

## ABSTRACT

### THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

by Brian Nealon

I've always been fascinated by the arabesques behind daily life: the interconnectedness of all living things, the patterns they arrange around themselves, the rhythms at play between them. And I don't really get intoxicated all that often. The tracings of these rhythms can be found in all great art, though they're easier to see in belly dances, Irish gravestones, and the Chinese knots guarding the Heaven Temple walls. They're in the telling of a good story. I've worked to that end in this collection, with various approaches—different narrative styles, points of view, and effects—and, as a matter of course, with varying degrees of success.

THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

A Thesis

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## DEDICATION

For George E. Clark  
1921-1996

and

Andrew M. Radcliffe  
1975-2002

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## THE SANTIAGO PREMIERE OF *FICCION PULPA*

I did not like that *Ficción* movie from a few years back. I saw it in an old converted theater along the Huérfano strip in downtown Santiago. I'd heard of it, but had never been there. The place has chandeliers and red carpets, very classy. I remember thinking as my boyfriend Damien drove us into town for the show that it was funny we were going to see this famous film so bloody and scary in such a palace, where there should have been philharmonic or opera performances. The place is so big, with a huge screen that should have been perfect for the great *Ficción Pulpa* from the great USA. No other show was supposed to be quite like this one, though, so hard and hilarious.

Damien and I took seats right up in the front to make our eyes bleed. Why not make the most of it? The pistols were cannons, the screaming mouths were bottomless pits, the beatings and fights were between gods. And just when I'd lost my sense of time and place and slipped into the movie, the lights came up, drowning the picture, and people began murmuring, some hooting or shouting as if they blamed a dozing projectionist. But bringing up the lights in a theater is never an accident, and soon enough it was clear that the sirens we thought were in the last scene didn't belong in the one still playing.

Both exits under the screen burst open, overflowing with police. The movie had come alive. They connected from either side like showgirls in a kick line, but all in black riot gear with helmets and their machine guns pointed at us, yelling, "Be calm!" When the first one said that, Bruce Willis, sixty feet wide, hardly visible

above them in the wash of light, made a funny face. They told us to get down, which was no problem for anyone else—most of them must have hid as soon as the police came in—but we were in the front row, voices gone, eyes popping for real now. I had a real rifle barrel in my face and nowhere to run, crawl, hide, or piss my Pepsi.

How could they say to be calm? We curled into balls at the men's feet. I lay there with my cheek to the tile floor and head pointed away from the police. I could see a little movement in the rows up the sloped floor through my seat's legs, a couple hiding their heads, sprawled in the popcorn and stickiness. I prayed my beeper wouldn't start its loud chirping, always at the wrong time, or that the men wouldn't be startled by sudden gunfire from the movie above our heads. Anything might've scared one of these idiots into blasting us.

"All men, exit to the lobby now," one of them shouted. I heard the man who had been sitting next to us whimper, but not my Damien. He took it well. I know what Damien was really thinking, though—*Shit!*

A cop near us said "Now" and lunged at Damien, poking the gun into his leg, making him crawl slowly to the aisle on hands and feet, ass in the air. Another one tapped the whimperer in our row with the toe of his boot, but the man was frozen. So I watched, still not believing any of it, as two of these militaries picked him up by the armpits, still clenched up and crying, like they carry the protestors on the news.

Then I caught a flash of a man's face in the shadows between the seats, slithering away from the aisle—long curly hair, a pretty hippie. Maybe the man

they were looking for, probably just a chico-rico pothead, all paranoid. The police filed behind the men who got up to leave—they were a leftover Pinochet squad for all I knew. A door whooshed shut behind the last soldier, and then there were loud explosions and a rush of strings in a minor key, our minds' soundtrack coming through the speakers. We'd been robbed, and there was nobody to call, nothing to do but put our seats back down, look at each other stupidly until our lives resumed.

“He's back, thought he was gone,” a woman said behind me. She was welling up, rocking herself, must have snapped, had a disappeared husband who was snatched from their bed during one of the president's purges. “I thought he was gone.” The air seemed to thud down on me at these words, got too thick to let me hear anyone but her. I turned to face front, gulping air, tried to make out what Bruce was doing on the screen to keep my mind off Damien.

Five years passed in those five minutes, and all the men came back in and flopped back in their seats, every one of them quiet, nobody laughing it off. I did hear new crying behind me though, the woman's fluttery moan. I turned as if to look down my row and spied them from the corner of my eye. She was cuddling her man's bare shoulder, kissing it like a baby's cheek, and he sat stock straight and wore a blank look. It seemed that Damien was the very last in! He walked past me too slowly. He lit up before he sat, puffed with relief, stretched his legs. Then he just dropped, sank in his seat until he was flat on his back. The lights dimmed again, but nobody forgot. Silence, a real silence—except for the



movie of course, the gunshots and sirens and jokes by Bruce that had been going on all this time.

I turned to Damien, who was just staring at the ceiling with dead eyes, dragging on his Marlboro Light, coming down. He held the breath a long time, let it float out like it was the memory of being outside. I wanted to say something normal, make a crack as if I'd been following Bruce's progress.

"Nothing," he said. "Some dude got shot in the street. So they rounded us all up." No one had been pulled out of line or arrested or killed by the cops, and the parking lot was bumper to bumper police and wouldn't break up soon, he said more calmly, lighting another smoke.

"Guess we might as well sit here then," I said. But I was ready to escape even if I had to leave by the exits the police had entered.

The entire audience stayed through the end, and all of us, a hundred or so of us, stiffly stood and collected our things without a word after the last credit faded—that little disclaimer in its simple English, all characters and events fictional, no animals hurt—and emptied the palace, going silently out to the parking lot. The streets were empty and illuminated by the shine of the streetlights on the wet pavement. There had been a shower, or they'd hosed down whatever happened. A driver almost cut us off as we made for the lot exit, but she stopped short and waved us on, allowing us to pass safely and return to the hills just outside the city.

## TIME ZONES

1

Ricky was sitting with his girlfriend Sam and his best friend Davis in his regular Dayton bar, the Trolley Stop, bullshitting away a Friday when he noticed the malice in his friend's joke: "So how's life in the Twilight Zone, you two?" Davis had started adding "you two" to general questions, looking at Sam only briefly. The man couldn't hold so much as a glance, like he was cursed to fall in love with whomever met his eyes. Plus "Twilight Zone" was how he referred to where Ricky and Sam had lived for a year, Rod Serling's college place—but now it seemed more to be his way of asking about the relationship's status.

Davis was a high school history teacher, had the raconteur's way of a good one, and adopted the story about Ricky's house as his own—told it like he lived there, like he was the fucking curator. He started in this time with Serling's early stint as a paratrooper before moving to Ohio from Binghamton.

Groups at nearby tables were listening. A stupendously fat man and his posse of systems analysts were taking special interest. *Zone* fans.

Davis kept looking meaningfully at Sam, and the whole thing was starting to turn into some weird metaphor, "The first *Zone* he wrote in that house was about a guy who wakes up in the past and has a chance to change history," and so forth.

"Pool?" Ricky announced. It worked this time. Davis left off, never one to miss a game. They were all pretty far gone an hour or so later, after Ricky whipped him in nine-ball and Sam bought a couple of rounds of black and tans.

The new Björk song started up on the jukebox. "What the hip-hoppin' hell is *this* shit," Ricky said loudly. Sam nudged him, playfully shushed him.

"So the fuck *what*, I'm lit."

Sam turned to a girl who was alone at the table next to theirs and trumped up a conversation in which she could act as enthusiastic as she was angry with him.

He just continued complaining to Davis about the song, Björk, ugly people, fat people. He cheered when a Led Zeppelin song came on.

Davis turned the conversation back to the Serling house: “—off Xenia Street, the darkest little corner in Yellow Springs.” Sam encouraged him with uh-huhs.

“Nothing wrong with dark,” Ricky muttered, bouncing his head to the cymbal crashes—“Communication Breakdown”—catching the fat man’s eye over the curator’s shoulder.

The man looked away, said, “Never knew Zeppelin was for the—*miseducated*, shall we say” to his giggling group. Though Ricky had given up on catching the subtleties in the room, some signals were easy to read.

He stood. Chairs scooted at his table. Someone’s dangling coat sleeve caught Davis’s chair and flipped it back, toward the other table.

Everyone at the other table grabbed their coats and walked briskly past Ricky to the front door.

“Later on, Porky!” Ricky called.

The man’s friends suited up in the tiny foyer while he leaned over the bar, handed a credit card to the server.

“Nothing scarier than an angry black man, is there,” Ricky called again, amused.

The man stood there waiting on the receipt to print out. He exchanged a few words with the server and lumbered out.

“And speaking of Yellow Springs,” Ricky said grinning at his friends. He ambled to the staircase that led to the toilets.

Sam came up behind him, said, “Ricky, what are you doing.” Her upper lip curled like when he passed particularly rank wind.

He looked away for a second. “I got to piss.”

Ricky's and Sam's combined scent was still in the living room after Davis had interrupted their throes on the couch with his knock and stretched out right where they'd been—it was, after all, TV night.

"Are you making that salsa verde again or something, Sam?" Davis asked.

"Nachos are a good idea," she said, hustling into the kitchen.

"So," Ricky said, leaning forward in the recliner, clapping his hands together, "how about that weekend?" He huffed out a laugh.

"Jeez, I thought Jabba was gonna roll you!"

"I was ready to go, and he just waddled on by. A *fat* mother," Ricky said.

"I would've—"

"Let's just shut the hell up, please," Sam said sweetly from the kitchen. It had taken some wooing to appease her after Friday. She'd called him a mean drunk.

"Right," answered Davis, now taking up the entire couch, as if marking over the spot. "What's the word on the new job, Rico Suavé?"

Sam whined Ricky's name as she came in the room with a plate of food. Her occasional Lucy Ball act. "He ain't going anywhere," she said, munching chips. She'd told Ricky she couldn't leave Antioch until she had her degree. So far that was where they left it, and Ricky wasn't going to say anything about the problem now to raise Davis's fantasies about Sam.

"You got it Sammy," Davis said, "he'd better never."

They sat and ate and cracked on the lame reruns. "These guys are all friends in the Village and don't find a single brown person at a coffee shop?" Davis asked. "Not even a windshield washer?"

"Doing your part for the Revolution," Ricky put in.

"And it will not be televised," said Sam.

A normal TV night. Ricky wondered what his friend would've done at the bar if there had been a fight, if they weren't adults. He would have asked him about it if they weren't adults, too.

Ricky's boss at Antioch was the son of a Nazi. The only black designer for a hundred miles, and Ricky answered to a man who told about his supremacist heritage like he'd tell a salty joke. He kept proof handy, a helmet from the Panzer corps as a paperweight and Luger slugs in his pencil drawer.

This wouldn't have been tolerable for long without Langston, the senior designer, who had his own office with a couple of the fastest Macs. Since he and Ricky had taken to one another, Ricky worked there more than his cube. Lang was an award-winner, a professor, completely golden, and had been planning to open his own firm. He told Ricky about it early on; Ricky agreed to be a partner if the money ever got together. The first director's meeting for the group, a formal dinner, was at Lang's that Friday—his wife had agreed to put up a good amount of startup. On the pretext of vacation, Lang was scouting office space in Seattle until then, so Ricky had the run of the office whether the other designers liked it or not.

He'd been webslinging, putting together the page for the Self, Society and Culture major—something spongy to offer the switchblade lesbos and Flower Grandchildren who seemed to make up most of the student body. Yellow Springs was a Little Ann Arbor in that respect. A village of sandal-wearers stuck in the sixties that had drawn the attention of time-traveling Future Grrlz.

He read his e-mail five minutes into the job, already bored to hell. One read, *ricky, i'm the person you called porky. i expect an apology. just so you know. ted*. The Geek Gestapo had tracked him down. All the mailing headers were removed, but there was a return address.

*Get fucked, fatty*, he wrote. *Next time your fat ratty racist ass shows up at the Trolley I'll personally roll you out the door*. It felt so good to send.

Later that day, his boss stepped into Lang's office—had never seen Ricky there before. "How we doing," he said, a little confused. Why would this grunt be lounging in the top S.S. officer's quarters? "Nice Mac," said Herr Boss.

Lang's wife's house was ripped out of maybe Malibu. A summer mansion, a museum. There were original Lloyd Wright sketches (details of a stained-glass window, a chair) and what might have been a Brancusi bullet-bird. Sam seemed happy to be with Ricky for the first time in a while—hung on him all night. He played her mood the best he could, asked Lang about living apart from his wife, who was in Seattle for a few months organizing a charity foundation for her first husband's estate, maybe wouldn't come back, Ricky thought, until Lang dragged all of them to her.

"It's hell," Lang answered.

Sam looked at Ricky, sent him some unreadable thought as though she recognized his attempt at saying it could work out.

"What sort of space did you find there, Lang?" Lila, an artist-friend of Lang's asked with a grating sibilance. "Are we starting out on the streets?" She would most likely share an office or even a desk with Ricky at the new firm, and she and her hiss were going to take some getting used to.

Lang looked sick. "I'm resigning from Antioch to work full time on this," he said quickly, "But we'll have to give it a few months before we move into the Space Needle."

Right on, Ricky thought. A few months might as well be never. Start with a big fucking blip.

The next day, Ricky suffered a back spasm when taking out the trash. It was unusually cold, and after wasting the morning in front of old-school Warner Brothers cartoons and then pro wrestling, he'd sat at his desk for a few hours doing sketches for Lang's new logo and letterhead—just putzing, he knew, since the firm predictably would never happen—then remembered the weekly trash

pickup. Probably missed it, but the coffee grounds and baked beans in the kitchen can were getting foul.

That's when he twisted strangely on a patch of ice that remained from the last snow. He walked a few more steps down the drive and collapsed, lay there prone with a plastic sack sitting on his leg for minutes, a half-hour, hour, till a girl came along.

Her chocolate lab was off its leash and rushed Ricky, slathering his face with kisses.

"Sorry," she giggled, sounded high.

"It's okay, it's a black thing."

The dog galumphed back to her. She was obviously from the school, but looked twelve in her droopy stocking cap and mittens.

"He's okay, we're just dosing," she said, walking on.

He lay there for some time—darkest corner of Yellow Springs, he remembered—up to an hour past when Sam got off work. She almost always came straight home. This would have to be the day she left him, set up house with Davis or some other fool, never bothering to pick up her things. When she finally walked up and asked him what he was doing, he was so happy that he couldn't say anything.

"Can you get up?" She hugged him from behind, dragged him to his feet.

It was like she was stabbing him in his spine's inner curve with every step, though she clutched him around his chest, grabbed handfuls of his shirt at his breasts. They made the front steps, and as he paused for Sam to get the screen door with its failed latch, its sprung spring, he sucked in his breath and held it. He let it out in a low moan once he could hobble inside—very much the sound he made at the moment of penetration, the thousand times he'd arched over this girl, poised and frozen there with her in the perfect moment, the easiest and only time he declared his love for her. Sam didn't recognize his sound, laid him face down on the couch, stripped off his shirt. She brought generic pain relievers and a glass of water to him and then kneaded his back roughly. Toughlove.

She came to the damaged muscle and elicited a yelp from Ricky. “Damn, woman,” he said—he must have looked pretty bad, sneering and ashen, face smothered in a pillow.

“Oh, Ricky!” Sam said in her Lucy, squeezing the same spot again, “That’s what you get. You’re leaving me, aren’t you.”

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Lang called him the next week, had heard from the boss that someone sent the personnel office a printout of a threatening note with Ricky’s address as the return header. All the guy wanted was an apology, Lang said. Blackmail the black male, Ricky thought as he thanked Lang and hung up, chuckled aloud. In a couple months he could come on board at the new firm full time, Lang had said, help move the operations west. A shred to cling to.

He stepped into his boss’s office when he was called. The man was silent, no “How we doing,” just gauging, smoking him out. Ricky braced himself, focused on the Panzer paperweight. Probation, suspension if he was to stay? He’d quit before either, he’d decided. Though he had an idea how that might turn out.



## BRONX CHEER

1

Sean was a little late to work, walked faster when she saw the center's van pull in from a few blocks off, came up to the storefront feeling like she was meeting a lover. She caught Mary Pat coming out of the women's center door with a tub of peanut butter and loaves of Wonder bread stacked so high they hid her face. Mary headed for the back of the van, making fart sounds with her tongue in rhythm with her walk. "Morning, Lady," Mary sang to her. "Sorry we're in a hurry. We've got to get Ya-Ya to Lincoln for her checkup." Mary was the last true activist in this dying neighborhood, to Sean's mind. These first days Sean had spent with her had been the most intense of her two years' volunteering in New York. Sean had planned to leave her program this year, and only now was she excited about this place, this job.

"Everything's ready to send," Sean said. "Just need your signature." Sean had letters with her that she'd written to Mary's donors, a few Catholic food wholesalers and deep pockets who'd read about Mary Pat in a church paper or the *Press*. Mary couldn't write worth a damn, Born and bred and one day dead in the Bronx, she would say, so Sean would do the asking for money.

"Good. Hang on. Don't get in yet," Mary said with her thin-lipped grin, thudding the rear door down. She ran back inside still smiling.

An old man from the neighborhood who existed in a slower time than everyone else finally got out of the van's passenger side. "Thanks for the ride, sweetie," he said in the brogue to no one.

"Bill!" Whenever Sean had talked with the man this past summer, she found herself staring at the five thick slash scars at one wrist and six at the other. Still now her eyes dropped to the sleeves of his thickly stained navy trenchcoat. Mary had told her Bill had been a foreman for a Bronx tool shop. It was all he'd ever been in the States besides drunk.

Bill closed a pink knobby hand around her arm, squeezed the down of her jacket sleeve. He drew close, looked off with milk-blue eyes, wine in the whites. Dark capillaries like tangles of wire showed through the skin of his nose. She expected he would try to give her "rosy cheeks" with his week's silvery stubble as he sometimes did. He whispered, "Nobody from Limerick ever tells any limericks, to be sure, Kelly. There once was a buck from Gibraltar, who left a young lass at the altar." He had no expression, and he barely moved his lips—they trembled as he spoke. "Yeah, some say he went queer, others say 'twas the beer, and the buggers and drunks, they all fault her." He released her arm, never once looked at her, started walking in the direction he was pointed before the end of his poem—perhaps just for effect, brushing her shoulder and then the van's rear fender. Sean only noticed his stench as he passed, a strong smell of shit. She checked the soles of his shoes, but he barely lifted his feet when he walked. The sidewalks were dogshit minefields here.

"Bye, Bill," she called after him.

"Bye bye Kelly girl." He was making a beeline across Ogden, aimed roughly at his friend Vernon who was already drinking in front of the bodega. Bill didn't seem to look at Vernon, though, would have connected with the storefront wall if Vernon hadn't reached for him.

Through the glass door of the women's center Sean saw that Mary Pat was still talking to the girls, hand on the door's bar.

She pulled herself into the van. "Ready to roll," she said as Mary came around to the open passenger door with a bucket and towels.

"Sean, don't—"

Sean slipped back as she sat. "Oh shit!"

"Shit, right? Didn't catch you."

Sean felt it leach through the seat of her jeans, imagined a puddle of cold cream of broccoli.

"Bill's getting Depends for Epiphany. And a real winter coat."

Mary Pat ran her back to the nunnery (as Sean had come to call it) for a change of pants, even though they would be late. Luckily nothing of Bill had gotten on her jacket. They set off to find Ya-Ya.

Mary Pat zoomed these streets, cranked the Caravan to its whining max, tailgated mercilessly, slammed the brakes too much. The pads had worn through, and Sean winced at the screams of bare metal against the discs. Everything about Mary Pat was on the edge.

Mary passed Ya-Ya's normal place a couple of times, waiting out two city inspectors before she parked in the turn lane. They were kids with sport jackets and a nice black sedan, and one of them had stylish oval glasses on. Boys like the ones Sean had dated in college, with jobs like the ones she expected her old boyfriends to have. Bricking up and razing abandoned factories and warehouses, throwing the people who took up in them to the street for the holidays. Development. They'd kept a tighter lid on abandoned buildings since a fire that killed several squatters the year before—an indoor campfire got out of hand.

Mary accosted a man who'd crawled out of the warehouse through an opening in a board barring the main doors. Ya-Ya wasn't around, he said. "Yeah, she say she staying with those bitches she always with. You know. Bitches on Broadway?"

"What's your name again?" Mary Pat asked sweetly of the man.

"Lem."

"Lem, we'll show you bitches. Clean up your mouth."

Sean felt like a cop.

They made it to Tina's apartment in a few minutes, only a little late now for Ya-Ya's appointment. There was still a Santa decoration on the door. Someone had drawn a long penis on him with a scrotum that hung to his black boots. When Tina opened the door, Sean held down a retch. She hadn't gotten used to the filth some people lived in here. They entered the funk.

Three women sat in the dark livingroom smoking. Their hair was unreal. One skinny girl had what looked like a vase on her head, and another had

impossibly shiny loose curls. The third had a shaved head and was sitting on a furniture-sized pile of what looked like laundry.

"Suck my dick, ho," one of them was saying.

"Shut up, ho," another said. She called to Sean and Mary, "Never mind this one, Sister."

"Least I'm getting paid for my bone," the bald one said.

After a few moments of adjustment to the dark Sean could see their large Adam's apples.

Tina was telling Mary Pat how she was, when her medicine ran out, when she expected to find work. The woman looked older, hair conked with an orange sheen, clothes weirdly youthful—short striped skirt, white stockings—and became rhapsodic talking about her faith. "Sister Mary, you should rejoice that you are saved. You shall be raised up, my love!"

She went on, and Mary Pat cut her off as soon as a person shuffled out of the bathroom. "You ready girl?"

The woman nodded, smiled quickly. She was almost certainly a woman, though she had a man's walk and wore oversized clothes.

"Sean, this is Ya-Ya."

"Yolanda!" Ya-Ya shouted.

Tina smacked her lips. "Ya-Ya, quit trying to impress the new girl."

In the car, Mary reviewed with her what she needed to ask the doctor. Ya-Ya seemed to know, resented Mary's tone a little.

"I bet you wonder why I look like this. You know, Sean?" Ya-Ya gestured to her bulky sweatshirt and ball cap.

"I guess I don't. Why do you look like that?"

"I ain't trying to look like some ho. And I ain't trying to be raped. Nobody want to rape no dude."

They got to the hospital in good time. Sean said she'd been there before and would find the doctor Ya-Ya had to see.

"Lead me on, Sister Sean!" Ya-Ya crowed like a preacher, breaking into a giggle.

As Ya-Ya slammed the van's sliding door, Mary Pat leaned over and said laughingly to Sean, "She's got her eye on you!"

Sean found the gynecologist's office and waited for Ya-Ya, trailing behind perhaps to avoid conversation. The woman loped in and looked at everything and everyone in the waiting room. Sean asked her if she was okay finding her way home. A stupid thing to ask a homeless person, Sean thought.

"Listen Sean, man." Ya-Ya opened her arms and smiled toothily. "I appreciate everything y'all doing for me!"

Sean allowed this woman, despite the smell, despite the way she was looking at her, to embrace her. She laughed, said, "We're just dropping you off, forget about it," patted Ya-Ya's back, kept her hand over the wallet in her back pocket.

Ya-Ya put her head to Sean's chest like a child, said, "I hate it. I hate it."

"Let me give you my number. If you ever need help. Okay?"

"Okay. I hate it, though. I hate the doctor."

Sean wrote down the number on a scrap she tore off a bank slip from her jacket pocket.

## 2

Sean waited for Rose to unlock a chain at her storm door and then said Happy New Year. Rose waved her in, chewing.

"Are you eating? I just wanted to thank you so much for the Christmas cookies," Sean said. "You're fattening us up for winter." Rose delivered scones and loaves of soda bread to the women's center every Friday morning, without fail.

"Come in, come in. Oh Lord, it's Bernadette." She called over Sean's shoulder, "What is it, Bernadette?"

Sean thought the woman coming up the street was named Bridget. She was always a mess and always panhandling, but Rose must have been civil to her because they were among the few Irish left in the neighborhood. The whole congregation had flown miles up Broadway twenty years before.

"Bill says we should marry." Bill? Bridget looked like she was serious.

"You fool, he's damn near a hundred if I'm a day. He's a crusty thing, might as well be a godless prot with his drink and tries at offin' himself," Rose said in a low voice.

"He's the only one, though," Bridget said. Her face stretched into a grimace. She had nothing in her arms, no purse, must have been on the way to the bodega for more beer. She wept silently for a few seconds, then let go three or four very theatrical sobs. Sean couldn't decide if she'd been daft, as Rose liked to say, all her life, or if it came with the common Irish mother's fate, living with her destitute grown son. Suze and Mary Pat always marveled at how Bridget managed to live—the son's bit jobs, takeout and beer, animals pounding around, no electric, pathways cut through the trash, cat and dog shit ground into the carpet. Sean had wanted to visit her, would visit.

"I need a bit to get me by, Rose." Bridget ventured to look at Rose. "I can pay you back."

"Christ, Bernadette, stay away from here," Rose said. "You're making a holy show of yourself."

The woman wiped her eyes with both hands and began walking up the street.

"Bridget! Isn't her name Bridget?" Sean asked.

"Bernadette, on my life. Come and set with me while I finish dinner."

Rose breathed in and closed her eyes a moment before eating. A prayer or an erasure. "You should be out with friends, boys. Whoever."

"I like talking with you," said Sean. Visiting made her feel good. Who knew what it did for the people she saw; it was just the only thing she felt competent doing—being present to someone, forgetting herself. She could assume the burdens of a different life, if only for a time.

Sean asked Rose about the day's visit to her husband in a Newark home. For years her husband had blackouts, and it had got so that when he'd collapse on the kitchen floor from the Guinness, Rose would step over him and go to bed. He'd be up and fresh the next day, more or less, humble as anything. Only one night he'd had a stroke instead, lay there all night on the cold floor, and now he needed good rehab. Rose walked miles and rode for hours every day to see him, clouded over when she talked about it.

"He's the same. He's seventy-four, he won't change. For better anyway." Rose said that he hurled the nerf balls and flashcards and any other childish developmental toy off his bed. The interns had given up. He would hold Rose's hand for the two hours they spent, rock her hand back and forth. He couldn't speak or yell or write, just rock and weep.

They talked about Rose's family until she shoed Sean to the door. Sunset was coming on. "Lord knows who's waiting to snatch you."

On her way out Sean saw a new plastic picture frame propped on the buffet in the front room, an addition to the photographic shrine to Rose's family. "Who is this?"

"That's a new one, Gabe's little Rosie. A doll, grade three. Shameful that her mother never brings her over." Gabe was the firstborn, back in his mother's house after what might have been a breakdown, leaning too much on Rose.

Sean picked up the picture. A cute girl with a pixie cut and doe eyes directed to heaven. She held it up for Rose and said her granddaughter was beautiful.

Rose smiled girlishly. "Come get a soda bread for the sisters."

### 3

Group dinners at the convent were unusual. Sean was the only volunteer living there, and the sisters mostly kept to themselves. And when they didn't it was like having six mothers.

"I'm thinking of nursing," Sean said.

"Go geriatric. We're all becoming geezers."

"We'll all be at the Mount together. Communal retirement."

"Spare me," Mary Pat said. She'd left the convent years before, slept on a cot in a women's shelter adjacent to the center.

"I only hope He does," said Suze, who ran the women's center and slept in the convent. "She really doesn't answer to anyone, not even Him."

There was the expectation that Sean would investigate religious life. She'd shadowed a few of the sisters during their workdays—a psychologist, a principal, the administrator of the neighborhood program. She couldn't relate to these women. Mary Pat was the closest she could come to this kind of life. She was beginning to think celibacy, even only before marriage, wouldn't work out for her anyway.

Even so, this wasn't the best area of the city to find dates. Good for catcalls and propositions on the walk home from boys in windows, maybe their fathers on the steps of their buildings. *Hi, Baby. Nice, real nice. Hello! Good evening! Fucking bitch.*

"How's that doctor doing? Doctor Bob," one of the nuns, the psychologist, wheedled, taking Sean's plate after they'd all finished. She had no illusions about Sean's disinterest in the sisterhood and regularly asked about her dates.

"Celia, that's been over for *months*," Suze chided. She followed Sean's affairs as some of the others did the soaps.

Sean had met Doctor Bob, a G.P. and practically forty, on a Catholic singles harbor cruise. *I've been thinking of giving it all up, doing what you're doing.* Called her a few times, invited her to his rental in the Hamptons. She'd refused sweetly, had to work.

"What about the boy from the Virgin Islands?" another asked as they cleared the table. She'd gone out once with the VISTA guy from the islands who lived in southern New Jersey. He'd come all the way up on the train—was it one, even two hours changing trains? She'd almost given in to him there on the sisters' couch, kept from the projects and crimeys and catcallers surrounding them, inside the convent gates and four triple-bolted doors and his arms, kissed



by his enthusiastic mouth. But she was scared of him, his hug a kind of stranglehold with an elbow closing on her neck, and a nun was creaking around upstairs; she sent him on the long ride home some time in the early morning. *It's okay*, he had said. Reminded of it now, she felt like tossing each plate stacked in the sink through a different kitchen window, to shatter the glass and be shattered against the iron security bars.

"He lived too far away," Sean answered.

4

Ya-Ya called early one morning. There was a phone in Sean's room, but the whole house must have been up, grouching and discomfited, by the time she answered.

"My boyfriend wants me to pay him. So I climbed this tree. Sean, man, I'm sleeping in a tree. C'mon, man."

How many times had Mary Pat tried to pick up clients who called her this early, only to be ditched, falling asleep in the van at the appointed corner? The chill on Sean's exposed skin, the warmth under her blankets decided it. "Well climb back into the tree, get some rest, and come talk to me tomorrow."

Ya-Ya was at the center's gate before the secretaries came to open up that morning, waited in the office until Sean walked up an hour later. Ya-Ya's eyes were puffy and she probably hadn't washed since they last met.

"Let's get you showered." Sean led the way to the closet bathroom. "I'll get soap and a towel."

"You made me sleep in that tree, man, but that's all right." Ya-Ya had a cold, sounded worse than over the phone.

Carla, one of the center workers from the neighborhood, shook her head. "These loco people infect my head."

Sean ignored her and the other two who agreed, went upstairs for a towel, underwear, sweater and jeans from the donated clothes. She took Ya-Ya up to

the donations after they both ate a couple of scones from a plateful Rose had brought by. "Pick some things," Sean said kindly, "Go to town."

"You said to call you."

"I know."

"Don't say it then." Ya-Ya took two pairs of overalls, three more sweaters too large for her, a pair of boots that fit her, and the thickest coat.

5

Just before spring that year, Sean found herself off her guard coming home from the Midtown clubs. She'd split a few bottles of shit wine with the other girls from her program toward the end of the night, celebrating her last VISTA check in a profane sort of way. She had trouble with the turnstile at her stop, was too wobbly going down the Stadium ramp, and she started the two hundred steps up to the neighborhood without thinking of what time it was, what the rule of thumb was for these steps—after dark it was the place for a mugging, a beating. You couldn't see past the flight you were on, and you saw nothing from the street. It was the rapeway.

The steps were unlit—a glint from the streetlights suggested ice smoothing the chinks and cracks in the salt-stained concrete. Sean turned around to take the sidewalk up to Nelson, and a man was close behind her. She tried to look cool by turning back slowly, taking in the skyline, the Empire State Building shrunk to a souvenir down the el track. Not a good idea, she realized. Now she looked like some pasty tourist lost in South Bronx. She started moving up.

In the sharp degrees of streetlight and shadow she'd seen it was clearly a white man, dark parka, hood down, dark mustache. Yankees stocking cap, dark. And he was pointed in the wrong direction for home. She climbed the steps with her hand on the wall for balance, clunked her feet—a show of confidence?—and sprang harder with each step, listened for him. She thought she felt his breath on

her neck and ears, and she felt her foot giving under a patch of ice, delayed, sprang again, kept moving.

He passed her on the left, taking two steps at a time. "Don't flatter your fucking self," he said angrily with maybe Rose's brogue, head down, huffing ahead of her. She spun and scudded back down to the curb, tears coming, saved by a gypsy cab, God bless the gypsy cabs. The hood couldn't have been anyone but Gabe, but she was past caring. Bless the gypsies.

Usually older black men drove the cabs, granddads who floored it where the Yellow and Checkered and Gold drivers feared to go, but it appeared that this one was driven by an actual gypsy, or maybe an Arab. A complete anomaly on this block. Her fear swelled again. Was it a skullcap or a ball cap he had on? Sean stared hard at the driver in the mirror, told him the way to her house.

"Just tell me when to turn." His trill made him sound as if he doubled every syllable. His eyes had dark rings, his eyebrows and beard were too full and wild.

He caught her stare in the mirror and held it to the first stoplight, returned to it when they stopped at the house. She said nothing, made no move to leave until his eyes began to scan her body in the dim cabin lights of the Lincoln.

A sense overcame Sean as she undressed in the dark of her room. Her window shades were up, the dying stand of twenty-floor projects across Nelson before her, and at her right a lot where a few guys she knew always stripped cars. Kids hung out in this lot too, one of them a kid she talked to almost every day who still ran for a man dealing down the street. A woman walked alone toward the other end of Nelson—slow, like the ones who still came to classes or the pantry at the center bruised up and scabby, too scared or tired to tell on their men. Nothing had changed. She'd done nothing for the people here, would be gone in days. The symphonic snoring of the nuns seemed to be the best reassurance they could offer her.

## A PASSING OVER

*There's a special place in hell for you*, I always thought, whenever one of them would dredge her up in my class: "Don't punch your hand through the overhead like Pellino did"; "Whaddya gonna do? Throw chalk like the last one?" When things were especially frayed: "He is *just like* Pellino." The lowest insult. They had run Melanie Pellino out of Archbishop Alter High School in only three months, and they flaunted it like a new bauble from Daddy. I was Pellino's replacement—came from the same college, was the same age and had the same lack of any experience—so I couldn't react to these whispers. It was personal.

I knew Melanie Pellino indirectly; we were on the same University of Dayton trip to Stratford, Ontario to watch the season's plays—the best of which was a rollicking *Midsummer Night's Dream* with sprites bouncing on an inflatable set—but we never spoke and rarely saw each other. We were roughly the same age; she was a semester ahead of me in that fall of her last year of school, and I wasn't in the same class because I had transferred late to the School of Education at the university. The first time I saw her on the chartered bus to Stratford, I thought she was a professor's prepubescent child. She was supernaturally small for her age—looked more like Puck or Buttercup in a sweat suit than a teacher. It made sense that the kids I would be teaching took her head.

"There needs to be healing," Valerie Burdon, head of Alter's English department, had said in my interview to be Melanie's emergency replacement. "The last one was, shall we say, frustrating." Or was it little Melanie who was frustrated? Just who needed healing?

As I introduced myself to my classes, I never let slip that I attended the archrival of the Alter Knights, Chaminade-Julienne downtown. What a strange thing to worry about; I knew from my Catholic schooling that a student's greatest and most secret adversary was the alma mater itself—the building, the teachers,

administrators, parent boosters. Who really cared about anywhere else (except the weekend of the C-J/Alter game) when you had your own school to undermine? I was in on a few school kid antics, sketching evil caricatures of all my teachers for my own enjoyment, and exchanging X-rated rewrites of scenes from *Hamlet* during Mr. Thomas's refutation of any Freudian content in the scene in Gertrude's bedroom. Nothing was more exhilarating to me than doing my bit, whittling away at the system in my small way and getting away with it. And I was one of the good boys.

I expected a little of this from my new students, but I had forgotten the work of my comrades in arms, the graffiti-writers and chatterers and the other saboteurs. The myopic vision I had of instructing respectful, well-heeled suburbanites, and maybe lighting them up with some city-kid shtick—imitations, wisecracks written into multiple-choice tests, tasteful usage of the black slang they so inexplicably prized—crumbled after the free one-month trial the students gave me.

In my first days there, I had glad-handed, shaken my head at past classroom atrocities, promised an easier time of things like a cub candidate at an election rally. But after that couple of weeks preparing them for exams I had to write over material I didn't teach, the election promises were soon forgotten. Classroom routine and preparation duties weighed heavily on me. Maintaining the status quo was difficult enough.

The new semester became my cautionary tale on how not to conduct class:

1. Don't be too hard: I once shouted down a sweet girl who was talking in a low voice while I delivered one of my long lectures. She was dumbstruck. Another student sneered at me and told me the girl was only asking to borrow a pencil.
2. Don't be too soft: One day in second period, John boldly implied that I was gay—which I'm not, thank Christ, since it's a sin to most Catholics I know that would land a homosexual in a lower pit of Hell than Dante even imagined. I handed John the

requisite number of demerits for teacher disrespect printed on the demerit slip (which was tacitly never followed by Alter teachers, I came to learn), and his father promptly called me that evening.

“Hi. John tells me there’s a problem.”

I explained.

“Let me tell you something, eh, Brian. John’s a good kid. John’s had some trouble in other classes with talking, but this disrespect thing’s got to go. He can’t afford it. Get rid of those demerits.”

John was in danger of expulsion.

I told him I’d see what I could do, and reduced the demerits the next morning. Word must have gotten around, because the giggles and gossip were louder than usual during second period. John had entered the room with a smirk, saying, “My dad talk to you?”

About a month later, John was kicked out of school for selling marijuana. His parents refused to accept the ruling, despite the fact that the vice principal caught him in a bathroom stall with cash and baggie in hand.

3. Don’t be just right: Once the first two rules are broken, it doesn’t matter how perfect you are. You weren’t fair before, and that’s enough reason to ignore you or even disrespect you until you are gone. I suspect most of my students had this attitude, sad to say, because I was too everything that semester.

This sort of struggle was exhausting. I’d doze home every afternoon, set my alarm, sleep through it till ten, and guilt myself awake almost grading papers until one or too late, only to rinse and repeat the next day. I felt like half a man and less.

Occasionally my best friend and roommate, who was taking a year off, just working a shit YMCA job, would come upon me in a fetal nap on the couch and

ask if I was all right. Sure. I was in complete withdrawal from everything and everyone, literally, even him. A junkless junkie, unable to speak to my parents or my old teaching mentor from high school out of shame for the job I knew I wasn't doing. Television was the sole solace for me, couldn't get enough O.J. Simpson updates to deaden my awareness of the burgeoning clutch of papers in my briefcase.

I would sleep fiercely, greedily inhaling the relief of the coming summer, which had a real smell to me, one that gave me hope. Maybe it was only the plaster that the walls breathed into the air, a sturdy, aged odor, one of broader concerns—seasons and lives, not end-of-term reports. I took the place because it smelled of my grandmother's generation of homes, plaster and wood and leaded windowpanes, an air of tradition befitting my emerging professional manner. But it was, in fact, the only sense of structure I had other than the school bell schedule.

"How are things going?" Ms. Burdon would ask at lunch, mapping the arroyos around my eyes, mothering me, I would think. There were the talkers during school Mass, the cutters from study hall, but she'd slice through all that: "How are the kids doing? In class?"

Gulping peanut butter on Wonder bread, I'd evade her with something like, "Fine. We're finishing *Romeo and Juliet* now," and let her take off on what she *really* wanted to talk about, her ex's new gift of a hot tub (Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Juliet?) or theses on male fantasies written, directed, or produced.

"I loved Zefferelli's version of that," Valerie began. "Filmed on location in Verona, you know that? Adds volumes."

I dreamed up titles for her lectures: Wagner a (la) Coppola: *The Ride of the Valkyries* in *Apocalypse Now*; or Mordred the Golden Child as Son, Grail Knight, and Anti-Christ in *Excalibur*.

But sometimes Valerie would stay on task, shuck the critic-speak and get right down to the gossip. "Poor little Pellino. The kids used to make fun of her because she was so small, and she just couldn't take it. We always heard her or her students shouting from the other side of school. She was always so bitter, so

angry. And she never wanted any help. She just never asked, never came to see us once.”

A hint? For me? If Melanie Pellino didn't ask for advice, I avoided all contact with Department Head Valerie Burdon or Principal Walt or any other power. I disappeared myself from the main office and the official sports functions. But at this school, nothing was more suspicious than a record of absences, whether of students or teachers.

When I told people that I taught at a Catholic school, the response would often be, “How generous!” But I gave nothing to anyone, even my students. My progress report read like only a few of theirs, the ones who hadn't been kicked out yet: Tardy to class, Late with homework, Too many detentions.

Half a teacher and less. Most of the seventh-period students, my true nemeses, redesigned their course: the subjects were throwing spit wads and coins when my back was turned, and some days, forgetting I was there. I lost control of classes to the point that I could only catch the principal's son, Walt Jr., tossing quarters against the wall. Most in the class had worked up a protective network of subtle distractions, talking and slamming books to the floor, that completely neutralized me as disciplinarian. As I remonstrated with Walt Jr. at his seat against the far wall, enough of the rabble began talking at a normal level—maybe fifteen or twenty of the thirty students—that I felt shame for leaving the door open. I ignored the clamor for the moment, concentrating on Walt Jr. But before I could finish my few sentences with him, I heard a shout from the center of the room. I used my new move, the teacher toe-spin, to spot the perpetrator, only to face Principal Walt himself. He was red-faced and shaking, his face the grimace of aneurysm as he ranted at the class.

When he finished breaking them, he looked at me for a second, his face changed to an amazing expression of disgust, tugged by horror, murder, abject grief. This bland man who hid in his office! He turned quickly and walked with more purpose than I'd ever seen in him, paused briefly at the door to choke out “Sorry” and left the silenced room. Instead of seizing on the shame the students might have felt then, grinding them down a bit to make the effect last, I felt



complete and wonderful sympathy with them in their degradation, and went forward almost immediately, giving a cheerful lesson on symbols in *To Kill a Mockingbird* I made up on the spot, shaken and emboldened by the momentary ceasefire.

Parents involved themselves after more of these loud days. Calls here and there regarding individual disputes over sons and daughters. There were few enough of these to dismiss, but then letters came from a few parents, delivered smilingly by their children. Got you this time, their faces said. "I am really becoming a little angry," the worst letter began. So was I, so was I.

But I had failed them all, "Just like Pellino." And someone had to make a sacrifice, if I couldn't. "I've recommended against your returning next year," Valerie said, looking just past me during my performance review, "unless we see dramatic improvements." She had earned the right of the champion to ride away with me slung over her lance, not bloodied or broken but only lolling, ignobly choking on my tongue.

That June, I had to ask for an audience with Walt, a real prince, my princey-pal, just to know my fate. Walter J. of Alter High, my aunt called him once. She had taught him the third grade at the elementary across the parking lot. My family had formed him. So who had control? I'd make him do the talking, make him sweat.

"How is Sister Carol?" he ducked. I knew I wasn't coming back the next year, but I only wanted the surest thing, so I bore the indignity of his averted eyes and his calculated rejection. "I think it would be best if . . ." Banishéd. A fate worse than death. Just like Pellino. We were the same. Banishéd.

Now, after all of that has been packaged, spun, explained away, my sister tells me my twin Melanie Pellino is dead, died in June, and I hear about it three months after finishing the year she started at Alter. My sister went to the same college Melanie and I had, and had heard it announced at a University of Dayton Mass, a month after it happened, the second-last to know. Offered up for the reposal of the soul of Little Melanie, Died while rock-climbing near her hometown

outside of Chicago. Didn't wear any equipment on a solo climb. That's all that anyone knows, my sister says.

I climb Death's Mountain like Pellino did, and here at the summit is a black eclipsed sun, sucking me toward it and spouting me through it, and I am undone, screaming down the insides of the mountain, down the bell of Gabriel's P.A. system. In this rage I see that my only revenge, hollow as it will be, will come on the first day of the new school year with the blast of the classroom loudspeaker as those good children hear the News: She is dead.

The News lodged itself in my throat that fall, as I saw one of mine from seventh period, a shock of fortunate bowl-cut hair tucked under the brown ball cap with the golden A. I turned away from him, looked to my YMCA kids playing on the tennis courts adjacent to Alter, and pulled my own cap down hard, ridiculously, as if to hide my red sideburns. The kid dropped his game and sliced my cowardice with my last name and asked, "What are you doing now?" and "Why aren't you back?" and all proper questions.

Okay, your turn, kid. I forced it out: "Did you hear about Miss Pellino?"

"When I heard that—" he started. He looked down, and after seconds, said, "—my heart just dropped." He brought his eyes up to the left of me. Fear. The damsel's scarf.

I said and only then began to believe, "Don't ever think it was your fault."

## PLAYING DAD

At exactly seven in the morning, thirteen days before the Ides of March, three years before the second millennium, I called in sick from Martha's Pre-op bedside. She was in for caesarean section, I was her birth partner, and it was clear by now that the honor wasn't entirely mine. I could hardly tell my boss the real reason why I wasn't coming in (after all, not my baby), and I avoided telling him anything by talking to the secretary in charge of getting substitute teachers to cover the day's last-minute sick list. "Hope you feel better, Brian," Janet said with a reproving sigh. I'd used up most of my sick days already halfway through the school year, but I could count on her propriety and affection in not quizzing me about my symptoms, or worse, transferring me to the principal's line for a proper inquest—*I have a source at Miami Valley Hospital tells me you're the father of some bastard they're delivering.*

I wasn't the father, though I suppose one night around the time the baby was conceived I had come reasonably close. I was too drunk and too petrified by Martha's sudden, frank ministrations for me to be able to achieve erection, let alone hunt down a condom. We hadn't even had this sort of disappointing intimacy since we were college kids five years before. But my fatherhood could have been conjured up by hearsay alone, so during the pregnancy I didn't tell anyone about being Martha's coach except a couple of friends and any girl I tried to impress.

"I knew you wouldn't tell them," Martha said as I hung up. She'd been understanding about my secrecy, but that never kept her from getting in a dig. I ignored her, fumbled for some diverting subject.

"Well, here we are!" was the best I could do.

A nurse appeared then, looked surprisingly hard at Martha. "Why aren't you wearing slippers?" she scolded, "I told you to wear the slippers in here!" Barefoot and pregnant—I thought about repeating the nine-month running gag, lightening Martha up a bit.

She couldn't have got up very quickly from the bed, but Martha looked ready to throttle the matron. "I—don't—want—the slippers!" she hissed. She hadn't broken her scowl yet this morning, didn't look like she would for the month it might take to recover from surgery, or maybe ever. She seemed even then to be more cut out for the lush's life of two-bit city jobs and barrooms than motherhood. And I was supposed to be her jester for that thirty minutes, a warm-up for the big act to follow, keeping her mind off the operation as an OB and an intern did their routine behind a low green curtain skirting her baby bulge. I wasn't up to it. The heavy possibilities—complications, death—sat on me like the roiling gray sky did on the way to Maternity.

Soon Martha's sister and brother-in-law—childless ("Don't have the nerves," Martha once said of them)—and mother came in to wish her well in the removed way that is exactly Martha's, a few feet off, waving, cracking dry jokes. And then, as if time was tilting at this event, gathering speed and weight, we were in surgery, I and the doctors, nurse, and anesthesiologist gloved and capped and masked, the epidural painkiller and anti-nauseant applied, the body opened, the procedure proceeding. I sit at Martha's left side, find myself locking eyes with her, holding her hand with my left—sweethearts again—and her puke basin with my right.

She says nothing, eyes beginning to drift, and it comes up within seconds, looks like soggy granola clusters. This snob, my first love who lorded her taste over me even as we came into the birthing wing—*Christ! A travesty of the Guggenheim!*, signaling the plastic bubble that capped the atrium—and then having a go at the art, a visual MUZAK, stenciled seascapes with *The colors on a baboon's ass!* She grips my hand after her first heave, someone else wipes her lips. "How's it lookin' over there?" she finally says.

"I'm sure it's fine."

In minutes I hear a quick gasp from one of the doctors. I screw up my courage and turn to see an impossible gush of red flash-flooding the open French doors at her abdomen. A vein? An artery? Tears are in my eyes, I smile at her, she doesn't seem to notice, I squeeze her hand. She pukes. In another

few minutes I must look again, first peripherally and then fully, and watch them reach in, room enough for both to work—one sponges blood from the yellowish fat layers under the retracted skin, the other pulls out her guts. The intestines are purple-iridescent, nearly transparent and in some areas dark with waste, retain a boa's form and Jell-O's composure as a length is placed on the tray just above.

An incision is quickly made in a small inflated bladder. The child brushes against this side of the uterine wall—I see it as if through a wet T-shirt, but only for a moment because the entire organ seems to retreat toward the warmth of the chest cavity; a doctor asks Martha to push and he gingerly massages the baby down to the slit in the wall, pulls it through with one hand around its legs, and Martha pukes a third and final time.

The nurse takes it, holds it up for me as if it were mine. It shivers, caught in its first breath, dazzled, unable to cry out. It is covered with film, vaguely human except for its feet which are turned away at ninety degrees above the ankles. An illusion, a trick of perspective, I tell myself, but I must say something about it. I lean down and tell Martha it's beautiful and I trip on the bad news, look around stupidly for help. The nurse cleans and wraps it before she brings it to Martha, pro that she is—better to explain than show the defect. The baby girl has found her cry now, an irritating, melodramatic cycle of sobs with a quivering lower lip on the intake. As if her life was over before it really started. *Oh, come off it, kid!*, I want to yell.

Martha cries a bit, only for a minute, and stops, now finally drained of everything, a year's storing-up.

"She'll be fine," I say to Martha, wiping her eyes, holding the Kleenex for her to blow on.

"Thought you were gonna pass out on me," she says with a silent hiccup for a laugh. She's back, already full of affectionate contempt.

She asks needy questions of the nurse: *How long will she be in casts? Will she have full use of her legs?* It's almost certain Maddy will develop perfectly, though the nurse can't answer with anything better than best cases. In Recovery nee Pre-op the father, who'd laid low since the first trimester, sweeps

in with flowers, concentrates on Martha's findings about clubfoot, says little, ignores me. The others are anxious to see Martha and Maddy, and since there can only be two visitors with them now, I make room for one more, Mom or Sis or Bro-in-Law, head to the baboon-blue lounge to tell the story, as I'll probably do for Madeline one day. I'll settle for being her witness.

## A NEW BED

Martha, my ex-girlfriend, is pregnant now—asked me to be her birth partner the same day she broke the news to me, the first one to know after Tanner, the charming asshole who moved on but somehow finds his way back to her bed. She may insist he's the father, but she knows how reliable he'll be. She asked me to be there for her, well aware that I'm barely able to handle my own life. But there was no one else she trusted, and I'd be a perfect coach, she said. So I bought a pager and did the OB visits with her, and didn't protest when she said we would skip the breathing classes. She went for the sonogram emphatically by herself, but showed me the glossy, a grainy image that could've been of a moon's surface, taken by a space probe. I took pictures of her belly over successive weeks, and eventually she let me feel over where the creature, soon baby girl Madeline, slithers around the base of her pelvis. She's to term—in time for May Day—the date set for C-Section by herpes I, II, III, stress. Martha's arranged exactly when and where and how she'll have Maddy, and I'll be there. But we've been avoiding each other since the time she conceived; and since then I've been prowling the night at the end of last July when we were finally back together for a moment, rekindled by wine and picking out my new bed.

I'd had my old twinless twin for half my life. Over the past decade the mattress gradually caved, cratered, stained and rotted through; but even if it hadn't, I intended to collect the equipment of my first salary, teaching high school English. I just needed my bigger apartment, a car, and this. Freedom of movement and of mating. Martha and I spent more time together then than when we dated, so she might as well have come to midwife me through this change. I was finally allowing myself civilized sex, she said. At the showroom I stiffly tested beds with her, careful not to brush her by mistake, arms to my sides, a cadaver on a slab. "This one's good," she said, hands flat against the mattress as she bounced slightly. The dyed-black salesman took his cue and rasped about the model's remarkable resistance to almost all organic stains—blood, urine: "Just

what does he think you'll do on this thing," Martha jabbed, "kill somebody?"—and he asked with a skeletal grin, "Does the wife approve?" Yes, the wife approves.

Delivered that day, so easy. We sat on it, stretched up, sagged, flopped, drew out on either side—not a king bed, but yes, plenty of room. Trying to ignore the mattress's unearthly odor, the skittery sound of our weight, the clear veins of plastic stitching, and the pearly skin, I felt my few feet of bed—"It's like lying on a hundred space-alien teats," I said.

"You'll have to get someone to help you break this in," she said evenly. She knew there was no one—no one else, anyway. That didn't stop me from devising new fantasies as we lay there. I'm sure she could read me. "I guess you'll have to clean your room for that."

As soon as she drifted out to check her messages I threw on new white sheets. A tight cotton fit, and over them a mail-order summer quilt, swirling black indigo Brahmin designs on white madras. Made up for its debut. With nothing to do on a Saturday, she was hanging at my apartment again that night, drinking my six-dollar chardonnay, watching unsolved UFO abduction stories and change-your-life infomercials until the TV went to noisy snow. And then it was as if we'd slipped backward into the bed showroom again, the salesman grinning over us as we shivered separately on the breasts in my room, fading to the rattle of the window unit. "These sheets are sandpaper!" she said. And they still smelled like the bedding department, antiseptic, sterile.

I was careful not to push her, even as we prepared to sleep together: "We haven't been like this for something like four or five years."

"We were like this picking it out today, right? Jesus! This sure isn't three hundred thread count." She rustled the sheets and wound herself in them toward her side, the right side, with a bratty click of the tongue. So that was it.

I just accepted it, tried to enjoy the feeling of another body next to mine, remembered her next to me on my first night with anyone, during my first semester of college, when she'd seduced me from her couch with "Let's lie down." Naked in her arms, high on her patchouli and curls and her smooth hips



against mine, I tried to stave her off with a history of kisses. *And my third girlfriend did this*, I said coyly, finally coming to our kiss, and she enfolded me.

I lay dreaming of this next to her in my new bed, resigned to a night's sleep. Sure as anything, though, she shifted, wriggled over a little at a time until she shared my pillow. After our silence, here she was in old dating mode again.

She reached over me for my left hand, leading it back around to her front as she turned away from me again, butting against my hip. With instant, instinctive eagerness, I felt through the material of her T-shirt and she sighed long and trailing. Struggling under the shirt, I petted up her loose belly to soft, softer than before, her breasts caving more than my memory of them, softer, older. She was my older lady. And she sighed, sat up and away from my grasp, "I'll be more comfortable if ..." pulling off and casting down her shirt. She moved in for the mate. Not kissing, not cuddling anymore, as we once did, but turning back over to me, she reached down for me not at all like she used to—straight to it, no messing around.

It was almost like a reward for patience and diligence in the past few years. Martha had got me into the apartments when we became friends again, about three years after we broke up. We'd hung out at the same bar, had some common friends, and one night I found her slumped over her wine in a corner of the Trolley Stop patio. She wouldn't speak, only sobbed, and when I asked if she needed to go for a night walk around the old houses of the neighborhood, she nodded quickly as she rose, and led me out through the patio gate. She wept as she walked. I kept quiet for a couple of blocks, but gently asked her, "Is it that guy I've seen you with?" She looked at me as the woman I dropped cold, hurt in her eyes. When she spoke, she used a voice I'd never heard from her, and she told me about Tanner. They'd been living together for almost a year, and she'd gotten pregnant with a first child—Madeline will be her second. He'd given her money to abort it, and when she did it, she moved out. She didn't tell me the rest, only looked down, her skinny frame convulsing with renewed crying, and raised her arms until the sleeves of her sweater revealed new scars across her wrists. We've been friends since then—in the past couple of years I've patiently sat in

her apartment watching bad TV with her most Saturdays, gotten drunk with her at the Trolley Stop, and until the night in my bed, I bided my lust. Here was the reward.

I caught her cool wet mouth with mine as she rolled onto me and she quickly licked back while concentrating more below, hand under her still squeezing me, her pelvis pressing against her forearm, my belly. She sat up and shifted backward, dragging back the covers. Now I sighed, reached up for her softness, attempting to bring her face down to my lips again, then to kiss under her wrists on either side of my head, but she pulled back, sat up straighter, saying loudly, “This bed is *outstanding*,” knees against the firmly resisting alien tits. Then she was all business, in control, grasping, trapping more blood, sliding against me.

Tanner the towering blond pothead appeared before me. I could see The Blond pick his guitar at the one gig he apparently ever had, singing his

*Someone ate the baby*

*Cos it's not here in its chair*

*Someone ate the baby*

*From its toetips to its hair*

(Was fatherhood in Tanner's head even then, more than two years ago?). Martha was just rapt at his little concert, looking like she'd wrap her legs around his head right there, cold sores on his lips and all—Yes, she says now, now that her baby is at stake, *that's* how I got the gift that keeps on giving.

And *Someone Maked the Baby*. Martha was rocking over me, not looking into my eyes, driven. At the moment, though, we were barely in life-making or breaking contact. A rabble grew in my mind—those Catholic junior high biology and religion teachers, abstinence boosters for the Marriage and Family units, and they said, “All sorts of nasty things are possible, even without direct intercourse!” If you aren't careful. If you aren't married to your mate. Herpes without orgasm. Pregnancy without penetration. Disease, Death, and worse, Life. But at the end of our college summer lust, when I broke it off with Martha out of fear, she'd

sneered the question to put to any bad Catholic: *Will you confess?* She arched over me now, eyes shut in anticipation, and her old question flared again.

I was failing again, falling asleep to her. She sighed and threw herself down beside me. *Now what?* Now I would become the attacker, kiss her less reluctant mouth. She closed her thighs on my stabbing and strumming hand and embraced me. I helped her to release, and she actually thanked me. She climbed down the bed and attempted to pull and suck me to life, but I was way past that.

She went on, oblivious, suckling faithfully—couldn't hear me say "Mar" until I gently tugged at her chin. "It's okay," I couldn't help but laugh. "Seems like old times, right?" I kept my eyes closed, waiting for her to answer, then sat up with her, wanting to make good. I kissed her, but she didn't return it, only broke it, turned, leaned way over for her shirt.

"Been nice, Jay. We should do this again sometime." Ten seconds from my bed, out the unlocked door and upstairs to her one-room apartment. It's like it never happened—but there was enough contact to hold me to something.

Now I'm out with Martha, two days before Baby Madeline's scheduled birth. It's dinner on the Trolley Stop patio, hot as hell for almost May. Mocked-up trolley diesel buses, thunderous chopper-bikes and sonic booms roll through the Oregon District, represent us in conversation since we're not talking. I'm here, and Papa Tanner isn't—no doubt sky high, banging his exotic dancer friend. Martha and I don't talk about it anymore, and don't talk about her and Tanner screaming in the front hall outside my door the other night, "You want my fucking money, I'll see my daughter whenever I fucking want." Through the peephole, his body curved over her like a giant cobra rearing up, fanning its hood. Martha stood there, hip cocked, and stared at him until he left muttering—but she wiped her eyes when he'd turned away, not so tough.

We haven't seen much of each other, even in the last month when I wore the pager to work in my pocket with the beep switched off. Now that the giddy sense of expectation that this brought has been anesthetized and cut away, I grasp for fantasy. "Well, Mar," I say when our silent meal is almost over, "at least you'll know who the father was if Baby has my eyes." What brings me to say it?

She wipes her mouth, says between chews, “Listen, don’t worry, it’s not you. I’m sure she’ll have long legs and fingers. She’ll be a blonde with no butt.” She twists her lips, laughs, “And that *nose!*” Still in love with the pecker, for reasons I want to stop thinking about.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t inherit that.”

Again Martha clinically recounts the night of Baby Maddy’s conception for me. “It was exactly nine months ago tomorrow, in August,” she says to me. “Not in July. I was already asleep, he just appeared over my bed, with a bottle and two glasses, as if he’d come through the window—like some doped-up troubadour. But I gave him a key a while before. We were so drunk, and he really has no butt, oh Jay there’s no doubt that’s when it happened.”

Stupid. Martha, are you sure you didn’t . . . make that white noise with that white trash . . . on purpose? Trailer park aluminum Airstream, a tin of kids? Get out the can opener—pop the top—it’s your dream! It’s here. She’s here. You can have it on your terms, for yourself. Live with it. I don’t want it.

But I’ll be there for Mar, leaning over her at the appointed time; I’ll be there to gaze into her eyes, to assure her with complete control, *It won’t hurt, I promise*. I’ll be there to hold her hand and her puke basin, *No, doc, I’m just a friend*; to smile at the hypo and scalpel; to say steadily, *What else did you buy for Baby?* as they dissect her abdomen in my peripheral view; to say, *She’s beautiful*, Maddy held up dripping birth just out of Martha’s sight, as I quickly catalog the defects from her parents’ toxic First Night through Mom’s unknowing, inebriated first month: club feet, fetal alcohol syndrome, cleft palate, forked tongue. And then later, I’ll be there for Mom with her angelic Maddy armful, kicking at our building’s security door, and Daddy!Daddy!’s handful of teary-eyed returns. Just be there.

## LOST CONTACT

1

Tanner was smoking up with a high school kid named Red Jackson in a janitors' closet behind the parts cleaning area. He didn't usually smoke at work, but Red had asked him all day, five times at least, and Tanner had always been susceptible to the power of suggestion when it came to pot.

He exhaled another hit off the bong he'd rigged from a Mello Yello two-liter. "Ever feel like, I don't know, the world's just—happening? You know, happening, crashing down all around you?" He loved the way that the smoke seemed to physically expand the passages in his head, giving him a chance to really think—more powerful than an asthma mister or fresh-killed skunk or maybe even ammonia fumes.

Red just tilted his head to signal Tanner to pass the bong. He never made conversation when they smoked together. He was a scavenger, used his muscles and dead-slack face to get what he could off you, then dropped you. When he did talk, he bragged about stealing cars or holding people up without getting caught. What made it funny to Red was his brother was a cop.

Tanner held on to the two-liter, took another hit, and then, hoping to draw Red out this time, said, "You know just from what your brother tells you."

Red jerked upright. "What the fuck do my brother have to do with it? The fuck you talking about." His scowl reminded Tanner of the tigers on *National Geographic* covers.

"No, man. I'm just saying he sees the shit every day," Tanner said quickly.

"I *am* the shit," Red said loudly, reaching an open hand to Tanner, who flinched. "Hand me the fucking bowl."

The closet door creaked slightly, but it took Tanner some time to understand just how his boss Larry Borders had materialized in the room with them.

*Blondie*, Larry laughed to himself. *Always contributing to delinquency*. He had Tanner's ass. He bared his teeth, wanted to growl. Larry allowed Red to leap into the shadows of the hall, but he walked his prize, the boy-man who was a foot taller than he was and a few years younger at thirty, to the center of the main room for the supply cleanup group at the Mendelsons' Recyclery. Larry looked around at the crew and then said to Tanner, in a low, very public tone, "You just gave me one more reason to believe you really are an asshole. So as of now consider your little pucker officially on the street."

Tanner stood stupefied before Larry, but suddenly turned on his heel and walked toward the back door, saying, "So long, *Lawrence*." As he made his way to the back, his stringy blond locks hopped with the jounce of his angry stride.

Larry smiled over the stun of disrespect. Everyone knew about Larry's wife Sandy and the warehouse night manager Lawrence Mollus, but no one had ever said anything; Larry was too surprised to do anything other than to go coolly out to the hall. The muscles remained tight on his face, a rigor mortis, as he continued his ritual walk toward the registers, his closing rounds, to switch off the breakers and sneak out the front doors to his covert.

Tanner passed a couple of shop vets as he came to the back door. One of them, a sweaty, twitchy man, put his hand on Tanner's arm and said, "Shouldn'a done that, man."

A woman working at the nearby set tubs laughed. She resembled the used medical squeeze bulbs she was washing down. "It's Larry shouldn't do that," she said. "He'll do that to the wrong man one day and he'll be sorry."

"But he *is* the wrong man," said the man who had approached Tanner. "He's as mean as they come. Look out, Tanner. That gun of his is proof." It was well circulated that Larry Borders kept a semi-automatic in the seat of his jeans, right in the crack. That he'd shot it at his own brother-in-law after a Thanksgiving meal, when the ballsy guy told Larry and his then-wife Sandy he wouldn't be using any of his cut of their daddy's fat inheritance to pay for the funeral or headstone. Larry danced him over the front lawn with a few well-aimed shots and

emptied the clip into his in-law's retreating pickup. When the police asked Larry how many bullets he'd fired, he just asked, "How many holes are in the truck?"

The two gossips wandered off without ever saying a word of consolation to Tanner. He stood against the door frame as he slowly realized that it was still five minutes to close, and he'd been caught smoking up and was fired in less than a minute. These facts in time taxed his mind completely, especially under concentrated pot. But he forced his head to work harder: *What this means. No more benefits. No money for a while. Rent, eviction, credit checks, homelessness, death by illness or credit cops or hitchhiking.*

He couldn't run home to have Kamara lick his wounds anymore—she'd given up on him and moved to a cabin in Oregon. She withheld her love on his birthday last year; though he was tough about it then—he embraced her for her gift, a moldy hardback of *Do With Me What You Will*, and she was absolutely stiff with repulsion, there was no mistake; he had to be the one to say, "I guess it's over." He wasn't tough anymore, and had the holiday maudlins, especially this past Valentine's, and even on the morning of this day, the Friday the Thirteenth just before the Ides of March.

Inevitably, lights began clacking off section by section on the cavernous first floor of the warehouse, so the junk stockers leaned and sat and allowed the darkness and circuit breakers' echoes to herd straggling customers to the main exit. Time was still slow for Tanner, though, and he could feel and do nothing. Automatically, he repeated the lines he wrote on Valentine's Day, and walked himself straight-backed through the back way.

*Maybe we'll camp in the U.P.  
Maybe we'll move to Montana  
Maybe somewhere  
share a farmhouse with other pilgrims  
raise children all together, in the altogether  
newest nudist Northern-California new age.*

He mouthed the words like rosary prayers as he went the eight blocks across downtown Dayton, Ohio, through the Oregon District and under the Highway 65 overpass to his apartment—the notice already on his door, or no heat, or whatever waited there.

2

Larry Borders waited at the lot next to Mendelson Brothers in his gurgling, barely sparking High Sierra—not his Ram—after closing the first floor down; he kept the headlights off as if he was warming up the old boy on that cold spring night. But he was really waiting for his buddy Lawrence—Great and Good Lawrence Mollus, almighty evening boss for the Mendelson brothers. Larry waited for him to unlock the executive john where he'd smoked Grenadiers and probably putzed around all night, waited for him to slide down the elevator and slip into his Subaru for home or the Bottoms Up Lounge. Larry'd followed Lawrence for a couple of weeks, since there were whispers about Lawrence banging one of the secretaries, and since Lawrence had married Larry's ex-wife Sandra less than a year before, on the day, at the God-damned hour the divorce went on record. Now she was Sandy Mollus, and his kids were Molluses, too, and her money—tens of thousands from her rich daddy, who'd made Dayton Tires world-famous. Sandy didn't let Larry's son or daughter speak to him now, but that didn't keep him from caring that the bigger, better Lawrence Mollus was dicking around on them. When Larry had heard about that, he followed his boss downtown and to the bars; so far, though, Lawrence just drank after closing the shop. Murders and other revenges percolated in Larry, and he drew his face into another death grin as he caught the full poison-apple moon taking to the sky over the highway in his rearview mirror.

As the last few workers peeled out of the lot in their kit cars or leased pickups with garish sport-decals, three vehicles remained, and Larry cut his engine and ducked to get his answer: Jenny, a fluffy teenager from the office, leaned on Lawrence as they wobbled and tripped to her car. *The old bastard* —



*surprised it isn't one of the boys*, he thought as he clamped his jaws. Suave Lawrence saw off the giggling drunk girl with a quick, stiff final kiss, and walked cowboy, easy and smiling, back to his station wagon. Larry had positioned his eyes over the dashboard of his truck like a submerged alligator, and with the utmost restraint, he observed as Lawrence turned south out of the lot—possibly toward the bars on Brown Street—but worse, after his early fun tonight, possibly home for more, to hump Larry's ex-wife and yell at Larry's ex-kids.

3

Tanner emerged from the overpass at the ruins of the Marvin Gardens Apartments, smiling because his head was still humming after fifteen minutes in the cold air; he had truly taken the Supreme Divine Hit before Larry walked in on him at the shop. He was glad Red asked him to smoke up after all, even if it meant the best job he'd had and having to bury his memories of Kamara again. He crossed the side street off Brown that led up to Route 65, went around to his entrance in the rear of this stack of pitted bricks and felt in his pocket for his keyring. The sawed-off roof of a cookie-cutter K-Car had lain against the fence ending this alley for at least the year that Tanner had occupied his first-floor efficiency. There were flattened fast-food bags with obsolete logos on the pavement, and close to the car top, rusty and peeling car sheddings strewn over a bed of glass shards. He stiffened with hate for this city shit; he had to cut loose, just leave the whole fucking mess behind, fall into oblivion.

Tanner felt around a tangled audiotape and tissue wads in his sweatshirt, shifting impatiently on the concrete stoop, found the keys and tested nearly each cold, flat head and its jagged blade—parents' garage, parents' basement door, his squished VW Bug—and never made it to his door key. He just froze, because the squat silhouettes of two men trotted up the alley and then, in an interval that seemed to slow down and eventually crystallize them in the amber lights of the highway overpass, they rushed him. Tanner merely watched, detached, as the older man named Dré and Tanner's smoking buddy Red blurred up the steps.

Dré and Red nearly had him in this second, but Tanner snapped to, leaped from the stoop and galloped along the rear face of the building.

Dré, a seasoned thief, father, and teacher, sighed and jogged back down the steps in Tanner's direction, trailing after his rabid pupil Red. The old man was sour because he didn't get a chance to charm this guy, or to show young Red the old-school finesse, a little play on fear that never required a gun.

But Red was on the blond's bony tail. "Come on, man!" Red was shouting over his shoulder some yards ahead; he'd taken his brother's semi-automatic while the fool was wearing it that night—smooth, faking a hug, promising not to leave Mama's house—and drew it now from the waistband of his sweatpants with the same fluid arm sweep, marking Tanner, aiming to shoot the dope and cash out of his pockets with one round.

Dré stopped short, heart fit to explode, and yelled quickly, "Let him go, Re-Re! Let him—"

Red stopped and fired once over Tanner's head, maybe hoping to force him down and just beat him to shit. But instead, the long-haired stick man cut left and hopped the chain link fence, climbed a vertical embankment, and pounded up the on-ramp to the highway, discharging a whimper with each step, finally shouting near the top, "It's me, man!" Red fired a couple more shots at him in reply.

4

"Nothing ever happens on this road, man!" said Officer Anthony Marks, driving with his right hand drooped over the top of the steering wheel.

Officer Noelle Smith tried to ignore her rookie trainee's complaint. What did he want? Did he dream of chain-reaction pile-ups and expressway shootouts? He'd got to talking again, looking more at her than the road—she was definitely driving after they got coffee. Anthony carried on about seeing more action at the academy; "Save it," Noelle said with a scowl, "And watch out for that debris! Damn, Anthony." They were coming up on the exit for Officer Steve Whalen Boulevard, the stretch where a few years back a redneck had shot Officer Whalen once through the head before the patrolman could tell him what he was pulled over for. No one ever caught the bastard. Steve was a boy-faced white—like the others, with a crew cut and moustache and too much belly—but really boyish, with that smile that proved nothing could turn him hard like the worst of them. Only his street sign reminded her of that kind of love anymore. *Young Anthony Marks here will soon see enough action*, she mused. As Anthony continued to prattle, she made out a figure in the orange wash of light down the road.

"I've got this guy, Noelle. First of the night!" Flipping the lights on, he slowed and rolled ahead of the flailing runner, then pulled to the far right of the shoulder and parked, nearly blocking Noelle's door with the guard wall.

"What are you doing!" she cried, but she knew. He always scoffed at procedure, and she was determined to break him of it. "Force him over on the right. Some nut's going to hit you on this side."

"There's enough room. I don't want to scare him. He looks freaked out," he said, already out of the cruiser.

*What a mother. How did this guy make it through academy?* Noelle thought. She popped out, drew her gun and flashlight, and assumed her backup stance at the right rear corner of the car, spotlighting the agitated man that Anthony was trying to calm.

Anthony put his hand on Tanner's skinny arm. Enunciating his words, he said, "My name is Officer Marks, and this is Officer Smith. Could you repeat yourself, sir? Are you in trouble?"

Tanner was crying, throwing off as much steam from his face as his breath, unable to speak for sobbing.

Anthony quickly flicked his flashlight in Tanner's eyes—bloodshot and bagged. "Sir, have you been using drugs tonight?"

"Guysaretryingetme!" Tanner whipped his head around, as if just remembering some imaginary assailants, and then lunged past Anthony.

With newly-honed reflexes, the rookie transferred his flashlight to his left hand, whipped his free hand to his right side, and collided it with his empty holster. He twisted his hip and raised his arms to see, disbelieving. Maybe his gun fell out in the car, or as he got out—he frantically scanned the pavement of the shoulder and the whizzing lanes for the nine-millimeter. He knew he snapped it in at the station; he couldn't have taken it off when he stopped at his house earlier on patrol—he had just gone in to kiss his mother, grab a sandwich, make sure his little brother wasn't out raising hell, putting Anthony's own ass on the line again—

"Freeze!"

Noelle's cry paralyzed him and the fleeing man. Dropping his crisis for now, Anthony wrenched Tanner back to the right side of the cruiser. A car ripped past them, slightly over the shoulder line. "Careful, sir," Anthony said flatly. "We've scared off anyone who's been chasing you by now."

Tanner was still whimpering, and with another burst, jerked away from Anthony's grip again, screaming, "They'regonegetme!"

Anthony caught him this time, violently twisted his arms behind him and shouted angrily, "Sir! Stand facing the car! Spread your legs and put your hands over your head!"

Tanner complied, weeping.

Anthony patted up both legs, from ankles to groin. “Sir! Are there any needles or any other sharp paraphernalia in your front pockets? You must, by law, tell me before I search you completely. Sir! Needles!”

A tacky solution of mucus and tears slipped from Tanner’s chin. With a heaving, quivering intake of air, he replied, “Yes.”

“Which pocket, sir! Here?”

“Yes. They’re just acupuncture needles. I’m holding them for my friend Kamara in Yellow Springs. Actually she just moved out west. She said—”

“All right, sir, you’re going to have to lean forward with your hands on the car. Come on, sir.”

Tanner bent forward dripping, placed his hands on either side of the blinding blue strobe on the cruiser’s roof, and the young cop—*Officer Marks*, Tanner remembered—gingerly felt in the front right pocket of Tanner’s unzipped hooded sweatshirt. “They’re wrapped up. Kamara, she—” Tanner started again, but the lady cop—*was it Officer Smith?*—stopped him with a dip of her flashlight and gun and another “All right, sir!” They needed to know why he kept them in that pocket, needed to know about Kamara, whose name means love and death, who no longer slid long needles into each of his nipples at once, raising, thrusting, and rotating. How could they understand?

“What’s your name, sir?”

Tanner flowed over again, with grief now—he would be arrested again, locked up for something stupid again. When he was just out of high school, his dad made him sit in some county jail for three days because he took his fifteen-year-old girlfriend to a Motor Inn in Richmond, Indiana. He cried for her, for Kamara, and for himself now—his eyes flushed so that he felt a lifting over his left cornea. He blinked hard against the blur in this eye, but felt the rim of the plastic lens between his eyelids and watched it drop and bounce off his sweatshirt sleeve, still illuminated in orange and flickering blue. Incredibly, it skated down the roof and along the curve of the left windshield support, into

darkness and the haze of shortsightedness. “I just lost my contact, officer. I’ve got to find it,” Tanner said, stepping back.

“Hands back on the car!” Noelle shouted, stalking Tanner from behind the cruiser, gripping her gun more tightly, aiming directly at his chest. This punk was already way too much trouble. Anthony was botching it, always too nice, wasting his people skills on somebody who obviously wasn’t worth it.

But standing behind this tall, shaggy mess was a frightened Anthony, who gestured at her madly. *He had no gun, couldn’t find it.* She rushed up, still aiming at Tanner, and shouted at Anthony, “Officer Marks here will find your contact, sir. Don’t move.” She jerked her head, leering at her partner, and Anthony dropped the pack of needles, quickly flashed his light inside the car, clicked his tongue. He kneeled down and then scuttled over Tanner’s feet and around the front tire under the engine block.

“I see something—naw, just tire rubber.” Anthony’s mouth dried out as he realized his gun was really gone. Noelle would report this, he was sure, go straight to the sergeant she was waving her ass for and seal Anthony’s chances for promotion after his initial probation period; he jerked back in a rage to get on his feet, to get on top of everything again, but caught something near the tire in the beam of the flashlight. “Here’s his contact.”

5

Larry Borders had never followed his man all the way home before, but something had to be said, or done. No one fucked with Larry’s own. Lawrence had driven around Brown for a few minutes, stopped in the Walnut Hills and then the Bottoms Up to see who was around, but there wasn’t ever any action on Monday night. So he was going to the arms of his Sandy and her two kids. Larry

got directly behind the Subaru in the turn lane off Brown; maybe he'd follow him all the way this time.

He allowed a good distance to build as they went up the gradual ramp, headed for the lovely plasterboard Mollus homestead in warm and inviting Beaver creek, wife and kids waving in the driveway. He wondered exactly how Saintly Lawrence the Good had reacted when he'd found out old Sandy was a package deal, kids at no charge. Larry would be footing that bill for another fifteen years thanks to alimony and the Deadbeat Dad law. So for losing his money, and his kids; for all the company picnics where Sandy and Lawrence exchanged secret smiles; for the calls Sandy made locked in the bathroom on the cordless phone at three in the morning; for all of it, Larry jammed the gas and shouted, "Time to ante up, Mollus! Wheeee-hee-hee-heeeee!"

Lawrence didn't consider any change in his acceleration until a half-second before he cannoned the cruiser from behind. It was better than the burst of speed before the two-hundred foot drop on the Screamin' Demon. He and Sandy's boy got back in line for that jolt a dozen times one day last summer at King's Island. "Again," the boy said after each time they rode it, until Lawrence diplomatically diverted his attention to the funnel cakes. Sweet kid.

On impact, the cruiser wrenched forward and up, butting Noelle gracelessly backward into the middle lane of the highway. She sucked in all the life she could as death bore down with raised blue symbols: 4BTCHZ. The gold-trimmed Coupe De Ville bearing down on her swerved across both lanes, nearly hit the far guard wall. Noelle slowly realized that her flashlight and gun were trained on the exact center of the rear license plate, unwavering.

Tanner had heard the roar and crunch between the cars, knew what it probably meant, but opened his eyes a little wider when he recognized that a compacted, smoking Subaru seemed to have instantly replaced or flattened the police cruiser, dropped by the gods. Maybe it was a gift—he was untouched, free of the police and the thieves and murderers, and now he could start again—after all, the first day of spring was coming soon. There was a beautiful spider web lit by maybe blue lightning, radiating from a point on his side of the Subaru’s windshield. He walked up to it curiously, and made out his senior boss Lawrence Mollus through the cracks in the glass, his head slumped forward, restrained by the strap of webbing across his chest.

6

Lawrence Mollus snapped up his head painfully and opened his eyes when he remembered the blue flashing lights, then was blinded by a flashlight spotting him through the mosaic of the smashed windshield. Had he seen the glint of a gun underneath?

“Hands on your head, sir!” shouted Officer Noelle Smith.

“I can’t move them,” he lowed.

“Now!”

Lawrence couldn’t move them. She came around to his window, light fixed on his eyes, and now he could see the gun. He almost laughed—he had done nothing, didn’t even know what he was doing here. Noelle whipped the door open. The blast cooled the blood in Lawrence’s jeans against his skin and made his stomach spasm. “I think I broke my legs,” he stuttered, “and I can’t move my arms.”

She moved the flashlight beam away from his face, maybe asked him a question, but all he experienced was the gurgle of a huge crumpled truck slowly passing on the left, and he saw in the lighted cabin over the cop’s shoulder—yes—there was a smiling Larry Borders. Instinctively, he smiled back, tried to wave. But only when he heard the noise of the truck, saw its white stripe along



the side, did he match it with the one he couldn't quite identify when he was with Jenny earlier in the shop parking lot. *It was the Borders' old family truck.*

"You have to explain what you were doing—" Noelle repeated for the fourth time. She turned her head to follow Lawrence's stupid gaze, frowned at the man rubbernecking in his oversized truck and waved him on peevishly. Anthony's groaning distracted her, and she cried, "How are you doing! I called an ambulance, Anthony." She checked quickly, couldn't see Anthony stuck under the cruiser from where she was, but noticed the same slack-jawed expression on Tanner's face as she did Lawrence's. Noelle watched the tall druggie's head follow the big truck as it sped off, license plate just going out of focus. "Damn! Did you get that plate number? Did you get the plate number!"

Tanner's eyes glazed over, locked on Lawrence, as he said, "Borders! Borders, Mr. Mollus! Borders!"

"*What* borders?" Noelle felt like coldcocking this idiot. "Do you know this man?" she asked Tanner.

"It was me," Lawrence Mollus said, trembling, flinching as she jerked her gun and light back to his face. "I did it, just lost control."

"No!" Tanner screamed. "I saw him!" It was all about revenge and hate and city shit. Larry wanted them all dead.

"It was me, Tanner, that's all," Lawrence said with perfect calm. Noelle began barking questions at Lawrence now, and his face was completely slack, head upright as he answered; his eyelids were half-closed and looked artificial, as if drawn with a double line. Even relaxed, Lawrence's lips curved into a natural smile. He was a god of compassion.

Tanner gave up the argument. He walked back to Anthony, bent over to see the man prostrate under the front wheel, pinned by the pelvis, and said warmly, "We'll take care of you, here, Officer Marks. It'll be okay. Can you keep

your arms away from the wheels, sir?" he asked as he opened the cruiser door. Once he heard another grunt, he popped the car into neutral, let the wheel roll past Marks and thunk down on his other side, and slammed it back into park. But the man made no more sounds. Tanner slid under the car, squinted out his face in the darkness, smiled at him.

Officer Marks seemed to focus on Tanner, and choked for a few moments, but managed to say, "Better. Shock—now," and dragged his arm toward Tanner to hand him something—the lens. Tanner teared up again and tucked the contact under his tongue, enveloped it in the womb of his mouth. He nearly smiled to reassure this remarkable officer, but grimaced instead as he recalled Larry Borders the cop killer tossing his head back with a heaving laugh as he saw Tanner, then speeding off in his wrecked truck, the license plate reading BRDRS1.

Tanner came out of this as he felt someone's legs against his right side, someone sitting against the closed car door. He knocked his head against the underside trying to scramble out.

"I didn't have my shit together enough to do what you did for Anthony," the lady cop was muttering, whether Tanner had heard her or not. "Thanks for rolling the cruiser off him."

"He wath hurting bad, Offither Thmith," he replied through the contact lens. She didn't seem to react at all. Tanner noticed her cap was off, and he could see her hard breath in the rear-ender's headlights; she ran her fingers over her sweaty face and tight-curved hair in one sleek, graceful motion.

"I'm Noelle," she said, and glanced over to him—he was gazing intently at her, pupils dilated in the headlights. His hair was a brilliant dappled blond in the shafts of light, like a sunrise. His lips were full and parted—his nose straight, lashes long.

"Tanner," he said with a girlish and irresistible smile.

Anthony awoke to a shot of static from the radio strapped at his shoulder, and though he lay against it, he made out a muffled call from the dispatcher: “Two . . . male suspects . . . robbery in progress . . . second, sixteen to eighteen . . . light brown skin . . . red hair . . . armed . . .” He tried his legs, grunted, murmured his brother’s name, decided that this was it, that the boy wasn’t getting off again, then came back into full consciousness. He vaguely heard Lawrence’s moans, heard Tanner and Noelle chatting, but beyond, he came to hear the dissonant chorus of a thousand honks, a thousand angry motorists gridlocked behind them. He slammed the belly of the car with both fists. “God dammit, Noelle! Can’t you hear? Let’s get on the fucking ball! The whole city must be backed up behind us! And Red’s got my God-damned gun!”

Anthony’s rant cleared the haze in Noelle’s head, and she lost any recognition of Tanner, jumped to her feet, called for backup, and stepped behind the cars blocking traffic without looking back.

Tanner got up slowly, looked down at Anthony, then over to where Noelle was directing cars to clear a path for the ambulance and wreckers. He whispered, “Take care, offither.”

Anthony knocked against the car again. “You’re not going fucking anywhere, you freak!”

Tanner turned west, and in the conflating streetlights on the horizon, a fuzzy celestial glow of amber and white, Kamara appeared in her spaghetti strap top, smiling down. She disappeared when he popped his left contact back in, but he headed along the right side of the interstate anyway, carefully staying between the yellow line and the wall.

## THE NEXT STEEL

1

“The water’s beautiful tonight,” King said. “Sheer green, even with the sun down.” He gestured to the low, pounding waves with a clink of his Scotch. Something his dad used to do, gesture like that, but with his requisite Jim Beam neat instead and a Salem gone to ash in the same hand. “Emerald Coast, all right. Marvelous water down here. I sure wish we’d brought you here when you were younger. Totally different from the Outer Banks or Myrtle Beach, right? Isn’t it great? And look up! Great bright stars. Straight ahead there—marvelous.” King could be a little euphoric tonight, last night of the first vacation of his retirement.

Jim’s childishly long blond eyelashes were invisible in the twilight, and as the boy looked toward the Gulf, his eyes were still. He was being antisocial, being eighteen as Viv lately observed when their boy removed himself during family visits. Jim didn’t flinch out of his meditation, but he’d probably heard the sliding door from the great room, Viv and the Florida cousins chatting and washing dishes, heard it sail shut and then King’s flip-flops slapping the planks—Jim, yes, had braced himself.

“Scorpio,” Jim finally offered.

“Scorpius,” King said quickly. His eyes watered with the coming darkness. He hadn’t seen these Gulf skies in over twenty-five years, sullied now by the buzzing fluorescents on the boardwalks of the condos on either side of the house. He could see the scorpion’s image almost perfectly anyway, a lit line drawing. “They’re just so bright down here! Dayton’s always so washed out. Wish we’d brought the telescope.” He got caught up in his instructor self. “That big red star, Antares, heart of the scorpion,” he said, “and its tail curls to the left, ends with that bright star, the stinger. And somewhere in there is the X-1, a dead star that’s crunched so far down it just sucks the life out of its twin. Almost like a black hole, almost sucks down light, for God’s sake.”

“I know,” his son said flatly. “Is that all?”

King knew the boy didn't want to hear his old man's bullshit right now, but his old man needed to say something to him, and it would take some leading up to.

"What's that biblical line again? Would you hand your son a scorpion? Watch it, kid." This wasn't helping. He had to start all over. "This is where I came to see the '70 solar eclipse—right here on this beach, in the springtime. Stayed here with the Florida clan."

"Dad, you told me on the way down."

"Damn thing only lasted about three minutes, but you could see the mountains of the moon against the sun, the diamond ring effect, and I got that beautiful shot of the corona. And that darkness was complete, kid. I mean even the crabs thought it was time for a night stroll, you know? You should've seen the collective oh shit of ten thousand sand crabs when it ended! Hopped back in their holes quick as damn whips." King snorted into his glass.

King saw his cousins, whom he called the spinsters to get a rise out of Viv, peer through the sliding door at him. They were kissing his wife, gathering their bags.

"Come on in and get a drink with me, Jim. Let's catch them before they leave." During dinner the ladies had embarrassed Jim with their predictions of his success in the military, an idea he'd been actively fighting since high school, and the spinsters probably got a sense of it when the boy disappeared without excusing himself. The boy's a fragile one, King had told them. "Jimbo, come and say goodbye to Doris and Millie."

Jim hadn't moved at all since King stepped out, and he obviously wasn't going to now. His body was completely slack against the deck rail, his face expressionless. "Man, what is the matter with you," King said as he trotted to the door. Before he slid it shut, he called to Jim, "Don't take off anywhere, I've got something to say." The boy said nothing.

King returned smiling, with another Scotch and water, fresh from the air conditioning and the glow of goodbyes. “You know, something else about this place is that it’s not far from one of those Blue Book sightings they never solved; folks say there was a metallic right triangle flashing over Ocala, over there.” Jimbo used to love his Project Blue Book stories from the few weeks King spent at the main desk on the base before the program was scrapped in ‘69. Just bringing up a little science fiction—Hangar 18 at Wright-Patt or Area 51 or anything futuristic the force had developed—occasionally still worked. “A buddy of mine, Sammy Oglesby, came down to check it out. Sam always did sort of jump to conclusions—my bet is it was one of the flying wings we were testing in California. There could’ve been something secret going on here between the two big bases here, over the Gulf, even something like the old Dyna-Soar program. But old Sammy liked to party too much, you know, never checked anything out.” A cheer distracted him, came from a porch near them in the behemoth building to their left, a mass of Quikrete and wallboard and gold vinyl siding, the *Sunchaise*. King glared up two or three stories toward the sound.

“Is this what you were going to tell me? Another glory days story?”

“Okay, forget the nicey-nice. Listen.” He waited until Jim had turned his head to him. “You’re starting off next year in a tough program, and I want you to be great. I mean that. Just don’t do this because you think I want you to. You know, follow in Dad’s footsteps or something.”

King caught a wince in the crow’s feet starting at the corners of Jim’s eyes. “It’s not like I’m enlisting in the Air Force,” Jim said.

“I know that. I just want what’s right for you. I mean, is engineering right? You’re a lot smarter than I was, and you’ll be able to do whatever you want. Do you really want to be holed up in some lab? You know what I did for most of my thirty years. Nothing. It was all throwaway.” He’d mixed, woven, concocted composites of ceramics and plastics and carbon spun into thread, baked until blackened—and then once, by alchemy, he’d found the balance of lightness and strength that held up to all the specs. The next steel. “And what I did will be replaced tomorrow by something a hundred times better. Once you do find

something useful, everyone's gunning for you. It's cutthroat, Jimmy." But his composite was in the skins of the newest fighters and in the ace of the force, the longest-range, lightest, stealthiest bomber class ever made.

Jim flashed his eyes. "You just want what *you* think's right for me. What do you know about engineering anymore? You sat behind a desk getting promoted for the last ten years. And I'm not doing anything military, Dad." He looked away. "You know what I think. I want to make something good for people, not help kill them all off."

Deflated, King nodded deeply to his superior little shit, winking and tipping his drink to him. The ice was completely melted. "Righty-oh."

Jim hunched forward on the rail and resumed his vigil over the water. "At least you weren't trying to start one of your vacation sex talks again."

King smiled, took a drink, a little dissatisfied with the turn. "That was when? Once, I think, when we were in Myrtle Beach."

"I already had one with Mom today anyway," Jim said. "Very interesting."

"Well, you remember what your granddad used to say to me about sex. The only thing he ever needed to say. Your brain isn't in your stinger, right?"

"He called it a pecker."

"I know. That was a joke. It was a joke and you were supposed to laugh. Come on, kid—" Jim didn't tickle at all, so King positioned himself at the boy's backside for a sidelong pinch, which Jim evaded with a spin.

"Man, quit. I asked Mom how come you still have sex and never had any more kids."

King gave a high whistle. Poor Viv. Got herself in a bind this time. "There's this thing I've been meaning to tell you about since our last little talk, and it's called menopause—" He burst out in a dry, heaving laugh, and bowed over toward Jim.

"Shut up, Dad. It means something to me."

This was the problem with bringing Jim out. When it happened, it was all the way, and never what you expected. Pandora's box. King took a big gulp of his watery Scotch and coughed. "And what did she say?"

“She said you got a vasectomy after she had me.”

So Viv took it on herself, he thought. “Did she say anything else?”

Jim paused. “Something about teachings versus laws.”

“Swell.” He looked back through the glass door—dark now, TV going.

“You and Mom had a real heart to heart, didn’t you.” King swung his arms into a loose embrace with himself. “Mother and son,” he loudly pronounced, saliva bubbling between his lips.

Jim matched his father’s shout. “It’s not right.”

“Damn right, Jimbo. Damn right. What a good little Catholic schoolboy you are! You’re about—” He leaned into Jim, who was at least still facing him, brought his hand up with a jolt, his index finger and thumb held in a pinch, and with a heady exhale said, “I say about—halfway the fuck there, kid.”

Jim looked like he’d been punched in the sternum—and King knew he was in control again, that the boy could have nothing to say or do about it. “Listen. Did Adam and Eve talk to a little snake? Fuck no. Did Noah take all the animals in all the world on a little boat? Fuck no.” King swang an arm out theatrically. “Did Jesus ever say moms and dads can’t have a little fun if they don’t want kids every time?” He flailed both of his arms, tossing the remainder of the drink. “Who made all that up? Human beings, kid. Fucking human beings who make mistakes. Take it all with a grain of salt. It’s called living for the spirit of the law! And I can even tell you an example that I know your mother wouldn’t tell you, Jimbo. So I’ll tell you.”

“Dad.”

“Your mom and I met just as we were graduating from Dayton, you know. We went out, and after a few dates, something snapped—June the twenty-first, 1970, that was it, we were googoo eyes all night. It was sultry, sticky hot. And when we got back to her folks’ house from the movie or wherever we made out that night, we were so hot and horny we dropped on the back lawn and did it right there under her parents’ window. I don’t know how I got my pants down that fast.”

“I really don’t need to hear this.”



“I was in fucking love, you know? And it was our first time, both of us on fire and not knowing what the hell we were doing, but we figured things out pretty quick. So there we are like animals in the grass, and I look up—and see the Virgin Mary throwing her hands up in complete disbelief. I mean, shit! I really freaked, you know? But somehow the animal in you takes over. I just kept at it, and after all I realized it was only a statue in their little rock grotto. But God, it was great, and we both loved it, first time or not. And neither of us was ashamed of it. And you know what? We were in love and stayed in love and got married. And we had you, and yes, now I’m shooting blanks. You see?” He opened his arms again, as if to rush and embrace Jim, but stepped back a few uneven paces. “See? And here we are, the—” But he’d already stepped off the deck, realized what was happening too slowly. He curled over himself in space, hit a couple of steps with his back, pitched, and sprawled out in the blackness under a stilt of the deck, cheek in the sand and burs, amid broken stalks of sea oats. Male and female laughter clattered and bounced under the house from other porches, under the pound of the surf.

He’d made it to the bed, relieved to have made it, accepting of death if it would just come now.

“Lay flat,” said Viv as she eased herself next to him on this foreign bed—not a trace of reproof or hurt in her voice.

He grunted while pain shot and pulsed and buzzed in him. “I really fucked up, Viv,” he said thickly.

“How are you going to handle working like this Monday? You can’t go in.”

“It’s a business. I have to be there. Jesus, I should be there now. But I just really fucked up tonight.”

“We’re still alive.” She propped herself close to him, laying on her side. “You learned something, I hope. I did.” Her face was just against his stubbly cheek. They often fell asleep kissing or making love on their sides, fully facing each other, and she paid for it with chafed cheeks and chin. When he’d get home

before Jim, she would rush up to embrace King at the front door, in one of his ragged V-neck tee shirts she wore during her after-school naps, sleepy-eyed and smiling so her cheeks made her eyes into slits. They had never outgrown it, their childishness, and he loved that—that he couldn't wait to get into bed with her at the age of fifty-three.

“Yeah, I learned. Learned two Scotches, that's it.”

“I learned something about Jim, anyway. I'm not sure if he was ready for any of that history.”

He lay still, trying to conquer the pains the aspirin couldn't. “There's just no middle for him. Good old Knee-jerk Jimmy. He thinks we have to be all or nothing.”

Viveka snaked her hand to his belly, pushing her fanned fingers up his chest, through his silver hairs up to his collarbone, over and around each breast in growing circles. “I *like* our gray areas,” she smiled onto his lips. He chuckled at this, coughed painfully, but settled, brought his breathing in time with hers, slow and assured as the waves sounding through the closed window.

King awoke well before Viv, early the next morning, as he had all week, to watch the natural passage of things from the deck, to see the sun rise over the curve of the water and snuff out the boardwalk lights. But this time, between dozes, and just before the first sunlight collected on the horizon and renewed the gray beach and waves, King saw something splash and sputter out of the tide. A massive dark body, a turtle nearly a meter long, had dragged itself onto the crest of the beach. It flashed what looked like long pale wings that glittered with wet and grit and hacked at the sand to turn itself around. The primordial thing shoveled out its pit, deposited its leathery clutch of eggs, buried it, and unceremoniously lugged itself back into the crashing Gulf.

Just before noon King directed his son in packing the Econoline, which Jim did silently and willingly—coolers first, then the bags, just so. As Jim sprang to retrieve sacks, the canvas umbrellas, the lounge chairs, King grew sick of his pitying glances and walked painfully from the open carport under the house through the deck stilts to the beach. He rubbed his bruised kidneys with his palms, arms swept behind him. Pity! The little shit brought him to it last night, upsetting everyone. Jim had got his confessions all around—was he satisfied?

The beach was steadily filling with fresh vacationers. A little leisurely to be leaving this late for Dayton, if they were going to make it in one shot. But he was wounded, he'd forgive himself some time, maybe stop at a hotel if it got too tough on the road tonight. He'd let Viv sleep off last night—avoid her driving—and Jim would have to kiss more ass than loading the van without being asked if he wanted to drive.

A pack of children charged up his section of beach, chasing after an older boy who towed a wide-winged black plastic kite. Its saw-toothed aft edge flapped loudly, and it reeled with the wind in feints and dives.

“Looks like your baby, Dad.”

King stifled a yip of surprise, tried to keep a disaffected expression. “Yeah, but it sure doesn't fly like her. And it makes way too much noise.”

There hadn't been any irony or anger in Jim's voice. His son still stared at the reeling kite, perhaps with admiration. “You going to see it next week? It's at the air show again.”

King knew the moment one of his bombers entered Dayton airspace. It made his head pulse like weather, but at a fearsome magnitude, to the point of collapsing his skull. “Ah, the air show. We shall see.”

Jim turned and looked at his father squarely. “I'm definitely going this year—I hear it moves like a UFO. And I want to finally see what this killer can do.”

Jim was restored to himself, his normal kinetics, as they drove out of the strand with the nearly twelve-hour trip before them. He read through the last few street signs they saw in the town in full dead-pan: “Now leaving Destin, Florida.” And for minutes he talked out the best routes he could devise from the road atlas, none of which were on the Triple-A planner King followed.

“Atlases don’t show construction, Jim. Nice try.”

“Thanks for your help, though, Jim,” his mother added, looking at King.

After nearly an hour, Jim sounded off again. “Eglin Air Force Base, two miles. That’s like Myrtle Beach. Wonder why the airheads build their bases so close to the good beaches,” he jabbed, “huh, Dad?”

“Is that the peanut gallery back there again?” Because they know a good thing when it’s not their money, King snickered silently. “The base in Myrtle Beach is closed down, Jimbo.” His boy’s real anarchic streak always thrilled him—free of loyalty or responsibility, and so different from his blind religion. King could imagine what Jim was doing with what old Dad loosed on him last night—*Give in on the little rules, and what goes next, Dad? You can tear it all the way down to not believing in God from there. And then throw it all out.*

But King remembered the glimmer from the beach earlier. “Did you see the sea turtle come out onto the beach this morning, Jim? Dropping eggs, I guess.” Jim had taught natural history classes as a summer job, always knowing the names of birds by their calls or trees by leaf-shapes. It was his first summer away from it; he’d said he needed to clear his head, live off an allowance for the summer.

“Seventy percent of all turtles in the world have some kind of VD,” Jim said. “Probably because those sex-starved males just jump the first lady turtle they see.”

“Wow. That’s cute, Jimbo.”

“I know all about nature, Colonel.”

King locked eyes with him in the rearview mirror until Jim looked away. “A whip, Viv. Our man here’s a real whip.” An air concussion caught the boxy van as King passed a truck, and he swerved violently to correct.

Jim clawed at the base of his bench seat to keep balance. “God, man! Why didn’t we just fly down here?”

2

The three raised themselves from the wooden kneeler in relative unison with the others in this church they’d found near the Louisville Holiday Inn. But Jim wouldn’t say the Apostle’s Creed for the first time King could remember, wouldn’t even mumble or pretend. The boy wouldn’t take his hand at the Our Father, either, as he had at this moment of Mass since he was a child. King took his hand and squeezed, and Viv did too on Jim’s other side, but the boy refused to respond. He may have said And lead us not into temptation, but that was all.

3

Retired Air Force Colonel King Kaber returned to Wright-Patterson the following Monday. The guards gracefully waved him in; he greeted everyone on his floor—beamed with the continued attention from these men who loved his stories and freewheeling way, who still called him Boss—met with his nervous successor, soothed the man with his familiar laugh, and signed a contract for testing new composites, as he’d planned months ago when he was offered early retirement. It was no decision, really; Jim had school, scholarships or not, and Viv’s teaching at Dayton Catholic and his retirement weren’t going to cut it. Easy as anything. This new group chief, one of his old civilian guys, said he was glad he’d stayed on, needed someone with King’s expertise. King told him his tie suited him well.

His empty new cubicle was rigged in the computer room, which had a constant fifty-five-degree gale piped in by a unit he had ordered just last year. Now he shivered almost constantly in the room; maybe he’d get some nerve disease. The computer system he’d bought the cooling unit for wasn’t even worth the price of the blower anymore—it was now meandering, inefficient, obsolete.

Each day that week was pitiful. He filled out job requests, played solitaire on his terminal. Most often he hid behind his portable walls to avoid the young gunners who'd come into the room to pull their test results from the community printer; they used lasers and computer modeling to perfect their structure designs before sending anything to an oven or a lab.

During that week King ate lunch down the road at Huffman Prairie so he could watch the planes come in for the air show—first time he could remember doing it. His baby would come in last, Friday afternoon, after the Blue Angels and the Thunderbirds. He didn't bother coming to the base that day—all the engineers were out at the airstrips anyway, admiring the stealth fighter or the F-15s, gems of the Gulf War, tested in battle. He came out to the spot he favored—just under the high ridge where the Wright brothers had launched their first kites and gliders, where they'd learned to fly, became the first fliers before becoming the first pilots.

He didn't think at all about his son that Friday; instead, his baby. When the first one died, the only one to die, in 1988—the two pilots, too—its entire body matrix came apart. His matrix, his invention. The cruising plane had slammed headlong into a wall of Canada geese just taking off. It was flying in stealth, silently skimming a rocky corridor at eight hundred miles an hour, and when it came upon the twenty birds, they punctured the cockpit windows, and crunched swaths of the fuselage and wings, and disintegrated the composite turbofans in the engines. It went down at the foot of a forest in New Mexico, and the people who heard or saw it hit said what he had feared—the entire plane had shattered. There was a thunderous ripping sound—like the rending of the Temple cloth at the moment of Christ's death in the old gospel stories, King imagined, but with snapping and something like breaking glass. Nothing was salvageable. Despite their strength and agility, and the fact that two of them could, in their first real test, in some future war, replace 72 accomplices—support and attack craft—when fully laden, and that they were the first truly untraceable, silent nuclear warhead delivery system—despite all this, his baby bombers were fragile. And

soon someone would fix the problem, and the world would move on to new babies.

He thought this while taking in the paradox of middle July in this park—the Huffman cottonwoods in full production of seed, their wisps sinking in the sunlight, collecting in cracks of pavement, along the gutter, and between the grass blades as dry, airy summer snow. The time that the trees kept in this way was loose and grand, and it almost made him forget the fighters and cargo planes and older bombers streaking overhead toward the Wrights' ridge and the base. But in the afternoon he recognized the muffled buzz of his bomber's engines, and knew he didn't want to see it. He snapped himself up with a twinge, loped to his car, and drove home, eyes set on the road. That was enough for today. He felt old, his back hurt.

4

Jim left early for the air show with a new girl, someone from his and King's alma mater, John Carroll High. She was dark-haired, well-scrubbed, and probably named Chastity. Jim smirked as he left the house behind the girl, saying, "See y'all there, right?" in his best Florida cousins lilt. Maybe Jim thought old Dad wouldn't go, since he'd seen it so many times in tests. Clinton was supposed to be there, too, and many of the retirees King knew were staying away to protest his most recent debasements, semen stains and late-night phone sex and perjury. But Jim was going.

"My God, King," Viv laughed. "Guess *you'd* better."

He and Viv got there around the time the bomber was slated, walked onto the main field arm in arm, strong, together. Jim and his girlfriend were probably up at the front line, so King and Viv worked their way in that direction, away from the easterly blast of the afternoon sun. They scanned for the plane as they walked, and it was flying at a higher altitude than he expected when it did come into view. *Kitty Hawk* was traveling through angular phases, a celestial body in the physics of another universe—a sliver, a wedge, and then a flat black diamond

against the white cirrus and crossed vapor trails. The craft rapidly descended toward them now, mighty and unquestionable, able to incinerate, he knew, anything as small as him, precisely, cheaply and easily. It would make a video of the kill as proof to be shown off at press conferences.

Viv sighted Jim and pulled King along—he was transfixed by the B-2. The plane pinwheeled with a surprise bit of acrobatics into a wide bank, centering on their field. But Viv yanked again at King, pushed him ahead of her. He spotted Jim by his white blond burr cut, tiptoed between blankets and then the droves of kids crowding up to the temporary gate. Jim hadn't noticed him yet; he and the lovely girl were holding hands, swinging them, and as King looked over his son's shoulder he realized that the pilots were setting up to buzz the crowd.

It came down very low over the main runway, seventy feet wide and half as long, almost organic, with dun skin that had only a vague sheen, scaled and smooth, like a reptile's. Its wings looked stretched and supple, poised for a beat, and its horizontal tailflap twitched. It was a careening abomination, its intakes jaws and its nose a hooked beak, and as it bore down on them, it roared—invincible. The beast's belly was over them at once, should have crushed them with the rumble of stampeding armies and collapsing stars, but the engines only sounded a low warbling hum, and no one shouted or made any move—it had sucked up all of their senses for that second of dark, and King grabbed his son, held tight, clenched too long after its shadow passed over.

“Dad—” Jim tugged at his father's arms and said again, “Dad.”



## THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

They were uncomfortable, they were piled one on top of the other, they could hardly breathe; yet not one word of complaint was heard. The thought that in a few hours they would reach a country where there were no schools, no books, no teachers, made these boys so happy that they felt neither hunger, nor thirst, nor sleep, nor discomfort.

—Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

1

The delegation of Serbs shot through the blackness of American night, what might as well have been deep space, with smartass remarks and guarded laughter. And as they deplaned on an air base planted among the Midwestern cornfields—Camp David, apparently, was too good for them—Slobodan Milosevic felt the second slap of the visit. There on the shining pavement were six white, snub-nosed Honda sedans. Completely unexpected. Then the near silence, the hiss of drizzle instead of cheery Sousa and well-wishers. No reporters, no floodlights or flashes. No limousines. Slobo stared balefully at the line of cars, ignored Negotiator Holbrooke's approach. "Happy Halloween," said Slobo.

"Predsjednik Milosevic!" Holbrooke barked under a guard's jumbo umbrella. Slobo continued to stare at the cars. "Those are for the non-dignitaries. All the parties got them," said Holbrooke. "Everyone is receiving equal and fair treatment here." American Japanese cars, he explained, fresh from assembly in the state where they had landed, and they would be used—no limousines necessary for the nobodies. It would be a short trip on secured grounds. Slobo was to be locked up, as he had feared, practically under arrest.

The entourage piled into five of the cars as Slobo and his bodyguards waited for the limo; officers would drive them to the public hotel on the other side of the air base. The dignitaries' car wheeled around their jet liner after a minute, and the driver was apologetic as he opened the rear passenger door. Just to

aggravate Sobo further, Holbrooke ducked into a black Honda that pulled up with the limo, said through the open door that he'd meet him in the hotel later, Clinton was waiting on his call. The car zoomed off before Sobo could open his mouth. He piled into the Lincoln with his chief bodyguard Sasha and his longtime family doctor and secretary, Dr. Milos "Malo" Morgen, a spry octogenarian. Rain tapped the roof as they settled in.

They rolled past cargo planes disgorging Humvees and crates. Moisture around the cooling jet engines caught the pink floodlights. A movie image—wouldn't have surprised Sobo if a heady, assassin-concealing fog suddenly rolled in. A fog to stroll out of, arm in arm with fedoraed Rick Holbrooke and Capitaine Claude Rains in gendarme's cap. This was no doubt the plan, to bring the warring parties together, to simulate the beginnings of beautiful friendships right there on the tarmac—in separate welcoming ceremonies, of course.

It was silent in the limo, and it fell to Dr. Malo, keeper of conversation, to set them off. He stroked the leather between himself and Sobo and said in his Brooklyn English, "Everyone in the fuggin' delegation should be in limousines. We stick out."

"We should all be in the Hondas. Good cover," said Sasha. He was a behemoth even in silhouette, so large in the seat against the interior driver's window that he entirely blocked Sobo's view of the road. "Six little cars, all the same, all with blackened windows. Big guy rides somewhere in the line. Saddam does it."

"To security, good cover, sure as shit. To me, disgrace," said Malo.

"Good cover," Sasha asserted. "Even an extra decoy, in case of breakdown. The Hondas would've been better than this. Blending in is better. The blackened windows are key."

Sobo made his first pronouncement: "Your English is better every day, Sasha. But the windows aren't *blackened*—we aren't riding in swordfish—they are *blackened out*. And those little toys aren't armored. There should have been limousines." He played at being a long-suffering tutor with Sasha. Sobo executed a melodramatic sigh. "Twenty days till our return to Jugoslavija," he

said. "And they whisk me to Ohio, shut me up in Day-ton, Day-town. I am not priest, you know."

"I fuggin' know," answered Dr. Malo absently, patting Slobo's knee. "Dan i noc, dan i noc." Dan i noc, day and night. Heartsease. Malo was good for comfort.

"I think of you, dan i noc, noc i dan. Pour me a Scotch, Malo. Night in Daytone, you are the one. Day-tone? Driver? How do you pronounce this?"

The American officer behind the wheel met his eyes in the rearview mirror. "Yessir. Try it without the tee."

"Day-own. I prefer comrade to sir. Day-one, Day-un, Day-in-Day-out, Dayawn."

They pulled out on a public two-lane freeway that cut through the base grounds. The driver stepped too hard on the gas, jostled the passengers with a sudden burst of speed. He apologized in Serbian—perfect Beograd accent.

Dr. Malo seemed not to notice, said, "Funny enough, some screw out here invented the motorcar self-starter—"

"Self-starter himself, doubt not," said Slobo, allowing a smile.

"—And Dayton claims the laser," continued the doctor, who read from a pocket notepad he'd produced, "the Nazi code-cracker, the microcomputer, the ink jet printer, the lighted scoreboard, liquid quartz crystal, flood prevention, locking cash registers, price tag affixers, cellophane, microfiche, Scotch tape, storm windows, modern beekeeping, the movie projector and camera, the TV talk show; propellers, the Wright B Flyer, the room air conditioner, refrigerators, chrome plating, the frostless freezer, freeze-dried food and drink for use in outer space—"

"Invention! You are fact-full, Malo."

"—parachutes, mail chutes—"

"Hold it. Damned Croat invented that hundreds of years ago. Who was really Serb."

"All right, maybe *perfected* the parachute. And at least one variety or other of gas masks, filtered cigarettes, pacemakers, heart-lung machines, flexible

radiator hoses; gyroscopes, stepladders, ejection seats, airbags, motorized wheelchairs; instant blood-glucose level testing—your sugar monitor, Slobo. The stealthy Batwing-2 Bomber was born here at the base, and then there are those who mention radar detectors, parking meters, carbonless copy paper, the stainless steel ice cube tray with ejector, pop tops and pull tabs; and black light.” “And we have hundreds of inventions from just one: Tesla,” said Slobo.

“Though, you must admit, Tesla was technically a Croat,” Malo said quietly, faced twisted, cringing from possible rebuke.

“And then an American,” said the driver, quite out of turn.

Indignity after indignity, and this was only the first night. “We claim him,” Slobo said.

The car’s wiper motors hummed and their blades squealed against the glass. There was nothing along this short stretch of public road splitting the air base, just blackness beyond the streetlights on either side. Slobo murmured, “Certainly as glamorous place as I expected. Where is the city? Where are the citizens?” Early in his career there had been rumors of underground complexes carved out deep beneath these bases; and this one seemed a key stopover for cargo and warplanes, high on Russia’s nuclear strike list even now. He imagined vaulted tram tunnels with chandeliers and mosaics like the first New York subway at City Hall station, moving sidewalks as one might find in the bigger world airports or under the Capitol building in D.C., hectares of red-brick California ranches, twelve-story buildings nestled among stalagmites, which in ritzy exurbs lined the streets like the date palms of Beverly Hills, all under perpetual and evenly blended metal-halide daylight. KFCs would hang from the cave ceiling, buttressed by up and down escalators and elevated highway systems. The air supply alone would require months of precise excavation and entirely new scrubbing and venting technologies; it was, if actual, the single greatest public works project in all of human history. And he couldn’t have been too far from the truth. These people were the players of the world, spectacularly comfortable and complacent, if not very worldly. They would not be stepped on, even if it meant dwelling underground, and he loved them for that.

He caught the officer's vacant eyes again in the dashboard glow. The boy's mouth didn't seem to move when he said, "You'll be received more formally tomorrow, Mr. Milosevic."

The procession was slowing, and the lead car turned left.

Sasha's radio went off—said, "Odgovor, Sasha."

"Don't tell me to answer! Nijedan red ne odgovara." Sasha spoke into the device as if scolding a dog. He shook his shoulders.

The man on the other end of the radio returned only a blat of interference.

They were pulling in. "Hope Hotel and Convention Center," said the driver.

"Named for your president's hometown," Slobo ventured. "Or American optimism about the Talks."

"Not sure, actually."

Dr. Malo said, "No-no-no, Bob Hope, the die-hard comic. Friend of GIs here and abroad. Didn't you see him in performance on American news during the U.S.-Iraq War? Always a snappy line. Saddam's men say, 'They're bombing Baghdad—you must relocate!' And Saddam says, 'Okay, I guess I have to move, but this time I'm selling the futon, and does U-Haul have a camel big enough to carry my favorite twelve-story wall portrait?' Forgive me, Slobo, I know your feelings about Hussein, but snappy at ninety!" The gumline of Malo's dentures showed when he smiled big, as now, and he'd gone unshaven during the long flight.

"Yes, Fuck your picture, as we say." All four laughed at Slobo's retort, Slobo loudest. "Of course, Bob Hope," he said.

An MP saluted stylishly at the security gate in a sort of dance move, a clean-cut ZZ Top, as in the old music videos Slobo's son Marko endlessly rolled in his discotheque, the Madona. The car jumped as they accelerated into another driveway. Head bobbing, Malo looked out his window smiling, and Slobo watched him study the only remarkable feature of the Hope Hotel, twin F-14 Tomcats pointed skyward, planted in the front lawn like Godzilla's plastic flamingos. Malo's white whiskers reflected the amber lights in the hotel parking lot, as did the long fingernails on the hand he used to brace against the door. The old man could

have been in his grave two weeks already. They stopped with a gentle lurch forward, and Sloba thought, *Noc i Day-un*.

The fried potatoes at Packy's were the main problem. And the Scotch. After bidding Holbrooke and some high-rankers good night at the hotel bar, Sloba allowed the Secret Service agents to lead him through the drab hallways to his room, where he spent two hours standing alone, smoking, staring at the mounted F-14s out the window, pressing firmly on his tender belly. He loved to eat trash. The grill was still open late that night, couldn't resist. Now it was boiling over, and there was only one thing to eliminate the pain. He called it Milk of Amnesia: take it and forget about it, *malo morgen*. No problem. The small potatoes would be small potatoes. He took just the right amount that he wouldn't explode all day the next day, and lay down, tried to sleep, and his thoughts cooperated, traveled over familiar terrain.

He saw Mira smiling, her signature purple plastic flower over her right ear, and then each of his two very modern children just as he saw them last: Marija in thigh-high boots and a full-length fur and matching Russian hunter's cap boarding for a New York trip, and lanky Marko in irregular fatigues and a fez, rolling through the rear gates of the private residence in his new Ferrari, talking gutter English. "Look at me, pops!" he'd said, "I'm a Turkish hashashin! Do you want a kilo or a killa!" He'll always try to be the Euro-trash bad boy—and he'll crack up this toy like the others, Sloba had thought. The first one (the old family Citroën) would always be most memorable to Sloba. Outside Beograd, teenaged Marko slid under the back end of a military truck, its minigun locked down and pointed at his head. It was a formative experience, since within ten years the boy had turned freelance stockcar racer and soldier. Lying on the queen bed under cool, taut bedclothes, Sloba paddled his feet, imagined the pain draining down to his bowels, and began drifting off. He heard his son's childhood voice whisper chillingly close to his ear, "No."

Slobo's dreaming the next morning was full of strange suggestions. A voice within him kept repeating "you," then names manufactured for the children of Tito's revolution: Titomir, Stalinka, Lenini. A wrinkled mouth with familiar bridgework formed around the voice, old Tito himself as in his last years, come for a visit from beyond. He was saying "Yugo nije za dugo" as if in a tape loop that hiccupped at each terminus of the phrase. Yugo is not for long, said Tito, a common rhyme about the national sub-subcompact car from ten years back. Why this? Why nothing congratulatory about the Sarajevo Olympics from the old boss? Tito winked out, and then in the blackness an arty sound montage began: the severe, thick-tongued Serb soap star Avram Izrael—with that distinctive jouncy Jewish phrasing—heard over a transistor radio, saying "Cover now," over the clatter of a Yugo motor. The cylinder pops blended into gently hammered piano chords, major to minor, answered by crackling guided missiles in flight, which when exploded made so great a noise, he dream-reasoned, the roar negated itself into silence in the way that a nuclear mushroom cloud created a dead black spot in its video image due to its great brightness. But a noise finally took hold—was it a siren or a squawking toucan that began to irk him? His eyes opened on the lime-green numbers of his sounding digital alarm, which read 6:06.

He recalled the events in the dream perfectly. His eyelids fell closed as he scratched down the details on a hotel notepad for later analysis with Malo. The toucan was a mark of his student days, when he lived in a dorm behind the Beograd Zoo. Late at night he and his comrades heard the piercing cries over even the screaming of the panthers. When Mira visited him there, she would close the shutter on his one window before greeting him, solely to muffle the bird. Malo would have fun with this. The notes were legible enough.

He slowly awakened, splashed himself with water from the oversized sink in the bath. Why such a large basin with such a stingy tub? It made his hands look like a child's. Though he had dreamed hard, he hadn't got enough sleep—doubtless oxygen deprivation from his usual apnea accompanying a sore throat. And he realized by a soreness in his jaw that he'd been grinding his teeth. Next

would be the diabetes. Infirmities were filing in. Was he a malingering schoolboy again, faking the flu on test day? As he toweled off, his body retorted with an involuntary wink and a strong twitch across both ass cheeks. He would defeat his nerves by the end of this.

2

The morning was tiresome for Slob: a formal handshake with the Muslims and Croats and a ceremonial round-table meeting before the press—and since he'd arrived at the set early, he had to keep things light over bagels and thin coffee with Alija Izetbegovic and his tribe of ground-hugging murderers. Slob watched them pass their fingertips over heart, lips, and forehead in greeting over the continental buffet. They could have been saluting Sydney Greenstreet at the Blue Parrot in punjab pants and turbans. Then, hours with the international Contact Team—a Frenchman, a German, a Russian, a Briton and several Americans, who shuttled between the suites all day with the latest demands, concessions, and muted invective from the opposing parties. They pored over tens on tens of plastic maps and satellite photos, niggling over towns and cities and what remained of their roads and bridges. The Americans hogged the overhead projector and red china markers during these sessions. Slob made a move to the projector in order to demonstrate a solution, and that bitch UN Ambassador Albright, who'd been shadowing Warren Christopher like a henpecking housewife, solemnly shook her head and frowned, china marker at her lips. It was their show and there would be no other acts.

At the dinner break, Slob struck up conversation with one of his youngest bodyguards, Mario. They spoke in Serbian and his other guards collected around them, gamely eavesdropping for new material with which they could torment Mario. Slob sensed it and continued his remonstrations, brushing Mario's shoulders, straightening his shirt and jacket, clucking over his ragged hair.

Sasha took up for Mario: "And your hair is bad as Yeltsin's, Slob. Poofy Soviet hair."



“It’s not white yet. I haven’t been told all the secrets of the czars. Better than Gorbachev’s hair, anyhow,” Slobo said. “Chernobyl’s made all you crazy Russians bald.”

“Especially the women,” said Sasha. “Though they have too much everywhere else.”

Slobo came back to the subject: “Have Gavril cut it. Good barber.”

The men laughed in single bursts of air. Gavril was a fortyish page who’d worked for Slobo for a number of years.

“Mario won’t be near Gavril. He won’t be touched by him,” Sasha explained.

“If Gavril were turncoat,” said Slobo, “he’d have done me in with the Flo-Bee by now.”

“That’s not what Mario’s afraid of.”

Mario blushed.

“What, then.”

Another of the guards broke in, saying in English, “He doesn’t want to have to smoke a fag.”

Slobo passed it over as if he didn’t understand the expression. “We’ll get your hair cut Friday when I go for shoes.”

Mario finally spoke up. “They’re letting us out?”

That night there was a one-sided dinner with Warren Christopher in an officer’s home, a fine old stone house deep inside the base. Leave it to Clinton to send out the usual toadies, Slobo thought. The withered man in his trademark navy Cosa Nostra pinstripe choked out “Mr. President” as he clasped hands with Slobo, and seemed to disintegrate like tissue paper in Slobo’s grip. Christopher had deftly avoided greeting him during the morning photo op; now the toady’s toadies wouldn’t offer their hands, but got claps on their backs anyway. Christopher himself refused to fall prey to Slobo’s charms, the steady gaze and breezy talk, and instead recited the same ransom note twelve different ways—

handover of war criminals, Allied-style division of Sarajevo, release of a kidnapped journalist, and so on.

Christopher's words were careful, even respectful, but his horned-owl eyes gave away his purpose: You *will* comply, old man. Or you yourself are next. We will hang the shoes of your victims around your neck and pitch you into the Black Sea, and then we'll fish you out and bury you under the rubble of your palace with a guided missile. You will be food for your own dogs, old man—a promise. *Noc i dan*.

Tudzman, the feisty Croat, had been brought to the house a little later by a separate car for a short face-to-face with Sloba. He'd been foaming to the press about another border dispute with Karadzic's Serbs in Bosnia, and it was bound to become the issue for him during the next weeks. Tudzman had the annoying habit of peppering his Serbian with archaic terms he identified as strictly Croatian, though they were all Serb. Sloba made the mistake of pointing this out only once, back at the abortive talks in the dingy French castle. So they would stick to English. "Don't worry about my little Bozos, boys," Sloba said, eyes narrowed. "I can take care of them." The top Bozos, his psychoanalyst Karadzic and his one-time general Mladic, had become so full of their own shit that they were massing troops at the worst possible time. Sloba would beat them down as he always did, and give them what they wanted from the Talks—a corridor around the substantial bite the Muslims would get out of Bosnia. Christopher and Tudzman woodenly accepted his pledge, began talking about Christopher's combination two-way radio/cell phone that worked like the communicator from the old *Star Trek*. Sloba took a turn with it, fiddled with the hinged mouthpiece and the walkie-talkie button. He said, "One to beam up," but it didn't register with anyone.

With Holbrooke's blessing, Sloba enthusiastically consented to speak with a local reporter later that night, the one exception to a media blackout for the coming weeks, and this formed his means of escape from Christopher, the rotten scarecrow. The shaming behind him, and with assurances there would be no

questions about any specific events of the past few years or the rumors of war crimes charges, Slobo welcomed a freewheeling session with the Dayton press.

The interviewer, Joe Gillis, doubtless would review Slobo's tape at home—sparse, white walls, a bitter smell pervading the rooms—over take-out Chinese, if at all. In Slobo's imagining of it, which happened just as he was speaking with the reporter, Joe would rewind the tape and play the interview from the beginning. "It's almost worth it," he would apologize to his wife. They'd sit cross-legged on the leather L sofa, eat out of the cartons with their own blue porcelain chopsticks.

*How am I? The New Yorkers are right. I compliment their naïve kindnesses, and they tell me I should hear the midwesterners. This amazes me. You greet me by asking me how I am, and you seem to really mean it. Can you imagine! . . . Joe C. Gillis—like Dobie! The many loves of Joe C. Gillis. I kid you, young mischief. I'm glad to see you take it in style. Your wife is Betty? You are with—Dayton Evening Post, good. Editor? Publisher? Reporter. I just spoke with Bernie of CNN before the Talks got started. Indeed so.*

"How did he know my name?" Joe's wife would ask.

Joe would answer, "God only knows."

"Charmer."

"It works on Bernie."

*Mira is also writer, translated in nearly twenty languages, bestsellers. Her top books are Night and Day, collected articles, and Answer, the Bible for troubled comrades. . . . I'm biased, but it's clear that any reasonable Serb swears by her writings. She is not my wife; I am her husband.*

“Shameless,” Betty would say. “His English isn’t bad.”

Joe would balance a carton on his knee and press a button on the recorder to play it at double speed. “Okay, first question, his impressions so far.” Joe would let the button go.

*. . . There must be hundred G-men here, not to mention the countless phone tappers and snoops, members of the legislatures, plus an obscenely large press corps, with all due respect. . . .*

“I could swear he just said legit lechers,” Betty would say.

*But this is American diplomacy. Did you see all of Warren Christopher’s attendants and ministers? His valet? I have single secretary and am often completely alone in the palace. I even work from my home from time to time, rarely take in visitors or even venture out for bite to eat. My daughter Marija calls me hermit crab! Mira loves to travel, and takes my place during ceremonial functions, even though she’s mobbed by admirers. . . .*

Joe would fast-forward the tape again: “Second question.”

*Ah—these rumors of gangs at my command are what my secretary calls malarkey. Leave the death squads to old Pinochet. I have far better story for you—the e-mail that’s going around attributing twenty-four questionable deaths of highly-placed Americans to William Jefferson Clinton, the new Godfather. Master of cover-up. Take for example his ruthlessness in targeting innocents during the NATO air assault on my country . . .*

“What did he say? Aerosol?”

“Air assault. Guess what I’m doing next.”

*You are able to tour Friday? You’ll ride with me. They keep me in this soda cracker box, but now you’ll see me in action. I look forward to this.*

*But then, perhaps not. I still don’t believe in Dayton. Are there buildings? Citizens? It is Brigadoon. They must prove to me it isn’t some leftover movie-musical set. Maybe tomorrow it will materialize.*

*Hello, yes. Your service is as beautiful as your face, dear. Who are you? Libby? My friend here is okay. I have you, Joe—insist. My credit is good here, eh, Libby? My friend and I are interviewing people in the bar tonight on this little thing. I would introduce you, but he is married. May I ask you questions? What is your best talent? Yes, you do. Tell me. You are psychic. Psychic—fortunes? Fortunes! Tell me, my dear sweet: Will there ever be time when I would be happy and once more able to laugh? Yes? No? Ah, yes! You see, I laugh, you were right. So sweet.*

“So sweet,” Joe and Betty would answer—Slobo heard their snorts across spacetime as soon as he uttered the words himself. But young Joe had all he needed to touch off a Slobo blitz in the national news. The *Dayton Evening Post* would break the interview, then the AP and national networks would pick it up—and then Mira would find it on BBC and Serb news, and everyone would know who was boss here.

3

Dr. Malo knocked and entered Slobo’s bedroom Friday morning. “Up, and to Dayton!” he called. They’d both got into the habit of speaking English here,

despite the probability of eavesdropping. Might as well put the Yankee translators out of work.

“Now’s our chance, eh, Malo?” Slobo was in the bath clipping his toenails, back to the doctor, dressed in his shorts and sleeveless undershirt, a foot propped on the plain fiberglass tub. Slobo took a drag on the cigarette that dangled from his lips, Robert Mitchum style. He flicked ash into the tub with a precise maneuver of his tongue. “Sit down, Doc.”

Malo tipped the raised toilet seat, just touching it with the long nail of a claw, and sat back on it.

“Our first day of so-called freedom in its so-called homeland,” said Slobo. He rinsed the clippings down the bathtub drain, stopped it, disrobed, and sat high in the tub, back fully supported against one wall, legs bent and the sensitive tops of his feet under the faucet’s scalding stream. He scowled at how short the tub was. Smoke began to burn his nasal passages, so he finally pulled the cigarette from his mouth, and a splash doused it. He hooked it into the toilet bowl, between Malo’s legs. “Tomorrow our worthy Muslim adversaries get to travel to another state for football game, while today I am granted mere visit to shoe shop.”

“That’s today,” Malo muttered, pulling out his notepad and thumbing through it aimlessly. “Yeah, well Sacirbey is an alum of Tulane. How do cardinals contend with a green wave? Malarkey matchup. He’ll watch in an open stadium with more guards than you’ll have. The highway he’ll use to get to Kentucky is one of the deadliest in the country, though. It is some comfort.” The old man squinted, said, “And if I recall, we’re to go to the museum for dinner after talks, so there is some hope for the day.”

“That’s tomorrow, Malo,” Slobo said, catching him with a dead stare. “Check your book again. Stop reading my schedule if you can’t get it right.”

“And you stop picking your feet!” Malo could always pull out the diabetes if Slobo was stern with him.

When a few minutes of Slobo’s splashing and scrubbing had passed, they began a therapy session.

“How is Mira?” Malo asked automatically, signaling the start of their daily talk.

“Well. Complained last night that neither of the kids is calling, now that I’m out of town. Jealous sweetheart.”

They talked this over, came to the same conclusion as always. Kitten was Kitten, and this was all. This reminded Malo of a dream he’d had, and Slobo submitted to a long and meaningless narrative that concerned their plane going down over the Atlantic. Slobo picked up only a few of the disaster’s details—the press secretary tumbling past Malo and Slobo in the microgravity produced by the plummet, the giant protective air bag that enveloped the entire plane, effectively cushioning its impact on the storm-tossed ocean surface. Malo trailed off strangely at the finish, as if he had fallen into nostalgia.

This sort of talk was annoying, of no consequence. “We don’t even have press secretary. Very strange. And I fail to see the correlation to what we’re talking about.”

“It’s an example, pal.” Malo’s thick glasses had completely clouded in the humid room. “What fascinates me about your dreaming is your inability to link the disparate, logically disjointed and inexplicable stream of dream images into a vaguely plausible narrative thread. May be why you feel like you haven’t slept. A fuggin’ conundrum. Can’t be healthy.”

This, at last, was something to talk about. Slobo could have put in that he seemed to see and engage increasing numbers of dream images at once, and as they clotted up his dreaming, he felt as though he was losing his particular identity-vibration, giving up the ghost, which would startle him awake with a deep intake of breath. Occasionally this same feeling surged in his waking consciousness. He’d turn cold, feel his surroundings slide away, begin to tremble. He had become increasingly aware of the shakes, even when he wasn’t having an all-out attack, could feel them there in the tub. The sloshing water masked it, but his ass, back, and belly all vibrated perceptibly beneath occasional twitches. He dared not mention this sort of madness to the gossipy doctor, though. “I haven’t dreamed since the last one,” said Slobo.

“Tito and the explosions, and Mira’s toucan,” Malo said. “Keep me informed. I’m thinking of doing a study. Oh, yes! Been meaning to ask. Any *special* instructions?” It was the first time he had asked this openly since they’d been home. The old Polonius was wearing on him already; Sloba now regretted dragging him along.

Sloba drained the bath, stood and began toweling off briskly. “I’m sure they’ve bugged the room, Malo, and I don’t care if they know that I know. I welcome their spying, and I pray they’ll spread any rumors they can cull from our little discussions, much less make up on their own. Let them put words in my mouth. But they know they’d be doing me too much of favor, don’t they. Don’t you, CIA! Wipe your glasses. I want to see your eyes. They fear me, what I can do to the minds of Americans. To the point of gagging and imprisoning me.”

Malo smiled as he fogged the lenses absently and began rubbing them down with a thin white towel from the rack. “It’s clear, bud, that Milosevic is a mother substitute, a target of the Western leaders’ acute jealousy. Your undergarments, bud. Serbia is the jewel of Eastern Europe, enjoying excellent relations with all the world superpowers since Stalin, Mao, Alger Hiss. These rotten prigs want to knock you down, as they wanted to do Tito. Your socks and their garters. Motherfucking rape fantasy, if you will.” Malo took his silver cigarette case from his inside jacket pocket. “War for them is sexy and impotence-abating. They’re bored with themselves and their enormous successes. They need this to get off, but they’ll soon lose their hard-on for you as they did for Tito.” Malo stuck two Camels in his mouth, hay-presto’d a wooden match with a shake of his wrist, struck it with his thumbnail, and lit both cigarettes with a deep puff. He handed Sloba one. “Don’t forget your insulin pills.”

“Let’s just tell them to fuck someone else’s mother today at Maps,” said Sloba.

“I suppose they’ve already heard you.”

Sloba laughed loudly, his phony guffaw.



Sasha came in and took his post by the door, and they waited for the assistants and the Contact Team with a TV morning show at full blast: “Later on *Today*, getting to the root of abuse, and Mr. Blackwell’s black-tie no-nos.”

“No-no-no,” answered Sobo. “Isn’t it clever for them to say ‘Later on today’?” Malo missed it.

The two whispered for a while, but when it became clear that Malo could not understand through the din, they passed notes on hotel stationery. They later burned these notes in a small black plastic ashtray, already full of butts from this morning.

One note from Sobo, written in Serbian, read:

FIND THE RESISTANCE PEOPLE HERE. IF NONE, BUY SOME.  
SEND ONE OF OURS OUT FOR IT. DRESS HIM AS BELLHOP.  
WE SHOULD ERECT TENT IN ROOM OR CONSTRUCT FORT  
OUT OF SOFA PILLOWS SO THEY CANNOT READ OVER OUR  
SHOULDERS.

As Malo stood to empty the ashtray of the last trace of evidence, he dropped it back onto the coffeetable, showering ashes on Sobo.

“Thorough as ever, Doc,” said Sobo. “The spies and their cleaning crews will handle it. Let’s be off.”

“Let’s be awful!” Malo rejoined. Their old joke whenever they spoke English.

“And now,” said Sobo, “we mobilize.”

Sobo, Malo, Gillis the reporter, and twenty-six agents burst into the Mall at Fairfield Commons at two in the afternoon. Most of the men fanned out to cover both floors. Ten guards, half his own men, were close around him, which didn’t allow him to observe much. There were graduated shades of rose marble tile on the floor, glass-and-chrome banisters on the second level, over which gawkers

were already leaning, and high ceilings with lights that glazed everything in pink icing. They stopped and stood outside the Rossics Barber on the first floor—in a little chapel off the main concourse that also housed shrines to fingernails, teak furniture, and latex novelties, all identified in fresh-baked glowing letters. The whole place was like a cathedral you could eat.

Slobo directed the show. “Look. No responsible person would deny that these shoes are exhausted—let’s away, boys, before they give out. We’ll see you soon, Mario. Looks like you have long wait.” He noticed Dr. Malo staring into space through his thick black-rimmed trifocals, and snapped his fingers to bring him back. “See if you can’t get him skipped ahead in line.”

Slobo watched young Gillis on the ride up the escalator. He had been trailing far behind them all the while, and wasn’t even to the foot of the rising stairs as Slobo stepped off backwards. So the boy fancied himself a shamus.

In the store, shoeboxes were piled like coffins, and a spotty teenager named Matthew remeasured Slobo’s flat feet with a heavy steel cruciform instrument labeled Brannock Device. Gillis sat opposite Slobo at Slobo’s insistence, feet propped on a salesman’s stool. The recorder was going; Slobo again asked after Gillis’s wife, expressed anticipation of reading about himself in that night’s paper, and then, since Gillis wasn’t forthcoming with any questions, he wound up his pitch:

*Side note, Mr. Joe G.: Lately, my subordinates have been making noise about better public relations with the U.S., with the Bosnian Serbs and Montenegrins and Kosovars, with old friends gathered here, with burly bureaucrats. It is time to mobilize honest men to bring credibility to our nation through the reform of its hopelessly corrupt media—stop the propagandists’ lies at the root. You look like the savviest of the other journalists here, experienced and wise in these matters. After all, you’ve had to contend with American*

*mythmaking during your career, which doubt not takes discrimination and strength. You could help me in this fight—debunk the outright lies and cover-ups plaguing my country. I'm too old to do this alone, need some young blood. Anyone left after your purge could soak up your methods the way flayed goat does the drizzlings of the pig roasted over it, the way my grandpop used to cook. You could help restore us to the world society of nations. And I'm no salt-giving freebreader, either. I'll make it worth your every while.*

As with the last interview, Gillis betrayed nothing, seemed to simply ignore Sobo's offer. Then he said, "I've got an employer." Sobo couldn't score with even a bottom-tier reporter; no wonder Holbrooke approved these interviews so readily—and forbade meetings with the national press. Sobo would have to buy commercial time on CNN and MTV to get any messages to the world outside Dayton.

The Secret Service men had locked the door of the shoestore, which hardly secured the glass box—though the glass was thick and might have stopped a low-caliber bullet. Several customers had tried to enter over the hour Sobo spent there, and when they realized someone important was keeping them out, they began to gather along the plate glass wall facing the food court.

"Where's Reba!" said a large woman holding a white plastic bag half her size. The stylized image of a teddy bear was printed on the side of the bag. It was a Christmas teddy bear, in fact, garnished with images of holly and ivy, even though Christmas was not for another two months. Sobo barely heard her, as her voice was muffled through the greenish glass facing him. "Look at me! Will you look at me?" she said. "Where's Reba!"

"Reba?" Sobo asked Gillis.

"A singer. Country singer who's in town tonight."

"Must be famous."

"Here, anyway."

“She sings standards?”

“Writes her own, I think.”

“I love the old American standards. Lady is tramp, can’t take that away from me, tenderly, stormy weather, I let song go out of my heart. I’ll wear these out. I’ll keep them on my feet, that is. Double tie them please, young man; it’s my custom.”

“Will you look at me!” said the woman behind the glass.

His purchases made—duly noted by Gillis as two pairs of identical orthopedic wing tips from Overland Trading Company at 3:30 p.m., 9 1/2 E, \$275 cash (Serb credit cards weren’t good anywhere abroad), one pair announced to be a gift for his son, though they were his extra—he made his way down to pick up young Mario from the hair salon. Five of the ten trench coats guarding Slobo, the Americans, stayed close to him while most of his men hunted around for souvenirs.

They landed near the hair salon to wait for the other Serbs to return. Gillis sat on a bench near the pack, present only to record any assassination attempts or shoelaces caught in the escalator. “What do you suppose?” Slobo said to Gillis, who was absently watching a large hopping breast in the novelty store window. Slobo was taken with a monstrous sculpture in this corner of the mall, and pointed Gillis’s attention to it like he would his cat to a biscuit he’d laid on the kitchen floor. The bronze before them was three times the size of a man, too big for its niche in this junior Galleria. It was humanoid and misshapen, with no discernable features except a raised gridwork that looked like wire garden fence. There was also a wide split down its sides, as if the actual artwork had pupated in this shell and then cracked it open with a shove, slipping through the gap to haunt the mall patrons.

Gillis briefly regarded the monster and took out his pager for distraction. Nonplussed. Crowds on the upper floors collected on the banisters, puzzling out who the two men with the bodyguards were.

“At’s not Reba,” said a man above them.

According to a tiny scalloped gold plaque mounted on the monster’s base, the piece was called “Golem,” that muscle-bound Yiddish Pinocchio. It was the rabbi’s clod of a henchman, clay robot-savior of the Jews. Not much good to his people in the past fifty years. If Gillis had been in a sweeter mood, Slobob would’ve told him that, and he would’ve agreed. He had the air of the young Jewish intellectual, and his looks couldn’t have been more typical. What had happened to the Golem, Dobie? Had he become a real boy and never told his keeper? Real boys, even Dobie’s uncles, who (if they existed) likely had heard the legend of the earthenware creature and believed in its beneficence, vainly would have scanned the streets for its loping shadow in the Nazi-run ghettos. They would stand vigil for the golem until the soldiers came for them. Only then would they understand, in the darkness of frozen cattle cars all bound for Hell, each fist closed around something, some amulet—a locket, one’s tefillin, one’s penis—seeing the lights of what used to be their country pass from their eyes forever, yes, they would know how unreliable superstitions are. Herded out of the cars, they would not yet realize the perversion of the cabbala golem-making ritual happening around them—instead of vivifying a clay figure by affixing God’s name to an arm or the lips or forehead, the soldiers would tattoo meaningless numerals into the limbs of their new slaves. The masters would goad them, starve them, transform them into stumbling, ghastly work gangs. All the prisoners would have become golems themselves. Perhaps God would save some of them at the camps, preserve them in a string of unlikely miracles; perhaps a particularly cruel supervisor would be strangled behind a barracks, found by one of these same boys who’d stood at his window every night in the ghetto, and perhaps little Yentl would notice a sticky brown residue smeared on the guard’s neck. But one could never count on anything from the other world, and most of these boys would find their way to the yawning burial pits.

And, Dobie might have thought, what was different in what the man standing next to Gillis did to countless un-Orthodox? What had Milosevic done to

any not-Serb under his guns? Joe Gillis must have been telling himself he should have killed old Sobo with the foot-fitter when he had the chance.

“What whimsical thing to prop here,” said Sobo.

Gillis only flashed a grin in response, thick beetlebrows raised slightly.

“So what is the extent of the Jewish population here? Is there Jewish presence? How many synagogues? Do the Jews hold powerful position here?”

Gillis obviously had no idea what he was driving at, and was certainly snotty in his reply: “I reported on the ’90 census results. Hundreds of Serbs and Croats. Thousands and thousands of Muslims. Place is crawling with them. Probably hundreds right above you, stone’s throw away.”

“Serbs and Croats needn’t be lumped together. And what of the Jews?” Sobo insisted. “Are they given to commissioning mall sculpture here?”

A news crew suddenly cut through the gathering crowd and approached them, followed by a mall security guard closing fast.

“Nice to see you!” Sobo said to the pretty reporter, her hair like one of Mira’s feathered hats, tight and shimmery black.

“You know you can’t do that,” said the mall guard. Had the news blackout made it all the way down to this lowly goon? Clinton’s arms were awfully long, most admirably long.

“Where’s Reba?” said the man above them.

As Sobo opened his mouth to speak, the cameraman’s light winked out. The feathered reporter retreated behind her crew and the guard with a look of genuine apology on her face—kept eye contact with him as she walked backwards, until the cord that tethered her microphone to the camera went taut and whipped her around.

“I am not Reba, comrade,” Sobo called. “I am Milosevic of Yugoslavia. I am here for peace. I come as friend to you and all Americans. All of you! But I must say something about my treatment here in your glorious land.” The one who had yelled looked much like one of the old turds who hocked produce in the suburbs of Beograd—grizzled, heavy flannel, boots—and he listened politely to

Slobo, nodding. "I am like you, from place very much like you, sir—and my father, maybe like yours, fought the Nazis."

A mother was paged on the mall's loudspeakers on behalf of a lost child, a pleasantly resonant woman's voice, and it broke Slobo's concentration momentarily. He started again.

*This is the first they've let me see of your country since I got here days ago. Too bad. I was here in your country once as young man, years and years and years ago. Start spreading the news, New York, New York!*

He laughed self-consciously. Had to make this count—make himself heard, if only over the earphones of the Secret Service on the floor above.

*You may know that there's been trouble in my country for the past few years. Ask any responsible Serb—Yugoslav, and they'll tell you how it's been, how we've been abused by rebels for years, suffering murderous attacks. But that is all in the past. We shall have peace, and you shall help us do it—you here in this mall, America! We Yugoslavs will become your greatest partner for making peace in the world. And it all starts here, in Dayton. I am Daytoner!*

He said this throatily, throwing up his arms. A few children were yammering, and people had circulated away from the railings since he'd started his impromptu. Malo had been watching from behind a balcony support, stepped up to him, said in a stage whisper, "You'll have to crank it down a notch to turn these bums on. They're Americans."

Slobo didn't look at him, just raised his hands once more smiling to the crowd, saying quietly, "I'll count my losses." He broke off from his audience and

marched straight into the detachment of guards that had been massing during the speech; they engulfed him and eased him out a nearby exit.

“I see we’re getting close to our metropolis,” Sobo said to Gillis. “I expect good tour now, Dobie.” He opened the day’s edition of the *Evening Post* Sasha had picked up at the mall. Sasha was a sphinx in the presence of Gillis, his tough guy pose, so Malo was the only one to laugh along, a phlegmy chuckle.

“Looks like the driver hasn’t been downtown in a while. Maybe ever,” Gillis replied. They’d taken a wrong turn into a dead patch, passing musicians’ practice rooms and artists’ studios in an abandoned assembly plant, though these artists seemed more patrician to Sobo than the squatters and instigators in such buildings back home. All the windows here had glass.

Malo was sketching in his notepad. “This town reminds me of Dresden after the bombing.”

“It doesn’t all look like this. It’s just a little town,” said Gillis.

They were stopped by a traffic light. At each corner there were vast rubbly asphalt lots with tiny stations like Foto-Mats, but serving inscrutable purposes.

“Dresden after the American wrecking ball,” Malo said.

Sobo completed his scan of the front section of the paper. “There isn’t one mention about me beyond the fact that I have arrived,” he said. “Why didn’t you print what I said about Clinton?”

“You were drunk,” Gillis said.

“Bum!” Malo cried.

Sobo now began to see. Clinton’s hand was in this, too. “What I said in the shoestore?”

“Not interesting.”

Malo blew a raspberry and threw up his hands. “Bums. Bums!”

Sobo smiled and allowed Malo to step in fully.

“Do you get it? He knows everything, Dobie—your failures in Hollywood, your bum kicks, where your wife is right now.”



Slobo made a fist, and said with his eyes trained on the unfazed Gillis, "Malo."

The doctor blurted, "He'll have you killed. You know he can fuggin' do it." Just what Malo had said to Karadzic, their boob in Bosnia, when the man had refused to free the UN soldiers he had chained to targets Clinton wanted to bomb near the end of the war. Karadzic had it coming after bucking Slobo hundreds of times in the past decade, but Gillis? The old man's senility had taken him too far. No officers were present in the cabin, but surely their clothes and the car had been bugged, and Gillis was a spy.

Slobo snapped the paper closed, feigning interest in the front page, and said distantly, "You have the loops, Malo. You are overtired, speak gibberish. Soon have you to bed. And why couldn't *Current Affair* join us today? *Access All Areas? Under the Covers? Damn.*"

The motorcade had righted itself after winding its way around one-way streets, and soon turned down Main Street, passing a slender column capped by a statue of an infantryman in hundred-year old fatigues, long rifle held like a staff, bleeding in the light of the setting sun. Gillis refused to identify it or anything during their ride through the five blocks of downtown—just stared out a window, stony as the soldier. There was almost no sidewalk business, no restaurants or shops of any kind. And though there was auto traffic, there were few people walking about, and this was quitting time in eastern America. The municipal and cultural buildings were stunted red brick structures; the old stone courthouse was a travesty of the D.C. Supreme Court in miniature. There were only five buildings of any note, none of which matched the splendor of the drabbest of Beograd's office complexes. Not a pigeon on the street. It was as if the Daytoners had locked the shutters and barred the doors, as when the nameless stranger rode into town in a spaghetti western. Slobo lit a cigarette, squinted, imagined himself as Clint Eastwood.

"Driver! Show us around!" Slobo called out in Serbian. It was the blond from the first night, the Serbian speaker, and he counted on their thin rapport. Could Gillis be shamed after the threat?

“Sorry, sir, I’m new here,” came the reply in English.

The driver switched on his headlights, and Sobo noticed as the interior lights came up that Malo wore a spooky idiotic grin on his face, as if his mind had broken. He must have been crying soundlessly over the past few minutes. Malo caught his eyes and said quietly, “Check your sugar.” Sobo looked away, drew out his glasses and again skimmed through the front page articles in the dim cabin light. A serviceman had to have his wedding reception moved from Hope Hotel to the Air Force Museum the next day because of the Talks, and a young man was arraigned the night before for raping several women at knifepoint at a Fashion Bug Plus in Dayton. Sobo recalled seeing several overweight women leave a franchise of the same name in the suburban mall.

The alleged rapist was well known in the neighborhood where the crime was perpetrated, and police said he had ties with two area gangs, the Doggs and the Sloe Kids. His nickname was Shoo Legbone due to his extreme height and reputation as a creep, some said. The accused was a college basketball player of note and had aspired to be a star in the NBA before turning to sex crime. Mr. Legbone had raped several women there in the changing rooms, though he couldn’t have personally threatened them all at the same time. The entrance to the store in question had not been locked, and in fact new customers came in and were subsequently violated during the incident. After violating the women, the assailant fled without demanding money or valuables from anyone. The register was left unmolested. Despite the ski mask and a deliberately hunched posture (he was nearly seven feet tall), Mr. Legbone was arrested almost immediately. A few of his victims knew him, and he’d pulled the same thing at similar stores on one side of town—an Added Dimensions, a Big Lots. “Sounds like him. Ladies didn’t put up much of a fight,” a neighbor of the accused reportedly said. Sobo couldn’t resist wheedling Gillis, now that the score was known: “My headlines stolen by gangrappist.”

The limo slowed sharply. They coasted past what appeared to be the final landmark on their random parade route, the city’s federal services building, according to the lit lettering at the main entrance; over this was a neon frieze of

exploded pink circles resembling sloppy Arabic. Professionals of every stripe were leaving, quitting time as he'd predicted. The nameless stranger wasn't such a threat. In fact, there was not a barrier to be seen around the facility. A fine place for naïve locals to do their country's business in the generous, eager bosom of oblivion—no expectation of danger at all. These fools had better move underground if they haven't already, he mused. They'll never survive their first real bombing.

After they pulled into the service garage of the hotel, Blondie the driver kept them waiting before opening the rear passenger door, which could only be unlocked from the outside, for their protection, to be sure. Malo and Gillis exited the car first, hopped out one after the other like skydivers, and went ahead to the entrance without even a glance at Sobo; Gillis got to the door first and let it close behind him before old Malo shambled up to it. "Killed!" Malo shouted after him. Sobo waited for the doctor to enter, and then Sasha escorted him to the door the same as always, side by side, tight friends. Sasha looked pained, as he did whenever there was trouble in Sobo's circle.

"How are your studies going with the good-looking interpreter?" Sobo asked, trying to remember her name. "Irena."

Sasha smiled. "Quite well."

"You have passed your exams?"

Sasha's smile widened. "Oh yes. She is a good teacher, comrade. Pure Serb. There is nothing more bewitching to a Russian than a raven-haired Serb girl."

"Your accent is improving. They are cats, big ones. Beware them."

A brass plaque above the entrance read:

YOUNG ADOLPH HITLER TIED HIS SHOES IN LITTLE KNOTSIES.

—Bob Hope

All the leaders wore black to the Air Force Museum dinner on Saturday, the day Rabin was assassinated. Probably all for the same reason as Sobo, pure primitive superstition. He'd mocked this weakness in others, but it was beyond his control—there but for the grace of Jehovah go I. He'd worn it yesterday too, his least favorite suit, worsted wool, tight in the elbows and thighs. His shirt collars had coincidentally become tighter than normal; earlier in the week he'd scolded the hotel laundress for overstretching them and sent one of his boys for more shirts in the same size. They were still too tight. Bloating already from the heavy take-out food and foul alcohol they were poisoning him with, doubtless. He was twitchy and irritable this evening—no smoking in the museum, though it was fine in the other base buildings where he'd been. At least Sasha had installed his Irena on the waitstaff here; she smoothed Sobo down with decent Scotch through the preliminaries to dinner.

A moment of silence for Rabin and Israel and all Jews, and then Holbrooke was at the podium launching into another self-indulgent harangue calling on them to forget their people's interests and sign on to the Americans' geopolitical eminence. Sobo meant to bring another grievance to him after dinner—the local evening paper printed a detailed illegal interview with Sacirbey and Izetbegovic during the Kentucky football game, while Gillis had only a pathetic front-page gloss on Sobo's shoe sortie. No word of the attempts to connect with the American people, nor the job offer nor even the threat. Complaint would come to nothing, since Sobo "had his chance" with Dobie for the past few days.

Holbrooke and everyone else were tinged with an evil green in the light of this hangar. Examples of the host nation's latest publicly-acknowledged air assets were parked here, fully laden with missiles and napalm tanks. A ten-meter severed batwing hung directly over him, lined up perfectly with the three tables occupied by his delegation—indeed, rigged to squash the Serbs at the height of Holbrooke's diatribe. The Yanks would've taken out a few of their own if that was

the case. Mayor Turner of Dayton and a couple of aides who were probably attached to Christopher or Holbrooke were babysitting him, filling up on bread. Sasha, at Sloba's right, eyeballed the scene, seemed nervous.

Mayor Turner discreetly broke the ice. Though his face was turned toward Holbrooke to give the appearance of undivided attention, the mayor quietly chatted with Sloba about exhibition basketball between the local university and the Yugoslav team in the eighties. All the man seemed to remember about the games were the Yugoslavs' long legs and sharp yellow-with-green uniforms. Mayor Turner stole glances at the center tables where his federal superiors sat, an apparent victim of belonging to the wrong party.

Under the patter Sloba heard one of the American aides say, "Yugo, it doesn't," to the snickering delight of his comrade. Sloba complimented the mayor on his city's considerable charm.

"Where's your food taster, Mr. M?" Interrupted the smirking, masticating aide who wore a sticker that said Hello, My Name is Luka.

"Mr. Luka, my doctor had to return home for medical reasons—for his health. He tests my food for sugar content, as I am diabetic. I'll relay your gracious concern to him. You are with whom?"

"I'm sort of a free agent."

"Like in baseball."

Luka laughed through his nose as he chewed a mouthful of sweet roll, what might have been the same mouthful for the past half-hour. "Yes, or *American* basketball," he said, cheeks stuffed.

"Did *your* team win the European championship this year?" Sloba asked too loudly, but Luka wouldn't answer. Holbrooke seemed to be staring in his direction while prattling on about something called long-distance teamwork, so Sloba met his eyes and smiled, saying, "Right. We did." Sloba said to the other jackass without looking, "Are they to drop the bat's wing on us soon, AI?"

"Accidents happen, Slobby, but I doubt it. If they did, it would crush us into pulp."

"I'm sure nothing's going to drop on our heads," whispered the mayor.

“But the B-2 is made of those featherlight composites,” Sloba said.

“Strong as steel,” said Luka. Al popped his lips as if to simulate the moment of impact.

Sasha couldn’t contain himself, saying in his Russian basso, “Your planes will shatter like chicken eggs.” People at the surrounding tables turned toward him, then turned back toward Holbrooke.

“Together! Ensemble! Zusammen! *Zajedno!*” Holbrooke was saying.

“Surely he meant to say ujedno,” said Sloba. “Only Tudzman would say zajedno, and call it Croatian. And Rick didn’t even bother with the Russian.”

“Not if you don’t see us coming,” Luka said to Sasha, and resumed chewing.

“Nothing’s going to fall on you, Mr. Milosevic,” said Mayor Turner.

“I prefer comrade.”

Sasha clenched his napkin in his hand, staring down the agents.

Sloba’s own napkin had dropped between his legs. He clicked his tongue; he bent to retrieve it and brushed his hand across a long wisp of paper. He pulled a bulky structure to the tabletop—a black-and-white crape bell, obviously from the wedding party held here earlier in the day. Sasha leaned close to him as Sloba said flatly, “They’ve disgraced us again with their cheapness. Another slap.” The white tablecloth didn’t seem to have any stains, but there was the scent of champagne at a damp spot. He felt faint, felt his gears grind, and his head slumped. He couldn’t move, if only for an instant, couldn’t speak or indicate anything was wrong. Sasha sat up again, must have been preoccupied with his own murderous thoughts.

Had he gone catatonic? Control was gone. His Slobotude was halted for now—all sense of self falling off. Was this all, the end? Or were his neurons playing trickster, holding back control only to allow his queued motor commands to flood the muscles of his limbs, throwing out the spasmodic jerks and kicks of a seizing idiot? He breathed deeply—still could do that—and considered what he was forced to see—pilled cotton fibers and other flecks from the napkin he’d kept at his lap dotted his pants front. It looked like the nighttime sky at his villa, away

from the lights of Beograd. He very precisely recalled something he'd heard the night before, falling asleep to the Discovery Channel—Stephen Hawking concluded one of those vague astrohistory programs in his mechanical voice: “In the way that *Aldous Huxley* fascinated about the infinite beauty in the *drape* of his pants while on *mescaline*, I too fascinate about outer space and its *contents*. And I, like *Huxley* did before, wonder about the problem of human relations in the face of the universe's mathematical perfection. Surely there must be a grand unifying theory of humankind, but it will take someone, perhaps a contemporary, with real guts to *nose* it out.” Why this snatch from the space show? He only dimly understood it. A quirk of memory just before sleep, and very likely the fact that he'd noted Hawking's computer's pronunciation was American rather than British, and far worse than his.

Slobo also saw the universe in his slacks, and in an effort to arc the short in his motor control, he somehow willed his hand to hit hard across his thighs, tried to slap the galaxies and quasars off the fabric, even to pinch them off, picking nits. But there was no change. The individual motes of dust, cilium and flaked skin and powdered glass, all the varieties of tiny debris described as lint—were bound to the pants surface by minuscule-but-mighty electrostatic charges. He was powerless to make himself more presentable; it seemed that the dust and fluff were in their exact original configuration. “You have got to be killing me,” said Slobo in a sharp whisper, giving his thigh one last good slap. Muslim kids at an adjacent table leered at him, some smiling, all the while facing the windbag Holbrooke. The Americans at his table had turned to stone. They had to be killing him. Slobo clicked his tongue once again, chided the two across from him and the olive-skinned, bearded beauties slouching in their seats beyond, a circle of bored Qur'an scholars in sport jackets, with a louder muttering: “Though you'd love to try.”

“They should have been cleansed too,” said Sasha of the kids. He wetted his napkin in a glass of water for Slobo to brush his pants legs.

Holbrooke finally took his seat to some applause. The Air Force Band started up with the American anthem, which everyone stood for—though only the

stuffed-shirt mayor sang at the table, perspiration over his lip and hammy hand on his heart. Sasha worked up more lather complaining that they didn't play all the other attending nations' anthems. "Not like we'd get into a shouting match," he said. The mayor politely agreed, forcing a gritted-teeth smile, but fell silent again. As the crowd settled in to eat, three black women sang Andrews Sisters tunes.

"The thing with you people is you're not afraid of anybody," Sasha said.

Al was watching for the servers who'd be entering soon, drummed the table's edge along with *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, and Luka finished off the last roll, tearing it to tiny pieces before eating it. He must have swallowed his earlier mouthful when no one was watching. Slobo was another Fidel to them, Papa Doc, a dictator-buffoon, and they were showing him the same discourtesy.

"I do love the standards," Slobo said. "I got to sing that tune with them the other night at Officer's Club."

Dinner was being wheeled out on squeaky gunmetal racks. As the plates were set down, Mario did his regular check-in on Sasha's radio. Sasha crouched away from the Americans to confer for a moment about the positions of Slobo's men in the room.

"Libby," Slobo said to their server as if greeting a long-lost friend. "You also wait at Packy's Sportsbar. Liberty is my first name too. Slobodan means liberty."

"Funny," Luka whispered, "I translate his name as Vacant Dead-fuck."

"I remember you, with the tape recorder," Libby said to Slobo. "Where're your friends?"

"Not where the fun is."

Libby tittered and scooted to the next table. Her ass had a coy wiggle—lewd and entrancing.

"In that bush lies the rabbit," Slobo whispered to Sasha.

"So to speak," said Sasha. "Irena told me about her. She's with us if you want."

"Irena. Over and beyond the call. Watch that cat. She bites."



Luka and Al watched them intently, reading their lips, translating. Enough. Sloba brushed his thighs in three quick thrusts. He got up clumsily, as did Sasha, and made his way to Holbrooke. He weaved a little as he walked, felt his mind, his guts drop into his grave. Could body parts travel through time, pass into nonexistence? Hawking spoke to him again, incomprehensible: “*Newton and Einstein were both right. There are wormholes in the applah.*” The new Andrews Sisters sang, *Don’t sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, till I come marching home.*

“So tell me, Rick.”

“It’s Dick.” Holbrooke didn’t get up, seemed to be taken aback by the unannounced audience.

“Dick. Tell me, Dick. This dinner is the best the great U.S. of A. has to offer us dignitaries? Folding tables and chairs over cracked concrete slab? Linty napery? Warbirds with their guns up our noses? Rude spies!”

“This is an expensive dinner, Sloba. Chilean sea bass, Argentine steaks, chocolate Napoleons. And we thought you would find the museum of great interest, the only one of its kind. I’m very disappointed.”

“And what is this?” He revealed the limp crape-paper bell he’d been holding behind his back. “We are dignitaries. If we aren’t treated with the fullest dignity, the world will know what you really are.”

Holbrooke looked more confused than wilted. “Red-carpet treatment all month, as we discussed.”

“There is no reason for disgust. Just get it done.” Sloba whipped around for effect and signaled to Irena, who was circling the tables with a water pitcher; she tipped her head and came over. She was a beautiful Serb even in her servant-girl whites—wide-set eyes and a black velvet hair bow. The bow was a dead giveaway, very un-American. From the front only its tips showed, looked like a cat’s ears. “Moia sestra. I need smoke,” Sloba said.

She led them past the Stealth Fighter, a sooty cubist swallow with jagged angles and slender beak opened sideways. Al and Luka picked up their trail, strolled toward them. Just behind the fighter, the caterer’s portable ovens were

still going, and the butterball chef was scrambling to correct steak orders on a flaming grill, his apron spattered with blood. “No smoking,” said Sloba to the chef, who nodded rapid-fire as if taking another order.

They cut left in front of the Blackbird spy plane and found a stairwell door.

Sloba wasted no time lighting up. “How far down does it go?” he asked.

He caught a faint blue light at the bottom of the shaft.

“Didn’t check,” said Irena. “Why?”

“Even the museum is connected to their subbasement network, doubt not.”

“Let me secure it,” said Sasha, who jogged down the stairs, radioing their position. Mario butted open the door they’d just entered with his hip, and took up position with Sloba and Irena, his radio echoing Sasha’s.

“I had no idea I’d be involved in things such as this,” said Irena, “I’m only a translator.”

“And I’m only smoking,” said Sloba through a grin, the fag dancing with his words. He took a long drag and exhaled through his nostrils. Drago the Dragging Dragon. “You’ve talked to Libby? She is willing to serve?”

“Yes,” said Irena. She wiped her hands on her smock and goggled like a country gossip. “She’s very interested!” Then she grabbed his wrist and whispered, “What is her mission, comrade?”

He was saved by Sasha, who huffed back upstairs. “Clean,” he said. Irena quickly unhanded Sloba, gave Sasha a nice kiss on the mouth, and returned to her duties.

“She’s a slut, Sasha,” said Mario. “Trust me.”

“You ask for a slicing.”

Sloba waved them off. “Leave me alone. You have me on pins and toes.” The first cigarette was already dead, and Sloba had two more in peace. On his third, he went down the flight of stairs and tried the door there, but it was locked. Blue light streamed in around the frame, and he thought he smelled fried chicken. He blew smoke rings as he did when he played with an idea, a nervous

working of the tongue. The draft whistling in blew them into quickly-dissolving question marks.

Slobo was awakened later by his daughter; she was flush with news of Pavarotti, whom she'd just seen at the Met. His room was dark save the green numerals of the clock, 12:22, and then this was hidden once he pulled the covers over his head, away from Clinton's spying eyes. He felt quite well after the good dinner, no pains, so after switching on the phone's speaker in the comfy igloo there under the sheet and coverlet, he could allow his awareness of his body to pass away, leaving only a voice in the night speaking with another. This was a rather precious idea, he realized, once Marija began her silly monologue on the opera.

"Tonio wanted to see if he was lip-synching. Obviously not, because he missed one of the high Cs during 'Ah! mes amis.' Who knew he was such a fat old fool, with hair like cobwebs and that mossy beard. Good power until he choked on the C just as he claimed his girl, the fille du regiment, Marija. Isn't that great? Marija? And her boyfriend is Tonio! Even though Pavarotti's a rouged tortoise of a boy. The note was shot after a second, they say mucus on the vocal cords, and he coughed terribly, three heaves right out as if the score called for it. He wasn't acting when he tore the cockade from his cap and stomped it. You could feel how mad he was, like he would've cut out his own throat. Fat old fool."

"Have you taken out the policy we discussed yet?"

"I will scream if I hear anything about business today. I'm on vacation."

"Just do it before it's too late. That boyfriend of yours can't pay out if the radio station goes up in flames. Neither can I."

"Tonio wants to work for you. Do you know something about the station? Something going to happen?" There was a faint tone on the line during their momentary silence, an electric whirring that put him in mind of a Mossad bomb, the kind the Jews would plant in the earpiece of a mobile phone. "We are being monitored, no? Maybe they don't speak Serbian."

Hell with it. He flipped the covers back and spoke in full voice. “I am the President, sweetie. You may say whatever you like to me no matter who may listen. Anyway my guys inspect this little phone every few hours, have gadgets installed.”

“Tonio is so much like you. You really should pay attention to him. I suppose it isn’t in your nature.” He could see her nostrils flare as she said this. It was his memory of her when she demanded his attention through this sort of abuse.

“You will never know me, really, Titikaka. Call your mother.”

“Titikaka,” she replied. They’d called each other “Poo-Poo” since Marija could speak.

When he clicked off, Slobo noticed noises outside his window he must have ignored while talking with Marija—obnoxious working-class laughter, drunken men and women, and the steady rumble of an idling motorcycle. The hotel bar wasn’t open to the public during the Talks; could this have been the remains of today’s wedding party? He would have checked the window, but he couldn’t feel his feet.

The catatonia reemerged, the sense of his innards dropping out. A series of twitches worked through his left biceps and calf. He willed himself to roll over, nuzzled his pillow like a breast, but in his efforts to sleep became conscious of his breathing, actually had to pump the bellows just to get a satisfying breath. Panic was setting in. “Sneak attack,” he heard himself say.

Now someone was gunning the bike engine, rock music was blaring. *Don’t feel like Satan, but I am to them*, the song went. The noise lingered for some time, seemed intentional, instigated by Al and Luka. Was he no better than Noriega? Some third-world hustler to be blasted out of bed by the Psy Ops boys? He needed to concentrate on calming himself, resisted the urge to smoke. His heart had begun its arrhythmia. He stood, stretched, bounced on his heels, went over to the bar on his dresser and poured a finger of Scotch. He would not allow himself to die—especially of natural causes—in this forsaken place, naked and alone. It was just a panic, a reminder that he feared death. *Keep on rockin’*, the

singer repeated. There was the lesson of Vuk Draskovic, who had been Sloba's greatest political enemy, aside from his own mentor and a few close advisors. As many times as Sloba had given the order, if that wild-haired, toothsome old wolf wouldn't die, neither would he. To seal his promise, he drank off the medicine. "Hear what I'm thinking, you bastards?" he said to the walls. In time the noisemakers roared away with a flourish of squealing tires and clanking cans.

5

After slow progress the following week, Holbrooke deigned to reward his charges with their first decent meal at the only French restaurant in town. A barn really, decked in white aluminum siding and black shutters and wrought iron painted the same glossy black with gold trim. It made a shitty chateau. Called itself a cathouse, Le Chat Noir, and the entrance was tarted up with faux-gas streetlamps, but where were the whores in fishnet and feathers to lean against them or work the parking lot with baskets of roses?

The dignitaries passed through the main dining area on their way to the private room upstairs. Regulars paused with forks raised and stared, and some on their way in were patted down by the SS boys. A few Dayton barons had problems with this—whining and abuse that would've cost them their wad back in Beograd, Americans or not.

Sloba was at the head of the party, waving at the diners as he followed the maitre d'. The party was seated, and Sloba noticed their host was not the typical farmer's boy: olive-skinned with a long nose and trimmed moustaches, dead eyes that had seen all there was to see in Day-town or anywhere else, including a file of presidents from half-recognized Balkan states. French? A bloody Croat? "You from around here?" Sloba asked.

"Oui," said the maitre d'.

Drinks were ordered and Sloba caught the man's eye, cocked his head to whisper something to him. The maitre d' leaned close, looked into space as his

counterparts in the movies might. Sloba spoke with a twang: “Where’s the cat, man?” Ich bin eine Daytownner.

“Cat?”

“The namesake for the place. The black cat. No cats allowed on premises?”

“Right. Health codes.”

Sloba laughed and clapped the maitre d’ on the arm. “So, have you managed Le Chat Noir many years?” He said “chat” in English, with a conspiratorial sneer. They should have a dark chat. There was the hint of a smile—the maitre d’ nodded, still looking away, then asked if there was anything special he could get for monsieur. “I have no idea. Is there?” The maitre d’ laughed looking at Sloba’s wing tips, rushed to the other end of the long table—the Muslim end—and did not return.

“New utensils, Sasha!” Sloba explained the little game he and Sasha played to the Bosnian Serbs and Contact Teamers on his end, set up the vaudeville act. As the first course came out, he picked it up again: “This one is specifically for skewering snails, my friend. One cannot just choose and pick any old piece of silverware for munching lettuce.” He’d even got the Croats laughing with that one, and they were halfway down the table.

The high-ranking Americans came a half-hour late. Christopher made a surprise showing, back from the Rabin funeral and other ceremonies, here to haunt Sloba again. Caught him at the urinal, where tagalong Albright, who was none too bright really, couldn’t hover. She’d been the one to push the idea of bombing Serbs, and they’d named the python at the Beograd Zoo after her in kind. She couldn’t go, after all, where the real pythons hung out.

“The reporter, old man,” said Christopher, looking down, concentrating on the work at hand, which seemed to go in fits and starts. “We’re beginning to think your thugs or Karadzic’s accidentally killed him. He’s back home in twelve hours, or you are. Name is Rhode, David. Start packing your bags.” Sloba didn’t believe him, but the Bozos would return this guy. They knew the consequences, even

though old Radovan pretended otherwise. He grunted the affirmative, shook, washed, and left Christopher to his relief.

A few rounds and courses passed, and a couple of Sasha's guys had tricked Mario into calling their waiter a thief in French. Taken up in the laughter, Sloba remembered a joke the Bozos told during the siege of Sarajevo. He thought he could manage it in English, so he rose up, tottering, and brought his glass high. The Serbs seated around him, Bosnian and otherwise, were the only ones to meet his toast. This would piss them all off:

*Here's routine that might as well have been in one of those Bob Hope-Bing Crosby road movies:*

*During the Bosnian insurrection Haso and Muju are walking about Sarajevo one fine day, and whom should they happen upon but American reporter wandering aimlessly through the cratered and understandably empty main square.*

*'My word! What are you doing here, friend?' says Haso.*

*'We have been laid siege by the great Serbs, rightful stewards of this city! They take us back into their arms,' says Muju.*

*Since the two are Bosnian mongrels, this is the only English they know, of course, and anything more is lost on them.*

*'Friends!' exclaims the reporter.*

*Haso and Muju look at each other, grin like the simpletons they are, and nod vigorously.*

*'I must escape!' says the reporter.*

*They shake their heads, unsure, so he motions expansively to the hills surrounding the city. The two dunderheads grin again.*

*'Serbs!' they say.*

*'Yes!' replies the reporter excitedly. 'I must get past the Serbs! What do I tell them?' He motions to his mouth.*

*Haso grimaces and shakes his head and Muju makes gagging sound.*

*'No! Not food!' cries the American. 'What is the Serbian word for investigative journalist?' Now it should be said that asking Bosnian Muslim about the Serbian language is indeed foolish thing, since their language merely parrots ours, and poorly. But the American doesn't suspect this, and asks for the word.*

*'Word?' queries Haso.*

*'Izvestigadiv?' asks Muju.*

*The American begins weeping with relief, saying, 'Yes! Word, investigator!'*

*Both Haso and Muju ponder this for while, play a little game of patty-cake to clear their minds, and at the end of their infantile chant, both say different words simultaneously—one the correct word, 'izvestac,' and one the incorrect word, 'izvidnik,' which means spy. The man had to make choice between the two fools, and unfortunately was shot in the face on the road out of town, the English word 'double-crossers' on his bloody lips. What's the moral to this sad tale—aside from never trust Bosnian mongrel? Reporter should always confirm his source.*

Nearly all the Serbs yipped and laughed and drained their glasses at the punchline, though none of them likely understood it.

"What we call neslana s'ala, unsalted joke," said Sloba. Though he seemed to be unnoticed by the Muslims, the Contact Team members on his end of the table balked, focused on their plates. None of them actually ate, though the Frenchman on the Team (who, Sloba noted, had drunk at least a bottle of wine by this time) had tried to help his colleagues with their orders, wearing a dubious expression as he read the menu to them. One had been presented with the boobyprize, a thick gray tongue. Sloba noticed too that his own foreign minister, an affable puppet, looked unusually grim after the joke, but it didn't bother him in the least. Sloba had been isolating him with the Bosnian Serbs—stuck them in the Hondas in the motorcade. All according to his byzantine scheme.



Slobo had taken over, no contest. He told stories on himself about his stay in New York—the tryst with the transsexual (“The parts were about right—”), singing Montenegrin goatherd songs in the subway. He sang his favorite for them, which in English happily translated to *Black ewe, black me, black mountain, la la la*. He won the Croats back with that, and though most of the lower-level Muslims were escaping the room, he ordered more 25-year-old Scotch for everyone anyway, and thanked the absent Monsieur Bill Clinton for his hospitality.

He toasted, “To more dinners here at the Black Chat! No more midnight pizza, right Rick? Right, Dick? The protesters at the hotel had T-shirts, *Give Pizza Chance*. What a way to sell pies! Nothing doing. You are torturing me with pizza, bad liquor and, as result, insomnia. But *this* is more like it. Look at all of us here, like the Last Supper—Christopher in the middle, Dick and Albright at his right and left. And Sasha the traitorous Russian running out the door. Never mind, Alija, you Islamists wouldn’t get it. Where are you going, Sasha?”

Slobo met him outside the room, spoke loud enough for any snoops: “Have our American friend report—pay me visit later.”

“Calculate on me, Boss,” said Sasha.

Libby came to his suite almost as soon as he’d returned to Hope. “Your onion flower and a fifth of Chivas. Is there anything else?” He had her put the tray on the coffee table. Light romantic music was playing on the TV; the screen was dark and the lamps were at their lowest setting.

“You know I’ve noticed you’re very tan for November. Maybe it’s just the lighting.”

“My dad’s part Irish and Cherokee and my mom’s black. What are you?”

“All man.” He noticed a bruise or birthmark of some kind on her neck very like the bitten cookie of the Bozos’ probable borders.

“My man,” she said, looking at his wing tips. “Great shoes.”

“Mon homme. Billie Holiday,” said Slob, reached up as if to brush away an eyelash, stroked her face, dropped his fingers down to circle the hickey. “I have friends who can do something about that. He will never beat you again.” They embraced and proceeded to bed. “Don’t worry about Sasha,” he said when she looked back in the direction of their suitemate. Heavy with drink, Sasha had lumbered onto the couch in the front room as soon as they’d returned from dinner. “Sleeps like Lenin.”

She was a talker. “Ooh, baby. I’m so wet,” she said a little later. She felt him through his pants. “Where’s your Drago hiding? You called it Drago, right?”

“You are Karlovac, dickhunter.”

“Shall I pay a visit?”

“It’s funny to.”

“What’s so funny about it?”

“I mean fun.”

They removed their clothes before continuing. Libby had a tattoo of a four-leafed clover below her belly button. The words “Lucky” and “You” were written in script on either side. This was a woman of some experience, if not taste.

“To the smallest hand goes the greatest prize,” Slob said.

“But my hands are the same size as yours.”

After sex, they smoked and snacked on the cold, slimy onion flower. They watched cable, some sort of evangelist. “...And why do the pornmongers always cry ‘Oh God’ during the money shot in their sex videos? Because they are rebelling against themselves, as if turning themselves over to the Prime Authority for their rash decision to join the armies of Hell. They, like the Evil One, live in eternal damnation, hearing the echo of our Lord God’s voice as He tells them all, in their throes of fuckpleasure, their drugged-out ecstatic ravings, their bestial, lascivious skullbuggery, to go to Hell! In that act of Divine Discrimination, He pays all those devils back with prick and pussy chancres, vein abscesses, brain lesions, fallen rectums. ‘Oh God’ indeed!”

“This patriarch is outrageous,” said Slobo.

“Nothing compared to my pastor.”

“Turn it to the old movies.”

“In a minute.”

While Libby was aiding Slobo early that morning, Mira called. She'd been calling between three and six in the morning while he was here, before her bedtime. The piercing ululation of the phone made him instantly go slack and lose all sexual excitement. “Hey,” said Libby. If he didn't pick up, Mira would know he was whoring again, always did when he took that tack. He mustered the will to switch on the phone speaker.

“Neither of the children have called, Slobo,” said Mira through static. “Do they curse their mother?”

“I told Marija to call last week.”

“She called you!” Mira was always so jealous.

“Daughters and fathers,” he said.

“And you sent Malo away. He's nowhere to be found. Has he returned home yet? Can't imagine what happened.”

“He acted senile, Kitty. He hasn't been seen?”

“He said before the trip that you want this too much. You'll give everything away.”

“Are you saying that, or did he?”

“I would never say such a thing. What has he done?”

“This operation takes delicacy he never had.”

“Don't make daffodils, Pup. Speak straight.”

“He threatened Americans. Like Rado's doing over there with the reporter.”

“What is that rustling? Radovan keeps saying you sold him out to NATO.”

Slobo stayed Libby's hands, gently pushed her back onto the bed. "The paranoid fool. What does he care about NATO when he has me to contend with?"

"And you yourself are not feeling paranoid right now? This is your pet. Tell me."

"All decisions and arrangements have already been made, Mira."

"Now you return dear for darling."

"Treasure! You questioned me, and I responded."

"The wolf's fur changes—no matter."

"Kitty, they've bugged everything. They're like flies. But I've set things in motion. Tell Malo to call me."

"He's nowhere to be found. Don't coast on your fears. Respect the power you have over them, and demand it if you have none. I wrote it in *Answer*." She often quoted this nugget.

"Kitten! I am lucky to have you."

"Time to show your balls."

"Arrangements have already been made," he said, giving a wink to Libby, though she obviously knew no Serbian.

After Slobo and Mira made a long good-bye, Libby asked, eyes closed, "Do you guys always talk that fast? What about?"

"A reporter."

"And what is *jaja*? Like 'Get Yer Ya-Yas Out'? Like Rolling Stones Ya-Yas?"

"What do you say? It's family affair."

"That *is* what I say!" Libby sat up and asked, "What about the reporter?"

"He was picked up for something or other, wrong side of the border, and they want him back. This reminds me—could you arrange for TV news crew to meet us somewhere outside? At your house?"

"I thought my boy was kidnapped last week. Scared me to death. Someone just found him and they called my name. We were at the mall."

“The Fairfield Commons?” he asked. “Friday? Small world after all.” She seemed to want to talk; he had just the story for her. A Serb had started a family with an American Jew back in Beograd, and after a few years he left her and took the children. This woman was a bitchy diplomat’s aide who beat the bushes to get them back—just to know if they were still alive—and landed in Slobo’s office about a year into her struggle. In telling this to Libby, he understandably left out the details that followed—he sent the wandering Jewess on a fool’s errand to Dachau just for his amusement, when her children were always right under her nose, blocks away from her apartment back in town. To him the irony was gorgeous, brought a smile to his lips to think of it. A fine prank. Of course this information would not have brought Libby any comfort, and he’d told her that after a while the woman was reunited with her girls anyway, so why bring it up? He started a smoke ring-blowing contest. She couldn’t make even one.

“Oh, look—a halo!” she cried. Indeed, a white wheel spread above him, lasted longer than he expected.

“It’s like the best horn jazz, all in the armature,” he said. “So tell me your dreams, Angel. Do you see your future like you saw mine that night we met?”

“It’s time for bed,” she said. She doused her half-smoked Salem in her drink on the bedstand, and switched off the lamp over her, swung it away by its brass arm. She lit fragrant candles and incense as she probably always did when preparing for lovemaking, let the patchouli stick flame for a full five seconds before blowing it down to an ember. And then, finally, she drew close to Slobo and took his hands in hers, moving them up and apart, extending one of his forefingers, bringing it to her mouth. She was a ritual lover.

He let her guide his other hand to his cigarette, took his last drag and held—and together they took it from his mouth and drowned it hissing. He blew two rings at her. One flew apart where her lips still met his finger, and the second caressed her round forehead before spinning into nothing, phantom kisses.

She moved his hands away again, her mouth popping as the finger left her mouth, and then she leaned in and kissed him full-on. “I don’t have any,” she finally answered.

“Me neither, Precious.”

“Dreams, I mean.”

6

In *Night and Day*, Mira wrote, “For good reason, life, as literature, opens forward instead of into the past.” Progress, reform, truth-seeking—these are the aims of the life worth living. To look back means death, the old pillar-of-salt business. And so Slobo single-mindedly bluffed through the coming days, feigning illness or exhaustion when overnight negotiations were set—especially when it looked like his opponents had new conditions—staying in or even getting away with Libby most every night until the week of the twenty-day deadline. He would call her from his cell on his cell, saying only “Lib,” and she would answer, “This is me,” and she would come, picked him up in her red Cherokee toward the end, plastic child safety seat on the back bench and a no-spill juice cup rolling between Slobo’s feet, which were clad in those beautiful new black-and-white shoes.

They’d had a few mild and increasingly blatant adventures in and around town. They danced at a shady club where he was by far the palest face and she got sick; reduced to tears a young hatless Arab on the street, a preacher for Islam, whose last defense of his bankrupt morality was “Where’s Cat Stevens now?” (Gillis had been right, Day-town was crawling with them); bought a “baggie” of marijuana, as they called it, and subsequently bribed an officer during a traffic stop; fled a very tall black man in an adjacent diner booth at Pat’s Lido Club who stared at Libby and generally acted threatening—Shoo Legbone out on bail?—culminating in this, their last night out.

He found escape from his confines too easy. The first time, he’d simply walked out the hotel’s front doors dressed in a purple workout suit after speedwalking a few laps around the SS snoozing in the lobby wingbacks. It was that simple every night after, but he and Lib had started looking for secret exits in the basement, just to challenge themselves. Without keys, they never got beyond

the sauna and pool. Hairpins and Sasha's lock picks just didn't work. His thirst for intrigue only deepened—he wanted disguise, subterfuge. So Lib had secured for him a gray bellhop's uniform for tonight, complete with a red satin pillbox hat with black elastic chin strap and pants with a matching red stripe down the sides.

He regarded himself in a full-length mirror on the door to the bedroom, and laughed too loudly for the early morning, showed his little gray teeth, tugged the epaulets like curtain ropes. The world's largest and longest-running luggage boy, now onstage, closing night, get your tickets right here. How had she found the right size? It was the best-fitting suit he'd worn during the Talks. His chuckles must have roused Sasha, because he was now sitting up on the couch, puzzling over Boss's latest fetish.

"You have been sneaking out," Sasha said.

"Keep cool hat about it." Sobo went to the bathroom mirror to inspect his shaving job: a few pink welts from the dry razor.

"It is a cool hat. But you give them the chance to assassinate, Sobo. You shame me."

"No, Sasha—not here. They can't rub out this icon." He slapped himself, winced at the sting of the Brüt cologne.

"You are too blasé."

"I try to enjoy myself. Back to your sugar plums."

Breaking things off with Lib would be awkward; she'd grown painfully fond of him, often pausing to kiss and embrace him after a car ride or during a walk, as if she were in love. He would never discourage this, would say, "So sweet," and the disembodied voices of Gillis and his wife would echo him. She was his ride tonight, and he didn't want her driving spurned—a suicidal plunge into the allegedly Great Miami would smack of Chappaquiddick. Ah, but any press was good press, and wasn't this the whole point of their relationship? The river wasn't too deep, he imagined, and Jeeps were sturdy. He'd get to shore, cold as the water would be, and there would be a marvelous interview. He would confess to

this little affair, tell all the details. “Hold the presses,” Sloba would say to Gillis over a hospital phone, “I’ve got scoop that’ll blow the lid off the whole town!”

*She tried so hard to please me, Dobie. In this amoral, hardboiled place, this country where eventually everyone betrays everyone, even one’s self, I can honestly say that the naïf would make someone marvelous first wife. It’s cold, I know, but I submitted only to cement her to me and thus throw off her handlers. Even if she wasn’t U.S. pawn, just silly starstruck gringo gal, she meant little to me. No wonder she lost her mind, if she was really in love.*

*Details, eh? Not much to say. She fellated me preciously, chewing her sugar-free gumwad and lifting pinky while picking hairs from her tongue. She was always as considerate as call girl, arranging pillows, asking if I was comfy and if she was squishing me when she was on top. She was soothing—calmed my nerves.*

*After all, sex is only well-rehearsed dance at best. Tenderly caressing the cheek, grasping the neck at the nape, nuzzling earlobe, timing tongue strikes. Learning the erogenous zones of new lover’s body, the underside of her right breast, confusing her fourth rib up on the left side with the last one’s fourth toe—it becomes tiresome. Fucking gets dull after couple of weeks, no matter how lithe and effervescent the partner.*

*And besides, even if it’s free and you don’t tire of it, why bother if you can’t do it all the time? Hell with it. Now that we’re beyond the sagging middle of negotiations, nothing can distract me from my country’s interests.*

“What are you thinking, Darling?” Lib asked.

“I’m not. There is the winged wraith, supposed inspiration for *Look Homeward, Angel*.” He’d pressed her to drive them through the city’s historic



cemetery, since according to the brochure (which he'd procured from the hotel display of area attractions he wasn't allowed to see) all the people who made Day-town famous were dead and gone a hundred years. Perhaps they would make whoopee on a sepulcher. They followed his map with the cabin light on and he shined a flashlight on the gravesites they could find, without getting out—black poet Dunbar, with a lovely withered willow bending over his stone; and those frauds the Wright Brothers now most permanently grounded; Agnes Moorehead of Mercury Theater on the Air and *Citizen Kane* and the far superior *Bewitched*—Endora and her dark arts were still popular in Serbia—never escaped her last appearance here in “An Evening With the Fabulous Red,” 1974; and Owen Stanley, a King of the Gypsies until 1892, still a mysterious resident. “And there is the famous statuary boy playing with cat. Note the marble yarn ball.”

Libby pulled the car over suddenly, glanced off the curb on his side. A chunky tomb crept toward him and squatted down as they rolled to a stop. He turned to her with some trepidation. There would be trouble, but at least he could escape the SUV without harm. Lib became the leading lady, furrowed her brow adorably, a thirtyish hussy Juliet. “There’s something wrong.”

He said, “We both need rocks to cling to.”

“I am a rock,” she said, straightened in her seat, “so speak for yourself. It’s because I get carsick, isn’t it. I barfed in the taxi on our first night out, while we were having fun there in the backseat, and that soured you on the whole thing, right from the get-go. I haven’t got sick since. Except when we went dancing. It took you just ten days to get sick of *me*?”

“It isn’t that.”

“The laugh, then. Has to be my braying ass laugh.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll remember to remove my makeup before bed like I promised. Or is it, after all, that I’m too ugly for you? This is what it always is with men.” She began to cry, grabbed him by the gold buttons on his uniform shirt. “Tell me!”

“Will you please quit it.”

“I can’t allow you to leave,” she said—an admission? An agent after all!—and then, “now that I’ve found you.”

He waited her out, sat there motionless for several minutes.

Lib sat back, looking out the windshield into nothingness, put her hands back on the steering wheel. When the time seemed ripe, she sighed and blinked as if she had tears, but Slobo saw none glimmering at the corner of her eye in the sallow light of the dome lamp. She was the picture of a fraught once-starlet in a soap opera, like the infamous *Iz Dana u Dan*, *From Day to Day*, where the scenes were often very like this one. She took a significant breath, closed her eyes, and said, “Well I suppose I should drop you off and continue looking for that man who’s meant for me, somewhere in this world.”

He suppressed a sudden giggle and said, “There’s always one.”

7

Slobo returned from his successful breakup, dropped off just as, well before his rise to power, he used to jettison Marija and Marko at the most fashionable skating rink. All his men were asleep, and he was insomniac and neuralgic. God’s throbbing revenge. He reviewed the latest draft treaty absently, aided by a tumbler of the Chivas. Just ran his eyes over it really, didn’t translate the marks at all. His clock said he was in trouble, 12:01 ante meridiem, long wait for morning. (He recalled a mistake in his favorite English dictionary, the really hilarious *Webster’s II New Riverside University*, that went, “Although 12 A.M. denotes noon and 12 P.M. denotes midnight, it is better to use 12 noon and 12 midnight to avoid confusion.”) A long, painful night. He stared at his cigarette burning in a dimpled plastic ashtray. Matching plumes of blue smoke came from both sides of the cherry and merged, caught in the lamplight—ever-dying and renewing bouquets of ghost roses rising from the ash. The heat had cut on, which sent the blooms spinning, and some whirled into diaphanous tunnels. He swooned, lost the thread from lack of sleep, or maybe someone slipped him a mickey.

It was the last day of negotiations—signed treaty tonight or a cancellation. Albright the un-ambassador presented the new proposal in Sloba's rooms that morning, though she wouldn't meet his eyes. "The—thin—ice thing about it," Albright said while fumbling with her collar, perhaps adjusting a hidden microphone, "is that we have full agreement, the full weight of the others on this."

"Another lovely brooch you wear today. Coal black dove alights on your jacket, listening attentively to my answer," Sloba replied, shouting down at the bug. "And where are my friends the Contact Teamers this morning?"

"I'm handling this myself, Mr. Milosevic," she said through perpetually pursed lips. "It's too important. This is the last chance. We all go home tomorrow, no matter what."

"Obviously."

"Don't get nasty. Izetbegovic wants a shared Sarajevo and total control of those few towns. You have no choice in this."

He blew smoke just over her head after a long drag. "Look, lemme tell you—"

"This is the agreement. Everyone is on board. Last chance." Her guards sat on either side. They were each a half-Sasha, but had many times the firepower—uzis, judging by the bulges in their suit jackets. Sasha was only allowed a semiautomatic revolver under the SS's rules. Idle thoughts, since his man was dozing on the couch in front of a muted *Today*, his English primer open on his lap.

"We need to spend more time on this. You'll have my answer."

"We've been talking about this eventuality all week. I don't understand the confusion."

He shouted in Serbian to his men playing Pez Roulette in the bedroom, "I'm from Mars. I understand perfectly: they want to destroy everything. Call CNN and New York *Times*, ask them what time the world ends." It wet the lips of an already parched day. Laughter from the bedroom indicated someone got the dud

in the candy dispenser, sometimes a halved square of nicotine gum, a carefully sanded horse pill, and on occasion an outsize pellet of rat poison. Mario ran through the front room, right between Sloba and Albright, and out into the hall, either to carry out Sloba's theatrics as an order or just wash the taste from his mouth in privacy.

"Twelve midnight tonight," she said.

Christopher summoned him during a typical room-service lunch of moldering cold cuts. One last tour on the base before they shipped out. This time, Sloba got his wish—a long trip below a nondescript engineering building as if down a mine shaft. "Is this where they keep the pickled Martians?" he said in the elevator, nudging his SS escort. They took a cart to an area in the twisting hallway marked "SYSTEMS SIMULATIONS," then entered a small projection room—Christopher, Holbrooke, and Albright, and a host of undersecretaries. The lights were dimmed.

"What's playing?" Sloba joked. Christopher stiffly raised a finger, and Sloba caught shadows in a projection room at the rear—a man at a terminal and someone else standing behind in a suit and tie—bulgy facial features and blow-dried hair, mobster, businessman, politician, worse. He and Sasha were directed to rolling chairs in the front area closest to the screen, while all the others filed into the installed rows of seating in the back. Spring-loaded seats flapped and squeaked as the men settled in.

The lights faded out, the whispers and wheezy coughs died down.

A deep bass thrummed up, organ music perhaps, as if a distribution company's logo was being introduced for an actual Hollywood picture. But instead, brilliant light flooded the room from all directions, really hurt Sloba's eyes. When he opened them, he found himself on the deck of a destroyer; he heard gulls; he smelled sea air and felt spray against his face. A klaxon sounded. He jumped up and shouted with fear.

“You’re still in the room, Mr. Milosevic,” said a man with a bland, scratchy southerner’s voice that came from behind Sloba and Sasha. The Arkansan? Sloba turned and saw only the sea, and Sasha sitting beside him agape. An American sailor wearing headphone-style ear protection ran into the ship and shut the door with a clang. “You’ll want to remain seated for the duration, or you’ll become disoriented,” said the voice. “And you may want to plug your ears.”

They’d finally done it to him. But he seemed to have control. He shouted, “If that’s you, Clinton, I wanna know what your boys put in the sandwiches.”

There was laughter, and a shriek from above the deck pierced through him, then a still more brilliant flash of light. He pitched back as his surroundings shot away, hit solid ground though he was screaming over the ocean at kilometers a second. He looked up to see Sasha, wind-whipped, clutching the base of his chair with his eyes shut, bellowing in long breaths. Ahead of them was smoke and flame that seemed to approach them; they were passing whatever it was. They caromed over it, and he looked down to see a large flat missile slide behind them, his face reflected in its nose like in a funhouse mirror—no, it was decorated with a cartoon of him straddling it, the words “SLO-BLOW” painted on the tip. He retched, began to weep, cried out to God.

And they rocketed ahead, approached and passed over a coast, over small and familiar hamlets, a mountain range, Montenegro—careening past the family cottage and just clearing the branches of the olive tree under which he’d molested his first girlfriend—and then on, over Bosnia, spiraling over the ruins of Mostar bridge and up to Mount Podbrdo, where a spectral hologram of the Virgin Mary made the V sign to a crowd of worshippers, and dipping toward a convoy of retreating Serbs, Sloba saw that Karadzic did stand down, at least in this version of reality. There was no time for Sloba to shut his eyes against this sensory assault, or perhaps he had and it didn’t matter. They were in a tight corkscrew about Sarajevo now, a bullet-addled husk after years of Serb punishment, and then were thrown down headlong, braking just before the smash to linger over two battered pairs of Nikes set out in the field where Bosko, a Serb Romeo, and his forbidden Muslim bride were sniped in an admirable escape attempt at the

height of the siege. Their bodies appeared briefly on the spot of doom, face down, arms entwined, just as they'd appeared in their famous photograph. Then there was acceleration—faster toward the Serb border, over greening mass graves where thousands of deedos and daddies and uncles and brothers lay, yet to be discovered. There was another burst of light and they crashed through the wide, jammed boulevards of Beograd, which was just as Slobo left it; they narrowly missed power lines and lampposts, skittering over the roofs of little cars jammed and honking on the central bridge, dropping to skim the waters of the Danube where a hundred more sweet ones (*So sweet!*) lay stuffed in a sunken truck. They spun higher and faster than before, and then almost as suddenly their career slowed to a stop, and they dropped gently to the backyard of Slobo's beloved villa outside Beograd.

There it was, flat and modern, chrome and steel and stucco, real as you or me. There were two of his servants, yes, Tita and Stalinka, ready to hang the daily washing, babushkas tied over their heads, skirts hiked for comfort in the miraculous summer sun. "Tita!" he cried, tried to stand with wobbly legs, but she didn't answer, only looked up at a rumble coming from the south, pointed. He hit the ground with Sasha, whose chair kicked away and toppled, and he smelled the sweet grass.

He had been wrung and hung out like the laundry—and then, with the explosion of the cruise missile dubbed *Slo-Blow*, his perception had the wrinkles snapped out of it. He was planted in his own grounds at the villa, simulated goats gamboling down the meadow (was that his favorite billy, Arkan?) away from the blast that ripped off a villa wall as summarily as the one that disintegrated Qadaffi's tent silks. He looked back to the house—a sofa fell from the second floor to crunch on the concrete patio, steel support rods and sparking cables hanging down from the cross-sections of the ceilings. Bits of plaster rained down on him, dusting his dark suit. He heard a pop and a curse from Sasha; a brick had beaned him. Slobo smelled natural gas and maybe Mira's gardenia perfume as he stood, attempted to brush off—it all was absolutely real. He opened his hands to catch the dust that still came down. Mira's purple plastic flower plopped

into his palm, and charred notebook pages fluttered down around him. One he caught read, “stealthy Batwing-2” in Malo’s print.

“Clearly you have gone whole hawk,” he said to the goats. “It cannot be possible, yet here it is, not like movie, but fully real. Any responsible person could see that. You’ve even changed the season of the year to suit you. Promise of future violence? Next summer? Four summers from now? Bravissimo.” There was no end to the Americans’ maleficent invention.

The projector (or dimension shifter or mind warper—whatever the beast was) went dark and a door instantaneously opened to let in a feeble light from the hallway there in the labyrinth under the air base. The other occupants of the room might have been long gone by now; he could detect nothing except Sasha next to him and a silhouetted officer beckoning at the door. Sloba left the black room in silence, except for one question whispered in Serbian to Sasha: “What day is it today?”

“The last day,” said one of the guards leading him to the electric cart.

Sloba laughed and patted Sasha on the shoulder. “Thank God I haven’t missed it.” He still held the souvenirs from the attack in his fist as they were trucked to the suite.

“I will not make it home,” Sloba told Mira. “My hands are strung from another’s. I must give up Sarajevo by the force of these opportunists.”

“For Heaven’s sake! What happened to you? The press has laid open your most personal tragedies, just as we’re on the verge of success. That Gillis wrote a new article, and they even printed it here. They paint your family as mad hatters bent on suicide. What happened!”

He fingered the plastic flower, the souvenir of his morning flight through Serbia. “I am to die one way or other. Decisions have been made, any responsible person can see.”

“You’re muffled. Walk a few steps, go out on the balcony. Can’t hear you.”

“These cheap rooms have no balconies. And it is too cold tonight.”

“You must force them to your side.”

“Deadline tonight, set by the puppeteers. Midnight. They have loaded our bags on the plane already. I die. They’ve already shown me my own death, and yours.”

“They lose more than you if you walk out.”

“I am going to do it. Think of me today.”

“Puppy! Stay alive for our children!”

“Those two have lost their love for us. There is no comfort in them.”

“Then think of me. Our fortune and homes. We have a future!”

He hesitated. “I love you, my Kitten.”

“You see? I divide your opinion. Beat down your worry with our joy.”

He began to weep again, felt the same helplessness he’d felt in the projection room. “Everything up and up.”

As they neared the fatal hour, Slobo went for a walk. He couldn’t decide what he had witnessed, if anything, or what he’d do now. Sasha would not come out of the bathroom, wouldn’t speak to him through the door. His men took turns trying to kick it down, but it had been reinforced, probably with Sasha’s back. Slobo didn’t trust anyone other than Sasha at this point—his own assistants and ministers would have him locked up if they suspected anything, Judases all. Even Mira couldn’t help him now. So after pouring a tall one into Mario’s sports bottle, Slobo went out.

No SS to be seen; the whole hotel looked more deserted than usual. Everyone was packing up. He strolled out the front door with his topcoat buttoned to his nose, nuzzled the collar. A chill wind had set in, and it felt like snow. He emerged from the loading circle overhang with the purpose of finding Holbrooke’s window on the first floor—he was the only one Slobo could ever talk to, when it was permitted. He caught sight of demonstrators at the fence behind the parking lot. They started whistling and shouting like football fans as he squinted at them. It was dark, and the only sign he could make out was “MARS, SLOBO, MARS.”



He'd just mentioned Mars in passing that morning. What was the connection? Was he finally cracking up? This was obviously the point, he realized, and he dismissed it as another plot.

He stood outside what he thought was Holbrooke's room, right there in front of the place. Flurries whipped around his ears with a sudden gust of bitter cold. He stood his ground, took a squirt of Scotch, and stared into the spaces between the horizontal blinds in the chosen window. Snow faintly collected on his shoulders and unprotected head for twenty minutes or so until a light came on and the window was cracked open.

"Rick, Dick," shouted Slobo.

Inside Holbrooke's suite, a replica of his own, Slobo dithered about Sarajevo. He stretched uncomfortably in a slick, overstuffed Ezy Boy recliner, knees bending over the leading edge of the extended footrest, feet on the floor.

"You know what's at stake, what you saw today," was all Holbrooke said.

It was down to a death threat. He felt himself sinking deeper into the chair. His whole body could just merge with it, soak into the pores of the leather and give up his ghost. He fought it by raising himself and leaning on an elbow. "I'm tired of your interminable deals and propo—proposi—" The Scotch had caught up, and Slobo drifted off to sleep with, "Hell with it. We will turn—over—" Slobo collapsed back on the Ezy Boy, cheek mashed into the pillow, back arched, nose whistling his propagandists' new tune on the Beograd Hot Fifty, number one with bullets for four weeks now,

*Hail, Slobo. Thunder emanates from thine belly,  
Lightning from thine loins, fire thine nostrils,  
And smoke thine hallowed mouths.*

Suddenly, he sprang to his feet and cried, "Take it all! The whole city! Bubsurds and suburbs and whatever else you have mind to. Today only and never again! If you miss your chance now you miss it forever!" He waited a

moment for someone to thank him, but Holbrooke and his aides were stunned. Then: “Everyone is welcome!” He spun and stomped out of the room.

Word came at 11:30 that when Izetbegovic was roused from a nap with news of Sloba’s big concession, he still refused to sign. Alija wanted more corridors and buffers snaking through the Bozos’ already meager lands. More indignities! After the call from Holbrooke, Sloba slipped past his sleeping men and went down to the Muslim wing in robe and pajamas—enough was enough. There was more activity on this end—“Where’s my—” and “Help me with—” in that particular Bosnian trill. Shadows played on the facing wall, Alija’s boys around the corner, so he slipped into a nearby lounge nestled between an icemaker and snack machines, but not before grabbing some Fritos.

“So how are you doing, Sloba,” said Alija Izetbegovic. He was sitting at one of the round tables with the lights off, rubbing his eyes with the balls of his hands. He too was in his silk robe.

Two other men sat at tables nearest the windows, obscured. “Leave the lights alone, old man,” said one of them, an American.

Sloba tried to play off his surprise, salaamed half-jokingly—a slight bow, eyes closed, open hand to forehead. “I am waiting.”

“The coffee from this machine is powdered. Awful,” said Izetbegovic.

“Alija,” said Sloba.

“Sloba.”

“Alija.”

“Sloba.”

“Deedo.” Alija’s people always called him Grandpa.

“Sloba.”

“You shall have all you demand, Deedo,” said Sloba. “I’ll have signatures on the treaty from everyone within twenty-four hours of my return home. You must believe it.”

“His future depends on me, and it’s why I’m persuaded by this butcher,” Alija said to the man who hadn’t yet spoken. The man sighed loudly.

“Is that Tudzman?” asked Sloba. He peered into the dark. It was Tudzman, surely. What a strange meeting this was! “If you think of your future, you are one of us!”

“We shall never be one of you, slob,” Tudzman hissed.

“As it may be. But if you decide on engagement I congratulate you here and now!” said Sloba. He rushed to embrace them, but Tudzman rose up and fled the room. Only Izetbegovic submitted, for Islam means submission, Sloba remembered, and embracing this scrawny, fearless grandfather who’d stayed socked away in his Sarajevo bunker through years of shelling, Sloba was repulsed by his scent, which reminded him of his musking cat.

“Now we’re getting somewhere, old man,” said the one who remained in the dark.

8

Immediately after the initialing ceremony, there was a little party at the Officer’s Club. “We all need a drink,” Christopher had said. There were still details to be sorted—especially strong-arming the Bozos for their autographs when Sloba got home—hardly details at all. Punchy from his second straight sleepless binge, he interrupted the piano man to offer his own vocals, as he’d done in past junkets to the club.

“I thought I told you never to play that—” Sloba said in his best Bogey. “I kid you. Great song. Play it—what’s your name, soldier?”

“Fritzzy Winkel.”

“Go on and play it anyway.”

As the introduction played out, he looked to the dimmed lights overhead and then to the violet, velvety rug—an entertainer’s flair, that family touch of theatricality. His mother had hanged herself; his father: pills; his father’s brother, gunshot to the head, all true, as Gillis had written. His mother had been the only

one to bother writing an explanation, which Malo passed along to Sobo weeks after the funeral: "I'm not fighting anymore. I don't want any more." What would his note say, when the time came? He'd certainly end it if the Serbs turned on him, if he were to lose most everything. Maybe the parting shot from Princip the principled Serb, Archduke Ferdinand's assassin, would do: *The idea arose in our own minds, and we executed it. We have loved the people. I have nothing to say in my defense.* A fun or funny goodbye pinned to his lapel like a carnation. Surviving that, he might say it at the height of an impassioned speech at some false tribunal on war crimes. (Would there be executions like Nuremburg?) In fact this would be ideal; after all, he often rehearsed it in his mind, as if it were his acceptance speech at the Oscars. Yes, this would be better than scribbling it on a scrap, Sobo thought, and anyway there is not a jot of proof that suicidal tendencies are inherited.

He began to sing, dropping all affect, really feeling the words he sang, no trace of a smile—not even for Libby, who had stopped near the stage to listen, grinning, bouncing with the rhythm, laden with full pitchers of Lite in each hand. What was she doing here? Didn't she work full-time at Packy's? No. She had, he remembered, served at the museum among all the spies. And the room service. "The trembling treezes embrace the breezes—tenderly," he sang, nearly spoke, into the wireless mic.

And then he saw the man, near the back of the bar, the shadowy Godfather himself. Clinton had taken his listening pose, that peculiar inclination of his head, the gaze into space that suggested he was concentrating on your words. He was here in secret—too convincing to be a stand-in. Were his eyes really wet? Hard to tell at a distance, but even in the dim light Sobo could see the tip of the President's nose was round and red and shiny, a ripe cherry. Sobo gave a nod. Here's looking at you. "Your arms open wide and they close me inside." Holbrooke, Christopher, the Pythoness Albright, Alija, Tudzman, the Bozos, even Alija's bearded wunderkinders—each had paused to listen. Sobo slowed the piano down for the last verse: "You took my lips, you took my loves—

so—tenderly.” Strong to the finish. They’re all mine, he thought, no secrets here. There is no Dayton without Milosevic.