porpoises don't have necks, it had to sort of swerve off course to look at him. The porpoise was thinking something about him, perhaps wondering why somebody would be standing in the cold watching porpoises. An intelligent creature stuck in its tank, the porpoise had probably thought a lot about human zoo-watching rituals.

"The departed," Vaughan repeated, mostly to himself. "Well, that's true enough. They took their leave. They left. To go elsewhere."

"Albert," Lipsky said. "Albert, I think you really *were* the ideal observer. And now I wonder if you were more than that."

"What else would I be?"

"I think you may have something of a gift, for voyaging." Lipsky studied his face. Then he continued. "There are two kinds of travellers—there are the ones who travel so they can come back and tell stories."

"And the ones who go on travelling and don't."

"There aren't as many of those. Most people can't wait to get home and show the neighbors their slides."

"Maybe the second kind can't make out the story they're in and have to keep on till they figure it out. Like Ulysses."

"Wasn't that the poet's point? That he never did figure it out?"

"He had his wife, who loved him beyond all things." Vaughan paused. Then he he continued. "No, I wasn't a perfect witness," Vaughan said. "There was my wife..."

Lipsky nodded. "Yes, I considered Julia."

Vaughan was a little surprised, not least that Lipsky knew her name. "You thought it made no difference to me if I died because she was dead."

"No, I didn't think that. I thought that perhaps you'd convinced yourself of the chance she might be... Anyway, that she might be elsewhere."

They halted on the pathway. A small circus-striped kiosk was nearby. He was surprised because the paint was fresh and surprised that it was open in the winter and surprised there were children surrounding it. He wondered if a series of surprises was in store from now on. A fat man inside the kiosk was dispensing hot chocolate. The children and the man were carrying on an animated conversation.

"Albert, it's important that I understand, for myself. And if you'd rather we kept it between ourselves, then fine. It's not what I'd ideally want, but I suppose that's your right."

They stood face to face, two middle-aged men in their gray overcoats, gray hair, gray faces. The children raced past them without a glance. To them, Vaughan thought equably, he and Lipsky were as good as ghosts. Then he thought (another surprise!), There are no such thing as ghosts.

Lipsky laughed nervously. "I'm beginning to think that you were admitted to some sort of arcane knowledge that you can't reveal." He gazed at Vaughan earnestly, despite his laughter. "If that's so, then all right. That's all you have to tell me. Knowing that would be enough."

The cold wind quickened. There were tears in Lipsky's eyes. What did it matter what we told each other, as long as there was comfort in it? We are here for that, he remembered. For the comfort of another.

"No, it's not secret," he began. "It's not unexplainable. There really isn't any distance at all between life and death. There are fences, but only the usual ones. Nothing that isn't already familiar to all of us—living and dead." He paused. "You go through the gates as you come to them.. You've got a long way to go before you begin, and even longer before you're finished."

"Before you're finished...." Lipsky gazed at the striped kiosk as though it had fallen from the sky. "Once you said there was an alternative. Do you remember that? You said, Things may continue pretty much as they do in life."

"A grim prospect, you said."

"Isn't it? Don't we have a right either to oblivion or something more imaginative?"

"Why? That's how I've spent much of my life—obliviously imagining things."

"Has that changed now?"

"I didn't say I spent all my life like that. I fell in love with Julia."

Lipsky gripped Vaughan's arm. Through thick glove and heavy sleeve, he felt the strength of his grip. "You're too hard on yourself, Albert. You're as good a man as any of us has a right to expect." Lipsky sighed and released him. "You'll tell me what you can tell me when you're ready," he said. "I'm going home. The snow's starting to come down in earnest."

After Lipsky left, Vaughan sat down on a bench by the kiosk. It seemed warmer there. The kiosk was emitting a cloud of chocolate-scented steam. Several of the children he'd seen earlier were running around and around the kiosk, racing by his bench before they repeated their circuit. One or two of the children dropped out each time, until there were only two left—a boy and a girl about twelve years old. They were wearing oddly old-fashioned winter clothes: frogged wool overcoats, berets, thick kneesocks. Her coat, hat and socks were forest green, his were navy blue. They were tireless. Around and around they ran. Sometimes he chased her, sometimes she chased him. Their long fair hair blew back from under their caps. They laughed and cried out as they ran, never stopping. He could see their breath in the cold air.

And now he could see their footprints on the path before his bench. The snow had laid down its first coat. The snowfall made him feel warmer. The zoo no longer looked so dilapidated. He put his hand in his coat pocket and felt the small book he'd brought along, a study of some past century in the Old World. He'd begun reading history again. He was a historian, after all, a professional rememberer. There'd been a time when he'd felt the actual presence of a day in some past year, the way light fell in its gardens, the way an old zoo looked in the winter. He understood that this ability to remember the past was a gift and that part of comfort was the sharing of gifts.

He would go on telling the stories, not ever knowing the endings but being certain of this: The story goes on without an end.

As he'd done before, he thought of all those uncounted dead that had gone before him, and all the uncountable living that would succeed him, and he thought of all those others who lived on Earth now, along with him, riding on the fulcrum of these armies of souls, sharing their short lived hours, knowing just this time and no other. So it was. Here, wherever this was, and possibly Elsewhere as well: We are here for our mutual comfort, which is (like pretty much everything else in the universe) beyond our understanding.
