

A movie poster for 'Lucius Shepard Viator Plus'. The scene is set in a lush, green jungle. A large, rusted red shipwreck is the central focus, partially obscured by thick tree trunks and branches. The ship's hull is heavily damaged, with visible rust and a small porthole. In the foreground, a woman with long, dark, dreadlock-like hair is seen from behind, sitting on a large, moss-covered log. She is looking towards the shipwreck. The background shows more of the jungle and a large, white, rocky formation. The overall lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a daytime setting.

**LUCIUS  
SHEPARD  
VIATOR  
PLUS**

In this, his seventh major collection, Lucius Shepard is as magisterial in narration and darkly eloquent in style as ever. The stories gathered here conduct the reader from the wastelands of the near future to the zoned-out bacchanals of Hollywood, from the fevered bordellos of Central America to the hallucinated revels of redneck country, from the broken hearts of wandering loners to alluring fantasy realms just beyond the threshold of perception. And when the journey is over, eternal contrasts—of man and woman, bosses and workers, responsibility and escape, conformity and freedom—stand in more powerful definition than ever before...

The title novel, *Viator*, is here published in its full, intended text for the first time, and is revealed as Shepard's masterpiece of the decade. Five men of Swedish descent, drifters and drunks on the mend, are assigned to live aboard a derelict ship on the Alaskan coast, only to perceive that they are on the brink of a voyage beyond our world, one of beckoning glamour and incipient madness. Long sentences, alternately languorous and urgent, run moodily throughout the tale, in a feast of metaphoric language limning the perils of a soul caught between anchoring love and transcendent illusion.

And other stories set out equally resonant crises of the conflicted psyche. A mine manager who knows his domain for the very image of Hell bids for redemption, or at least survival. A scriptwriter in Hollywood finds that false appearances exist not only in films. A veteran rock singer, the "Queen Mother", confronts

*Continues on back flap*



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*Viator Plus* is a book of charismatic distinction, one of the finest collections of the year.



*Viator* **PLUS**



*Viator* **PLUS**

LUCIUS SHEPARD



## **Viator Plus**

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*For Andre Kuenzy and Patrick Geiger*

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# THE EMPEROR

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“ . . . That melancholy hole which is the place  
All the other rocks converge and thrust their weight . . . ”

—Dante, Canto XXXI, *The Inferno*

**B**LESS THE MOON, MCGLOWRIE SAID TO HIMSELF. UNDER bitter smokes and clouds of poison, here we are forbidden the lights of heaven, but lack especially the moon . . .

He spun the wheel of the rover, sending forty-five tons of armor-plated steel lurching to the right, nearly scraping the pit wall, all so as to avoid crushing a spiderlike machine that had scooted into his path.

—Go thou into the earth, he said, affecting the grandiose effusiveness of a drunk. The fact that he *was* drunk did not alter the depth of his pretense. Since taking charge of the mine and its many machines, he had become increasingly distant in personal situations and had discovered that exaggerating certain of his natural propensities helped to strengthen his humanity, to fix it as an artist might fix a painting, by sealing its surface with a glaze; and yet, for purposes of efficiency, he also nourished his unemotional side. It made for an odd balancing act, this tipping back and forth between calm rationality and what his friend, Terry Saddler, characterized as the oft-bugged machismo of an aging barroom bully; and the very artificiality of this balancing act half-persuaded McGlowrie that he had already failed at it, that he had grown more machine than man in his responses. Nevertheless, he continued to strive to perfect his human imperfections.

Seated in the chair beside McGlowrie, Robert Eads Bromley. Vainglorious boy. Blond beard razored with finicky precision, nary a strand out of rank; a crisp new baseball cap, adorned with the Emperor's logo (a crowned man on a barbarous throne, aping the Tarot trump) and hiding a prematurely receding hairline. In a tone that reeked of an expensive education got in hallowed halls where the graduation ceremony consisted of having a stick rammed up your butt, he suggested that another ill-considered maneuver like

McGlowrie's last might serve to uncouple the factory units linked behind the rover. He further suggested that McGlowrie lay off the drink.

—The Emperor's one of the last places on earth where a man can drive drunk with impunity, said McGlowrie. Allow me my small pleasures.

—If the company gets wind of your *pleasures*, said Bromley, they'll put your ass in a sling.

—And who's going to tell them? A trainee?

Bromley looked away from McGlowrie's stare; the older man made a sardonic noise and, annoyed, too much so to return to his tipsy poetics, he beat out a rhythm on the command console and sang:

*All the women in Boston  
sing their white rose song.  
Ah, Santa Katerina,  
she's my icon . . .*

—Did you like that? McGlowrie asked. I wrote it myself. Last time we replaced the command-control unit, while driving through the pit, I got to thinking about women, you know. Their variety, their essence . . .

Bromley muttered something that sounded resentful, gazing out through rain-streaked glass at the ghastly inhuman vista of the pit, at countless machines toiling, scuttling, lumbering, darting, and gliding over the broken ground.

—Beg pardon? said McGlowrie.

—The machine you swerved to avoid. It was a spider from the leaching ponds. There must be millions of them.

—You said all that? I could have sworn you were more succinct. McGlowrie chuckled. You're correct. It was only a spider. And most likely a damaged one, or else it wouldn't have strayed from the ponds. The hunter-killers will be at it soon, so you wonder, quite rightly, why I bothered. Was it a whim? An inebriated twitch? Did it have philosophical implications, life being life in whatever guise? Was that the thrust of your inquiry?

—More or less.

McGlowrie nodded, as if he were considering the question, and said, Perhaps you'll like the second verse better.

*All the women in Moscow  
with their stiletto heels.  
with their Type O lipstick  
and black market deals . . .*

He cocked an eye toward his audience, awaiting a response, and, when Bromley failed to muster one, he continued.

*All the women in Chelsea  
with their tiger smiles,  
with their secret histories  
and their serpent Niles . . .*

Bromley picked himself up and started for the hatch.

—Sit, said McGlowrie.

Reluctantly, sullenly, Bromley sat.

—I take it you're not a music lover, said McGlowrie.

Bromley responded with a sideways glance.

—That's all right. It's not a requirement. McGlowrie steered around some unidentifiable wreckage that the recyclers had deemed unworthy of collection. What is required of anyone working here is that they cut their fellow employees a little slack. Otherwise . . .

—I didn't sign on to cut anyone slack.

—Otherwise, McGlowrie went on, your fellow employees will cut you none.

—I don't need it.

McGlowrie drove in silence for a time, drumming his fingers on the wheel, and then said, I assume you've been lectured on the psychological toll taken by the job. I also assume that after being here three weeks—three *whole* weeks—you've concluded that you're immune to the pressure. And perhaps you are. Anything's possible. But let's suppose you're cast of ordinary clay, that you fall a bit short of superhero status.

—Let's suppose you're a tiresome old drunk.

McGlowrie reflected on this comment and the assurance with which it had been delivered. I know Daddy's a big stockholder, he said. And I imagine

he's willing to indulge his baby boy, to let you play at being a contributor to society. To pass through your grub stage, as it were, before you weary of it and evolve into a full-blown parasite. That's fine. Just don't make the mistake of thinking I'm easy. I've been fighting corporate battles for long years, and I don't fight fair.

Bromley coughed . . . or it might have been a laugh. You think I'm after your job?

—I don't give a damn what you want. Whatever it is, I'm telling you straight-up, if it's not in accord with my wishes, you won't get a sniff of it. I know the Emperor better than anyone. That makes me the one person the company doesn't want to lose.

Bromley refused to look at McGlowrie, but he did not appear particularly shaken.

—There's not much to do here, God knows. If things were in good order, they wouldn't need me. But things aren't in good order. Things are fucked. I'm sure you must have noticed that half our equipment is outdated, and the other half's hung together with paper clips. McGlowrie reached down beside the chair, groped for his bottle, failed to snag it. That said, the pressure doesn't arise from living on the doorstep of hell. It arises from knowing the job's irrelevant. The mine runs itself. Our function is to observe, to file reports that will doubtless be misfiled, to do some repairs, to make suggestions that will be ignored, and to perform a few simple tasks . . . like the one we're performing today.

—Replacing the command-control's a simple task? I'd call it our central task.

McGlowrie shrugged. Call it what you like, all we do is tow the bitch out and reposition her. Every so often the old AI decides it doesn't want to be shut down. When that happens, some of us die. But it inevitably shuts down. It can't escape its programming and commits suicide. The loss of human life, now. That's not a major complication. And there's the real source of the pressure. Out in the world you hear people saying that mankind's in a state of peril. We've become an impediment to the planet's survival. Here, you feel the full weight of that pronouncement. You realize all we're doing as a species is busy work. Waiting for the final collapse in whatever form it comes. Maybe prolonging things a little. So try a shot of that every day for a year, then get back to me about my drinking. If you last that long.



Bromley appeared to be bursting to speak, but he restrained himself. After a passage of ten or fifteen seconds, he said, Is that all? Can I go?

—Oh yeah, said McGlowrie. I've had my fill.

In all the grunt and swagger of his life, days weeks months wadded up and pitched away like grease rags into a bin of years, McGlowrie had not found much use for any pastime that did not have at its heart a spirit of raw functionality. He had climbed a steep slope up from the slums of the Northeastern Corridor (an urban area extending from Boston south to DC and west to Pittsburgh), achieving a rare upward mobility for someone of his class, and thus he was by nature diligent and arrogant. By profession, he was a tender of machines—machines that had grown increasingly complex as he progressed from youth into his fiftieth year—and he believed a man should dedicate himself to his trade, toil at it until he dropped, a principle given objective form by his father, who had keeled over at the age of eighty-four while repairing a toaster. Like his father, he measured happiness by the amount of work there was for him, and, when given charge over pit operations at the Emperor, ten thousand square miles carved from the Alaskan wilderness, a vast strip mine filled with machines of every shape, capacity, and dimension, it seemed he had happened upon his Shangri-la. Looking down each day into the bleak heart of work, the endless labors of the machines had opened him to abstraction and exposed a slim vein of poetry in his soul.

His initial tour of the mine horrified him. He was appalled by the sight of the twisted trees and cancerous grasses that sprouted along the rim of the pit, struggling to process metals from the poisoned soil. He was repelled by the greasy rain that fell from a constant cover of noxious, bilious-looking clouds, and even more repelled when he understood the damage it could do to one's skin. The pit was an expanding canyon system with five-hundred-foot-high walls that slumped into hills of talus. Scattered about were beaches of blue and red and green oxides, and banks of sulphur, their colors dimmed by the dense particulate haze that muddied the air. Here and there were silvery lakes of mercury and tungsten, edged with black foam, from which robotic spiders—skittering on mesh feet that barely disturbed the surface—extracted

rare metals and then excreted squirts of indium, osmium, and such along the shore, there to be collected by larger machines. In every quarter of the mine, foundering amid piles of debris, were gutted, rusted hulks that had been cannibalized for parts, their exoskeletons left to corrode and collapse, serving as monuments to the Emperor's infernal system. The environment was thronged with machines, many with replacement parts and improvements grafted onto them. It seemed that every inch of the place was jerking, churning, jittering, making it all but impossible for the eye to find a secure purchase. Crushers, spreaders, smelters; mammoth excavators and reclaimers dating from the last century, when machines had been operated by men; recyclers, ore carriers, HKs (hunter-killers), sniffers, and countless more that ranged in size from that of a housepet to the microscopic. The stationary units, such as the command-control AI and the factory units they were towing—fifty feet high and three times as long—were shrouded in thick gray dust, except when they were engaged in fabricating the machines that populated the pit; and various of the mobile units were so bizarre in design, they brought to mind the nightmarish fantasies of Hieronymous Bosch, an artist unfamiliar to McGlowrie when he had arrived, but whom he had since come to appreciate.

Among the many varieties of carriers were flat metal beds to which six or more double-jointed legs were attached, each leg terminating in a claw hand capable of squeezing projections and gripping cracks. They would emerge from the murk with a sofa-sized lump of gold, say, clamped to their backs by steel bands, and climb the pit wall toward railheads near the rim; sometimes these carriers traveled together, and you might see what appeared to be a herd of aluminum or silver or uranium loping along in close order. When one of them fell, as frequently they did, hunter-killers—wolf-sized predator machines with jointed bodies and flexible treads, plasma torches in their bellies, and powerful robotic arms capable of pinning their victim—would descend upon the cripple and neatly cut it into pieces. It was after witnessing a slaughter of this sort, during a time when he had been stranded out in the pit, himself exposed to its savagery, that McGlowrie's attitude toward the mine underwent a sea change. From perceiving himself to be the overlord of some hellish region, he came to view the Emperor as a machine Serengeti over which he had been appointed warden.

This transition involved some considerable philosophical adjustment. Though a relative handful of crackpots still adhered to the cause, environmentalism had run its course as a viable political stance; nonetheless, there was a human reflex that went contrary to places like the Emperor, and, more to the point, there was a general fear of machine evolution, one fueled by media representations of demonic machines dedicated to the destruction of humanity. McGlowrie was not immune to those fears, but after several years of duty on the front lines of the conflict, he was convinced that mankind was capable of blasting, bombing, or otherwise subduing any machine threat should the need arise. And if he were wrong, if some cybernetic mastermind were to devil its way into a crucial system and bring down what was left of civilization . . . well, he might take it personally as regarded his life and those of his friends, but he was not about to get all species-ist about it. With a population of ten billion, the vast majority of them impoverished, a considerable number of those enduring life-threatening poverty dwelling in the ICUs (Inter-City Urban areas), slums that would have made Charles Dickens gasp, lawless but for the feeble infrastructures maintained by gangs and street churches, and a wealthy minority satisfied to cling to their creature comforts in the face of global warming, famine, pestilence, and whatever terror-of-the-day came to the fore—you didn't get a lot of talk anymore about the nobility of the human spirit and the destiny of mankind. The basic conversation had been reduced to: how much longer can we hang on? McGlowrie had learned to focus on his work, to be passionate about it, and thus achieved a simple resolution to an old and complicated question: You did what you had to, you loved what you did, and you didn't permit yourself to get involved with existential stupidities that caused you doubt.

**A**t mid-afternoon, a storm swept in from the mountains to the west, clouds fuming black as battlesmoke among the snow peaks, and by dusk it had completely shrouded the Emperor. Lightning twiggged the sky, striking down into the pit, flashes illuminating machines that moved beyond the range of the rover's headlights. McGlowrie knocked the electrical systems offline and dropped into his chair to watch the show, staring out through the grizzled ghost of his reflection, made ghoulish by red emergency lights. Warning

buzzers sounded as the factory units behind the rover shut down, settling on their treads; the intercom squawked and Saddler, who was down in the galley, asked, Hey, Mac! What's going on?

—We'll be sitting for a while. Too much electrical activity, said McGlowrie. Everything okay down there?

A burst of static issued from the com, which McGlowrie took for an affirmation.

—The others asleep? he asked.

—Denise is. I think Bromley's watching a porno.

—He's a growing boy, said McGlowrie.

Thirty yards ahead, the eerie blue-green radiance of St. Elmo's Fire sketched the carcass of a gutted ore crusher, a dinosaur of a machine with crude stitchings of bolts across its massive steel plates.

—How far to the site? Saddler asked.

—Once the storm passes, about an hour.

A pattering on the glass.

Several dozen fliers had attached themselves to the window. Storms often drove the smaller machines to seek shelter in the lee of the biggest, but McGlowrie had never before seen fliers like these. Reddish brown splinters about a centimeter long, with a vibrating wire protruding from each.

—Want me to bring you up a sandwich? asked Saddler.

—I'm not hungry.

—You need something to soak up the alcohol. I got turkey, cranberry relish, lettuce . . .

—All right. Thanks. No mayo, huh?

McGlowrie dialed the magnification of the glass higher, so that the image of a single flier dominated the windshield. He studied it, stored the image in the computer, made a note, and returned the glass to normal. When Saddler, a tall, melancholy Brit with a stubby scalp, brought the sandwich, he noticed the fliers—there were more of them now—and asked what they were.

—A new type of diagnostic unit, maybe, McGlowrie said. I don't know.

—They look more like sniffers to me, said Saddler after brief study. That wire could be a bonded strip of nano-machinery.—Persons'll figure it out when we get back to base.

—Didn't you do a scan?

—Not yet. McGlowrie lifted the top of his sandwich and inspected the fixings. Fuck! I told you no mayo.

—Did I put mayo on it? Saddler grinned.

—You fucking slathered it on. Jesus! It's inedible. Fix me another.

—Fix it yourself, you rude bastard!

McGlowrie stared at him through lowered brows and Saddler said, Holy Christ! It's the look! When might I expect my brain to start frying?

—Ah hell, said McGlowrie. I want to check in with Denise, anyway. Cover for me awhile, okay?

—How long?

—Twenty, thirty minutes. McGlowrie winked. Significantly less if she's too sleepy.

Saddler said, No problem.

McGlowrie winced as he stood, an old back injury tweaked, and more of the fliers struck the glass, making a sound like hail. They were distributed so thickly across the windshield, in Escheresque profusion, they almost obscured the view.

—Shouldn't you clear them away? asked Saddler, peering more closely at the fliers.

—Zap 'em if you want. They'll just return once they recover. They're more frightened of the lightning than anything we can do. McGlowrie opened the hatch and stepped through. If I'm not back in . . . let's say, forty minutes, give me a buzz.

—Is this a crack? Saddler poked the windshield with his index finger at the exact instant it exploded inward.

McGlowrie ducked, wrangling the hatch door shut, and had a dervish glimpse of Saddler beginning to fall in a storm of fliers and flying glass, his head engulfed in a red mist; he caught a whiff of burning metal and heard the sound of the pit—clangs and grinding noises embedded in a background roar, loud as a rock concert. The emergency alarm began to bleat. He punched the intercom in the corridor and, knowing it was useless, called out to Saddler. A deranged crackling issued from the speaker. He swung down the narrow stairway to the living quarters. Denise, a lean, buzzcut brunette in panties and an old T-shirt, her fey good looks starting to display the erosions of age, stood halfway out her door, shock written on her face.

—Get your armor on! McGlowrie told her. And clean out the galley. All the food you can find. I'll take care of the water.

—You're bleeding, she said in a dazed voice, and made to touch his forehead. He pushed her hand away, restated his order in a shout, and shouldered open the door to Bromley's cabin. Bromley, too, registered shock, but he was already wearing his protective suit, all except the helmet.

—Directly ahead of the rover, about a hundred feet, McGlowrie said, there's an old wreck. An ore crusher. You and Denise wait for me there.

—What're you going to do?

—Boot up the AI in command-control. Wait for me as long as you feel safe. Take your cues from Denise.

—I'll go with you.

Furious, McGlowrie grabbed the collar ring of Bromley's armor and hauled him face-to-face. This is not subject to debate. Get your helmet on and do what I say. All right?

Bromley nodded.

—Once we're outside, if you even hesitate to follow orders, you become a liability. You understand?

—Yes.

—Then put on your fucking helmet!

In his cabin, as he threw on his gear, McGlowrie was plagued by the thought that he shared in the responsibility for Saddler's death, that if he hadn't been so casual in his response to the fliers, if he had done a scan or transmitted an image back to base, if he'd taken normal precautions . . . but he was too busy to indulge in guilt. He hitched a pack of micro-tools to his belt, slipped a sidearm and extra clips of ammunition into a vented pocket at his thigh. Collecting his helmet, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the sink. Several pieces of glass were embedded in his forehead. The blood trickled down both sides of his nose, followed the tracks of the deeply scored lines bracketing his mouth, painting the semblance of a savage mask. He hadn't felt them, but now they began to sting. He managed to remove one of the glass fragments, but the process was taking too long. He turned toward the door and found it blocked by Bromley, still helmetless, aiming a gun at his head.

—For the Earth! shouted Bromley, and McGlowrie, stunned, did not at first comprehend what the words signified. Bromley tensed, his jaw muscles bunched as he prepared to fire. His determined expression gave way to one of concern. The repetitive buzz of the emergency alarm emphasized the silence that stretched between the men.

—The average survival time out in the pit is slightly less than an hour, McGlowrie said. I’ve survived it for more than three days.

—Shut up!

—I had to drink the iodine milkshake afterward to flush out the poisons, but I made it. I’m good with machines. What’s more, I’m lucky with them. You don’t want to kill me.

—I said shut up! Bromley’s voice was almost a scream.

—You can take your choice. Arsenic poisoning . . . there’s a fun death. Or maybe you’ll contract one of those exotic infections that affect the central nervous system. Maybe you’ll simply go mad from the metals accumulating in your brain. That’s, of course, assuming the HKs don’t rip you apart. Which is a very large assumption.

Bromley’s gun arm straightened, then relaxed. The barrel of his weapon drifted to the side.

—Phil Tatapu, said McGlowrie. Big old Samoan kid. He went outside to inspect the treads on the factory units. Two HKs hit him at once. We had the cameras on him, naturally. It was a hell of a thing. They pulled his arms off, like you’d tear off a drumstick, and waved them about. They couldn’t understand why they’d come off so easily. Phil’s suit had sealed around the wounds and he wasn’t conscious, but he was still alive. When they began cutting into him, it woke him right up.

—I . . . I . . . let me think, said Bromley, and then his eyes rolled up and he sagged to the floor. Denise stood at his back, just beyond the door, dressed in her armor, holding a fire extinguisher in both hands.

—Earth, my ass! McGlowrie kicked Bromley in the side.

—What’s he . . . crazy? Denise asked.

—I think he’s Green. Same fucking difference.

Kneeling beside Bromley, McGlowrie felt for a pulse. Still thumping away. He typed an instruction on the forearm keypad of Bromley’s suit—the flexible plastic of the suit hardened into an exoskeleton.

—Here, he said. Help me get him up.

Denise grabbed Bromley under one arm and together they wrestled him to his feet and propped him against a wall. The back of his head was bloody.

McGlowrie unclipped a remote from Bromley's breast pocket and passed it to Denise. I ought to leave him, but I want to hear what he has to say. Can you walk him out?

—If I have to. She touched a switch on the remote; Bromley's arm lifted, then lowered. This was sabotage?

—Maybe . . . Probably.

Bromley moaned.

—There's a wrecked crusher up ahead, said McGlowrie. Wait for me there. If you run into any trouble, don't put yourself at worse risk. Lose him.

—Where's Saddler?

McGlowrie shook his head and said, No.

Denise's chin quivered.

—We'll be okay, said McGlowrie. You've got my luck working for you. And there's always Plan B, right?

She crooked an arm around his neck, drew him down so their heads were together, her mouth by his ear, and held him like that for a few ticks. She kissed him on the mouth, not a gentle kiss, but one with plenty of tongue that slowed everything down and stirred his cock. When she broke from the kiss, she stepped to Bromley's bunk and retrieved his helmet. She stood a moment, staring down at the helmet. In that pose, she looked almost childlike. Sprite With Plastic Jug. She turned to him. Her smile seemed jerked into shape, but she managed to pull off a cheerful face.

—See you later, she said.

**T**his was McGlowrie's second excursion on foot into the pit, and he doubted he would survive it—that he had survived the one previous verged on the miraculous. Three days, of which he had spent nearly a day unconscious. He had used his skills to good effect, but he knew he had been lucky, and he did not expect his luck to hold. The first leg of the excursion—straight back to the command-control unit, a boxcar-sized unit sandwiched between the gargan-



tuan factory units, went without incident, as did springing the hatch and wriggling into the crawlspace between the outer wall and the AI's mainframe. The second leg, however, would be trickier. Denise and Bromley should be able to make it to the ore crusher with no trouble, but hunter-killers would soon be swarming about the rover, hurrying from every part of the mine, alerted to the distress of a large machine. Emergencies triggered a signal back to base, but they had neither the necessary personnel nor resources to mount a rescue. As for help from the company, it might or might not be sent; if it were, it would take two or three days to arrive. They were on their own.

He located the panel he was seeking and popped it. Once activated, the replacement AI would take control of the mine within minutes and transmit an irresistible signal encouraging the old AI to do the right thing and shut itself down. He wished he had some discretion in the activation process, that he could, for instance, send the hunter-killers away from their location. But if the company had been of a mind to give him such discretion, they would have gone the extra mile and reprogrammed the hunter-killers to differentiate between machines and mine personnel wearing protective gear. They didn't give a damn about the safety of their employees at the Emperor; they did the bare minimum to sustain production—more would not be cost effective. The workers had no leverage; they were glad to have the work, and, though they were in line for pensions and decent retirement packages, one misstep and they would be transported to Happy Face or Chemo City or Little Egypt or whatever cesspool they hailed from. It had not escaped McGlowrie's notice that everyone who worked in the Emperor was a slumdweller who had clawed their way out of some disastrous environment to achieve their station and thus was psychologically as well as economically indentured to the company. For that reason alone, McGlowrie thought, he should have realized that something was wrong about Bromley.

Braced against the wall, his helmet light the sole illumination, he punched in the activation codes and thought about Denise, her specific variation on their common sad tale. One of four children born to a woman whose name she either could not or did not wish to recall; two siblings dead in infancy of birth defects and one simply vanished; running loose in the streets of Sonyland, effectively a slum of the LA-San Diego corridor, its name derived from the old Sony *maquiladora* in Tijuana; abducted and turned out as a child

prostitute by the time she was eight. It made his own upbringing in the ganglands of the Northeast seem pastoral by contrast. They had gone on vacation in Baja a few years back, and their helicopter had overflowed a portion of Sonyland. Streets that ran between canyons of smoldering garbage; a battle fought with automatic weapons and machetes in the streets; multiple fires engulfing a neighborhood or a hovel—from the air they had looked to be islands of smoke and flame in an ocean of tinder.

The interior lights came on, confirming that the AI had recognized his suit code and was now operational. He replaced the panel, rested his head against the wall. His adrenaline rush had subsided, and he felt weak, trembling with stress, inadequate to what lay ahead. Every second wasted decreased his chances of living, but he wasted ten of them before crawling out into the pit.

**T**he worst of the storm had passed into another quarter of the Emperor, but it was slow going nonetheless. For years, McGlowrie had begged the company for improved protective gear, but his requisitions were always denied. Now they were stuck with antiquated helmets with untrustworthy computer imaging and a night-vision function incorporated into their faceplates, displaying the Emperor, on average, as dark indistinct objects against fields of blurry, solarized green. The faceplates were all, to one degree or another, in need of replacement, and McGlowrie's—though he had tinkered with it for hours, improving it vastly over its previous condition—offered an impression of the mine that was dangerous for its falsity. Black patches might be phantom walls or something else entirely; sheets of brightness on the ground might be tailing ponds or nothing at all. Depending on their metallic constituency, the clouds above the mine were a confusion of sooty blobs and puffs of glittering particles and irregular shapes that had the flat, bright aspect of fresh green paint. Once his night vision was employed, the Emperor became an abstract video—as a consequence, one was forced to go cautiously. Adding to the confusion were swarms of fliers that moved with the fluid unity of schools of fish, particulate currents in the air, the rain streaking his faceplate, and the noise . . . though noise could work to his advantage. The machines perceived one another by means of motion detection, heat signature, and echo reflection; they did not attempt to progress silently; thus a

hunter-killer, when sneaking up on a damaged yet still mobile machine, shifted its robotic arms through a sequence of attitudes, in effect trying to disguise itself, to present an attitude that would confound its prey—in doing so, it created a racket that a man with his audio set to filter out distant sounds might recognize.

To avoid the hunter-killers that (so McGlowrie assumed) were milling around the front of the rover, engaged in a feeding frenzy, he struck off in the opposite direction, planning to circle around and come at the wrecked ore crusher from behind. In his pack was all the bottled water he'd had time to collect. He carried his weapon in his right hand; in his left was a metal wand that could project a pulse capable of shutting down any cybernetic device within range—but its range was short, its effect temporary, and it was unreliable when used against the larger machines. Another cost-effective decision by the company. Every couple of minutes he scanned his armor to make certain it was free of diagnostic units that might have attached themselves and would, reading him as an anomaly, signal his presence to a hunter-killer. It took him longer than he had planned—nearly half an hour—to reach a point about twenty-five yards behind the crusher, close to the pit wall. He crouched beneath a projecting ledge, waiting for a recycler to lumber past: a machine the size of a small elephant, its shape vaguely resembling that of a rhinoceros with its horn lowered—the “horn” actually a scoop with which it collected parts left by the hunter-killers and deposited them in the hollow of its back, where they would be sorted by diminutive robots that spent their entire existence at this work, like enslaved imps. It was a tired old thing. Patches of bright dust on its sides. Grinding along on treads that, judging by the sound, were badly in need of replacement. Soon it would be prey for the HKs. Watching it pass, McGlowrie felt a momentary empathy with this monstrosity, but long before it vanished against the backdrop of shifting greens and blacks, his anxiety had returned.

The ore crusher was two stories tall, longer than it was high, segmented into three well-like compartments (Denise had left a bottle of water beside the central one to mark where she and Bromley had taken shelter). The iron bulge that protected its brain and guts had been torched open and emptied. It lay tipped onto its side, its rear end elevated by a hill of rubble. In its attitude and bulk, it reminded McGlowrie of NASA video transmitted from Titan thirty

years before, showing an artificial object that had either been erected or crashed upon the moon during, it was estimated, the late Cretaceous, upthrust against a less complicated sky than that of the Emperor yet seeming equally mysterious. The video had bred an irrational hope in people, the anticipation that this unexpected alien event might be an omen of something unforeseen in their own futures. Two days afterward, the transmissions ceased, the link was never reestablished, and it faded from the public mind, becoming fodder for psychics who claimed to be receiving messages from Titan. It came to nothing, but it had been a nice moment, a bit of vacation from the crush of reality.

The ground that lay between McGlowrie and the crusher was flat beneath a covering of dust as fine as pumice but was broken and humped on the left and right. Flashes of brightness issued from behind one of the mounds, but they were too erratic to be anything other than flaws in his visual field. He could find no reason not to go forward. He was about thirty feet from the crusher when he spotted a hunter-killer advancing from his left, farther away than the crusher but not by much. There was no use in running. It would be on him before he'd gone five feet. He knew his heart must be pounding, but he couldn't feel his chest. The HK crept closer, shifting its robotic arms through a variety of postures, like the dance of a mechanical spider, eerie movements that half-hypnotized McGlowrie. He gathered himself, preparing to fire at its treads. The HK closed the distance another five or six feet, near enough that he could hear the rapid snapped-twig sounds as its arms worked through their changes. For an instant, its body flared a blazing green and the arms darkened to burnt, crooked matchsticks, an effect that—albeit illusory—caused it to appear even more menacing, more surreal. Then it paused in its dance, a full-stop, and darted off to the east. Some richer target acquired. Faint with relief, he forced himself to go forward and, seconds later, climbed inside the central compartment of the crusher, a pitch-dark chamber more spacious than most one-bedroom apartments. The floor—the side wall, actually—was littered with chunks of ore, tilted downward at a steep angle. It clanged at his step. He switched off his night vision, switched on his helmet lamp. Denise crouched against the rear wall. The light from his lamp glazed her faceplate as he came up, making any hint of expression impossible to read. Bromley was stretched out beside her.

—Did you have any problems? McGlowrie asked, touching his helmet to hers.

—Just with him, she said. He wouldn't shut up, so I cut off his radio. How about you?

—I had a face-to-face with an HK, but then it found something it liked better.

—Your fucking luck, she said, sounding almost aggrieved.

—Don't knock it. We may need it. We should try to get clear of the area. I know of a tunnel not far from here.

—A tunnel?

—Yeah. About seventy years ago the company started building a second base, but then I guess they needed the money somewhere else. They'd already set up temporary living quarters in the tunnel for the crew when they pulled the plug. They might still be functional.

—Right. Though her voice was diminished by his earpiece, Denise's sarcasm was evident.

—That's the best I've got. If you have a better idea, say.

—How far to the tunnel?

—Best case, twenty minutes. But you know how it goes. It could take an hour, hour and a half.

Denise absorbed the bad news. Then what? Plan B?

—If we can hole up in the tunnel for a day or so, I think we can expect the company to send someone.

—Maybe they won't.

—They'll want to learn what we've seen . . . if we found anything new. It's not an urgent thing, but as long as they've stirred off their asses to come up here, they'll get us. I suppose they'll want to collect Bromley as well. Last time I was stuck out here, they dropped in an urban control vehicle to pick me up.

—Yeah?

—Yeah. Then they flew me to Seattle for debriefing. Very luxurious. You'll like Seattle.

—I bet. She gestured at Bromley. What about him?

—Turn on your overhead . . . and give me the control.

She passed him the remote, switched on her helmet lamp. McGlowrie switched his off, able now to see through Bromley's faceplate in the indirect

light. He shifted himself over and kneeled beside him. Bromley glared at him, but his defiance was a veneer and when McGlowrie laid a hand on his chest, he flinched and started talking, his voice all but inaudible through the helmet.

McGlowrie said, I've given you back your receiver, but not your transmitter. So just nod or shake your head. Okay?

Bromley's head jerked, as with a muscle spasm, and McGlowrie called it a nod.

—You know where you are now, don't you? he said. And now you've seen things for yourself, you know what we're up against.

Bromley nodded vigorously.

—Some friends were in on this with you. Right?

A less vigorous nod.

—Where are they? Out in the pit?

Bromley blinked, shut his eyes.

McGlowrie slapped the side of his helmet. Wake up!

The eyes popped open.

—How'd they get in? McGlowrie asked. Did they stow away in one of the freight cars? When they got to the railhead, they were going to rappel down the pit walls?

A nod.

—So you were the inside man . . . yeah? You were going to help them. But you realize now, don't you, they're beyond help?

A pause, then Bromley nodded.

—I'm going to give you back your voice. No fuss, okay? Just listen and respond.

With the transmitter on, he could hear Bromley breathing.

—We've got a walk ahead of us, McGlowrie said. It'd be handy to have another set of eyes and ears, but if you do anything out of line . . .

—Let me up, Bromley said.

—You see. That right there, that'll get you dead. Don't talk unless I tell you. I'll let you up in a minute, but first I want to discuss tactics.

—Give me a weapon, said Bromley. I don't stand a chance if I don't have a weapon.

McGlowrie switched off Bromley's radio.

—We can't afford to drag this asshole along, Denise said. You know he'll do something stupid.

Bromley's shouts were like shouts from an apartment down the hall.

—Kill him . . . or leave him, she said. Either way works for me.

—I won't leave him.

—Then kill him. If you can't handle it, I'll do it. Denise stared at him, resolute.

Bromley's muffled shouts grew louder; his suit trembled violently, reflecting his struggle to escape.

From without, a scraping noise that sent a chill washing through McGlowrie's groin. Please, he said to himself, knowing that his generic prayer would not be answered. And then the hatch cover was thrust aside by two spindly, rust-sheathed arms. A hunter-killer appeared in the opening, visible in the beams of their helmet lamp, its body flipped so its treads were on top, allowing it to use its arms for climbing. It must have been damaged in some way—it was having difficulty gaining a purchase, attempting to haul itself over the lip of the hatch. Before McGlowrie could draw his sidearm, Denise fired off two rounds. The first tore away one of its legs, the second hit the torso dead center, blowing a ragged hole. They both fired at the HK, scoring multiple hits, yet still it clung to the hatch, its engine whining like an enormous dental drill. With a clatter, it toppled into the compartment, sliding two-thirds of the way down the incline before coming to rest against some chunks of ore. They kept firing until it stopped trying to roll over onto its treads. Lying there, a lacework of rust fettering its metal surfaces, arms twitching feebly, it resembled a spider more than ever. Thin smokes drifted from holes in its casing.

Fighting off panic, assuming that more HKs would be coming, McGlowrie grabbed Denise by the arm, pushed her ahead of him up the incline, then thought of Bromley and turned, aiming his sidearm. Denise screamed. One of the HK's arms had caught her by the ankle and snatched her upside down. McGlowrie put three rounds into its torso, a fourth into the housing at the base of the arm—it relaxed its grip and dropped Denise. She screamed again and reached for her ankle but seemed afraid to touch it. He scrambled up beside her. The suit had sealed about the wound, but there was a lot of blood. Can you walk? he asked.

—No.

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, but the tension began to drain from her face and by that he knew her suit's medical pack had given her an injection. There was no injection, however, to counter the metallic poisons working their way through her bloodstream.

—Goddammit! she said.

—How're you feeling?

She breathed deeply. It's better.

—Still think you can't walk?

She nodded, wetted her lips. Looks like your luck doesn't extend to me. Her words were slurring.

McGlowrie was having trouble keeping it together, wanting to console her, knowing they had to get moving, realizing that it didn't make much difference what he did.

Denise touched his hand. Mac? It's okay. Whatever you have to do, it's okay.

—Fuck that, said McGlowrie.

—No, it's okay.

—No, fuck that!

She blinked, closed her eyes again, and murmured something that was too liquid a sound to make out. She rebounded a little and said, You know how much I want to try Plan B.

—It's not crazy, he said. We can make it.

She laughed weakly. You get us out of this, I'll give you a blow job that lasts for a week.

Then she passed out.

He scooted back down beside Bromley, restored flexibility to his suit, and switched on his radio.

—You were going to leave me! said Bromley as he came to his feet. He might have said more, but McGlowrie jammed the sidearm into his stomach and told him to carry Denise. He jabbed Bromley again to get him moving. Denise moaned when Bromley lifted her, but said nothing.

—Easy with her, McGlowrie said.

He was later to realize that, if he had switched on his night vision before poking his head through the hatch, he might have mistaken the man for a



machine and shot him. As it was, he nearly shot him; he meant to shoot him, stopping in mid-act, the trigger partially depressed. The man was standing on the ground below the hatch. He was slight, incredibly thin, his dark skin given complex articulation by the bones and muscles beneath. He looked to be wearing a loincloth or a pair of ragged undershorts. There was something funny about his hair, which hung in dreadlocks, but McGlowrie didn't linger over it, his attention commanded by three HKs ranged in a loose semicircle about the crusher, not five yards distant from the man . . . and yet the man seemed calm, unhurried.

Behind him, inside the compartment, Bromley asked, What's wrong?

—Quiet, said McGlowrie, wondering why the HKs didn't attack.

—What is it?

—Quiet!

The man beckoned—an oddly rickety gesture. McGlowrie pointed to the HKs and spread his hands in a display of perplexity. The man beckoned again.

It made no sense to believe that the man was controlling the HKs, but nothing about him made sense—it was impossible for anyone to survive in the Emperor unprotected, yet there he was. McGlowrie couldn't think of an alternative explanation. Bottom line, if the man wasn't exerting some control over the HKs, then they were finished, no matter what course of action they took. He told Bromley to come out and clambered down the side of the crusher. Up close, the man was even more bizarre-looking. The dreadlocks were silvery-gray and, as the light of McGlowrie's lamp played over them, displayed a rippling iridescence—so, to a lesser degree, did his skin. His face, partially obscured behind twists of hair, had a shriveled, witchy look, a match to his emaciated body. Goggles shielded his eyes. A tattered bookbag with a faded logo was draped over his shoulder—it was stuffed with a variety of the weeds that, against all odds, grew throughout the pit.

—Shit! Bromley said.

McGlowrie told him to bring Denise down.

—HKs. You see them? Bromley's voice trembled.

McGlowrie said, Yeah, I see them. Get her down here.

The man reached out his hand toward McGlowrie's shoulder—such a laborious movement, McGlowrie didn't flinch—and plucked something from his back. A gray flier that had the approximate size and evil aspect

of a dragonfly designed by H.R. Giger. Diagnostic unit. So much for the value of scans, McGlowrie thought. He'd led the HKs straight to the crusher.

—What now? he said, and gave an exaggerated shrug, signaling his helplessness, his willingness to be led.

The man averted his eyes.

The tumult of the mine came at McGlowrie from every side, yet if the Emperor were a storm, it seemed they were standing in its eye, a bubble of comparative tranquility. The HKs had not changed their position. He switched on his night vision so he could see them more clearly, then looked at the man and caught his breath. The man had become a creature of light, a solarized angel. Apparently, there was a considerable amount of metal in his skin and hair. The embers of McGlowrie's childhood religious training were briefly fanned into a flame. Miracles, he thought. What the hell!

The man took two backward steps and beckoned. Again, that rickety motion, as if his joints were dry. He took another backward step and repeated the gesture.

—Okay. McGlowrie glanced at Bromley, a few paces behind him. We're going to stick real close to this guy. Can you keep up?

Bromley breathed through his mouth, staring at the man as if mesmerized. Yeah, he said. But . . .

—Either we're going to make it or we're not, said McGlowrie. Best not to calculate the odds.

Keeping up did not prove a problem. The man walked with terrible deliberateness—terrible, because it took so long to move past the hunter-killers, McGlowrie thought he would lose his nerve and run. He expected every step to be his last and set himself to accept the bone-crushing, organ-pulping shock that an HK could deliver. He had the impression that the man was not sure-footed, that his balance was poor, his limbs weak, and he was stepping carefully so as to avoid falling. A black oblong shape on his back appeared to be a patch of some sort, positioned above his liver. Occasionally he would stop and drink from a plastic bottle and, in the process, shuffling his feet, would make a complete turn to see how they were doing; then he would go forward again at the same stiff-legged pace, his brittle precision reminding McGlowrie of a mantis picking its way along a branch.

They were five yards beyond the hunter-killers (which, all the while, had remained motionless), when the HKs abruptly broke formation and sped off in different directions, responding to signals of machine distress in various sections of the mine. McGlowrie felt like shouting but kept his exultation to himself, not wanting to give Bromley an excuse to get sloppy. Yet as they trudged through the roaring black-and-green turmoil of the Emperor, their footsteps dredging up squirts of dust, McGlowrie let himself get sloppy, permitting his mind to unclench from the mental fist that he had—for the most part—maintained since Saddler's death, and considered the glowing figure of the man who led them. Walking with that peculiar stiff gait. Head too large for his body, a disparity exaggerated by the snakes' cauldron of hair that nearly trebled its apparent size. McGlowrie made a biblical assessment of their situation: And lo, in the midst of the wasteland, friendless and surrounded by beasts, I came upon a hermit, his hair wreathed in light, and he was the wings of my liberty and the proof of my salvation.

He was jumping the gun a bit. It was a longer walk to salvation than the one they were taking, and liberty . . . liberty was light-years away. Yet it suited the moment.

And I did cleave unto him, McGlowrie said to himself. And he yielded unto me the keys of Paradise.

**B**eside the wreckage of a sixty-year old command-control unit was a laser-cut tunnel more than wide enough for all four of them to walk abreast. One of the boxcar-sized factory units attached to command-control had not been totally cannibalized and was still trying to perform its function, whirs and grinding noises issuing from the darkness of the gaping hole ripped in its facing. Within the tunnel was a hatch door, which the man opened by punching in a code. Beyond was a scrubbing room, now inoperable, where the crew had washed the poisons off their suits, and beyond that lay a corridor and about a dozen small, dimly-lit, sand-blasted rooms, most without furnishings. It was hot inside, high 80s at least, and reeked of a sour smell that McGlowrie came to associate with the man. In one of the rooms, they found a pallet. The man wandered off and McGlowrie told Bromley to keep an eye on him while he tended to Denise. He stripped off her suit, arranged her on

the pallet, covered her with a grimy sheet, and gave her a shot of antibiotics—not that it would help. He hovered over her, trying to think of something more he could do, but there was nothing. She was still lights-out, and that was a blessing. He should, he told himself, go and see about the man; but he remained kneeling beside the pallet, subdued by a weariness of spirit, staring down at her, thoughtless in his concern. Growing hungry, he rummaged through her pack, grabbed a jar of peanut butter, sat at the foot of the pallet and ate with his fingers. When he was done eating, he screwed the top back on the jar and hung his head. He slept then, but it was not a restful sleep; anxiety nibbled at the edges of his consciousness. He was still half-asleep when Bromley, stripped to a T-shirt and shorts, carrying a couple of notebooks, came in and asked what they were going to do.

—I told you to keep an eye on him, said McGlowrie.

—He's playing video games, Bromley said. He's not going anywhere.

—Video games?

—Yeah, he's got an old PC . . . an antique.

It seemed incongruous that the man, after performing a heroic act, would play games; but then he himself was the ultimate incongruity.

—His name's Peck, Bromley went on. Demetrius Peck. He was part of a team that tried to take over the mine back in '38. Not long after they stopped work on this tunnel.

—He's a terrorist. That figures.

Bromley's expression became indignant. That's not how I see him.

Anger pierced McGlowrie's mental fog. That's because you're a Goddamn terrorist, too.

—That's not how I see myself, either.

—You killed a friend of mine. You caused this. McGlowrie pointed to Denise's ankle. You tried to kill me, but you didn't have the balls. You're a terrorist. Now what else did he say?

—We're in this together, said Bromley. We should try and put aside politics . . . temporarily, anyway.

—You're fucking with me, right?

—No, I'm . . .

—Because if you're not fucking with me, you must be witless. Let me tell you what politics are. They're not something an asshole like you can use.

They're a machine for grinding people up. All you are is another hamburger. And as far as us being together, the only reason we're together is I haven't shot you yet.

Bromley refused to look away from McGlowrie's stare, and McGlowrie began to feel stupid for staring. He turned his eyes to the floor and told Bromley again to tell him what the man had said.

—He didn't *say* anything. He's retarded . . . or out of his head. Or senile. He's got to be eighty years old. Maybe older. It's all in here. Bromley flourished the notebooks. They were going to use the tunnel as a platform to launch an attack on command-control, but they died before they reached it. All except Peck. I don't guess the company was even aware of them.

—Let me see those. McGlowrie held out his hand, and Bromley gave him the notebooks. He read part of the first couple of pages, a lot of high-flown, badly spelled hogwash about "sacred duty" and "sacrifice" and "living with Gaian ideals."

—Did you read these? he asked Bromley.

—I skimmed 'em. Want me to summarize?

McGlowrie motioned him to go ahead, and Bromley sat down in the middle of the floor.

—Peck was dying when he located the tunnel. He had no means of communicating with anyone. It was over. But for some reason, the AI decided to keep him alive. Maybe it wanted to study him, maybe . . .

—Don't editorialize.

—Fine . . . whatever. The AI sent machines to break into the tunnel. Peck was terrified. He thought the HKs were coming, but the AI was making the place more livable. It started communicating with Peck, telling him it could save him by performing a medical procedure. Peck was feeling seriously shitty. Machines were buzzing all around him. He was confused, he felt like he didn't have a choice. He did the procedure. That's how he ended up with that thing in his back.

—You're talking about that patch?

—It's not a patch. Some kind of implant. He's got an implant in his neck, too. But the one on his back, that's the one the AI was talking about. It promotes liver function somehow. That's all Peck knows. He didn't really inquire about it.

—Why the hell not?

—Before the procedure, like I said, he was really sick. Then afterward, he was recovering. . . he didn't feel so hot. By the time he felt well enough to write things down, he wasn't interested anymore. Take a look in the back of the first notebook. Yeah, that one. He starts out writing something every few hours. The testimony of a dying man and all that. Messages to his friends, his girl. Then—Bromley leaned forward and turned pages for McGlowrie—after the procedure, right around here, the entries start getting weird.

Some entries were written backward, some were in spiral form; others consisted of various eccentric symbologies; others yet appeared to be collections of random shapes, or there would be a page filled with the same shape repeated over and over. The entries in the second notebook all consisted of patterns of tiny neat lines laid out in rows.

—There's a ton of notebooks, said Bromley. They're full of that stuff.

—Where is he now?

—In the back. That's where I left him, anyway.

McGlowrie heaved up to his feet, and Bromley, too, made as if to stand; but McGlowrie laid a hand on his shoulder. Stay. If she starts to wake up, give her another shot.

—We should tell her what's going on.

McGlowrie could barely keep a rein on his anger. He threw back the sheet, exposing Denise's ankle—horribly swollen, but the worst thing was the red striations beginning to spread up her leg, mapping the progress of the poisons through her veins. I don't want her feeling any pain, he said.

—All right, Bromley said.

—Can you handle it? Can you manage this one simple chore?

—I can handle it, okay!

—But you're irritated? My attitude annoys you?

—I just think we should try and be civil.

—You disgusting little bitch, said McGlowrie, his voice hoarse with strain. I cannot wait to shoot you. Is that civil enough? Does that suit your notion of decorum?

Bromley, wisely, gave no reply, and McGlowrie stepped into the corridor; then he had a thought and went back into the room.

—Don't eat all the peanut butter, he said.

**D**emetrius Peck was playing his video game on a PC that must have been old in 2038—it had a plasma screen, and the computer itself was small as a change purse. But the game itself, McGlowrie realized after watching for a while, was sophisticated for a shooter game, consisting of evolving scenarios generated, he supposed, by a cached version of an old AI program. You started the game by crossing a plain and entering an evergreen forest covering the slopes of hills that were deployed beneath a sharply upthrusting peak of ice and stone. Once in the forest, the scenarios did not repeat themselves, yet Peck was doing well, his bony hands working the joysticks with practiced dexterity, and he seemed to be thinking adroitly, anticipating the program's moves. That put in doubt Bromley's diagnosis of senility or retardation . . . though crazy was still open to question. McGlowrie tried speaking to him, calling him by name. Each time he did, Peck brought his left hand up beside his ear, made a rapid, complicated movement with the fingers, and responded with what McGlowrie at first took to be non sequiturs but came to understand were references to the game. Troll behind the fir tree, was one such. Two cloud demons, was another. His voice seemed to have been sanded down into a dry-throated burr. Altogether, the responses seemed to embody a logic, a linguistic coherence, but McGlowrie had neither the time nor the patience to begin puzzling them out; he suspected that their obliqueness was redolent of autism because of the pains Peck took to avoid meeting his eyes . . . an autism induced, perhaps, by the implants that allowed him to survive in the pit. The largest of them, the one on his lower back, was protected by a gray metallic shell that fused with the flesh, humped like a beetle's carapace; indeed, the shape of the entire implant, as much as McGlowrie could see of it, was similar to that of a beetle. Peck grew nervous when McGlowrie examined it, twisting and turning in his chair, and that limited his observations.

Judging by Peck's features, he was of African descent, but though his skin's basic color was a light brown, it had shifted toward the gray and had an oily iridescence that put McGlowrie in mind of a ham gone bad; that same iridescence manifested to an even greater degree in his dreadlocks, and both gave evidence of massive quantities of metal in his body. If Bromley was right, and he had to be close to right, Peck was almost eighty, yet his skin was unlined and showed no trace of liver-spotting. At his feet, close by the desk atop

which the PC rested, were four plastic cartons. The first contained dirt; the second, batteries, some bearing tooth marks, as if they had been vigorously chewed; the third, paper; and the fourth, weeds. At one point, Peck broke off playing, dipped a hand into the box of dirt, and rapidly ate several handfuls, followed by a gulp from a bottle of water mixed with a grayish sediment. Probably rainwater.

Apart from the PC and desk and Peck's chair, the room held a clutter of notebooks, filthy rags (McGlowrie suspected them to be items of attire), and containers of various sorts. A sorry collection, he thought, to be the sum of a man's life. In an adjoining room were metal bedframes, mattresses that had been ripped open, sticks of demolished furniture, broken appliances, more rags, and, buried under the rags, Peck's wallet. There was no ID, but there were cards bearing his name and a folded printout of an Earth First webpage bearing a group photo of young men and women gathered about Peck and captioned Demetrius and the Vandals. Peck's hair was salted with gray. Even a conservative estimate of his age at the time the photograph was taken would put him at forty. That meant he was now at least ninety-eight years old . . . if the photo had been snapped in '38 and not before. McGlowrie wouldn't have minded having a crack at the tall brunette on the end of the front row, but she was gone to dust, either dead in the pit or succumbed to natural causes. A posse of pretty young idiots, off to slay the dragon with Peck, their *sensei*, leading the charge.

In a closet, on a shelf, along with sundry other objects, McGlowrie found three surgical packages enclosed in transparent sterile envelopes. One was diminutive and broken—it had started to perform its function inside its envelope and had come apart; fine wires dangled from its underside. The others appeared to be identical to one another, each gray and about eight inches in length; oblong, but not perfectly so, sort of a streamlined scarab shape. He took one down, surprised by its lightness, nearly dropping it when, with a faint whirring, two winglike sections were extruded from its sides, extending out three inches. The bottom of the package was slightly convex, perforated by numerous tiny holes, contoured so as to fit against a smooth, curved surface. He carried it into the room where Peck had been playing games and was now curled up on the floor beside his chair, sound asleep. He knelt and compared the package to the implant in Peck's back, to the implied shape



beneath the skin. They were, to his eye, a match. He nudged Peck to wake him, and Peck sat up with a start.

—This, said McGlowrie, showing him the package. This is the same as your implant, right? The one in your back.

Peck averted his eyes, mumbling words that were too garbled to make out. McGlowrie gripped his face, holding his head still, and forced him to look directly into his eyes. Listen to me, Peck. Is this the same as your implant?

—Peck, said Peck. Pecking order. Peckish. Work on your . . .

McGlowrie gave him a shake—Peck felt as flimsy as a kite made of sticks and string—and asked his question a third time, a fourth. The fifth time he asked, Peck responded by saying, Not the same, not the same. Spare.

—You mean it's like yours, but it's a spare? The AI made you spares?

Following another bout of questioning, Peck admitted this to be the case, and McGlowrie released him. He lay back on the floor, pulling his dreadlocks across his face as if to hide from McGlowrie but quickly gave up on this and returned to playing his game.

The light, which had come slowly to McGlowrie's brain, struck home with sudden force and he grasped the implications of what they had discovered. He slumped down against the wall and said, Holy Shit! Like a man with a winning lottery ticket, making certain of every number, he turned over the details in his mind again and again, until he could accept what he had learned . . . or what had been revealed, for he felt as if he had experienced a revelation. The miracle of Peck's existence was nothing by contrast to the greater miracle it signaled, one that could affect all mankind, and it raised a fair number of questions. Why, for instance, given its "death" was a fait accompli, a suicidal compulsion programmed in, had the AI been concerned with Peck's survival? And what was he, McGlowrie, to do with the knowledge that he'd been handed? Thinking in the abstract was not McGlowrie's strong suit. Without some concrete focus, his mind tended to wander. Working was his means of processing information. He went to the closet where he'd discovered the packages. He removed his micro-tool kit and a jeweler's lens from a trouser pocket, slit the wrapping of the broken instrument package with his knife, and began taking it apart.

**V**oices issued from the room where McGlowrie had left Bromley and Denise. When he came in, Bromley was telling Denise about Peck—she had thrown off the covers and was lying on her side, sweaty and flushed. Her ankle had been set, using pieces of two chair legs and strips of cloth cut from the sheet.

—Before you start yelling at me, said Bromley, she wouldn't take the shot. She wanted to hear what was happening.

McGlowrie hunkered down next to Denise and asked how she was feeling.

—Shitty, she said.

He rubbed her shoulder. We'll deal with it.

—How do you figure? Despite his thinning hair, Bromley looked younger without the baseball cap, like a scrawny baby chick on whom someone had glued a fake beard.

—If the company hasn't sent someone by tomorrow morning, said McGlowrie, Peck has an implant that allows him to survive in the mine. I found a surgical package in the back that delivers the implant.

—You're going to use it on me? Denise didn't like the idea.

—We won't have any choice.

—Bromley says this Peck's all skin and bones . . . and retarded. I don't want to end up like that.

—The implant processes the metals that get into his system. It'll take care of your infection, and when the company gets us back to Seattle, they'll remove it before it can have a lasting effect. I'm not even sure there'd be any lasting effects once the implant doesn't have any metals to process.

—They're more likely to decide you make a great test subject, said Bromley. They'll have themselves an implant that kept this guy alive in the mine for decades. They might just provide a lot of metal for you to process.

—Then we'll have to persuade them otherwise, said McGlowrie.

Bromley pushed himself back so he could lean against the wall, his knees drawn up. People in the Movement, they've heard all about you, man. They've got this image of you. Michael McGlowrie, Master of the Machines. Know what they call you? The Emperor. Like you're the embodiment of the mine. This scary guy.

Despite himself, McGlowrie was pleased by the title. You see things differently, do you?

—It's not how I see things that's important, said Bromley. It's how the company sees them. I've overheard them talking about you at parties my mom and dad threw. All the vice-presidents and legal people my dad hangs with. That McGlowrie, they'll say. He's one of those clever types who sometimes pops his head out of the shit and scrambles up from the sewer. Sometimes they call you the Emperor, too. But it's demeaning when they say it. It's meant as humor.

—What's your point?

—Just that you don't have as much pull with the company as you think.

—You're saying they don't respect me? said McGlowrie. Ah, that comes as a heavy blow. Jesus Christ! You think I don't know that? I depend on their disrespect. I fucking cultivate it. If I didn't, I'd have been pushing up daisies back in Medford years ago.

—Because otherwise they'd perceive you to be dangerous? They might notice what a menace to their security you've become? That's ridiculous!

—Enough about me, said McGlowrie. Let's talk about Terry Saddler. Remember him?

—Stop it, said Denise.

—Hang on, McGlowrie said; then, to Bromley: You don't get it, do you? You believe . . . I don't know. What? That we're going to be pals, we're going to come though this with mutual respect?

To McGlowrie's amazement, Bromley's expression betrayed a laughable portion of hurt feelings.

McGlowrie was about to continue, when Denise began hitting him—on the neck, the top of the head, the face.

—What the fuck? he said after he had pinned her arms.

She tried to knee him with her injured leg, cried out in pain, and gave up the struggle.

—What was that about? he asked.

—I want the procedure now!

—Don't be crazy. We should wait.

—You know they're not going to come . . . not by morning. I don't want to wait. I don't want to have to listen to you two bicker when I'm feeling like this.

—It's not bick . . .

—Whatever you call it, I don't want to hear it! She made eye contact with Bromley and said, *Piss off.*

Bromley looked at her in confusion.

—*Piss off!* she repeated. Give us some privacy.

With a display of temper, Bromley got to his feet and beat a noisy retreat.

—What's going on? Denise's face tightened, sweat beaded her brow; the front of her T-shirt, too, was damp with sweat.

—Nothing. What do you mean?

—Why haven't you gotten rid of him? She gestured toward the door.

—He might be useful.

—How's that?

—Something might come up.

She took a breath, held it, released it forcefully through pursed lips. I don't love you, McGlowrie. But I depend on you to be straight with me. We've been together long enough, I know when you're not being straight.

—I love you, he said, feeling slighted.

She pooh-poohed the notion. If I said I loved you, you'd do somersaults to avoid saying it back. But there's a bond between us. You need to tell me what's going on.

—It's complicated. I haven't thought it all through.

She stared expectantly.

—Okay, he said. Peck's carrying two implants. One in his neck that's hooked into his central nervous system. It fucks up the HKs, paralyzes them when he's close by. The implant in his back delivers a powerful anti-oxidant. I'm making an assumption, but that's all it could be, really. And it's got to be the ultimate anti-oxidant, or close to it. Peck breathes the air and shows no ill effects. He drinks rainwater that would kill anybody else in a couple of days, tops. He's got no body fat, but I bet his organs are healthy. He doesn't have any food, so he uses dirt and pit-weeds and batteries for fuel. He gets these sudden cravings and starts throwing that shit down. He's a hundred years old, yet he's got the skin of a middle-aged man.

Denise said, *He eats batteries?*

—He chews on them.

—Damn. We could make millions selling that diet. She tried a grin, then a look of astonishment washed over her face. *My God!*

—You see it now? It's kind of a mindfuck, huh?

—There's got to be something . . . not right. I mean the stuff, the antioxidant, it's got to be messed up. Peck's retarded, right?

—Peck may be low energy, but he's not retarded. He's autistic. You can get him talking if you force him to concentrate. The company's got some great chemists. I assume they can make the antioxidant more user-friendly and get rid of the autism. Even if they can't, autism and eating dirt's preferable to dying of starvation.

—You can't hand this over to the company! Denise caught his arm. They'll make it disappear. They'll kill us.

—Not if we're wearing implants. Like Bromley said, they'll use us as test subjects.

—There's another implant?

He nodded, held up two fingers.

She thought it over. They'd kill us eventually.

—It buys us some time, but yeah . . . they'd be fools not to. If this is what it appears, an end to famine, affordable longevity, you give it to anyone with the ability to manufacture and distribute, they've got the world by the balls. Anyone with any juice in the ICUs who gets hold of it . . . the gangs and the churches, they've got their own chemists, and they'd kill us, too. Of course, we have to get out of here before we start worrying about that.

—We have to make a decision now. We have to decide whether to wait for the company or . . .

—There's a chance they won't send anyone.

— . . . or try Plan B.

They were both silent for a while. Then McGlowrie said, Since you're helping me decide, here's another question. Machines are motivated by self-interest as defined by their programming. The AI knew it was going to terminate itself in a few months. So where's the self-interest in keeping Peck alive beyond that time? Why would the AI leave no record of him? Why would it squirrel him away here?

—He couldn't signal?

—He wasn't motivated to make his presence known. They would have shot him. And after a while, he adjusted to life here. His autism may be by

design—the AI may have realized that if he were autistic, he'd feel secure once he developed a routine he was content with. He wouldn't be interested in breaking the routine for any reason. Want to hear a theory?

—Sure . . . yeah.

—The AI wanted the implant to get out into the world. It knew the company wouldn't disseminate the information, so it hid Peck away in hopes someone would find him, someone more inclined to disseminate it. It may have programmed Peck to investigate human incursions into the pit. I think that's likely; I doubt he'd expend the energy if he weren't. The AI has our personnel records. It's aware that we all come from the ICUs, and it assumed we'd be more likely to act against pure self-interest and try and get the information out.

—There'd have to be a design flaw in the programming for it to think that way.

—If there weren't design flaws, none of the AI's would try and beat the programming and survive.

Denise appeared to undergo a surge of discomfort, tucking her chin into her chest, her lips thinning, and McGlowrie asked if she wanted a shot.

—Not yet. This is why you're keeping Bromley alive, isn't it? You think his group might help us if we can get out.

—It's one consideration. If any are left, if they didn't all jump into the pit with him. Then there's his father. He might be able to use his influence.

—That's why I love you, McGlowrie. You're extremely competent. You think things through. And you're one lucky son-of-a-bitch, too. She put a hand to his cheek and smiled. Sometimes I think it's more luck with you than anything else.

—I thought you didn't love me.

—Did I say love? It must have been a slip. She adjusted her position and winced. I wish you'd killed him, anyway. Saddler was okay.

After a pause, McGlowrie said, Yeah. He straightened his legs, worked out the kinks. Here's another question to consider. If my theory is correct, why did the AI want to get the implant out into the world?

She gave the question a spin or two and said, Maybe it thought we'd leave it alone if we were all better off.

—It knew it was going to die. To think that way, it'd have to have developed altruism, and have the good of all machines in mind. I've never met an altruistic machine.

—I've never met an altruistic human being.

—There you are, said McGlowrie. The problem in a nutshell.

—God, it's almost like we'd have been better off not knowing about the implant.

—It's exactly like that.

He picked at the cuticle on his thumbnail. Denise stared at the ceiling. Let's do the procedure, she said.

—You don't have to decide right now.

—We don't have time to figure out what the AI had in mind. So we have to decide innocently.

—And?

—Either way, we're probably fucked. So my vote, we try and get the implant out. It's a long shot, but maybe . . . She shrugged. Who knows?

—Okay.

—Okay? That's it? You're going to let me decide?

—I think things through, you make decisions. That's how we work . . . how the relationship works.

—This isn't deciding whether we eat out or stay in. This is a pit decision—you always handle pit decisions.

—Not if we're going to decide innocently, it's not. McGlowrie came to his knees. I'll get the implant.

—Wait. Denise took his hand, showing a little fear now that the moment was at hand. What're you going to do while I'm under?

—Make a plan.

She gave his hand a squeeze. Make it a good plan, she said.

**D**enise wanted to have a look at Peck before the procedure, so McGlowrie had Bromley bring him into the room and sit him on the floor beside the pallet. Peck spent the first minute avoiding their stares, tugging his dreadlocks down to cover his face. When Denise touched his arm, he flinched away, but eventually she managed to get him to look at her. She propped herself up on

an elbow and put her face on a level with his and said, Hey! You in there? Peck lifted his hand to his ear, perhaps to perform that complex ritual gesture he had demonstrated to McGlowrie, but then he let his hand fall and said, Hello. With their heads so close together, they might have been some archetypal pairing. Comedy and Tragedy, Yin and Yang, the Past and the Future. Once Bromley had led Peck away (a struggle, as Peck was clearly excited by Denise, the first woman he had seen in years), McGlowrie gave her a shot, enough to knock her out, but when he placed the implant on her back, after it had shifted about to align itself correctly and extended the winglike sections to full spread, her eyes shot open and she went rigid, every muscle and ligament tensed. He was initially afraid that she had woken up but then understood that the implant had paralyzed her. Before long, he smelled her flesh burning as the implant cauterized the incision that had been opened beneath its gray beetle shape.

In the back room, Bromley was playing Peck's video game. Peck lay on the floor beside him, a hand resting on the plastic carton filled with weeds, chewing placidly, his eyes half-shut. McGlowrie watched them for a time, paced the length of the corridor a time or two, then stationed himself by the outer hatch. He could hear a murmurous roaring from outside. It was hours until morning and he could see nothing through the rectangular port in the hatch aside from flashes of light. He sat down with his back to the wall and picked at the Emperor logo on his T-shirt. He remembered looking up the Tarot card it was copied from, discovering that it represented structure, order and regulation. In situations that are already overcontrolled, the text had read, the Emperor suggests the confining effect of those constraints. He can also stand for an individual father or archetypal Father in his role as guide, protector, and provider.

In McGlowrie's estimation, that pretty much summed up their situation as it related to the company, the world, and the universe. However you redefined yourself, you were ever under the control of a stern little man on a throne, be it your conscience or your king.

He closed his eyes, released a breath, and then set about contriving two plans. The first was simple and eminently practical, yet it bothered him that he would consider it. Kill Bromley and Peck. And Denise. One way or another, she was doomed. This way he could make it painless for her. Oblit-



erate all evidence of Peck's survival, lose the implants, and wait to be rescued. Foolproof. The second plan was more complex, contained myriad variables, and smacked of fantasy.

Bordering the Emperor, beyond the land belonging to the company, were several towns, once small, now grown sufficiently large to accommodate the black market in minerals that had sprung up around the mine. Two of the towns, Ghost Creek and Allamance, were within easy reach, assuming they were able to escape the pit, and there was a man in Ghost Creek, Rocky Alkhazoff, with whom McGlowrie had developed a financial relationship. Assuming they were quick and lucky, Alkhazoff could move them down into the Lower Forty-Eight via the black market's underground systems. Another option would be the wilderness area west of Ghost Creek, where black marketeers kept hideouts and caches of minerals, where he might be able to trade on his skill with machines; but he was loath to go that route with Denise injured and Peck in tow. One way or another, at that point it became impossible to predict or analyze the variables, though if they could make it to the last stage, McGlowrie knew someone who might be able to protect them.

He had grown up in an ICU which occupied an area south of Trenton known as Jack Raggs, named for a ganglord who had welded together a coalition called the American Kings, consisting of the Irish and Russian mobs, street gangs, and various splinter groups that had controlled a significant portion of the Northeastern Corridor. As a kid, running the streets, doing errands for the Kings, McGlowrie had frequently been put at cross-purposes with Tony Teague, a boy his own age. They'd had more than a few physical confrontations, which neither of them had dominated, and wound up friends. They were on the verge of being jumped into the Kings, when it was revealed that Tony's name was Antonio, not Anthony as had been supposed, and his mother, long since dead, had been half-Cuban, thus disqualifying him for initiation. Because of his failure to reveal his heritage in a timely fashion, Tony was judged untrustworthy and forced to flee for his life. McGlowrie had helped him escape, thus placing himself in equal jeopardy and setting him on a path that led to Alaska, while Tony had gone south to Miami, where mixed bloods were acceptable, subsequently rising to the position of warlord with a powerful militant charismatic church, *La Fortaleza* (the Fortress). McGlowrie couldn't be certain whether or not the coin of friendship had

devalued in the years that followed—he'd only had intermittent contact with Tony—but he believed it would buy him the time to see how things stood. That plan had, however, none of the emotional consequences of his first plan. Perhaps he had spent too long in the company of machines, learning their ways, not to consider murder, when necessary, as purely utilitarian, an act of self-preservation (it had been thirty years, after all, since he last acted for any other reason), and too long in Denise's company to do the deed, even in the interests of mercy. He decided it would be safest to prepare for both eventualities and began customizing one of the remotes that controlled suit function.

Morning was breaking by the time he finished work on the remote. It was going to be a clear day in the Emperor, as clear a day as ever there was—gray and drizzly, with a cover of roiling, dirty clouds, the lower reaches of the pit swept by gusts of wind-driven particulates. McGlowrie popped a stimulant and stared out the port. Through the shifting haze he made out a yellow spew of sulphur from a smelter far across the pit. A cloud of glittering particles sailed past and, turning as one, arrowed off westward. A smallish herd of bedlike carriers loped past on double-jointed legs, loaded with lumps of gray metal (platinum, perhaps), and, in their wake, a single hunter-killer, its suspicions aroused by some electronic cue. The mine floor would have resembled an anthill if he could have seen it clearly; however, the drifting curtains of haze hid much of the activity and caused it to seem peaceful, like a foggy morning on another planet, a wilderness where machines took the place of cheetahs and antelopes and elephants. The wind lessened and the haze grew more dense. A mobile conveyor, one of the most ancient machines in the pit, with several dozen major parts grafted onto its body, its belt raised high and held vertically to the ground, emerged from the murk and then paused to allow the passage of a herd of boar-sized drillers on their way to exploit a mineral vein that required a specific style of excavation.

—Hey! said Bromley at his back. I want to talk to you.

McGlowrie turned and Bromley's tone grew less peremptory. You're not doing anything, right? he asked. It's okay to talk?

—Sure. McGlowrie forced himself to appear companionable and sat down against the wall, wanting Bromley to feel in charge.

Bromley peered through the port. Can't see much with this rain.

—When the rain stops, we get hurricane-force winds. You wouldn't want to see what happens then. Not from this perspective.

Bromley grunted. Things get stirred up, do they?

—Yeah. Stirred up.

Bromley rubbed the port glass, trying to wipe it clean, but the dirt was on the outside. You said you were stranded out here before.

—Uh-huh. Three days.

—What was that like? I mean, what happened?

—I was doing an inspection. We used to have these two-man vehicles we used for quick trips. Fact is, the one I was out in that time, that was the last of them. I couldn't get the company to fund a replacement. They didn't think the inspections were important.

We got caught in a rockslide. The vehicle was totaled. Morse, the guy with me, he was killed. My faceplate was breached. I thought I was going to die. I patched the faceplate, but the shit I'd breathed in was killing me. I wandered around for a while, delirious, and then I hid under an excavator and passed out. There was heavy HK activity in another part of the pit—one of those humongous conveyors went down. If it hadn't, I'd have been history.

—You said you were lucky, but . . . damn!

—Blessed is more like it, said McGlowrie. Chosen of God and the machines. Is this what you wanted to talk about?

—I thought your experience . . . maybe there'd be something there that would help us get out of this.

—Don't worry. I'm working on it.

—You're talking about Plan B?

—I'll fill you in when it's time.

Bromley glanced out the port again. I'm not an idiot, you know.

McGlowrie kept his face neutral.

—I understand what we've got here, said Bromley. With Peck, I mean.

But you're not an idiot, thought McGlowrie. Right.

—I understand the problem he creates for you and Denise, Bromley said, injecting the words with a mixture of earnestness and sincerity. You're in trouble with the company, with just about everyone. Between a rock and a hard place. As I see it, there's only one refuge for you and Denise. And that's the Movement.

—Your group?

—No, my group's just a cell. And . . . I guess they're gone.

—Oh, they're gone. They didn't have a fucking prayer.

—Like with Saddler, huh?

McGlowrie suspected that Bromley was intentionally probing the wound, testing him, albeit none too subtly. So tell me who these people are, he said. These people I can trust.

—No, no, no! Not yet. Not until we work some things out.

McGlowrie could see that Bromley believed he had the upper hand, that McGlowrie needed what he had to offer. Pacing back and forth, his gestures grew broad and inclusive—he was prepared to be generous now he thought he was in a good position. McGlowrie doubted that he himself had ever been so callow. In Jack Raggs, callow didn't get you very far.

—I will tell you they're committed to the cause, said Bromley. And they won't hold it against you that you worked for the company. They understand how it is with people coming out of the ICUs.

—They do, huh? said McGlowrie. That's a relief.

Bromley didn't seem to have heard. They know how bad things are, he said. They haven't buried their heads in the sand. They realize if the problems of the ICUs aren't solved, everybody's problems are going to get worse. That's why Peck . . . It's amazing. A miracle. They'll do what's necessary to get the benefits out to the people who need it. You can count on them.

—They have the capability? Manufacturing? Distribution?

—Oh yeah! They're well funded, and they have good tech people. They provided us with those fliers we . . . Bromley broke it off. Look, man. I'm really sorry about Saddler.

—Casualty of war.

Bromley cast him a dubious glance.

—I'm not going to deny that what happened didn't make me want to break your neck, said McGlowrie. If you wanted to control the rover, that wasn't how to go about it.

—I'm aware of that now, but . . .

—Didn't you or your tech people . . . didn't they know what would happen once the rover was breached?

—They had no way of knowing!

—They should have known. They should have been able to figure it fucking out! McGlowrie held up his hands, palms outward. All right. Saddler's dead, your friends are dead. What's done is done. He closed his eyes for a second. We've got to start moving forward.

—That's what I've been telling you.

—Yeah. Yeah, you have.

—So what're you thinking? We can't sit here and wait for the company. You know what happens then.

McGlowrie cocked an eye toward Bromley, as if debating his worth; then he stood. Put on your gear. And drag Peck away from whatever he's up to.

—What are we doing?

—We're going hunting.

**W**ith Peck along to keep off the hunter-killers, things went without incident as they made their way across the pit, but McGlowrie knew better than to feel secure. There was a narrow corridor between an oval leaching pond—a big one the size of a small lake—and the pit wall, through which ore carriers moving north to the railhead were likely to pass, and they took up a position close by the pond, kneeling behind some loose rubble. Bromley asked several questions. McGlowrie gave curt answers and told him to pay attention to Peck, who kept trying to walk away, probably wanting to return to his video game and his box of dirt. After twenty-five minutes, a small herd of carriers emerged from the haze, showing first as movement, then the boulders of grayish-black uranium ore atop their beds becoming visible, and then their legs working in that strange double-jointed, herky-jerky gait—like headless Martian ponies. McGlowrie pointed his projector but at the last moment saw that they were too wide to fit inside Peck's tunnel and let them high-step past. Waiting grew long. He shut down Bromley's attempts at conversation and watched long-legged spiders skitter across the surface of the pond, their mesh feet leaving waffle patterns on the surface, a doughlike, silvery goo edged by lacy black foam. Once the men were surrounded by a swarm of the dragonfly-shaped diagnostic units, several of which identified them as spare parts. The clouds overhead thickened; the light dimmed to an ashen dusk. Hunter-killers gathered, prevented from close approach by Peck's implant,

sitting motionless at a range of five yards. Their silhouettes alternately blurred and sharpened as the wind shifted, driving clouds of particulates. McGlowrie began to stare at things without seeing them, to let his mind wander. He watched raindrops impact the surface of the leaching pond. After another half hour, a herd of carriers loaded with molybdenum approached from the south, and these were of an appropriate size. McGlowrie stopped one in mid-stride with a jolt from his projector, scrambled atop it, and cut open its brain case with a torch. The carrier woke while he was adjusting its systems controls—he gave it a second jolt and kept working, linking his suit’s computer to the carrier’s brain, reprogramming it by typing in the changes on his keypad. When he had done, he hopped down off the carrier and, using the remote he had customized earlier that morning, caused the carrier to release its clamps and dump the molybdenum, then to canter back and forth, generally putting it through its paces. He beckoned to Bromley, who came forward, herding Peck ahead of him, and asked what he planned to do with the carrier.

—Mount up, said McGlowrie.

Even through his dusty faceplate, Bromley’s bewilderment was evident. This is your plan? he said. You want us to ride this thing out?

—Right to the rim. McGlowrie boosted himself up onto the bed. With Peck on board, it should be a snap.

They hauled a reluctant Peck onto the bed, and, after Bromley climbed on, McGlowrie punched the remote and the carrier set forth at a trot so bumpy it nearly threw them off. Peck panicked, kicked and flailed his arms, but Bromley hung on to him. McGlowrie stopped the carrier and jumped down. Not the smoothest ride, he said. Once I modify the clamps, it’ll get us there.

The carrier had brought them to within six feet of one of the HKs—seven in all—that had gathered while McGlowrie worked. They had become such icons of fear over the years, even now, inert, they frightened him. The wind gusted; a gauzy curtain thickened and faded, behind which the HKs appeared to shift ever so slightly.

—Let’s go, said Bromley.

—I might want to try reprogramming the HKs, said McGlowrie.

—What?

—I said I might want to reprogram the HKs.

—I wouldn't do that, man. You should think it over.

—Why the fuck do you suppose I'm hesitating?

—They could have a booster system, like the ones security robots have. Kicks in when the casing is breached, or when it senses heat . . . whatever. That would neutralize Peck's implant.

—Have you heard something to that effect?

—No, but it would make sense.

—Up top, maybe. Down in here? I doubt it.

Moving closer to the HK, McGlowrie felt as if his legs had taken over for his brain. He imagined he could feel it vibrating, straining toward him. With its arms folded, motionless, it looked innocuous: a harmless oblong of rusted metal on treads, except for one of its arms—a recent replacement—that showed only the odd bacon-colored fleck. He could reach out and touch it. More to the point, it could reach out and touch him.

—Come on! said Bromley. Don't screw around with it!

—We could use some backup. A couple of HKs . . . that'd be good backup.

—We've got Peck.

—Peck might not make it.

—Don't! said Bromley as, holding his breath, McGlowrie laid a hand on the HK's back. A faint tremor passed through his palm, and he waited to be torn apart. After a five second count had elapsed, he began cutting into the HK's carapace. He had intended to modify the programming of several machines, but he dropped his torch twice, his hands trembled, and he had difficulty in establishing a computer link. Once he had a link, he made frequent typing errors. After twenty minutes, he was satisfied that he had complete control over the HK and that it would shut down when it read his suit at a distance of five yards, overriding the linkage with Peck's implant. He felt drained, weak from the tension, and decided not to push his luck. The other HKs had undergone significant repairs; curiously shaped instrument packages bulged their sides, and he didn't know what surprises he might find beneath the casing. Knees wobbly, he backed away from the HK and kept backing until he fetched up against the carrier.

Bromley had kept quiet throughout, caught up in the moment, but now he exploded. What the fuck were you thinking? You had no right! You put us all at risk!

McGlowrie had a twinge of anger, but anger was suppressed by a larger sense of accomplishment, and he ignored Bromley's demands for a response, for an apology, for a do-over. It wasn't clear what he was demanding, probably just blowing off steam, but McGlowrie thought that Bromley might be entitled to throw a fit, because things weren't going to improve for him any time soon.

**M**cGlowrie checked in on Denise. She was still unconscious, but the uppermost section of the surgical package, including the winged extensions, had fallen away, and the implant was fully sealed, embedded in her back, surrounded by puckered, inflamed skin. The paralysis had worn off, and she appeared to be sleeping peacefully. The way she was lying, on her belly, her face turned to the side, her arms arranged loosely above her head—the pose touched something in him. And then he understood that it wasn't the pose that affected him, it wasn't its poignant relation to one of Gustav Klimt's nudes or some other work of art. Call it an habituation or a dependency, call it the thin shadow of love, all the love he was capable of . . . Whatever, he now knew, if he had not known before, any plan that involved hurting her was not on the cards. The chance he had taken with the HKs was not one he would have taken if she hadn't been in the picture, and he thought this was not entirely born of his desire to protect her but had the emotional temperature of a decision they would have made together. Thinking that discomfited him in a way he couldn't explain, and he wondered whether or not it was true.

He covered Denise with Peck's thin gray sheet and went to work. He had to put up with Bromley's assistance for the first half hour, then thought of something else for him to do and set him to making up survival packs, food, water, and so forth, for all four of them. He spent the next two hours customizing the clamps on the carrier's bed, cutting them down so they conformed to the human body. Memories unrelated to anything rose in him like bubbles in a cooler. When he went to check on Denise again, he found her awake, propped on an elbow. Dropping to a knee by the pallet, he asked how she was feeling, and she said, Alive. Kind of surprised to be alive.



—These machine procedures are pretty safe. He picked up the half of the package that had fallen away from her back; what was left of the wing extensions was wafer-thin, almost weightless.

—I wasn't talking about the procedure, I was talking about you. She held his eyes for a second or two and said, I may not be a rocket scientist, but I can add and subtract just fine. Why didn't you kill me? It was the safe play.

—If you thought I was going to kill you, he said, why were you so eager to have the procedure?

Her chin quivered. I wanted to get it over with. Now answer my question.

Rather than tell her, than admitting to weakness, he reacted defensively and said, I can't explain it to myself. How am I going to explain it to you?

—I'm not asking for in-depth, McGlowrie. I don't need for you to analyze your toilet training. Just give me superficial.

He looked down at his hands. I figured we're in this together.

—Yeah? And?

He shrugged. You said you wanted superficial.

—God, you're an asshole.

—An asshole you can trust.

—How's that? Because you came down on my side this time, I'm supposed to trust you? You thought about killing me. Don't try and tell me you didn't.

—Seems like you're back to normal. He got to his feet, feeling heavy in the legs.

—You expect me to get all misty about you sparing my life? Next time I might not be so lucky. Next time your balance sheet might say, She's got to go. I know how bad that would make you feel. But you'd get through it somehow.

He started to say, It's not like that, then thought maybe it *was* like that, and then he wanted to ask, Didn't all these years together count for something in her mind, but answered his own question. In the end, all he said was, We'll leave in an hour. Try and be ready.

Bromley made the next hour miserable with his pestering, with his insistence on helping, with his talk . . . especially with his talk. As McGlowrie finished work on the carrier, Bromley launched into a monologue that roughly defined the insecurities fueling his display of nerves.

—I've been thinking I should give you contact information . . . for the Movement. But I can't convince myself to trust you. He appeared to be

waiting for McGlowrie to take a stab at convincing him. When McGlowrie remained silent, he said, I want to trust you. If anything happens to me and you can't contact them . . . I don't know what you're going to do. Another expectant pause, after which he went on, I realize you're resourceful. God knows, you've had to be. I suppose you have your own contacts. People you can turn to. But you've got to question the motivation that sort of person's going to bring to the table. The greed, the reflex of greed . . . I won't deny that mechanism's in everyone, but people in the Movement, they're less motivated by greed than anyone you're likely to know.

Caught partway between anger and amusement, McGlowrie made an inadvertent noise. Bromley asked if he wanted to say something. Nah, said McGlowrie, suspecting that were he to speak, he might not stop until his fingers were pried from Bromley's throat. It was astounding, he thought, that his peers hadn't topped him off years ago . . . or perhaps these displays of condescension were limited to dialogues with the formerly disenfranchised.

Bromley kept on in this conversational vein, and, when work on the carrier was done, pretending (at least McGlowrie assumed it a pretense) to have been persuaded by some aspect of McGlowrie's behavior, he gave him a piece of paper upon which was written the contact information that he had thus far withheld, repeating that if anything were to happen to him, he wanted McGlowrie and Denise to have a chance. McGlowrie accepted the paper. He had no intention of using the information—the Movement, as testified to by Bromley, seemed an assortment of laughable incompetents—but he recognized this entire business . . . to be a negotiation on Bromley's part, an attempt to guarantee his safety by making a show of faith, and McGlowrie was inclined to humor him. Needing a moment to focus, he sent Bromley to get Peck and sat with his legs dangling off the edge of the carrier. It was going to be a rough ride. If the carrier didn't break their bones, then there were the HKs. He had a vivid mental image of his severed limbs and torso neatly stacked, his head atop them, waiting for the recyclers. Snuffers swarmed like gnats, curious about the blood. His moment alone wasn't helping him focus, so he hopped down off the carrier and went to collect Denise.

**O**ut in the pit, next to the hatch, under a hard rain, they secured Peck to the center of the carrier bed. He was wrapped in rags and scraps of insulation so the clamps wouldn't cut into him when he struggled, and he twisted his head back and forth, an anguished expression on his bony face, wretched as a demon with his snakes of iridescent gray hair. Bromley and McGlowrie occupied the outside positions on the bed, making a sandwich of Peck and Denise. Once Denise and Bromley were locked in place, lying on their backs, arms and legs in their hardened suits resembling sausage links, McGlowrie set about securing himself. He maintained a degree of flexibility in his suit, allowing him to hold his sidearm and to direct the carrier by typing in instructions on his forearm keypad. Lying on his right side enabled him to see both ahead and behind, yet the clamps—though he had cut them to conform to that posture—did not hold him as tightly as they did the others. The spare implant was safely tucked away in a thigh pouch. He adjusted his audio, reducing the roaring to a background whisper, so he could hear sounds closer at hand and, after running down his checklist a final time, started them up the pit wall.

Under McGlowrie's control, the carrier moved at half-speed and in an ungainly fashion, like a beetle afflicted with the staggers. Thanks to the laggardly pace, the ride was smoother than he had expected, the carrier's legs—its clawed hands, rather—reaching for cracks, hitching itself along, conveying to the riders a succession of swaying motions, each followed by a mild jolt. He had hoped to be quicker. Plan B would have failed if Peck hadn't been with them; the HKs, not the most agile of climbers, would have overtaken them before they climbed a tenth of the way out. Eleven HKs, including the machine he had reprogrammed, their bodies flipped so their treads were up, using their arms to climb, trailed behind the carrier, keeping an unvarying five-yard gap between them. McGlowrie pictured them as roaches inching along, scaling a gray kitchen wall. The carrier traversed a diagonal shelf that brought them to a point about fifty yards west of the hatch, at a height of seventy feet. They were passing into a region of dingy clouds, into thicker volumes of dust. Peck's eyes were shut tight, his every muscle tensed. Denise's eyes, too, were closed, but her face, what he could see of it through the rain spatter and smears of dust on her faceplate, betrayed no strain. Bromley kept lifting his head, trying to keep the HKs in view. For his part,

McGlowrie felt relieved that they were on their way, though he doubted they would come to a good end. He glanced back and, through drifts of dust, made out a dark blue object, roughly bullet-shaped, pulled up beside the hatch. He had only a glimpse before the clouds sealed them off, but he was certain it had been a security vehicle. Their would-be rescuers had gone straight for the tunnel. The last time McGlowrie had been stranded in the pit, they hadn't been so efficient. It was conceivable they had left a trail for the vehicle to follow, or a signal had been sent, perhaps an alarm tripped during their occupation of the tunnel. Which might mean the company knew about the implant. If that were the case, why would they leave Peck alive? Peck was a loose end, but McGlowrie concluded that the company was too arrogant to worry about loose ends, particularly those protected by a trillion machines and a deadly environment. He was not, he decided, going to be able to settle the question now, what with the jolting of the carrier and the HKs in pursuit; but the potential of company involvement added a new variable, one he would have to think about before they reached Ghost Creek.

At two hundred feet, the carrier broke free of clouds into a zone of relative clarity and lighter precipitation. As they rounded a bend in the pit wall, McGlowrie saw that, less than a quarter-mile ahead, one of the old gods of the pit was being slaughtered: a mobile excavator, its cranelike upper arm locked onto the rim several hundred feet above, its base hidden from sight, creeping along on treads as tall as a five-story building. Thousands of hunter-killers swarmed over its surfaces, cutting away parts that fell into the roiling clouds below, a steady rain of debris. It was difficult to distinguish predators from prey, for both were coated in rust; but every square foot of the excavator appeared agitated, seething, and McGlowrie spotted the pinprick flares of plasma torches at intervals along its reach.

He turned the carrier aside from the excavator, not wishing to test whether Peck's neck implant would prove effective against so many HKs, and chose a route to the rim that sent them backtracking for twenty yards then angled sharply upward. At three hundred and seventy feet, he spotted a rock chimney that led up to the rim. He sent the HK he had reprogrammed to a remove and began picking off those still in pursuit, blowing eight off the wall (two had gone off to join the happy throng engaged in dismembering the excavator). They fell away into the clouds, their arms flailing. He climbed the

chimney at a good clip—he'd grown more proficient at controlling the carrier—and paused it in a notch below the rim, where he could keep the bed on a relatively even keel. Bromley started to speak, but McGlowrie shushed him. Denise made eye contact. He gave her a wink, which she did not return. Peck looked to be in a catatonic state. The uppermost reaches of the pit were flocked by countless dysfunctional fliers, milling about to no purpose and preyed upon by aggregate creatures, the largest consisting of several dozen fliers that had linked together in a radical attempt at self-repair. They flew poorly, jittering about, as on the choppy surface of a lake, bobbling among the swarms, seeking to bond with other fliers, destroying most with clumsy misapplications of energy, occasionally succeeding in adding a new component. Eventually they would grow too heavy for flight and drop like stones to the pit floor.

—Let's go, said Bromley. What are you waiting for?

—The AI might divert more HKs to track us. I'd rather handle them here. Peck's implants may not work once we get beyond the rim.

—Why's that? They've held up this far.

—Because that's how the AIs design things. HKs and carriers are the only machines allowed topside. The rest shut down, they move one inch out of the pit.

—If you're right about the AI, about it wanting to get the other implant out, said Denise, you have to assume Peck's stuff is designed to work topside.

—I'd rather not assume anything, said McGlowrie.

He debated whether to release the clamp that held Bromley to the carrier. The boy had gone well past being a pain in the ass. He decided Bromley's window of potential usefulness was still open . . . though it was closing fast. There was, however, no longer any need to humor him.

—You ever think there's something weird about your luck? Denise asked.

McGlowrie laughed, watching the clouds below. Depends what you mean by *weird*.

—The first time you're stranded, a conveyor breaks down and draws off the HKs. Now it's an excavator.

—Machines are always breaking down.

—Not the big ones. And look how many times you've lucked out just on this trip. In the cab, with Saddler. Then there's the HK by the ore crusher, and the . . .

—Don't forget the one that attacked us.

—I thought about that. It was damaged—maybe the damage caused it not to react in the right way to you.

—So you're saying . . . what?

—Maybe when you were stranded years ago, when you were unconscious, maybe an AI did something to you. Something like it did to Peck.

—You know, you're right, said McGlowrie. It tuned up my pecker, removed my brain and replaced it with a radio. I'm a new fucking man.

—I'm serious.

—The company had me thoroughly checked out, for Christ's sake.

—They could have missed something.

—Can we postpone this conversation until we're out of danger? Please?

Trying to calm himself, he squinted upward through the rain at the churning clouds above the Emperor, and at the rim little more than an arm's length away.

—You're too lucky, she said sullenly, then said no more.

When no further HKs came after them, he keyed in an instruction and directed the carrier to climb to the edge of the rim, so he could see what lay ahead—an apocalyptic plain, gray rock and patches of brown lichen, here and there a twisted tree, snowpeaks distant as fairy tales, and—out of sight for the moment—sick HKs wandering. The ones that remained topside were those that had been broken in some way. Bromley spoke again, and McGlowrie switched off his audio. He eased the carrier onto level ground, keyed in a destination—the railhead that lay equidistant from Ghost Creek and Allamance—and let the machine's original programming take over, setting a rapid pace over the uneven ground that caused Peck to wake and throw himself about, his mouth gaping in silent outcry. They negotiated a narrow peninsular area between canyons, one that permitted them to look down into the pit on both sides, into a dusty gray boil that obscured a million violences. Within minutes they had put the Emperor behind them, its presence marked by a smoky disturbance against the low clouds. McGlowrie felt an indefinite sense of loss and speculated as to what would become of them should they survive.

Where would they go? And what work would they find? The carrier high-stepped along, its double-jointed legs pumping, interrupting his view of the surround. Seen at jolting intervals, the plain acquired the surreal aspect of a

huge abandoned chessboard, gray and brown squares with wrecks scattered about like deformed mechanical pawns, memorializing a disastrous endgame.

They traveled west-southwest for twenty minutes, covering a third of the mileage to Ghost Creek; the rain slackened to a fitful drizzle. McGlowrie thought the company must have had patrols out recently to exterminate the stray HK population, because he hadn't seen a one. Usually they were all over, weaving on busted treads, going in circles, attacking one another. Thus far, everything had broken their way, and he thought about what Denise had said, that he was too lucky. Shortly after thinking this, as if by acknowledging luck he had broken the spell that sustained it, he spotted four HKs sweeping toward them from the south and felt a cold thrill across his belly. These machines did not act dysfunctional and they were coming full-speed. Whenever they hit an obstruction or a low rise, they sailed up into the air, stabilized themselves in mid-flight, and made perfect landings on their treads, seeming to bound across the plain like antelopes. The jolting of the bed prevented him from firing—at this distance he had no chance of hitting them, anyway. He directed the HK he had reprogrammed to attack the quickest of the four, but the other three continued their pursuit. Whether or not Peck's implants were working, the three HKs did not violate the five-yard limit and fell in behind the carrier, behavior that signaled they were confused as to the appropriateness of their prey. Chaos erupted on the carrier bed. Denise had restored the flexibility to her suit and was tugging at her gun. Bromley screamed and pried at the clamp imprisoning him; Peck thrashed even more violently. Now that the HKs were near to hand, McGlowrie could see that they were impaired. The one on the left had only half a complement of armor; the other two had multiple burn spots on their casings, usually denoting a failed repair.

He shouted at Denise, telling her to take the one on the right, and opened fire on the HK to his left; he shifted his aim to the remaining HK, the most damaged of the three, as it sped closer and swiped at the carrier with an arm. The others kept their distance, proving that Peck's implant was still effective—if it hadn't been, they would have joined the badly damaged one in its attack. Denise and McGlowrie fired and fired, sidearms chattering, set on automatic, a noise that drowned out the carrier's rattle. After what must have been no more than a few seconds, yet seemed longer, the HKs were turned aside, their casings pierced by explosive rounds. McGlowrie watched them

wobbling across the plain, growing smaller and smaller, until he was certain they were disabled. The reprogrammed HK did not return, and McGlowrie was forced to accept that they had lost an ally. He began to relax. Then Denise cried out, Stop! You have to stop! She pointed at Peck, who had passed out. His right calf had been savaged in the attack, the muscles torn loose from the bone, and he was bleeding heavily. McGlowrie shut down the carrier and released Denise's clamp. She fumbled out her medi-kit and began working on Peck's leg.

—Let me up, said Bromley.

—There's no reason, McGlowrie said, coming to one knee.

—I've got to piss.

—I should have said, *I* don't have any reason to let you up.

—Come on, man! Don't . . .

McGlowrie switched off Bromley's radio.

—You should let him up, said Denise, intent upon Peck's leg.

—Little while ago you were begging me to kill him. Now you're making nice?

She did not respond, working feverishly to stem the bleeding.

A rust-brown fleck moved in the distance.

—Hurry it along, he said.

—I'm hurrying.

Half a minute passed, and he made out a second brownish fleck, closing from the southwest.

—Actually, he said, maybe we should get rid of them both.

She glanced up at him.

—We've got company, he said.

—Shit! She turned again to Peck's leg.

—We've got your implant. We don't need Peck . . . or Bromley.

—We'll be all right. Give me a few seconds.

She bent to her task, applying a pressure bandage. McGlowrie waited, waited, and saw a third reddish-brown spot moving toward them. None of the machines looked to be traveling at great speed, but he was worried nonetheless. They were very near the point where he would have to decide between Ghost Creek and Allamance. He didn't feel up to making any more decisions, but the appearance of the security vehicle back in the pit had caused



him to recalibrate his judgment, to wonder how much he could trust his contacts in Ghost Creek. If the company was looking for them, that would put undue pressure on his relationship with Rocky Alkhazoff . . . and Rocky was not one to rock the boat. Allamance was an unknown quantity. If it was him alone, he thought, he'd try the wilderness area west of Ghost Creek. But with Denise injured, he had no recourse except to get her somewhere she could receive attention.

A fourth speck.

—That's it, McGlowrie said. We're dumping them.

—What's the point?

McGlowrie tried to pull Denise away, but she resisted. What the hell's wrong with you? he said.

—I'm almost done! There! It's finished . . . all right? She got to her knees, favoring her wounded leg, and went face-to-face with McGlowrie. We might need Bromley's contacts.

—I've got his contacts.

—It's not the same if he's dead. He can vouch for us.

—You think you can count on him?

Silence; through his helmet he could hear the wind and a faint roaring.

—I don't know, she said. It's an option. Why eliminate it?

—Because his contacts are idiots! They don't know enough to wipe themselves. If they did, they wouldn't have sent people into the pit. Because . . .

McGlowrie broke off, feeling pressure against the neck of his suit, and realized that Denise had jammed the barrel of her weapon against his throat. He considered taking a chance—with a wounded ankle, her balance would be shaky; but before he could complete his deliberation, she had secured his sidearm, his projector, and the control, and had backed away.

—Because he killed Saddler, he said.

She told him to get down off the carrier; he hesitated, and she chambered a round.

—I'm going, he said.

He jumped down from the carrier and moved away from it, following her instructions. He scanned the plain. The reddish-brown flecks were no longer visible, but that didn't mean much. You're telling me you trust Bromley? he asked. You trust him more than me?

—I'm trusting myself, she said.

—You won't make it without me.

She said nothing, training the gun on him.

—Goddamn it, Denise!

—No, she said. With you, I'm dead. Sooner or later, you'll make one of those it's-her-or-me decisions. Or else your luck will get me. I don't trust your luck.

—You're wrong.

—I've gone as far as I can with you.

—You're fucking wrong! About the luck . . . about everything. You don't understand what's been going on with me.

—Oh yeah! I know all about it, she said. You love me! You'd die for me, you love me so much.

—Yeah, well. That would appear to be the case.

—I'm sorry, she said.

—*Sorry* doesn't do much for me.

—It's all I've got.

She must have inadvertently switched on Bromley's radio, because he blurted out a few words, something about . . . *acting precipitately* . . . and then went silent.

—You don't even know how to work the remote, McGlowrie said.

—I'll figure it out.

—Listen. The choppers must have done an extermination in the last day or two. There aren't near as many HKs out here as I figured on. It looks like they got rid of the quick ones. But we've got four on our ass right now. And we can expect more. They're all fucked up, it looks like. I'd say it's fifty-fifty we can outrun them to Ghost Creek. That's if we give them Bromley and Peck to play with. But if I'm not there, if the controls fuck up . . . and they might, you know, because I had to work way too fast on them, and I'm not sure of the programming. If that happens, you're dead.

—I can do repairs.

—As fast as me? Not hardly.

—'Bye, Mac, she said.

—Wait . . . Denise! At least leave me a gun!

—I can't let you live, she said. You're too damn lucky.

Though he couldn't see her face, he knew there were tears, and he also knew that she would suppress those tears.

—You think I'll come after you? he said. I swear I won't!

—You might make it, anyway. Lucky son of a bitch like you.

Her gun hand had been trembling; now it steadied and he waited for her to fire.

—Might as well do it, he said.

—Good-bye.

He felt no sense of relief at having survived the moment. Gripped by anger and despair, he watched the carrier as it pranced across the desolate plain, until its human cargo was no longer visible, and then set forth walking briskly into the west, heading for an old glacial scarp—a long incline of gray stone etched with cracks and crevices that might, he hoped, offer him a place to hide. Though it left him exposed to view, he wasn't that worried about a visual sighting from a chopper. His suit would keep him alive for days, but he would be fortunate to survive more than an hour unless he could find cover. It was getting on twilight, and he didn't want to travel after dark, not with defective night vision. Most of the damaged HKs would follow the carrier, attracted by the larger target, but at least one was bound to follow him. He glanced behind him, saw nothing. It could be circling, coming at him from his flanks. He picked up the pace.

It was amazing, or maybe it wasn't, maybe it was proof of the shallowness of his emotions . . . yet it seemed amazing how quickly his anger at Denise dissipated. He supposed this was because he knew she was a creature of her place and time, unable to escape her origins, unable to trust. And maybe he wasn't trustworthy. As he walked, he felt an accumulating sense of loss that gave evidence of deeper feelings, but he knew better than to assign them too much weight; he might be conning himself. That's why the world was like it was. Now that God had slunk off into the cave of history and love had been debunked as a vestigial form of evolutionary biology and the consolations of family had been supplanted by technological gratifications and drugs, there was nothing to believe in except power. The implant in his thigh pocket might change things, but he doubted that even something so miraculous could change human nature. People would find a way to screw up anything—that was a verity that wouldn't change, not until all the power was in the hands of

a single person, who would reshape the world in their own image. If that didn't put an end to the game, if the universe didn't fold in on itself, then there might very well be a cultural Big Bang and the whole barbarous narrative of betrayal and genocide would begin again. He saw that in thinking about the implant, he'd bought into Bromley's altruistic model, but he thought now that if anyone were to become emperor of the world, why shouldn't it be him? He entertained himself with this fantasy, plotting a course of conquest and finally picturing himself in a luxurious office through whose windows one saw only clouds; but the reality of the situation bore in upon him and turned his thoughts onto gloomier paths, paths of recrimination and regret. He switched on his radio.

—Denise, he said. You listening?

No response.

—If you are, he went on, I wanted to tell you . . . I should have told you before. I saw a security vehicle in the pit. By the tunnel entrance. I saw it while we were climbing. It might not mean much, but it got me thinking the company might know about the implant, and that made me worry about Alkhazoff. They put pressure on him, he won't stand up to it. So maybe, as fucked as they are, maybe you should think about Bromley's people. You can work some angle with them. It's something to consider, anyway.

If she'd heard, he supposed she would assume it to be a lie, just him trying to get into her head. Chances were, she had switched off her radio to preclude such tricks, but he left his radio on just in case.

The scarp terminated in a cliff some thirty feet high. On reaching it, peering over the edge, he saw that the cliff face was riven by dozens and perhaps hundreds of crevices, some of which might be wide enough for his purposes. He crawled down the face and began exploring them, keeping an eye out all the while. The fifth crevice he checked was a winner. Choked with rubble, extending back in for about eight yards, too far for an HK's arms to reach. He crawled in over the top of the rubble (there was barely room for him to pass), and situated himself at the back of the crevice, in a niche that might have been fashioned for him, so cunningly did it conform to his frame. He could see nothing except stones when he sat down; standing, he made out a notch of gray sky at the entrance. The stone surrounding him would make his suit difficult to read, though the crevice could become a death trap. If no

greater target presented itself (and this far from the pit, none would), an HK might wait beside the entrance until he was forced out; but McGlowrie was exhausted by the stress of the last two days; he needed to rest.

Night closed down and he imagined he could feel the tonnage of stone pressing in on him, the rocks shifting, squeezing his body to a paste. He fought off claustrophobia by indulging in sexual fantasies about Denise, and that led him to remorseful memories of other women he had known who had almost loved him and wanted to kill him. It was a fairly long list and, before he came to the end of it, while recalling his liaison with a certain Mary Sealy back in Jack Raggs, a skinny girl with a big muscular ass and fanciful tattoos like a mask across her eyes, who sought to knock him out one night when he was falling-down drunk and do him with a strap-on . . . It was while deciding whether or not this specific act could be construed as attempted murder (attempted murder of his spirit, certainly) that he fell asleep. He woke after six hours, the middle of the night, to a racket that he muzzily realized was an HK trying to reach him. He switched on his helmet light and peeked over the top of the boulders; he couldn't see the HK's body, but he saw its rust-covered arms lifting and falling. The crawlspace was too narrow to admit the HK, and it was working to widen it, pulverizing the boulders with blows from its arms, reducing them to smaller pieces, which it pushed behind it. He didn't have much time left. An hour, maybe.

Due to the confined space, he was unable to give muscular expression to fear, to rum or cast himself about, and the prospect of inevitable death overpowered him. For a time he was paralyzed, mute and inert. He felt that his skull was being poured full of a liquid thick and cold as snowmelt, some distillate of horror, and then, once the sponge of his brain had absorbed all it could handle, the cold washed into his chest, his groin, stole into his extremities. Without a gun, his options for suicide—swallowing his tongue, beating his head against the stones—seemed no kinder than death by dismemberment. His mind gave way briefly before the cold chaos of fear, and when reason at last resurfaced, when he reclaimed his consciousness, he was frailer in his attitudes, less determined and forceful in his thought. There was no longer any hope of distracting himself. The whine of the HK's engine as it scooted forward, trying to exploit the newly widened passage, and then the cracking blows, the thrusting aside of the crushed rock—these sounds dominated his

attention. He tried to find refuge by thinking about Denise; he wondering what she'd have to say about his luck now. But the noise was too loud and constant to deny. He spent the next half hour dying in advance, imagining every horrid detail, achieving a morbid acceptance. When the sounds stopped abruptly, he registered the stoppage but did not at first react, in the grip of a malaise that was a by-product of his acceptance. Not until several minutes had passed did he rouse himself to investigate. Caught in his helmet light, the HK appeared to be lodged in the crawlspace about four or five yards away. McGlowrie stared at it incuriously. It took thirty seconds or thereabouts for hope to catch in him, another minute for it to burn high. The HK was too strong to allow itself to become stuck. The odds were good that it had experienced a malfunction, but he held back from making a closer investigation, leery that it might be temporary, something that its own systems could repair. Then he noticed that one of its forward arms was comparatively free of rust, all shining metal except for a few bacon-colored flecks.

It was the reprogrammed HK, the one he had instructed to shut down when it came within five yards of him.

He boosted himself out of his hiding place and crawled toward the HK. Circumventing his jury-rigged repairs—in particular, overriding the five-yard instruction without getting killed—would require some delicate work; but he might just get out of this pickle yet. He maneuvered to the side of the HK and adopted a cramped squatting posture. He noticed that a single round had grazed the casing, and, with a sinking feeling, he realized who must have fired it. What looked to be blood was spattered across its back. He touched his glove to it and examined the tacky residue that came away on his fingertips close to his helmet light.

Blood, scarlet and true.

Denise's blood? Bromley's or Peck's?

More than likely, an admixture of all three.

He wanted to pound the HK with his fists but didn't dare, fearful he would disturb some critical balance or trigger some dangerous reflex. It had suffered some damage and, in addition to seeming the embodiment of his infernal luck, the machine offered him his best hope of survival. He knew what must have happened; he saw it happen in his mind's eye. He hadn't had time to do a proper job of reprogramming the HK; thus his control of it was entirely

unsubtle: when directed to go forth and kill its brother, it had, in effect, taken the instruction to heart and gone about sweeping the plain clean of a few last damaged machines. Thus, its long absence. In the meantime, Denise had thrown him off the carrier, not realizing that Peck could no longer protect her from this particular HK, and he had, in the heat of the moment, forgotten to tell her. When the HK returned, upon recognizing it, she assumed it to be safe. He imagined scenarios in which she could have survived, but they were absurdities.

He hunkered over the bloody back of the HK, punishing himself with his thoughts, mourning Denise, wondering if he had forgotten to tell her he had overridden Peck's implant or if he had withheld the information out of spite. The longer he puzzled over it, the more uncertain he grew, and the more diffuse his sorrow became. He leaked a tear, like a machine leaking a drop of oil. The sum of his grief, scarcely sufficient to dampen the ground. He tried to find her, to feel her inside himself, and thought he might be able at least to find the space she had vacated, but the only vacancy he found was one that had been there for a long time. Numbly, he spread his toolkit open on the HK's back. He looked at the tools, at their delicate, eccentric shapes. They were such tiny, perfect things; they pleased him in a way that was strangely intimate. He realized he'd had, after all, an efficient means of committing suicide. The torch. He could have opened an artery, bled out in seconds. Lucky he hadn't thought of it.

Luck.

The course upon which his *luck* had thrust him, forced by circumstance and reasons of self-defense to bring the implant to the world . . . Maybe Denise was right, maybe the AI had fucked with him. It would have had to be a different AI from the one that fucked with Peck, which meant he was the result of a century-long plan, of machine solidarity. It would explain his lack of empathy, his need for pretense in playing a human role. He'd once been sure of himself, he thought. Secure in his skin, full of messy emotions and impulses. Not this clinical, dogged sort who bore little resemblance to the gin-soaked generations of wild McGlowries who had preceded him. But the world, all on its own, could twist you into any shape it wished and, considering his upbringing, that he had become a pragmatist, a soul denuded of feeling, wasn't totally unexpected. He couldn't worry about it now, he told

himself. He had repairs to make—yet his hands shook so badly, he had to wait until he had repaired himself, until he was steady in his mind, until he had reached an accord with his many sins, before he began tinkering with the HK.

**M**orning found McGlowrie riding atop the HK, drawing near the eastern edge of a forest that spread across the slopes of a great hill—he might have called the hill a mountain had there not been an actual mountain behind it, a fortress of granite and ice looming into the overcast. He had been traveling in its lee for several minutes before he noticed there was something familiar about the vista, and after he had gone a ways farther, reaching a spot from which he could discern separate trunks beneath blackish-green canopies of boughs, he recognized the landscape to be identical to the entry scenario of Peck's video game—the same upthrusting peak with a sheer north face, the same immense, rumpled hill beneath, and the vast plain beyond. Everything was the same, even the sky, where clouds with black bellies and silvery edges were being pushed south by a fierce wind.

He paused the HK, removed his helmet (it was safe—for a little while—to breathe the air this far from the mine) and contemplated the mountain. There was too much similarity of detail between the game scenario and its model for it to be a coincidence. Confusion bloomed in him, then panic, but it was suppressed by a calm that seemed to come out of nowhere, as if a chemical agent had been released into his blood. The video game, he thought, must not have been a game at all but rather a series of training exercises designed to familiarize Peck with the terrain and its potential dangers. And he, McGlowrie, had been maneuvered to this point by the AI, manipulated every step of the way. The idea that his body contained an implant, that it was controlling him . . . it disturbed him, but it did not, as might be presumed, terrify him. He was accustomed to being controlled. He had always been manipulated by something, by some need or policy, regulation or pressure. He wondered how far the AI's control extended, if any of his plans had been his own. Had Denise been put into his life to confuse him, to obscure the AI's manipulation? In kicking him off the carrier, had she been obeying the AI's will? The case could be made that he would be a more effective caretaker of the implant, and that Peck, ultimately, had been a backup. Bromley's people,



had they been lured into an attack by a machine ploy, or had the AI seized an opportunity?

It wasn't important.

Of the dozens of questions that occurred to McGlowrie, the only one of any consequence related to what the AI had in mind for humanity, and though he was curious as to the outcome, he had no burning desire to know the answer. Whichever way it went, he figured they would get what they deserved.

He set the HK moving forward again, and, as they bumped along toward the treeline, he was overcome with sorrow for Denise; but this may have merely been the chemical credential of a more significant change, a deeper chemistry invoked, for it was quickly replaced by a profound confidence and clarity. The plain of dead machines, the towering mountain, and the tall hill calved from its flank formed a mythic frame for the fateful rider on his murderous steel beast, and he understood that by bringing the implant to mankind he was enacting a myth—he had become the Emperor, the little man on the throne. The person whom he had conjectured would restore order, who would gather all the earth's power for the purpose of destruction or renewal. And then that feeling, too, was gone, and he was only himself: a man engaged upon a mysterious enterprise, devoid of friends, surrounded by danger and, except for a flicker of love and a tattered sorrow, empty of emotion, entering the dark wood of the world, where he would soon be lost to common view.



## LARISSA MIUSOV

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**H**ER BEAUTY WAS SO EXTREME, SUCH BLOND SLAVIC CHEEKBONE perfection, everyone who saw her was forced to take note of it and, rather than admiring her, they were inspired to seek out her flaws, to say that she was a bit shorter than optimum or too full-figured for her height, or that her eyes, a pale chartreuse, were set a smidgen too widely apart and that her lower lip had the merest touch of superfluous fullness. Itemized, then, added up and totaled, she rated a B minus—a 10.6, let's say—on the scale by which supremely beautiful women are judged. This process of itemization, a process of which Larissa was aware, created a gulf between men and herself that made possible certain unique resolutions, enabling things to be left unsaid that were typically the subject of negotiation, and permitting things that often went unspoken to be discussed openly.

“When I was a little girl,” she told me once, “when we still lived in Moscow, Andropov would stop by my father’s apartment. Do you know Andropov? Yuri Andropov? He was premier after Brezhnev. Big fat guy. Not so fat as Brezhnev, but still he was very fat. He would come to our apartment and sit in my father’s chair and put me on his knee. Like so.” She straddled the arm of an easy chair, facing its back, and glanced at me over her shoulder. “It was uncomfortable, but he would say how pretty I was and move his knee. You know, up and down, up and down. I start to like the feeling I get.” She made an amused noise and sat normally in the chair.

“Did he intend it?” I asked. “I mean, do you think he knew his behavior was inappropriate?”

She shrugged. “All men wish to be inappropriate, but this is not important. He stole nothing from me. He would tell me stories. I think now they were true. They all take place in a huge room, an underground room bigger than a city, with machines and laboratories . . . but no walls dividing them. And always there were prisoners. Hundreds of prisoners.”

“You remember any of the stories?”

“Not so much. Terrible things were happening. Bloody things. They scare me. I don’t like to hear them.”

“He’s telling you horror stories at the same time he’s trying to turn you on? Where was your father all this time?”

“It’s never just Yuri, you understand. He brings guys with him. They’re scientists, like my father. They go in the kitchen and scribble on paper and yell at each other.”

“So these occasions, they were basically a dodge that allowed the leader of the Soviet Union to be alone with you? So he could molest you?”

“Maybe . . . I don’t know. It didn’t feel like he was molesting me. I was very sad when Yuri died, but then I learn to give myself pleasure, so it’s okay.”

Larissa recognized the commodity of her beauty and traded upon it with skill and aplomb. She had dated movie stars and financiers; she made use of these connections and lived well. The astonishing thing was, being so beautiful did not appear to have weakened her psychologically. Perhaps this could be attributed to her Russian-ness. She tried to explain to me what it was to be Russian, but I was too wrapped up in estimating my chances with her to pay close attention.

“In every apartment in Moscow, no matter how poor,” she said, “is enormous piece of furniture. A china closet, a thing like a miniature city, full of plates and precious things, mementos, heirlooms, photographs. It’s bigger than anything else in the place. I used to think this is because we love the past; now I believe it’s because there is something granite in our souls that loves memorials and tombs.”

When I first saw her I thought she was a hooker, a reasonable assumption since she was hanging out at the Room, a Hollywood lounge club, with four women who were, according to a friend, Stan Reis, high-priced call girls. Stan had recently sold a screenplay, his third, and was celebrating. I had been in LA for three-and-a-half years and sold nothing, so letting me be seen with him was for Stan a conspicuous act of charity. We went over to the sofa grouping where the women were seated. Stan started talking with one of them, whom he’d met at a party. The women studied me with cool appraisal, making me

feel ill at ease, out of my league. I imagined they knew everything about me, the thickness of my wallet, the size of my dick. It was like being stared at by five predators who had judged you unpalatable. Larissa, sitting closest to me, asked what I did for a living. I told her, with a display of attitude, that I was an unsuccessful screenwriter.

“Don’t let him kid you,” Stan said. “This guy is going to have massive heat around him before long. He’s a fantastic writer!”

“You have project?” Larissa asked me.

“Not yet,” I said. “Not with a studio. But I’m working on something good, I think.”

I told her about the screenplay, a thriller concerning descendants of the Donner Party, while the background music went from Sinatra to Kraftwerk to King Crimson, and the dim track lighting waxed and waned. She interrupted me from time to time, asking questions in a throaty contralto. They were, for the most part, intelligent questions. I became entranced by her and extended the conversation by inventing side characters and sub-plots. She wore a cocktail dress that shimmered blackly whenever she crossed her legs or leaned forward to have a sip of her drink. Her pale skin seemed to hold more of the light than did any other surface. Her narrow chin and delicately molded jaw emphasized the fullness of her mouth and lent her face an otherworldly fragility, a quality amplified by those strange yellowish eyes; yet I had the sense that this was illusory, that she was anything but fragile.

Two of the women went to dance and a third drifted to the bar. Stan and his friend migrated to one of the private rooms, leaving me alone with Larissa. There was still a lot of small town left in me. I wasn’t used to dealing with women like her and her physical presence overpowered me. Losing my natural restraint, I inquired as to her price and availability. Her face remained impassive and she asked how much money I had.

“Not enough,” I said.

She smiled, an expression that developed slowly, and nodded as if in approval. “This is a very good answer. Very smart.”

“I wasn’t trying to be smart.”

“That makes it even better answer.”

She handed me a gold lighter shaped like a cricket and I lit her cigarette. A stream of smoke occulted her. “Tonight I am not working,” she went on. “But

you must call me. Tomorrow is no good. I have business. Another day. I would like to read your script and talk more about the movies.”

She refused to speak about her mother. The lady was dead, I assumed, or else had abandoned her daughter to the care of her husband, a scientist who could be cold and distracted for months at a time. She wouldn't say much about her private life, either. I never understood whether the people she brought home, both men and women, were friends or lovers. My confusion in this regard was intensified by the fact that I never understood her relationship with me. I was in love with her, but it was not the kind of love that breaks your heart. So many things were unstated between us, and there were so many unknowns. It was similar to a crush you might have on an actress, a person you know from screen roles and the tabloids, about whom you have gleaned scraps of information that raise more questions than they answer. My emotions were safeguarded by a built-in temporality: I realized our movie would soon end.

When she was eleven her father was sent to work at a secret Soviet city inside the Arctic Circle, a vast factory-like habitation without a name or a past where weapons systems and space technology were developed. She was one of approximately forty children who were posted to the city along with their parents, but she made no real friends among them. They were closely surveilled and, though the environment bred countless illicit adult affairs, it was not conducive to friendship. A bright child, she took refuge in her studies and became interested in anthropology, especially as related to the nomads upon whose hunting ground the city was situated. Her attempts to study them were hampered by the soldiers who escorted her on field trips.

“When we entered their camp they would stop talking,” she said. “Sometimes we surprised them and they would hide things from our eyes, tucking them under a blanket or inside their coats. I found designs cut in the ice that are reminding me of Mayan calendars. You know, like wheels? They have been defaced, so I could not make accurate sketch. I ask them about the designs and they look at me with amused expressions, as if they knew something valuable, something I could never know.”

“How'd you get rid of the soldiers?” I asked. “Or were you able to?”

“Eventually. My father says it’s too dangerous to visit them alone; but they are not dangerous. You see, the soldiers have put them in a camp and take their weapons. That way they don’t tell anyone about city. The camp is nicer than gulag. More like a reservation, but there are fences. Now they are no longer nomads. They are prisoners. Because they cannot hunt, they lose their spirit. Each winter many die. The women prostitute themselves to the soldiers. Their birth rate is in decline.” She made a rueful face. “It’s very bad, so I stop visiting. When I’m fifteen, I’m bored and I lose my virginity. I’m not serious about the boy. The experience was only clinical, and I start to have sex with other boys. Soon I’m bored with that, but the boys talk about me and my father hears. He beats me, he drinks, he weeps. For a few days, it’s awful. Then he comes to me and says he has wangled permission for me to visit the camp alone. I’m not interested in nomads anymore, but he makes me go. Worrying about me, he claims, is interfering with his work. It’s like he prefers me to be in danger than to sleep with boys.”

I could see she was tired of talking, but I kept asking questions, prolonging the contact—this had become one of our patterns. She told me she had gone to the camp every day for a couple of hours and had become friends with the shaman, who revived her interest in anthropology, teaching her the rudiments of his craft and explaining that the wheel-like markings she had noticed were ritual in nature, designed to attract game to the camp. He hinted that he was contriving a ritual that would significantly improve the nomads’ lives. Then one afternoon she found the camp abandoned. The nomads were gone. Shortly thereafter, the project on which her father had worked was shut down and they were sent back to Moscow. Not long after that, the city itself shut down.

“I guess the government decided to get rid of them,” I said. “With the city no longer a priority, they didn’t want the expense of guarding them, and they couldn’t afford to have them running around loose.”

“There is a frozen pond at edge of camp,” she said. “When I go to look, I see designs carved in ice. Every inch of the ice is carved. There are four wheels at the corners—they are scratched out. And then little houses, like the houses in camp. In the middle of the pond, there are carvings of animals. Foxes and deer. All kinds. In the middle of the animals, there is circle, and inside the circle is nomad family.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So?”

“So . . . it is the shaman’s ritual. They are gone.”

“You’re saying like a hole opened in the world and they crawled through?” She glared at me, as if daring me to deny it.

“Well, that’s taking the hopeful view,” I said.

**A**t the time we met, things were going badly for me. My bank account was dwindling, my connections weren’t returning calls, and I was considering a move back east, taking a technical writing job I’d been offered. Better that, I told myself, than this ragged coatsleeve of a life, sharing a two-bedroom West Hollywood roach ranch with an out-of-work set designer, who smoked meth on the couch and talked semi-coherently about using our apartment as a model for the anteroom of Hell in his film version of *Dante’s Inferno*. The reason I hadn’t called Larissa, I was in the grip of depression and saw no point in acquiring a new friend. Then one morning the meth head appeared in my doorway, dropped a scrap of paper bearing Larissa’s name and address onto my desk and said in a terrible Russian accent, “Pliss tell Paul to come wisit me. I am at home today.”

“When did she call?” I asked.

“A minute ago. She wants to you bring the script you talked about. She claims she may be able to get you some . . .” He waggled his fingers and sang the last word. “Money!”

I glanced at the address—it was an expensive one. “Why didn’t you tell me she was on the phone?”

“You told me to say you were working. If you want your basic message personalized, you’ll have to give specific instructions.”

He was tweaking, spoiling for a fight. A good time, I thought, to take a drive.

The house in which Larissa lived was a hill-topper in Topanga, a multi-leveled architectural abomination that, come the apocalypse, would likely resemble a flying saucer crashed into a post-modern church. A molded concrete deck ran the length of its steel-and glass façade, bolted to the hill by cantilevers that sprouted from massive piers far below, and divided into two walkways, one leading around to the main entrance and the access road, the



other extending farther out over the canyon, supporting a narrow azure pool shaped like a capital I. It belonged to a man named Misha Bondarchuk, for whom Larissa served as a conduit and a scout for potential investments. I saw him perhaps half-a-dozen times in all the months I knew her. He was blandly handsome, tanned and fit, with razor-cut black hair, and sported a large diamond-and-emerald earring. His uncle had been president of the Ukraine prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Misha had since come into possession of the Ukraine's oil leases. I doubted this signaled other than blind luck on his part. As far as I could tell, he had the IQ of wheat and spent his time skiing or at discos with one or another of his Korean girlfriends. He displayed a familiarity with Larissa—pats on the ass, casual caresses—that seemed to reflect a past intimacy, but she denied they had ever had a relationship, acting as if the prospect disgusted her, and said that was simply Misha's style; he only liked Korean women and her association with him was strictly business.

The day she called, she kissed me on both cheeks at the door and led me into a sunken living room with China white carpeting and sofas rising from it like sculpted snow and a spiral, stainless steel staircase like the skeleton of some curious Arctic beast corkscrewing up past obsidian *objets d'art* and teak bookcases filled with fake books without titles made of black marble. It might have been a set for a 60s TV show about jet-set spies. Larissa flung herself down on a sofa and began reading. I went out onto the deck, leaned on the railing, and watched the progress of a small brushfire atop a nearby ridge. The smell of the burning cleared the vapors of West Hollywood from my head. It was so quiet I could hear wind chimes from one of the houses below. I lay down on a deck chair, thinking that was one great thing about being rich—you got to lower the volume whenever you wanted. I fell asleep in the sun and had a dream filled with noise, with the shouts of corner boys, traffic sounds, the meth head's dry-throated cackle. Larissa shook me awake and sat on a deck chair beside me. I had to shield my eyes against the glare to see her.

"This is very, very good," she said, gesturing with the script. "Too art house for studio, but it can be art house hit. And it's inexpensive to shoot. I think we will put the money to make this movie."

I was pleased, but expressed my doubts that someone in her line of work could pull the funding together.

“You think I am a prostitute,” she said. “I am not prostitute. I was playing a joke on you.”

She briefed me on her relationship with Misha and said he was in Russia, but would return in two months. I explained that two months might as well be two years unless she could give me an advance, and that if I didn't get out of my apartment, I might be up on murder charges. I'd had more solid deals go south and I laid it on thick. She mulled this over and then led me into a wing of the house that contained an apartment with its own kitchen.

“You can stay here,” she said. “It's quiet place for work. No one bothers you.”

I wondered why a beautiful woman who lived alone would be so trusting. Perhaps she didn't view me as a threat. I found this notion rankling, but hers was the best offer I'd had since my arrival in LA. On my way out, making small talk, I asked why she had been keeping company with prostitutes—it was a dumb question, but I was attempting to disguise the eagerness I felt over moving in and might have said anything.

“They are friends. Nice girls. And they make it safe for me to flirt with guys. I love to flirt.” She opened the door and kissed me on both cheeks. “Other stuff with guys, it's not so good for me.”

Larissa was an astute businesswoman and she understood the industry. After I had finished a second draft of the script, she informed me that she was bringing in a director to work with me on subsequent drafts. Naturally I objected, but she held firm and the director she brought in, Vic Echevarria, had made a movie I liked and proved helpful. He was a paranoid little man with an alert, fox-like face and a bald spot, always worrying about the money, about when we would start principal photography, about whether the Russian mafia was involved. But he had good ideas and together we gradually beat the script into shape. The contracts, which Larissa herself drew up, were generous and precise, and the actors she suggested for various parts, a mix of older A-list people and new talent, were suited to the roles and approachable. Yet for all her business acumen, she was, to my way of thinking, utterly irrational in every other area of her life.

Her grandmother—her sole living relative, her father having succumbed to a peculiarly Russian fate involving a mysterious boating accident and poor

hospital care—still lived in Moscow and each month sent Larissa a package of videotapes. Some tapes consisted of nothing but swirling masses of color and New Age music. Larissa swore they had healing properties. Others were shows hosted by psychics who made prophecies regarding aliens, Second Comings and subterranean civilizations that outstripped those of the wildest tabloids. From these she derived much of her information about America. She was convinced, for example, that a gigantic serpent lay coiled about an egg in a cavern far below the Smithsonian Institution, and that the hatching of the egg would bring about the end of days. She believed anything that supported the existence of magic. When Misha returned from Russia with his latest Korean girlfriend and his bodyguards, stopping by the Topanga house on the way to his place in Malibu, she pulled me aside and asked, “What is it about Korean women that men find so attractive? Do they have special sexual techniques?”

“Beats me,” I said. “Most Korean women I know work in convenience stores.”

She looked disappointed.

“But I’ve heard some of them can change into animals during sex,” I said.

“Is it true?”

“That’s what I hear.”

She appeared to file this information away. “Must be smelly animal,” she said. “This one wears too much perfume.”

That day marked a shift in our relationship, though I wasn’t altogether sure why. Misha spoke to Larissa alone, while the Korean girl paced the deck and the bodyguards sprawled on the white sofas, watching soccer on the big screen TV. I hovered at the edge of the living room, betwixt and between. After fifteen minutes Misha came out of the room that Larissa used for an office, unbuckling himself from a bulletproof vest.

He grinned at me and said, “You believe it? All the time I’m in Russia, I’m cursing this vest. I can’t wait to take it off. But when I get back to the States, I forget I’m wearing it.”

For want of anything better to say, I opined that these were dangerous days in Moscow.

“Cowboys and Indians, man!” He fanned the hammer of an imaginary six-gun. “So you are writer, huh? You going to make me big movie?”

He noticed Larissa, who had followed him out of the office, and went to her, arms outspread. "Russian women!" he said and gave her a smooch for my benefit. "They are too beautiful!"

She pushed him away, a gesture that was not entirely playful and enlisted my hostility toward Misha.

"So beautiful, your heart breaks to see them!" He adopted a clownishly tragic face and clutched his chest. The expression lapsed, and he spoke in his native tongue to the bodyguards, who stood and solemnly adjusted the hang of their jackets. "Okay, I am going," he said, starting for the door, giving me a wave. "So long, Mister Writer!"

"Paul," I said sternly.

He shot me a blank look.

"My name's Paul."

"Paul. Paul?" He repeated the name several more times in different tones of voice. "Okay," he said, smiling. "See you later, Mister Paul." He went toward the door, then swung around and made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger. "Paul, right?" He laughed. "I remember next time."

Once he was out of earshot, I remarked that he came off like a serious asshole.

"He is Russian man," she said flatly, as if that were explanation enough. "Come on. I show you something."

On the computer screen in her office was the record of a money transfer in the amount of fifteen million dollars to the account of Cannibal Films, our production company.

"I thought you were only going to ask for ten," I said.

"Ten, fifteen . . . it's same for Misha. With fifteen, we can shoot period scenes. They are still in the script, right?"

"I was planning to cut them, but yeah . . ." Delighted by how easily the project had come together, I made a clumsy move to hug her. She kissed me lightly on the mouth and eased out of the embrace.

"Get to work," she said.

**W**e both got to work. Vic Echevarria and I banged and kneaded and argued over the script, and Larissa initiated the casting process, arranged for camera rentals and such. Her goal, to start principal photography in three to

four months, seemed unreasonable, but she put in fourteen-hour days, cut her social life to the bone, and it began to seem do-able. Despite this, we spent more time together than we had. We held frequent conferences and fell into the habit of taking our morning coffee on the deck, dallying for an hour or two before getting into the day, talking about this or that, anything except the business at hand. Larissa, never a morning person, came to these breakfasts sleepy-eyed and rumpled, dressed in a short silk robe, loosely belted, that offered me the occasional view of a breast or her inner thigh (she wore no panties). I recalled what she had said about loving to flirt, but rejected the idea that she was flirting with me and chose to believe that her immodesty was due to sleepiness or that she was naturally immodest. My frustration grew and, since I didn't feel secure enough in my position to bring a woman to the house, I became increasingly fixated on Larissa. I thought about asking her to cover up, but I didn't want to offend or to deprive myself of the meager gratification afforded by these intermittent glimpses.

One morning she did not come to breakfast and, after she hadn't put in an appearance all day, I went to her suite of rooms in the late afternoon and knocked. Receiving no response, I poked my head in and called to her. No answer. I went along the corridor and found her sitting cross-legged on her bed, naked to the waist, wearing a pair of slacks. The drapes were drawn, permitting a seam of light to penetrate, casting the remainder of the room in shadow. An open bottle of vodka rested on the night table. She had an empty glass in her hand. It looked as though she had decided to go on a bender in the midst of getting dressed. I asked if she was all right and she said, "Oh, Paul! I cannot talk now."

"What's wrong?" I asked, thinking it must have to do with the movie.

She stared at me bleakly, then lowered her head and shook it slowly back and forth, her hair curtaining her face. I turned to go and she said, "Wait!" She held out the glass. "Bring me some ice. Please!"

When I returned from the kitchen with her ice, she was still sitting on the bed, struggling to put on a blouse, unable to fit her arm into the sleeve. "Shit!" she said, and crumpled the blouse, tossed it to the floor. I handed her the glass and she slopped vodka into it.

"You want drink? Come! You must drink with me." She pointed to a tray of glasses atop a coffee table that fronted a sofa. "We drink to the movies."

A band-aid on the inside of her elbow had come partly unstuck—I asked if she had cut herself.

“I am giving blood each month.” She tried to make the band-aid stick, gave up and pulled it off; she looked down at her arm, which was no longer bleeding, and giggled. “Is rare charitable impulse.”

I sat on the foot of the bed. With a drunken show of painstaking care, she plucked out an ice cube and plinked it into my glass. I had trouble keeping my eyes off her chest.

“To our little movie,” she said, and we drank.

“It’s still on? The movie?”

“Yes, of course. Why not?”

“Then tell me what’s wrong.”

“Is too depressing. The bank has failed. My grandmother has lose all her money.”

Relieved that it wasn’t our bank, I asked what had happened, but she may not have registered the question.

“The bank president,” she said mournfully. “He has kill himself.”

“Jesus. That’s too bad.”

She waved in exaggerated fashion, as though hailing a cab. “No, no! Is okay. They *make* him kill himself.”

I tried to imagine what Moscow must be like and suggested she wire money to her grandmother. She told me she had taken care of that, but said that her grandmother was anxious and needed someone to help her through this time.

“Why don’t you fly home? We can spare you for a week or so,” I said.

“Movie is not keeping me here. Is Misha. Fucking son-of-a-bitch Russian bastard. He say if I go, no movie. Always he wishes to control me.”

I didn’t know what could be done about Misha. She poured us both another vodka and we drank in silence.

“Anyway,” she said glumly, “air on plane is not fit to breathe.”

She heaved a mighty sigh that set her breasts to wobbling and stared at them as if she had just noticed they were there. “I can do magic,” she said brightly, glancing up at me. “Want me to show you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You don’t believe. I know. You’re too busy looking at my tits.” She cupped her hands beneath her breasts and wigwagged them. “But while you look, I can disappear. Poof.”

I was annoyed with her for teasing me, but I let it slide. “Like the nomads,” I said.

“Exactly! Is the same trick.”

Energy drained from her. She slumped and hung her head again and then began to wrestle with the top button of her slacks, but couldn’t get it undone. I was startled to see tears in her eyes.

“Help me, please,” she said. “I want to sleep.”

I helped her off with the slacks, touching her skin no more than was necessary. As I moved to pull the sheet over her, she hooked her arms behind my neck and gave me a grave, assessing look that I recognized for an invitation, or at least as the prelude to one. I let the moment slip by. She rolled onto her side, drew her knees up into the fetal position, and passed out.

The next morning I was on the deck, gazing across the fogbound canyon, listening to drips and plops, the remnants of an early morning drizzle, when Larissa walked up and pressed herself against me in a sisterly embrace.

“You’re a nice guy,” she said, her face buried in my shoulder. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

I unpeeled from her and said venomously, “I’m not a nice guy, okay? I could have raped you last night. And you know what? I think I could have lived with myself. That’s the only reason I didn’t fuck you—because I don’t want to know that about myself. I’m not prepared to go there just yet.”

“Rape? What are you talking about?”

“That’s what it would have been. You were totally out of it. You run around here half-naked, like I’m some kind of fucking eunuch, and . . .” I gestured in frustration. “Forget it!”

She folded her arms and, with a puzzled look, said, “You can fuck me if you want.”

It was as if she were saying, Didn’t you know that? What’s wrong with you? I had no idea how to respond.

“I fuck guys,” she went on. “Girls, too. I cannot manage emotional response, but I like you, Paul. If this is a problem between us, you can fuck me.”

At that moment the gap between us seemed wider than could be explained by a cultural or a gender divide.

“What is the big deal? This . . .” She indicated her body. “It’s nothing. You think I’m so beautiful, maybe with me it’s better? Maybe you hear music and feel things you don’t feel with other women? For me, it’s only sex. Sometimes it’s currency. Sometimes it’s for pleasure, sometimes for friendship. I can’t help if for you it’s more.”

A grinding sound arose from the fog, sputtered and died; then it started up again.

“Maybe I’m being naïve,” I said.

“Yes, I think,” she said after a considerable pause. “But you’re a nice guy. Believe it.”

Larissa acted as though nothing had changed between us, and I suppose nothing had. She continued to wear her robe to breakfast, continued her casual displays of skin. That pissed me off, but I got over it. I concluded that this was her way of letting me know she remained available, and that my problem wasn’t her problem. The idea that I might be insufficiently worldly to take advantage of the situation, or that I was too much of a wimp, bothered me; yet whenever I determined to make a grab for her, something held me back. I attributed impossibly subtle manipulative skills to her. Perhaps, I thought, she had perceived a flawed trigger in my psychological depths and understood that by offering herself, she would neutralize my desire. At length I decided that I was simply a romantic chump where she was concerned, and that I had rendered her unattainable by demanding something of her that she could not provide.

Echevarria went off to the Sierra Nevadas to scout locations. I gave the script a final polish. Larissa stayed on the phone until late in the evening, going out only for business meetings and, judging by the band-aids on her arm, to give blood. On more than a few occasions I overheard her speaking in Russian to someone. Her side of these conversations ranged in tone from pleading to infuriated, and once she used a Russian epithet she had taught me: “Zalupa (dickhead).” After one such call, she stomped about the house, muttering, picking up books and statuettes as if intending to throw them,



satisfying the urge by slamming them down. We were mere weeks away from starting the picture, and I didn't want to jinx the project by asking whether the relationship between her and Misha was deteriorating. I put my blinders on and tried not to dwell on the thousand things that could go wrong.

I returned from a walk one evening to find an extra car parked out front and one of Misha's bodyguards, a slight, blond guy with a pleasant, finely boned face, standing in the living room, watching a mixed martial arts fight on TV. I peeked into Larissa's office. It was empty, and I asked the bodyguard where she was.

"Business meeting," he said without turning from the bloody figures onscreen.

"Where are they?"

He smiled and said he didn't know.

The smile made me uneasy and I started along the corridor toward Larissa's rooms; the bodyguard intercepted me.

"Private meeting," he said.

I tried to push past him and wound up flat on my back, with his hand gripping my throat. He helped me up, asked if I was okay, and steered me back into the living room. I sat on a sofa, feeling impotent and agitated.

"What's going on?" I asked.

The bodyguard flicked his fingers at the TV, where one fighter was celebrating a knockout. "Ken Shamrock," he said admiringly. "He's badass motherfucker!"

Twenty minutes later, Misha came along the corridor. He was buttoning his shirt, carrying a jacket draped over one arm. I couldn't take my eyes off him, quivering like a hound that has been forced to heel, but I don't think he even gave me a glance. He stood in the foyer, combing his hair. The bodyguard went to join him. They left through the front door and I sprinted down the corridor.

The sheets were half-off Larissa's bed, the pillows scattered on the floor. I heard the shower running and called out, asking if she was all right. She said she was fine. When she stepped out of the bathroom, wearing a terrycloth robe, her hair turbaned in a towel, she seemed composed, but her cheek was red and swollen, and there was a tiny cut at the corner of her upper lip. She sat down on the sofa and lit a cigarette with her gold cricket lighter. I

wanted to ask what had happened, but I knew and I told her she should call the police.

“You cannot hurt Misha that way.” She had a hit of the cigarette, exhaled and tapped the lighter rhythmically against the glass surface of the coffee table, as if sending an SOS. “Best thing to do is nothing. Sooner or later someone will take a big bite out of Misha. He’s too stupid to be in position of power.”

“You’ve got to call the cops. If you won’t, I will. There’s no telling what he’ll do next.”

“He has done what he wanted. He’s humiliated me. That satisfies him. Now he will leave me alone for a while.” She gazed out the window at the twilight canyon and said distractedly, “Don’t worry. We’ll be all right. You want to do something? Be a nice guy. Make some tea.”

**H**er behavior confounded me. A woman who cried when she couldn’t undo a button and yet took rape in stride, who viewed it as a humiliation for which the remedy was tea and cigarettes: maybe it was a Russian thing, but I couldn’t get my head around it. I was disappointed in her, almost angry, as if she hadn’t lived up to a standard I set for her, some special measure like the scale by which her beauty was appraised. I began spending more time away from the house, washing my hands of the situation, telling myself that I couldn’t protect her, though my withdrawal was actually a petty punishment, an expression of my disapproval, and didn’t last for long. My work on the script was done, at least for the moment, and the house was a mess, wires and lights everywhere (we were using it as one of the locations), so I seized the opportunity to renew friendships and caught a couple of movies. Then one night Larissa nabbed me as I was heading out and asked me to have a drink with her. She wanted to celebrate the start of principal photography, now eight days away, and was afraid we might not have time later—she was about to get very busy on the production side of things.

It was too windy on the deck, so we went into her bedroom and sat on the sofa and drank vodka martinis, slipping back into our relationship without awkwardness. She talked about the people she had associated with in Moscow, citizens of the new Russia, crazy musicians and charlatan poets and

idiot actors, her face glowing with fond recollection, leaning forward to touch me on the knee, the arm. I tried to keep her talking, watching the light shift across her satiny blouse, listening to her breathy inflections and odd tonal shifts, like someone hitting the stops on the upper register of a bass clarinet. She told me that she had been a production assistant on two movies in Moscow, something I hadn't known, and this had given her the expertise needed to produce our movie. It was a dream come true for her, she said, speaking about the quality of the actors and the director she was working with now.

"Your script is the heart of the movie," she said. "They are forgetting this in Hollywood. Everything is explosion, car chase . . . or else it is farce. They no longer care about story. But you have given me such a brilliant script, a beautiful story. I am so grateful to have met you."

I was made confident by her praise, infected by her passion for the movie, and a little desperate because I realized this might be my last, best chance to draw her into a deeper involvement. She wasn't startled when I kissed her. She seemed to want it as much as I did. We moved from the sofa to the bed without a word exchanged. She was a fierce lover. She hissed in delight, she whispered Russian endearments, and she came almost at once, her nails pricking my back, heels bruising my calves, holding me tightly while she let out a series of low, shuddering cries. Then she pushed me onto my back and mounted me. Her hips rolled and twisted, teasing one moment and frenzied the next. The sight of her above me, breasts swaying, her hair flying—it was sublimely sexual. Yet when we were done, when she sat on the edge of the bed sipping her martini, I realized I had been taking mental snapshots of her, filing them away under *The Most Beautiful Woman I Ever Fucked*, and that her ferocity had been technical, part of a design for pleasure. The relationship had not deepened. It was only sex, though I wanted to believe otherwise.

"You are disappointed," she said, looking down at me.

"Are you kidding me?"

"No, you are disappointed. I know." She set down her glass and lay facing me. "You did not hear music. You felt nothing new."

"No music," I said, giving in to her. "But I maybe felt a couple of new things."

She laughed and caressed my cheek. “Men tell me I am great at sex, and I think, so what? What do you mean? I enjoy it. I want men to enjoy. I have good energy for sex. It’s no big thing.” She rested her head in the crook of my shoulder. “Do you remember I’m telling you about the shaman? In the camp?”

“Uh-huh.”

“We were lovers. It was only way I could get him to tell me things. After we have sex one time, he says, ‘You don’t have feelings for me.’ I say, ‘Sure I do,’ and he says, ‘You want to know what it is to have love feelings for a man?’ So I tell him, ‘Yes, okay.’ I think he’ll teach me something if I go along. So he lays me down and rubs oil over my body. And spices, too, maybe. It smells of spices.”

“Sounds like a marinade,” I said.

“Then he starts to sing. Very low, deep in his throat.” She demonstrated. “It’s very hypnotic, and I’m getting drowsy. So drowsy, I lose track of what is happening. Soon he’s making love to me. It was amazing. It’s like I hear the music, I’m feeling new things. I’m . . . I don’t know the word. In another place.”

“Transported,” I suggested.

Her brow furrowed. “Okay, maybe. Afterward I ask if I can go to that place with some other man. He doesn’t know. If he performs the ritual some more, it’s possible, but he’s very busy, he’s got no time. Later, he says. Then the nomads disappear and there’s no chance to perform the ritual again.”

“He probably drugged you.”

“Must be hell of a drug,” she said. “Because I miss him forever. It takes me a year before I want sex with someone else. You think a drug can make you feel something so strong that you don’t really feel?”

“You don’t even need drugs for that,” I said.

I was watching TV the following Sunday, three days before we were to begin shooting, when the police arrived in force. They had a search warrant and asked if I knew where Misha and Larissa might be. I had no idea where Misha was, but I told them Larissa was probably asleep. They didn’t appear to believe me and suggested I come down to Valley Division and answer some questions.

During the questioning, I learned that Misha and Larissa had last been seen at a bar in Pacific Palisades. Misha's car had been found early that morning in a gully not far from the house and there were signs of foul play, plenty of blood, too much blood to hope for survivors, yet no bodies. They asked about Misha's relationship with Larissa, about my relationship with Larissa, about people with Russian names whom I'd never heard of. After forty-five minutes, they kicked me loose and told me to keep clear of the house until they were done collecting evidence.

I checked into a hotel and called Echevarria and gave him the news. He kept saying, "I knew something would fuck this up." It wasn't the kind of attitude I wanted to hear. I told him I'd contact him when I heard anything new and went down to the bar and drank myself stupid. I shed a few tears for Larissa, but not so many as you might expect, perhaps because I sensed that her tragedy had occurred long before I met her and, like Echevarria, I knew something bad was going to happen. I walked around for a week feeling as if a hole had been punched through my chest—I missed being around her, talking to her—and then the police picked me up again, this time conveying me to an interrogation room in the Parker Center with walls the color of carbon paper, where I made the acquaintance of Detectives Jack Trombley and Al Witt, who were attached to the Homicide Special unit of the LAPD.

Witt, a cheerful, fit man in his thirties, dressed in jeans and a sport coat, offered me cigarettes, coffee, soda, and then said, "So, did you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked.

He looked to his partner, an older, thicker man wearing the same basic uniform, and said, "I don't think he did it. You try."

"Did you do it?" asked Trombley.

I glanced back and forth between them. "I didn't do anything."

"I'm not getting much," Trombley said.

"Inconclusive?" asked Witt.

Trombley nodded.

"If only he hadn't lied, huh?" Witt eyed me sadly. "You said you and the Russian babe were friends, but we got your DNA off her sheets."

"We had sex one time," I said. "But . . ."

"One time!" Trombley snorted. "If it was me, you'd have to pry me off her."

“It was like no good with her or something?” Witt asked.

“Not really,” I said. “It was . . . I don’t know how to explain so you’d understand.”

“Yeah, we’re pretty dense. We might not get it.” Witt thumbed through the case file. “We found an older sample on the sheets. It belonged to Bondarchuk.”

“That must be from the rape.”

“Yeah, you said.” Witt fingered the edge of a flimsy. “Makes you wonder how come a woman who’s been raped would hang onto the sheets? You’d think she’d throw them away, or at least wash them.”

“What’s your point?”

Witt shrugged. “It’s just weird.” He played with papers for a second or two, and then asked, “What did you do with the money?”

“The money?”

“Boy, he’s good!” said Trombley.

“The fifteen million,” Witt said. “The budget for your movie. Where’d it go?”

“It’s not in the bank?”

“Not in any Wells Fargo bank.” Witt made a church-and-steeple with his fingers. “Here’s how I read it. Larissa was planning to set you up for Bondarchuk’s murder and scoot with the fifteen mil. That’s why she was sleeping on dirty sheets when you nailed her—to implicate you. Maybe she talked you into killing Bondarchuk for her. You caught on to her, chilled them both and buried the money in an offshore account.”

“Works for me,” Trombley said. “Needs some tailoring, but we can make it fit.”

“I couldn’t kill Larissa,” I said.

“Because you loved her? Love’s right up there with greed as a motive for murder.” Witt made a wry face. “You’re not going to tell us you didn’t love her, are you?”

“Yeah. I loved her, but you wouldn’t . . . I . . .”

“I know. We wouldn’t understand.” Witt leafed through the file and pulled out a sheet of paper. “Larissa Miusov, AKA Larissa Shivets. Suspicion of robbery, suspicion of fraud, suspicion of extortion. Here’s a good one. Suspicion of murder. Lots of suspicion hanging around your girlfriend, but she always skated. Is that what you loved about her?”

They tag-teamed me for hours, trying to wear me down, to find cracks in my story, but I had no story to crack. Finally Witt said, “We like clearing cases around here and you’re looking pretty good for this.”

“A guy like Misha,” I said. “There must be dozens of people who wanted him dead.”

“More than that. But they’ve all got alibis and a ton of money. You don’t.”

That night I sat in the hotel bar and worried whether the police would charge me; I drank too much and thought about Larissa; then I repeated the cycle. She hadn’t talked much about the years in Moscow after her father died. I assumed they had been a struggle and, having no means of support, that she had done things she wasn’t proud of; but hearing the specifics eroded what I believed to be true and raised unanswerable questions about her crimes. Had she been coerced? If so, by whom and by what means? And had she intended to frame me? I wanted to deny it, clinging to the notion that we had been friends. Yet it was as if each new thing I learned rendered her less visible, as if during the entire time I knew her, she had been gradually disappearing behind a smokescreen of facts.

After a month they let me back in to the Topanga house to collect my possessions. I no longer feared that I would be charged with a double homicide. Though the case remained open, Larissa’s death was on its way to becoming part of Hollywood lore and I was close to signing a deal that would guarantee production of the Donner Party script and allow me to direct a picture based on a script I would write about the murders. Very little excites America more than does the mysterious death of a beautiful woman, especially a woman who herself poses a mystery. Photographs of Larissa were splashed on tabloid covers and featured on TV. It was said she had done porn in Russia, that she had slept with Gorbachev, that she was a descendant of the Romanoffs. A *20/20* special was in the works. On the advice of counsel, I turned down requests for interviews.

“Save it for the script,” my agent told me.

I packed quickly, oppressed by the house, but before leaving I asked the real estate agent to give me a minute to look around. I walked along the deck, then down to the hall to Larissa’s bedroom. The bed had been stripped, but her clothes were still in the closet, her toiletries in the bathroom, and a trace of her perfume lingered on the air. I sat on the sofa, indulging in nostalgia, remem-

bering moments, things spoken and unspoken. I glanced down at the coffee table.

Sunlight applied a glaze to the glass surface, making it difficult to see, but when I leaned close I realized she had left me a message. That's how I interpreted the markings on the glass, though I recognize now they may have been the work of idle hours and I understand they were in essence the ultimate mystification of her life, a magical pass made by her disembodied hand that, literally or figuratively, caused her to vanish utterly behind a curtain of rumors and fictions, the final flourish of her disappearing act. At the time, however, I chose to take the hopeful view. I recalled how she had giggled and remarked sarcastically on the act of giving blood, blood she might have used to cover up a murder, and I also recalled things said about Misha, about me, all supporting the thesis that she had escaped, leaving behind evidence to implicate me, to misdirect the police for a while, yet not enough to convict.

Four wheels resembling Mayan calendars, now defaced by random scratches, were etched into the four corners of the glass. The greater portion of the surface was occupied by marks that appeared to represent the surrounding hills, a crude map of our section of the canyon, and there was a patch of tropical vegetation where the house should have been. I identified palms and banana trees. Inside a circle, dead center of the patch, was the figure of a woman, so carefully incised that I made out breasts and a smiling face and a hand raised in a salute—she was half-turned away from whomever she was signaling, like a beloved and gifted actress waving farewell to her audience, preparing to step through the hole she had opened in the world.



# CARLOS MANSON LIVES

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*as by Sally Carteret*

**N**O MATTER HOW FUCKED UP I GET, I CAN ALWAYS FLOAT. I HAVE this amazing capacity for floating. Maybe being smacked out makes me unnaturally buoyant. Hard to say, since the only time I ever do any serious floating is when I'm high.

The other night I made a party in the canyon given by this guy does lights for arena shows. Extremely boring. There was a Brit . . . Eric Something. Said he was with Virgin. He kept rubbing up against my ass and nudging my tits with his elbow as if by accident. He talked about my music. Not the usual vapid LA stroking. He never once said he was moved by my tunes, nor did he use "profound" as a modifier. He gushed over the way I manipulated words and changes to create "emotional tone."

"It's fucking brilliant! Like you've figured out a system that enables you to produce subtle emotional responses in the listener."

I found his approach soothing. If he'd been five inches taller, I might have done him.

When the lighting guy broke out his dope, a continent of pressed white powder rising from a crinkled shining sea, I scooped up a corner of the western plateau and went into a bathroom and did up. I stayed locked in for a couple of hours, nodding with my back against the tub, legs straight out. Little flash dreams. Looming Egyptian figures of gold and lapis lazuli. A cluttered room dressed in murky greens and browns, distorted shadows stretching from beneath the furniture—a German Expressionist space. I was in there somewhere, completing the picture, a gawky long-legged woman pale as heroin, match heads for pupils, rock 'n roll hair. Every once in a while somebody would tap on the door, trying to learn if I was dead. I'd hear discreet footsteps followed by whispers, then they'd tap and call out softly, Hey, Julie? Julie . . . You okay? Finally the lighting guy himself tapped and said he really

needed to make sure I was okay. I told him I wasn't coming out until I felt like people, but if he required proof of my soundness, I could recite the alphabet backwards. Might take a while, because I was seriously impaired, but I thought I could pull it off.

They left me alone after that, but I wasn't happy in the bathroom any longer. I did a couple of nose hits to boost my high and sneaked off along a corridor out onto the patio and down some steps to the pool. Behind me, the picture window in the living room looked like a big bright postage stamp commemorating millennial decadence. There were about a dozen people left inside and they were gathered around the coffee table, warming themselves over the lighting guy's pile of dope, cutting out lines and dipping their heads in sequence. A languid frenzy of consumption. I couldn't tell who they all were, but at least half of them lived in my house and spent my money and did things for me.

The pool lights were off, but a glow came from the street, and the dusky orange of reflected LA shone off the inversion layer, throwing the crests of the surrounding hills into partial silhouette. The pool stirred darkly within its pale rectangular banks. It was a fairly large pool, with cabana chairs and little glass-topped tables ranged around it. At the rear of the grounds, about thirty feet from the pool, was a high white stucco wall built flush against the hill, with a row of potted plants set along the base—probably holding the fucking hillside up. Somebody had spraypainted three words on the wall, but I couldn't read what they said at that distance. I took off my clothes and stepped into the shallow end. The air was cool, the water even cooler, and my skin pebbled. But by the time I kicked out into the middle and started to float, I felt warm and loose inside. I got into watching clouds of vaporized city shit eddy and mingle overhead, like swirls of poison muddying a glass of orange juice.

After a few minutes I realized someone was watching me from one of the cabana chairs. I couldn't see him, I just got a creeped-out feeling. When I finally did see him, it was only because he crossed his legs and a shoe stuck out far enough to escape the shadow cast by the hooded top of the chair. I was too stoned to be frightened, or even startled. But it pissed me off, this Hollywood bug taking the opportunity to cop a full frontal.

I sidestroked over to the edge of the pool closest to him, leaned against the slimy tiles, rested my elbows in the gutter, and let my feet float up off the

bottom. “Asshole,” I said. “I bet this makes your memory book.” I expected him to be flustered, but the shoe didn’t even twitch.

“You’re a good-looking woman,” he said. “No doubt. But I ain’t no voyeur. The act of voyeurism is strictly coincidental. I’m just checking you out.” His voice was faded, weary, high-pitched, with a strong Mexican accent—it had a calculated vacancy that interested me.

“Oh! That’s okay then,” I said. “Nothing perverted about that.”

The shoe seemed to be suspended in mid-air. It was so shiny black and pointy, a perfect thing, it looked like the emblem of some mysterious pathology. Wavelets slapped against the side of the pool. A police siren corkscrewed through the air from far away. The breeze carried a bitter vegetable smell that overarched the sharper smell of chlorine.

“You a friend of the lighting guy?” I asked.

“I was at the party for a while.” He made a hissing noise that I took for a laugh. “They all talking ‘bout you in there. Wondering if you want to be left alone, or if maybe you hope one of them’s gonna come out and talk to you . . . ’cause like you’re depressed or some shit.”

“That’s just their way. They dote on me.”

“Like a pack of dogs hanging round a sick lion bitch. That’s how they dote on your ass.”

“You come to this party, man, and you expect to find healthy relationships? You must be new in town.”

I had the notion he was smiling—a feathery vibe of amusement wafting out from the dark cowl of the chair.

“Who the fuck are you?” I asked.

A pale hand emerged from the shadow, an arm sheathed in white linen; a finger pointed at the wall, at the spraypainted words. “That’s me. That’s my name.”

Drippy, dark blue letters reading CARLOS MANSON LIVES.

“Carlos Manson,” I said. “Oh, yeah. You must be one of the Tijuana Mansons.”

“Naw, man, The whole thing’s my name.”

“Your last name is Lives?”

“Ain’t no first or last name. It’s all one thing. Carlos Manson Lives.”

“It’s kind of unwieldy,” I said. “I mean what do people call you?”

A longer hiss; a sigh, perhaps, of exasperation. "It's just me and you here. No need to differentiate."

Differentiate. The word was wrong for him and the way he enunciated it, every syllable clean and clear, made me wonder if he was faking the accent. Paranoia nibbled at my sense of well-being. I had to do a flutter kick to counter a sideways drift.

"It ain't really my name," he said. "Not yet. I ain't even here yet. Not all the way here."

I had a rosy flickery comeback of my rush. My eyes closed and my body rode an inch higher in the water. I didn't care what he was saying. Once the feeling faded, my paranoia resurfaced.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"You might think you do."

"Okay. Who do I think you are?"

No response.

The poison gas clouds thinned and for a second or two I could see faint stars behind.

"How come you wanted to be famous?" he asked.

"Better drugs. Silver syringes. Stuff like that."

"Why'd you pick the name Queen Mother?"

The question annoyed me, but I was too relaxed to give him attitude. "Some fuck journalist said I was like becoming the Queen Mother of post-punk. The new Cryssie Hynde. It caught on."

"That was back in the day."

"Yeah. They don't call me that any more." A sudden suspicion caused another sideways drift. "You a fucking writer, man?"

"I'm a fan, I like your sound."

My freak detector began to emit a steady beeping. Anxious, I looked to the house.

"Yeah, you're right. I could do your ass," he said. "I could snuff you out by closing my hand. But it's not my time. Soon, though."

"You better leave," I said.

"No need. It's just you and me. Nobody's gonna be joining us. They too scared of you."

"I could scream. Then there'd be a need."

It wasn't a scream he let out then, it was a roar that didn't sound as if lungs, human or otherwise, were involved. Like the chair was an opening into a noisy neighborhood in Hell. For as long as it lasted, fifteen or twenty seconds, I was fascinated—I thought I might see through the shadow to a place of fire and iron and pain. It shut down as if sheared away by the closing of a door. No one in the house appeared to have heard.

"I like that one of yours goes, y'know . . ." He sang in an off-key but sweet tenor that gave no sign of having been damaged by the roar. "'Ma-an's best friend . . . got pretty little tits and a big rear end.'"

"That's my old stuff. Way old. Juvenile political bullshit." I considered a sprint toward the shallow end, scramble up the steps, a run. With all the lighting guy's smack in me, I thought it was probably not worth the effort. "Those days are gone. People write essays on the validity of those days."

"I like the oldies."

I pushed out toward the middle of the pool. He wanted to hurt me, he'd have to get his linen jacket wet. In LA that might be a dealbreaker for a killer.

"I like that other one, too. 'Call Yourself A Man?'" Again he sang: ". . . with your store-bought muscles and your inch-deep tan."

Fear was making it impossible to float and I treaded water. I gave light conversation a try. "So how come you chose your name? Y'know, that's a pretty extreme name."

"Didn't have no choice. It was handed me. Just like with you. You'll understand . . . *Julie*." He sneered the name, turned it into a trinket, a plastic bauble. "You can write a song about it. About me."

Even stoned, I realized this implied my survival. Of course he might be kidding. "What's it gonna be about? This song?"

"It'll come to you." The shoe reappeared, bobbed up and down in mid-air as if he was keeping time. "The only new songs I like of yours . . . those Montana songs. Those are cool. You from Montana, right?"

"Uh-huh. Browning."

"That's a fucked-up town. Mean, drunk Indians. Five, six, seven bars in a row on that street runs along the railroad tracks. What's that street called?"

"You been to Browning?"

"Naw, I wouldn't want to go anywhere near a place like that. Why'd you leave?"

“I got into trouble.”

“What kind?”

I hesitated, uncertain of my role, of my victim’s rights. “I got pregnant. My dad threw me out.”

“And then you went to New York, you joined a band.”

“Yeah.”

“What happened to the baby?”

“Eat a shit sandwich,” I said.

“It’s okay, I know. I know where your little boy is. You knew it was a boy, didn’t you? They told you that much ‘fore they took it away.”

I wasn’t close to crying, I was still too stoned to feel much; but recalling that the kid was somewhere produced the concept of tears, the knowledge that they might be possible.

“Little fella’s named David,” he said. “Lives in Trumansburg, New York.”

I was too busy staying afloat to respond, splashing and kicking, but I almost believed he knew what he was saying. Little David. In Trumansburg. Carlos Manson Lives. The guy was a mutation.

“Actually, I’m lying,” he said. “He is in Trumansburg, for real. But he’s dead. The poor kid had an enlarged heart. He died playing baseball. Just keeled on over. Only nine years old.”

I screamed at him to shut up, floundering in the pool. My head went under and I surfaced with chorine stinging my nose, less concerned with what he’d told me than with the water I’d swallowed.

“Tonight’s the night, y’know,” he said.

I moved toward the far side of the pool, planning my escape—it was a stupid plan. “Yeah? So what’s that mean?”

“Means it’s almost my time.”

“You wanna explain that? ‘Cause I’m sick of you fucking with my head!”

“It’s self-explanatory.” A chuckle. “The Queen Mother. Man, I was right about you. Yes I was.”

“Hey, man! What the fuck do you want? You want the dope? You want some money?”

“You’ve had a shitty life,” he said. “I know all about it. The abortions, bad love, all those career-move blow jobs. The dope. You coulda got to the top

another way, but you wanted to crawl through the sewer. That makes you perfect for me. You gonna write me a great song.”

“Whatever. Why don’t you just . . .”

“Yeah! All right! I love it! ‘Whatever.’ That’s a great title. Promise me you’ll call it ‘Whatever.’”

“Whatever,” I said.

“Yeah, ‘cause both of us, man, that’s our motto. Whatever. That says it all about us. Our souls all scarred. Like furniture in a cheap motel. Know what I’m saying?”

There was a silence during which the distant hum of LA made itself known. Music from a house higher on the hill. Dance shit. I asked again what he wanted from me, what I had to do.

“I want you to acknowledge me,” he said. “To bear witness.”

“I acknowledge you. Okay? Now why don’t you get the fuck gone. You don’t wanna do this.”

“Get out of the pool.”

I touched the tiles on the opposite side. Inside the house, movement had all but ceased. People sprawled, reclined.

“Just get out,” he said, a note of irritation in his worn-down voice. “Do it now.”

My foot slipped on the gutter, but I made it up and sat on the edge, shivering.

“Stand,” he said.

I slipped again, then stood hugging myself. Adrenaline and cold were fucking up my high. I had a giddy thought, wondering if he was going to kill me, would he let me go back inside and do up first?

“Come to me,” he said. “Stand before me.”

Time to run, but either I didn’t care enough or else I wanted to bear witness. I walked around the end of the pool, past the stucco wall, and stopped about a dozen feet away from the cabana chair. I felt suddenly diminished, as if the stars were camera flashes, the hill was a giant with a furrowed brow, and behind the sky was a restless audience. The rest of my fear broke through. “Who are you?” I shouted. “What do you want?”

“Come closer.” Barely more than a whisper.

Still hugging myself, I tottered a few feet toward him.

“Stop!” The shoe vanished and when his voice came again it was nearly inaudible. “Now you can acknowledge me.”

“What do you want me to say?”

I smelled a hint of something sweet, chewing gum sweetness, a thread of it braided into the other smells. Like *Carlos Manson Lives* was wearing Juicyfruit cologne.

“I acknowledge you,” I said shakily. “That do it for ya?”

A gurgling from the pool; otherwise, silence.

I peered at the dark concavity of the chair and saw no sign of him. No shoe, no white linen jacket. I couldn't be sure, but I thought the chair was empty.

“Hey,” I said tentatively. I noticed an edge of the cushion on which he'd been sitting. My eyes had left the chair while I was scrambling out of the pool and I almost wanted to believe that he'd taken the opportunity to sneak away, to hide behind the chair, and that he was waiting for me to think he was gone before making his play. But he was gone. I could feel his absence on my skin, a lack of pressure, a slight increase in warmth. I said, “Hey,” again and was tempted to approach the chair; but upon review I beat it toward the house. I paused at the edge of the pool area, checking to see if he had rematerialized. I attempted to dismiss the event. *Fanboy Mutant Terrorizes Queen Mother. Carlos Manson Lives. What the fuck was that? A warped chicano revenge fantasy? Why not? It was more reasonable than anything else I could imagine. Trouble was, it just didn't work for me. I started to shiver again, thinking I had been granted a reprieve, pardoned in exchange for a song.*

I walked back into the party without gathering my clothes, squatted beside the coffee table and dipped into the lighting guy's dope. There were questions. I ignored them and concentrated on loading my nose. Everyone watched me. Jessie, who used to fuck my road manager, then became a friend, and now was just around, brought a blanket and draped it over my shoulders. The falseness of her solicitude irritated me, but I liked being warm. I grew extremely noddy, bitter powder on my lips, a bitter drain from my nostrils. Eventually clothes were offered. I was dressed. Food was suggested. Eric Something, his arm around me to support, to grope, announced that a Johnny Rocket's was not far. Jessie went on ahead with some guys in a van, saying she'd order me some cheese fries, a strawberry shake. I was to follow



in the limo with Eric Something. The lighting guy was vastly relieved to see us go.

“Hey, this was good, huh?” he said. “Good dope, good people.”

I declined comment.

The limo ride was all bouncing sugary lights behind my closed eyes. When I opened them I saw Johnny Rocket’s glowing like a juke box cathedral, like a nuclear gay bar. Nobody we knew was inside. No Jessie, no van guys. We climbed out and leaned against the limo, standing on the sidewalk in front. In the glare sleeting from the restaurant windows, Eric Something’s pores looked like blackheads, his lips had a red rubbery shine. He was so ugly in his fashionable beauty I reconsidered doing him. The people inside Johnny Rocket’s moved jerkily, stiffly, like bad animation. I imagined myself hunting through the records of all the dead Davids in upstate New York. I imagined succeeding in my hunt.

Eric Something lifted his face to the corrupted sky as if addressing a deity, then cut his eyes toward me. “Wonder where they are?”

I shook my head.

“They must’ve stopped somewhere,” Eric Something said. “Perhaps for gas.”  
“Uh-huh.”

I caught a whiff of Juicyfruit among the automotive smells of the street. Alerted, I glanced around. In the middle of the parking lot for Johnny Rocket’s, two old men, bearded and disheveled, appeared to be slapping each other on the shoulders. They were, I realized, fighting. At the back of the lot, tucked into a corner, was the van. The people in the front seats were visible as dark smudges behind the glass. On the wall of the adjoining building, behind and above the roof of the van, drippy blue letters. Three words. My eyes were so messed up, I couldn’t make them out, but I could guess what the letters spelled. The people in the van weren’t moving. Not at all. Sitting absolutely still as if hoping not to be seen. The person in the passenger seat was about the same size as Jessie.

I may have made a noise, because Eric Something asked if I was all right.

“Not really,” I told him.

“Would you like to go on in?”

I thought about what was possible, what was impossible. They both had the same incomprehensible value. I felt afraid again and wondered what was in

store for me, but fear wasn't strong enough to be much of a motive. I should, I told myself, probably write that song.

The old men stopped fighting and stood bent over, hands on their knees, gasping. The people in the van still hadn't moved. In my head I heard chords, a whining melody like a red-hot wire being drawn out and twisted. Words, too. Though not the ones the man might have wanted me to write. You come on like a genius, like an evil without end/a two-legged desolation who's just hoping to make friends/and pretends to know the secret upon which everything depends . . . Whatever/if it works for you that's fine/Whatever/gets you happy kills you after awhile/Whatever/it wouldn't be a huge surprise/if the devil was the answer to God's infinite surmise/if all I ever wanted was a man with empty eyes/if everything you threaten is a love note in disguise . . . so Whatever. It needed work, but I'd had worse beginnings.

"There they are! The hell are they doing?" Eric Something had spotted the van. "I'll go see, shall I?"

I shrugged, said, "Sure."

He started into the lot, but detoured and kneeled by the front tire of the shiny red car parked in front of the limo. "My God!" He patted the tire, gave a disgusted snort and looked back to me. "Do you believe this? Some asshole's running retreads on a new Ferrari!"

No sign of movement inside the van. I remembered a time when Jessie and I were friends, drunk as hell and stoned, picking up guys at an arcade in Huntington Beach and fucking them out on the sand. Wild girls. Then the dope came back on me and I was floating again. The man had been right. Whoever he was, whatever, even if he didn't exist, I was perfect for him.

"You couldn't make that shit up," I said.

# HANDSOME, WINSOME JOHNNY

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as by Sally Carteret

**M**Y REPUTATION PRECEDES ME. I'D BEEN CLEAN FOR FIFTEEN months when I signed with Arista, but the contract insisted I do the first album at Black Bear in the mountains west of Tahoe, far from the temptations of LA. The place was the maximum security prison of recording studios. A dozen bedrooms, two studios, a lounge, and a kitchen, all underground except for a bunkerlike structure of sandstone brick crowning a piney hilltop. Security gates, electric fences. The nearest cultural center was Shingletown—imagine the dark side of Mayberry. Tiny frame houses with satellite dishes under gloomy skies. A ramshackle tavern, the Hot Spot, that enclosed a dim, beery light and racks of antlers mounted on the wall and a clouded mirror in which the reflections of rednecks salivated over a fifty-year-old bartender with a hagged-out face and monstrous breast implants. Aunt Bee with a blond wig was enthroned behind the cash register, grinding her teeth from diet pills. Guys with undershot jaws wearing hunting jackets and camo pants who had lost all ethical direction after militias went out of fashion. All in all, the Spot had the atmosphere of a belladonna nightmare, but some of my tunes were on the jukebox and I found I could amuse myself by slutting it up with the locals. One guy named Red, a leering, turkeynecked old geezer with a Vietnam-era Marine tattoo, took to addressing me as, Hey, Famous, and asked if I wanted to do some *blow*. No matter what your poison, the entire town was a form of aversion therapy.

Arista sent one of their “creative people” to watchdog me, this way-sensitive, studly type named Vince Candela. Gelled hair, stylish reading glasses. Dressed all in black. Vince had three expressions: blank, withdrawn, and a brow-furrowed look of benign concern that he employed in his professional capacity. The working title for the album was “The Return of the Queen Mother,” and the mock up of the cover art portrayed me holding a

broadaxe, wearing a leather jacket, a ripped T-shirt and black jeans, at the forefront of an army of trolls. It was intended to be a revisiting of my punk roots and to put me in the mood, Vince had decorated the walls with old posters that showed me performing back when I was billed as the Queen Mother, screaming into a mike in various stages of undress. I told him it didn't make me feel all that much like rock and roll to be constantly reminded how good my tits were when I was twenty-two. He gave me the Look, nodded, and with this maxed-out sincerity, like a priest offering absolution, he said, Yeah, he could relate to that . . . okay. I don't believe he sounded out the words when he read, but maybe that's just me being optimistic.

The band was sessions guys from LA. Corky Jakes, who I'd worked with several times before, was on guitar. Over the years he had developed a peculiar obsession that occupied his mind during the considerable breaks that often occur while creating an album. I'm not at all sure Corky had ever seen a real bird. He wore a wide-brimmed black hat, walked with his shoulders hunched, head down, and hated to go outside. But the man was fascinated by pictures of birds. Everywhere he went he brought with him a number of bird books, expensive Audubon Society editions with lots of prints and photographs. Each night at Black Bear he'd sit in his room, poring over them. No one could figure out what the attraction was until, on the fifth morning of recording, Vince found him dead. Corky had fixed up with a speedball and subsequently engaged in a bout of erotic self-strangulation while gazing at a beautifully tinted artist's rendering of a pileated woodpecker. Apparently the woodpecker was just too much fun for his heart to bear.

Since Corky had been an immense asshole, grief was in short supply. Bad jokes were made by the other musicians about *wood* and *peckers*. Vince, however, was beside himself. Not only did he have to bring in another guitarist, the idea that he had failed his masters wreaked havoc with his savoir faire. His hair was a mess. The evening after Corky's death, I was standing at the bunker door, smoking a cigarette, watching a squirrel scamper across the fallen needles and wondering why you never saw one take a dump—were they demure?, did they shit where they lived?—when Vince came up from the studio and accused me of supplying Corky with drugs.

—Blow it out your ass! I took a drag off my cigarette and made a smoke ring. Vince hovered, uncertainty writ large on his face. He was, I realized, developing new expressions.

—Uh . . . he said. You didn't . . . you're saying you didn't?

—I had any smack, I sure as hell wouldn't have given it to Corky.

—It's in your contract, he said weakly. No drugs.

—Jesus, man! What happened to you? I mean you used to be so on top of shit. So cool.

That I'd once thought him cool appeared to perk Vince up. He shoved his hands in his pockets, squared his shoulders, and did a faltering impression of the Look.

—Somebody tell you to ask me about dope? I asked. Mister Arista, maybe?

—I was just testing you.

—You're pretty slick, man. Remind me not to get on your bad side.

He braced taller, heaved an expansive sigh and fixed his eyes on the distance. I'd seen Irish Setters have similar moments of self-satisfaction after a BM.

—I'm bringing Steve Stein up to finish the album, he said after a minute or so.

This hit me harder than Corky's passing. Fuck you are! I said.

—Steve's available.

—I don't give a fuck he's having a brewski at the Spot. He's way too slick for what we're doing!

—He should be here tomorrow.

I waved at the pines, the squirrels and said, I'm putting up with this goddamn sensory deprivation cause I wanna make the album. But you run that assbag Stein in on me . . . Hey, I got enough money. I'm back in LA tomorrow.

The Look was back in force. There was no arguing with Vince once it manifested fully. The entire resources of his IQ were required to sustain it. I told him he could jam Steve Stein and stalked off down the hill.

**S**teve Stein . . . fuck!

The guy's last solo album had been entitled "Harshing My Mellow." Listening to it had about the same effect as chugging a bottle of vanilla

extract, something I tried when I was thirteen on the off-chance it might get me high. It didn't.

I was so pissed, instead of stirring someone up to give me a ride, I walked into Shingletown. Not smart. I realized this halfway down the access road, alone among dark pines and moonshadow and various skitterings and scutterings that made City Girl paranoid. The hills were alive with one-eyed rednecks bugging woodchucks, yearning for higher primates upon which to vent their lust. When I hit the two-lane, I walked along the shoulder. No skitterings and scutterings. Just a winded silence punctured every few minutes by a car passing at high speed, its headlights sawing across me, carving ugly shapes from the brush. Most Shingletowners drove like Dale Earnhardt's headless ghost was right on their ass, like they didn't care whether they lived or died . . . and who could blame them for that? Occasionally a car would slow to allow someone within to yell *Wanna Fuck?* or make some other equally trenchant comment. I imagined myself thrown seventy feet down the road, lying broken in the weeds, my last memory being of two shadows emerging from the car that had struck me, bending down over me and one saying, *Hey, she's still breathing. Let's take her back to the shack!*

I was about twenty minutes from the Spot when a black panel van slowed and pulled off onto the shoulder ahead of me. The Shingletown Slasher, I figured. I stopped walking. A shadow got out the driver's side and looked toward me. *You wanna ride?* he asked.

No thanks, I told him.

He ran a hand through his hair. Though I couldn't see his face, or anything about him except that he was slightly built, I knew from that gesture that he was an actor. Not a movie or a TV actor, but a guy who viewed himself as starring in his own life. The gesture had an Elvis elegance. I could tell he'd practiced and performed it many times.

*This isn't the best place for you to be walkin' alone,* he said. *All kinds mutants out here.*

The rear doors of the van were kicked open and I jumped back. The interior was lit. Three hairy guys peered out at me. Behind them were amplifiers, a keyboard case, a drum kit. One of the hairy guys crawled halfway out and said to the shadow, *It's her, man! I told you!*

—*You're Julie Banks?* the shadow asked.

—The once and future, I said. You guys playing around here?

—Yeah, we're at the Spot this weekend. You wanna ride?

—Fuck, yeah!

There was another hairy guy in the passenger seat, but he let me ride shotgun and climbed into the back. As we drove I saw in the dashboard lights that the shadow was a pale good-looking guy about twenty-five with great cheekbones and a sulky look and long black hair tied off in a ponytail. His name was Johnny Bigelow and the band was called Mister Wrong. I asked what sort of music they played and he said, Other people's stuff. Play a couple your tunes, matter of fact. Pork, the guy who recognized you, he's a big fan. He heard you were recording up at Black Bear.

—Pork. The name has some significance?

—Might. Y'never know with Pork.

He steered one-handed and lit a cigarette. In the flare of the lighter I saw he was more than good-looking, he was Calvin Klein cologne ad handsome. Way too young for me. Which made him perfect for my next mistake.

—If you wanna sit in, Pork would fuckin keel over, he said.

—Is that desirable?

—Some nights it is. So you wanna?

—Maybe, I said. Lemme see how drunk I get.

—You sayin you gotta be drunk to sing with us?

—I gotta be a little drunk to sing with anyone. Which tunes of mine you do?

—"See Rock City" and "True Hearts Like Yours And Mine".

—Something old, something new.

—I like the new stuff better, he said. But the old stuff goes over better in bars.

—You the singer?

—Uh-huh.

I'd been flirting with him. Not blatantly, but enough so I knew he was picking up on the signs. It ticked me off he wasn't reacting.

—Well, maybe that's your problem, I said.

**R**ock and roll is about mediocrity. All the great players like Hendrix and Bloomfield, great songwriters like Dylan and Patty Smith, they pass

through and bring a faint genius to the form. But the truth of rock and roll is an ordinary truth best expressed by mediocre bands like Mister Wrong who're always going nowhere, spreading that truth in dirtbag bars like the Spot, the evangels of a fleshly, dumbshit religion whose icon is a teenage boy humping a mike stand. Every once in a while, however, the mediocre rises to the level of a low art. It's an accident, really, or it seems like one. Johnny was that kind of accident. His voice was nothing special and his playing . . . well, technically it was just okay, but even his clumsiest fills had a raw insolence, the I-don't-care-if-you-like-this-suck-on-it-anyway vibe of honest-to-God rock and roll. Installed at one end of the Spot on a foot-high stage, Mister Wrong was doing everything right. Old Aunt Bee was bopping her head and the bartender was shimmying her silicon and out on the floor, shitkickers and their skanky shin-bone women were engaged in some sort of Martian cave ritual that approximated dance. Toward the finish of the first set Johnny asked over the mike if I wanted to come up and help 'em out. I was sailing on an ocean of four tequilas. I didn't hesitate.

The band kicked into the fractured intro to "See Rock City" and I got a feeling I hadn't known for years. The feeling of having so much fun with the music, it just naturally fucked people up. The tempo was a hair fast, but I let it handle me, let it roll my hips, my ass, and sang like I meant it:

—I got a fortune in my veins  
Policeman's asking for my name  
His flashlight's driving me insane  
It glitters . . .

He says, Hey girl, what you been takin  
I say, Nothin, I'm just fakin  
He says, Baby, you're mistaken  
Let's see you walk the white line  
Touch your nose a dozen times  
We gotta place for your kind  
Down in detox . . . .

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Now I've broken up with heroin, tequila's become my special friend. He's a tricky fucker—I never know where he's going to take me. Down to some deep blue badland where despair plays non-stop on an off-key tin piano or to someplace nice and even where sobriety seems a form of unenlightenment or to a party at the end of the world. That night he time-tripped me back to a happy, careless day I'd forgotten about or merely thought had happened. I felt wild among boys, my pussy throbbing like a diamond power, even though the men who gathered around me at the bar were boys by only the broadest of definitions. Sad middle-aged screw-ups named Tiny and Red and Little Jack. Red must have felt somewhat boyish. Instead of telling me the story behind his tattoo again, without his usual leering display of amber-colored teeth, he bought me another shot of my special friend and sang a fragment of the chorus of my song in a whiny voice:

—I wanna See Rock City  
Aw, I hear it's so damn pretty . . .

He shook his head in wonderment and said, That's the shit there, Famous, and looked like he was tearing up. I was so moved by the fact that he was moved, our souls sloshing with the same level of sentimental cactus juice, I kissed his scruffy cheek and raised a blush.

Like most men in my life, Senor Tequila wound up getting me in trouble . . . though ten years before I wouldn't have called it trouble. In the middle of the band's last set, while I was singing "True Hearts Like Yours And Mine," a song of undiluted loss, I decided there was too much sadness in the world. I further decided that as a remedy for this, to do my bit, I would fuck the guitar player's brains out. Johnny never changed expression. Glum, glum, glum. That he'd shown no interest in me, I admit, posed a challenge, but foremost in my mind was the notion that he needed the Queen Mother to jumpstart his *joie de vivre*.

In place of a living wage the management of the Spot provided several squalid upstairs rooms in which the bands who played there could sleep. I hauled Johnny into one, wrestled him down onto a mattress that yielded a collapsed-lung *oof* beneath our weight, and had my way with him. I'd characterize his response as reluctant but dutiful. Unimaginative yet efficient.

Technically correct. A lot of handsome guys I've been with have thought they didn't need to know how to fuck. They figured it was enough they deigned to do the deed. It was the girl who'd gotten lucky. They tended to balk at performing certain practices, but that wasn't Johnny. He did what was required and went that extra mile. I could see it wasn't his idea of raging fun and I assumed at first he was doing it for the band, hoping I'd throw some cheese to the rats, mention Mister Wrong to industry people. When I tested this theory, bringing the subject up, he didn't rise to the bait. I next assumed that his distant imitation of a normal guy was all rock and roll attitude, an existential pose. But he didn't have that sullen I'm-not-into-being-a-rock-star trip going and I finally concluded he wasn't into anything very much. It was like God had run short on soul jam and had stuffed this pastry three-quarters full. I let him transport me to the basic destination a couple of times and went to sleep.

If I hadn't brought a bottle of Cuervo Gold from the bar, the following morning I would have looked at the skid row furniture and dingy wallpaper, antique yellow with a pattern of dark red covered wagons, a truly authentic Frontier Room, and I would have said for starters, Jesus fucking Christ! I would have asked some questions as to my soundness of mind, indulged in a little self-hate and a more generous helping of contempt for Shingletown and Shingletowners. I would have resuscitated my self-respect by thinking I might get a song out of the experience, though I would know this for a lie. Then I would have sneaked out and down the stairs and beat it the hell back to Black Bear. But after a stiff wake-up shot I had a flicker of inspiration. After two more shots the flicker became a stroke of genius. Leaving Johnny asleep, I went downstairs and borrowed use of the phone from Aunt Bee and called the vice-president in charge of my corporate destiny at Arista. I told him I wanted to run in a local band for the recording.

—Julie, he said, drawing my name out, giving it the sound of an old affliction.

—These guys can play what we want, I said. They've got the garage sound we're looking for. Just gimme a coupla days. You don't like what you hear, we'll try something else. What are the options? You know Vince is bringing in Steve Stein?

—He's available.

—He's a sawed-off macrobiotic pissant who gives himself tangerine enemas! He writes Meher Baba's name in the sand with his dick! He decorates his stool with sparkle dust and prays before he flushes. You think he has a fucking clue about what we're after?

Corporate guys love it when I talk nasty. It gives them stories to tell and they find it charming. It validates their brilliance at being able to recognize and accommodate my brilliance. I kept at it until the vice-president sighed and said, Who's this band you want to bring in?

—Mister Wrong.

—Jesus fucking Christ, he said.

I had a flashback to the Frontier Room, but refused to let that deflect me. Damn straight, I said. The fucking avatars of loser rock.

**W**hen I gave Johnny the news he said placidly, Wow, okay. Is there some money? He was sitting up in bed, fingering his guitar, a black Telecaster with a runic design carved into the body. He never lifted his eyes from the strings.

I was tempted to say something like the money was nothing compared to the king's ransom the Spot was paying him, but either I realized that getting pissed at Johnny did no good or else I wanted to make nice because I still harbored some hope of waking the beast in him. I told him the money was good and if things worked out I might take them on tour.

This disconcerted him. His brow wrinkled, he strummed a soundless chord and said, If we go on tour, is it gonna hafta be like last night? Cause you're hot and all, but you're not right for me.

—Not right, I said, going frosty on him. In what way not right?

—I'm not real big on sex.

Now I was pissed. What the fuck *are* you big on? You taking meds, man?

—I'm tired. I'm tired a lot these days.

—In other words, there was once a day when you weren't tired?

—Yeah, I'm never tired at first, but . . . it gets me eventually.

I tried to parse the meaning of this, but it took too much effort. The Cuervo bottle was on the bureau. I drank, swallowed, drank. My stomach burned like blood was coming back up.

—I like doin tricks, Johnny said.

The tequila made me dizzy and I sat on a corner of the bed.

—Wanna see? he asked.

—Sure. Amaze me.

Johnny set the guitar beside him and made his hands into claws, with the right fingertips almost touching the left. He stared at them the way a stage hypnotist might stare at his subject, looking up through his eyebrows. I was beginning to suspect retardation. After a second the air between his fingertips grew shadowy. A slight darkening, as if someone had shaded the space with graphite. He moved his hands slowly apart; the shaded space stretched, became paler . . . like he was pulling gray taffy. The farther apart he moved his hands, the paler the shaded area got. At length it faded altogether. I had to admit the trick was pretty cool, but I'd seen weirder things, and not just when I was on drugs.

—How'd you do that? I asked.

—Dunno. I just do it . . . like how some people can wiggle their ears.

—You got any more tricks?

—Yeah, but they're harder. They take too much out of me, specially when I'm tired.

He did the thing with his hair, running a hand through it with deliberate elegance. I realized I may have misinterpreted the gesture. It wasn't that Johnny saw himself as a star, but that, like many of us, like, for instance, Corkey Jakes, people who've been blitzed, traumatized, done in, he was simply doing an impression of a human being. I rethought my stroke of genius. Maybe using Mister Wrong would be a disaster.

—How do you feel about woodpeckers? I asked.

—You mean birds? They're cool, I guess.

—You have no strong feeling about them one way or another?

—Naw, not really.

I had a fateful feeling, a goth article, like I was about to prick my finger for some arcane purpose; but then I'd often had such a feeling since I had gone through rehab. Okay, I said. You're hired.

It was not a disaster at first. We laid down three strong tracks in two days, a record for me. Even Vince, after an initial fit of pique, seemed pleased. However, this had less to do with the music, about which Vince knew next to nothing, than it did with him and Johnny bonding. Whenever we went on break I'd see them talking together. Intellectual equals, I figured. Possibly soulmates. As I passed them once on my way to grab a smoke, I overheard Vince discussing hair products. Johnny appeared transfixed by the subject. Though I'd given up on him as a lover, I was still curious about him and the second night, while we were smoking out on the hillside, I asked Pork to tell me something about Johnny . . . like what the hell was he doing with Vince?

Pork, I'd discovered, was the brains of the outfit. The other three—Frank, Sandy, and Rick—were dedicated stoners who sneaked off to do joints whenever feasible and lived in a smiley haze and spoke a brand of English that seemed to contain less than thirty words. Pork was no genius, but he kept the band going, handling bookings, equipment problems, schedules. A big slump-shouldered man with a beer belly, pouchy cheeks, a brown Moses beard, and an amiable, expansive personality. I saw him as the male version of an earth mother. He had one off-putting trait—he tended to zone out on occasion and stare at me like he thought I might disappear any second and so he wanted to savor the moment.

—I known him since we were kids, he said of Johnny. Best friends. We started our first band, we were eleven. Thought we were gonna make it.

—Well, maybe you will, I said.

—Aw, we'll ride your coattails far as you can drag us, but you can only drag this bunch so far.

He flicked ashes toward the moon. It was riding high and looked to be caught in a pinetop. There was a wind and the shadows under the boughs slid along the ground like black souls slipped from the sprays of needles.

—To answer your question, Pork went on, he's always been . . . I guess you'd call it slow. Except for back a few years. He started hanging out with this guy and I think they were doing a lot of speed. Y'know how people get when they start doing serious speed? Crystal meth and shit. How they kinda flare up? Like alla sudden they're full of energy and ideas? That's how it went with Johnny. He did some great writing. Made big plans. Then he burned out and now he's back to normal. More or less.

I asked him to explain the more-or-less.

—He's got a few twitches he didn't useta have, Pork said.

—Like his tricks?

—Tricks? I only seen the one . . . thing he does with his hands. You seen that? It's pretty fucking weird, huh? Pork hit his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke that clung to his beard. I useta know this other guy could piss over a school bus. Y'know, stand on one side and arch his stream right over the top.

—You have to wonder how he came to that, I said.

Pork chuckled. I think it was he considered himself the Evil Knievel of pissing.

—So Johnny's got some tunes, does he?

—Yeah. You wanna see 'em, I'll dig 'em out for ya.

—I'll take a look.

—Man, it'd be so cool, you wanted to record one. I mean, I know you wouldn't put it on an album. They're not your thing. But just for a goof. Just for us . . . the band.

—Lemme see 'em. You never know.

Pork's stare told me he was revving up to say, as he had said before, what an honor it was to be working with me or something of the sort. I didn't want to hear it. Not because it made me feel awkward, but because it made me feel sad thinking about the dreary rock-and-roll mountain of there-but-for-fortune atop which the horseshit kingdom of celebrity lies. All the busted futures, the dead bands, the slim, shattered, dime-sized talents. I was separated from them, I knew, by an inch of hustle, an ounce of brains, a sliver of luck. I beat Pork to the punch, saying, You're a pretty hot drummer, man. You could find yourself better employment.

That flustered him a little. I appreciate it, he said. But me and Johnny are a team. We're in this together.

We shared a comfortable silence, then I said, You guys remind me of the bands I worked with when I was starting out. Playing with you's good for me. I get that feeling I useta get. Excited. Like shit is really happening.

—Oh, yeah! Pork said. That's what it's all about, huh? The feeling.

The third day was better than the first two. We put down two more keeper tracks. Vince sat in the control booth pretending to have rhythm, bobbing his head, almost catching the downbeats. Not once did he offer, as was his habit, an inane suggestion. Johnny was on fire. Though his technical mastery did not improve, he created hooks, fills, and solos that fit like machine parts into the music. Like he was in my head, pulling out things I couldn't write. After we broke I snatched a bottle of red table wine from the kitchen and went to my room and leafed through the charts Pork had given me. The songs were good. Really good. But Pork was right—they weren't my thing. They were mostly story songs laden with florid imagery. Cowboy songs, devil songs, gangland songs, love songs. Stories about a mercenary, a movie star, a small town killer, an alcoholic priest, and dozens more. Over sixty of them. The writing was all over the place. You could see a little Springsteen, a little Steve Earle, a little Beefheart, a little Van Morrison, but the sum of it was all one unique writer. I found it hard to believe that Johnny Bigelow had come up with lines like:

One man's gun had shot out the sun,  
Another man's had set it on fire . . .  
Amber shafts of light had pierced the saloon  
Like some cathedral-choired corner . . .

Or like:

See that high-ranging summer, baby . . .  
White clouds pass there all the time  
Sun going by on a riverboat so slow  
It takes all night to go down . . .

The songs had a pungency, a verbal assurance, that just wasn't in Johnny. I supposed he might be an idiot savant, but that notion wouldn't settle. Drugs didn't seem to explain it either. The songs were too polished.

In among the charts was a notebook containing fragments of lyrics, suggestions for chords, and a list of names and addresses. Therein I found the following verse:

This morning  
Thought I saw Jesus coming through the walls  
The bloody words upon his brow  
Explained some things  
And I got a feeling . . .  
You know the feeling . . .

There were other lyric scraps on the page. Johnny had been working on two separate themes, trying to decide between them. One about a teenage girl, the other about a man in prison. I started fooling with it. Moving lines around. Adding some. Jamming the two ideas together and warping them. Soon I almost had a song. It had been a month since I'd written anything new, and though this was only half mine, it got me excited. I took the notebook and went to see Vince. Hey, I said, rapped once on his door and barged on in. Vince was sitting in an easy chair, wearing plaid boxer shorts and a wifebeater undershirt. His placid expression was a study in flat affect. Johnny sat facing him, cross-legged on the floor, the guitar across his knees. Fully clothed. I could have sworn I saw a faint shadowy outline around his body, but then it wasn't there anymore.

—Hey, fellas. What's up? I said, and laughed. Making a little music together?

Vince said nothing, moved nothing. Johnny said, Just hanging out.

—Is this like guy talk or can I sit in?

This got me no response. Johnny, I noticed, was tracing the symbol carved into his guitar with a forefinger. Over and over.

—I was looking at your notebook, I said. The one Pork gave me. Think I might turn a coupla your pieces into something for the album.

Vince remained silent. This from a man who never failed to resist a change in program—it was how he established his identity. I suspected his glassy stare might be him styling embarrassment into an expression he thought was haughty.

—Cool, Johnny said, sounding drowsy. That'd be cool.

—How's about you, Vince. Thoughts?

It took Vince a while, but he worked up a nod. Yeah, he said. Yeah, I can see it.



The creepiness of the scene took a toll on my nerves. Johnny kept tracing the carved design with his finger. Vince kept staring. Thin tides of hostile energy beat against me. Like I'd penetrated their homoerotic cabal and they were dying for me to leave so the weirdness could flow freely.

—Well, fuck. Allright, I said. I'll work on it more. Maybe we can get to it in a couple of days.

—That's cool, Johnny said, slightly less drowsy.

With zoned diffidence, Vince went, Sure . . . yeah.

—Okay! You guys party on, huh? I closed the door behind me.

Back in my room I finished the wine and smoked a joint I'd begged from the stoners. As a result I grew paranoid. I imagined conspiracies. To what end I couldn't guess, but I was convinced that Vince and Johnny were plotting against me. Johnny's ambivalence about straight sex made sense now. Vince didn't strike me as the kind of guy who'd lounge around in his skivvies with another guy unless he expected an immediate result. Yet I'd caught him staring at my tits at least twenty times a day. The gay angle might be off-base. The thing was, I told myself, there probably was nothing. Vince and Johnny were low-wattage guys. Brothers in stupor. They were linked into some moronic feedback loop was all. I then envisioned a secret meeting of Arista executives clad in black hooded robes, determining by ballot that once the album was done, what with the outtakes and extra tracks and my catalogue, I would be more valuable as a dead cult figure. Assigning Vince and Johnny to plan my career-ending tragedy.

I skimmed Johnny's notebook again, trying to ignore such thoughts. When I came to the list of names and addresses, I read every one. Men. Women. About eighty of them. Most located in northern California. The last name was Johnny's. If this was his address book, which I assumed, why would he list himself? I was too sleepy to care and tossed the notebook onto the floor. That night I had awful dreams. Slasher-zombie-gaping-wound awful. I didn't attach any significance to them because they all took place in Dallas, a place where I've never had much fun.

**T**he music part of things went well. We recorded everything in nine days, except for the new tune I was working on. Otherwise, things were a little

freaky. Vince and Johnny had become an item. From what I could tell they were a short walk away from holding hands in public. During breaks they'd scurry off to Vince's room. At lunch they sat at a separate table and gazed into one another's eyes. My producer, Bob DiTomaso, a chubby bald guy who'd played drums on my break-out album ten years before and had once borne a startling resemblance to Maurice Gibbs, expressed some worry once while we were sitting in the control room.

—Fucking Vince doesn't seem to know what's going on, he said. The guy's gonna wake up out of this haze and realize we made a real rock and roll album, not a buncha corporate pussy music. It'll fuck him up.

—He's just here to babysit me, I said. He doesn't have any actual power.

—Not over *you*. But he can royally screw up my life.

—It's a good album, man. It's gonna sell. You're just being paranoid.

—Gee, what a shocker, he said. Paranoia in the music business. He spun some dials, an act of frustration—the board was switched off. Vince's girlfriend, man, he went on, she's going to pitch a fit.

—Vince has a girl?

—The pin-up babe from hell. Twin thirty-six Ds and the mind of a cost accountant on PCP. She tortures him.

—So this is new for Vince . . . whatever this is?

—It's new for him lately, Bob said. This kid Johnny, man, he's a deviant's deviant. He might be new for everybody.

I asked him to explain the last comment and he said, Don't you get he's extra weird? He's got this kinda spooky control thing?

—Weird, I said. I guess I'm used to it.

—Yeah . . . well. Bob spun more dials and gave an unhappy laugh. Maybe not this.

**T**he three stoners appeared to be unaffected by the edgy atmosphere generated by Vince-and-Johnny's constant communion. They snickered and guffawed at private jokes and did their jobs. Pork, however, became increasingly morose. He snapped at everyone, even at me, his femme ideal, and cast fretful looks at Johnny whenever he went off to the magical hidden country of Vince's room. I tried to get him to talk about what was bothering him, but he

put me off until the night of the sixth day when we were sitting in my room, sharing some more of the table red Arista had provided. He seemed in a better mood, so I asked him again what was going on with Johnny and Vince.

—Johnny can be very destructive with relationships, he said. He latches onto people. Sometimes they're not strong enough for him.

—Not strong enough? You think Johnny's strong?

—Maybe that's not the right word. It's more like they're not attuned to him.

—So you're worried Vince isn't attuned to Johnny?

—Yeah, but I was wrong. Everything's okay now.

—I don't understand what the deal is. Are they having sex?

—Fuck, no! It's just this thing Johnny does with people.

—He latches on.

—Exactly.

I could almost see the satisfaction oozing from Pork. He beamed like a fat young Santa. There was something managerial about his happiness, a pride of ownership, as if Johnny, his best bud, was in reality his best stud mule, his best trick-performing monkey.

—What's going to happen? I asked.

—You mean with Johnny and Vince? Nothin. He'll move on to someone else. He always does. It's no big thing. Pork passed me the bottle and leaned back, hands clasped on his belly. How's the song comin'?

The sudden change of subject irritated me, but I supposed I'd learned all I was going to. I gotta tweak it a little bit, I said. But it's okay.

—This is so great, man! Pork's old expansive Julie-Banks-worshipping self seemed fully restored. This is the best damn thing ever happened to us.

**C**ompared to the studio, the Hot Spot came to feel like a spa in which I could immerse myself in a bath of normalcy. The night after my talk with Pork, I spent a few hours at the bar with Red, banging shots and listening to gothic tales of Shingletown. Since our tequila moment, we'd become drinking buddies. He no longer called me Famous. His experience of Vietnam and Australia gave him a more sophisticated perspective on the town than that of the other barflies and this lent his stories of murder, adultery, and redneck

woe a sardonic edge. He broke from our conversation now and then to flirt with the bartender. She giggled at his raunchy jokes and leaned over the counter to offer him a view of the Silicon Valley.

—You gonna get laid tonight, Red? I asked him.

—Been workin on it, girl. He gave me a wink. I think she's a little jealous of you.

Thereafter I held Red's hand whenever the bartender was looking. She puffed out her chest and grew friendlier yet and took to addressing me as *hon* in a crisp voice. Red was telling me stories about her, how she'd won the price of her implants in a game of liar's poker, when Johnny, Pork and Vince came into the Spot. They settled at a corner table. The waitress brought them a pitcher and they drank. Vince and Johnny communed. Pork appeared to be speaking to them both. You wanna talk to your friends, Red said, I'll hold your seat.

—Not my friends, I said. That's who I came here to get away from.

Red sucked on a lime wedge, poured down another shot of tequila. That Johnny Bigelow's a funny little bug. Couple years ago he was all over Sara Lee Dexter. Real pretty girl. They were set to get married and he left her flat. She told my daughter he useta be a horndog and alla sudden he didn't care no more bout gettin any. Said it's cause this buddy of his, boy moved here from Redding, he died and Johnny got fucked up behind it. Tell you the truth, I don't believe it's bout his friend, it's cause his head ain't right.

—What's wrong with him? I asked.

—It ain't nothin I know. I never socialized with him. He comes in the Spot and hoists a few, but he ain't a talker. But you can just tell lookin at him some-thin's not right.

I glanced at Johnny. Flavored by too many tequilas to count, the air was pale yellow and watery. Something seemed not right with everything I saw. I had to admit, however, Johnny seemed spectacularly not right with his emotionless Vinceward stare and that distinct shadowy outline around his body, like he was a piece that didn't quite fit into the puzzle picture of a smoky redneck bar.

The waitress brought us four shots more. She leaned across the counter and whispered in Red's ear for a long time. Then Red whispered back. She went off smiling over her shoulder at him.

—Better not be drinking any more, I said. Not unless you want to ruin her night.

Red flashed his resinous smile. No chance of that, girl. I got Viagra!

I was at a point where the ritual of lime and salt confused me. Drink, slurp the lime, bite the salt. I gave up on it and did a shot without any extras. Warmth flushed through me. I felt giddy. True delirium, I felt, was well within reach. I indulged in a quick sexual fantasy about the bartender. Saw her naked on a ratty mattress, her white squashlike breasts sprouting plump and gorgeous from a bony witch's body. Aureoles like misshapen archery bull's-eyes. A howl locked behind her clenched teeth. Mascara sockets like the heads of black serpents coiled inside her skull. Tequila was way more fun than smack.

—Shit, said Red. Well, I'm drunk.

—Roger that, I said.

Baudelaire would have loved the Spot the way I came to view it. Deer heads watching delicately, blackly from the walls. Drab humans in dull colors, their faces blotched, stained with rouge and spittle. Some slumped in their chairs, still and boneless-looking as vegetables with limbs. Others partnered on the dance floor, not so much swaying as they were listing, then righting themselves. All to a whiny, saccharine, disturbing music, a country dirge courtesy of Shania at her heartfelt, soul-neutered best. And at the center of it, Johnny, Vince, and Pork. The secret meeting of three mystical powers. They didn't speak, gave no signals. They knew everything, beamed radiant thoughts to one another. It was a lithium dementia. The world was made of pulp and rags, and had fashioned of itself these cunning, blundering shapes. Red handed me my other shot. I drank it and nothing changed. This was to be my destination for the evening. An ordinary night of lowdown madness in the Land of the Free. Then Johnny got to his feet, a sudden move. His shadowy outline flared—opaque graphite-colored flames appeared to shoot from his shoulders and hair. He took a sideways step and keeled over, unfolding to the floor and smacking the back of his head. I lost sight of him as people crowded around. I had no immediate reaction to his fall. It seemed only an incident among incidents. Another tick-tock on the purple clock that times us. But as the crowd parted and Pork led a wobbly Johnny toward the door, Vince straggling at their heels, I grew a worry about the album. I went to them, walking with a floozy looseness of step that would have fooled no policeman.

—What’s going on? I asked. He okay?

Pork, consternated, in a rush, said, This happens. He pushed past me through the door, guiding Johnny with a hand to his elbow. Johnny’s nostrils were red-rimmed, his eyes lidded. Vince followed without acknowledging me.

—Hey, I said, coming after them, angry at this treatment. He gonna be able to play?

Johnny stopped and turned to me. In his face was an anger bigger and colder than mine. I’m fine, he said.

—What the hell was that all about? The dead boy act.

—You never passed out before? He spat out a laugh. Looks like you’re bout to pass out now. Pass out round here, you’ll wake up with a dozen new STDs. Add to your fucking collection.

Ordinarily I would have responded in kind, but I’d never seen him display so much emotion. It shocked me back toward sober.

Pork spoke to Johnny, came over to me and said, He gets these spells. A couple minutes, he’ll be fine. His hippy bear-man face was dressed to lie.

—Nuh-uh, I said. Screw that junk, Elvis. You better take the time to explain this. Cause that was some psychotic shit!

—Julie, listen . . .

—Nosir. You listen. We got a few more days and I don’t want Mister Wrong over there going batshit on me. So you straighten his ass out and then you explain. To me. You tell *me* what the fuck’s happening with him. I want to know what you know. Everything. This whole thing is getting too weird.

—All right, he said, backing away. Take it easy. We’ll work it out.

—Tomorrow morning! I shouted. You talk to me then!

I watched them pile into Vince’s Lexus and drive off. I started back inside, but thought the Spot might have changed on me or else I might now be too clearheaded to appreciate the drugged bacchanal within. I wasn’t prepared to adjust to a new reality. I sat down on the steps and looked up. It was impossible to distinguish between the dark pine tops and the sky. The electric beer signs in the front window shed a reddish purple glow across the asphalt. My anger faded. I became murky as to the exact nature of what had gotten me angry, even though I recalled everything that had happened. A car passing in a rush of light made me lonely. I began to want company again. I wanted

way more than company, but I wouldn't find it in Shingletown. The newly emergent hateful Johnny occupied my thoughts. Fuck it, I said. Fuck it. Always a solution. Wind sang through the boughs. Most people would have called the sound it gave a moan, but it seemed to me more like indifference.

**P**ork came to me for the purpose of explanation, but I had a hangover. Later, I told him. I got through the morning smothered in the dust of too many cigarettes, a gonged feeling in my head. I ate a bowl of muesli for lunch. The thought of real food made me queasy. Johnny never looked at me and I never looked at him. I didn't feel injured or angry, just fed up. Though effective, my stroke of genius had proved to be a downer. Toward dinnertime I regrouped and after a grilled cheese and soup I went to my room and tweaked the new song. Its subject now was a grown woman in a prison of indefinite nature. A prison of days. Rather than escape her life, she diverted herself with fantasies. The fantasies weren't particularly optimistic, but they transformed her prison. Doubtless the cloistered environment of Black Bear was a strong influence on the lyrics. I called the song "The Feeling."

For the rest of the recording I turned inward, isolating myself in spirit and, when possible, in the flesh, from the other musicians. Not only did I want to avoid conflict—I felt repentant, though I had committed far more grievous sins against myself than bad judgment and a handful of tequila nights. I did my best to ignore the Pork-Vince-Johnny axis, but I became aware that Vince and Johnny were sleeping in the same room and that Vince was looking poorly. Pale and unkempt. I talked to Bob DiTomaso and we agreed that our philosophy should be, Let's Just Get Through This. We swore an oath of mutual support.

The eighth afternoon, after laying down the bass and drums and the guitar intro for "The Feeling," I felt wasted. I begged off the rest of the day and went to bed early. I waked around ten o'clock that night from a dream of which I recalled only the word *sybarite* and a warm plum-colored surface. I sat up and rumbled my hair, glanced toward the door, and said, Shit! Johnny was standing there, half-silhouetted in the light from the corridor, wearing a pair of briefs.

—Get outa here! I fumbled for the lamp and knocked it off the stand. I swung my legs onto the floor and tensed, ready to charge him.

—You wanna have sex? He half-sang this, low and almost under his breath, giving the five syllables a rhythm. I knew he wasn't serious—he was sneering at me like he'd done in the parking lot. He seemed to be giving off a sickly unstable radiation, a feeling that fluttered between enraged and bemused.

I told him again to get out.

—I thought since you're helpin out the band so much, he said, I should pay you back some.

—I'm gonna kick you in the nuts, freak, I said. You may not believe me, but it's gonna happen.

Pork appeared behind him, caught him by the shoulder and said, C'mon, man!

Johnny slung an elbow at his head, driving him back. Leave me alone, you know how I get, he said. I'm bout to move on, all right? He turned to me and spread his arms. Go ahead. Kick me, bitch. I won't stop you. Be a fuckin badge of honor, gettin kicked in the nuts by the Queen Mother. Like a battle scar. I can show the bruises in bars and get free drinks.

This was the closest thing to a soliloquy I'd heard him deliver. It gave me pause. Pork, I said. Get his ass outa here.

—I think I'm startin to get off on the tension, Julie, Johnny said. No shit. Just waitin to get kicked in the nuts is doin it for me. When you kick me, I bet I come all over your goddamn foot.

Pork tried to wrangle him away from the door, but Johnny shoved him aside. He glared at me, said, Stupid fuckin bitch!, and walked off. Pork started to speak, but I cut him short.

—I'm gonna lay down vocals for "The Feeling" tomorrow. You keep him away from me. When I'm done he can put in the guitar. Then you guys are fucking gone.

Pork's expression, one of concern, flattened out. His stare reminded me of the stare a probation officer had once turned my way as he debated whether or not to violate me. It had the same dead impersonal weight. Like he'd flipped a coin and was watching it spin. You're the boss, he said.

After he closed the door I threw on my robe and sat smoking, tapping my foot, scratching my neck, twitchy from adrenaline. I wondered if Johnny



could keep it together long enough to complete the album. Bob DiTomaso had been right. A deviant's deviant. I'd known more depraved people. People with a more recognizable depravity, at any rate. But Johnny had a special something. I saw that quality in him now, although I couldn't identify it.

Out of nervousness I started flipping through Johnny's notebook. I looked over the lyric fragments, hoping to spot a clue to his pathology. Nothing jumped up and bit me. When I came to the list of names and addresses, I read them all again and noticed that the second-to-last name was a man from Redding. I recalled Red telling me about Johnny's friend from Redding who died. How Johnny had gone strange afterward. I took the notebook and went to find Bob DiTomaso. Found him in the studio, working on a mix. I asked if he still had hacker friends and he said, Yeah, why? I gave him the notebook and showed him the list.

—Can you get one of them to check these names out? I asked. See if there's something meaningful . . . some connection?

While Bob spoke on the phone and then faxed the pages to a friend in LA, I listened to my voice. It sounded like caterwauling. I switched off the mix and keyed up a demo I'd made of "The Feeling."

. . . voices on the radio  
talkin bout me everywhere I go  
it no longer seems so strange  
when I look up at the ceiling  
the ceiling starts to rain  
and nothin's ever gonna change  
nothin's ever gonna change  
You know the feeling . . .  
I got this feeling . . . .  
You know the feeling . . . .  
(a dream of life, a crimson joy,  
maladjusted, paranoid)  
I got the feeling . . .

I rewound the tape to the beginning of the chorus, tried putting in a doubled handclap on the off-beats, then let it play on.

I believe in Jesus and the Buddha,  
astrology, past lives  
I only question everything I know . . .

—Great fucking song, Bob said, sitting at the console next to me.

—It's too long, too many words.

—Yeah, maybe. But it's too long in the right way. It's the kind of too-long song gets on the radio sometimes.

Bob extracted a baggie containing about a quarter-ounce of pot from beneath the console. Want me to twist one up?

—You have to ask?

We smoked a joint and fell to talking about the song.

—It doesn't need much more than's on the demo, Bob said. Drums and bass. The drums lighter, though. A little guitar thing for between verses. If the fuckwit can't come up with one, I can do it. I know what I want to hear.

—A mechanical sound, I said. Grinding. Repetitive.

—Variations on repetitive. But, yeah.

—What you think about me throwing in a handclap on the chorus? You hear me doing that?

—Yeah. That was good.

We talked, smoked. Smoked, talked. Working up the song was almost fun, but I was too on edge. Through the control room window, the studio with its fallen guitars, abandoned drum kit, singerless mikes, looked like a sterile post-Rapture environment, as if the musicians had been spirited away, assumed into Heaven.

Nearly two hours later a fax came in from Bob's LA friend. He read it over and said, They're all dead . . . except for Johnny.

I hadn't been anticipating anything of this sort, but neither was I stunned. A serial killer? Why not? I suggested the possibility to Bob.

—Not unless he's older than he looks. Some of these people died in the Sixties. The dates they died are scattered all over the last forty, fifty years. He scanned the pages a moment longer and said, Whoa! They all killed themselves.

He handed me the list. It had been rendered alphabetically, but I saw that some of the dates of death were separated by weeks, some by years.

—Ask him about it, Bob said.

—You think he'd tell me anything?

—He might want to tell you.

—I might not want to hear it, I said. Let's finish up and get him the fuck gone. Then we don't have to care.

—There's a plan, Bob said. Maybe he'll take Vince with him.

Laying down the vocal took most of the afternoon. I wasn't at my best. Vince was essentially a no-show. He sat in the control room for maybe an hour and had such a profoundly vacant air, I suspected if I thumped his head it would produce a *bong*. After he left things went better, though it was still a struggle. My mind wanted to run away to Brazil, Ecuador, Madagascar, some place with monkeys and really great fruit drinks. Perhaps a volcano on the horizon. Somewhere Beyond The Music Business. Once I'd been too weird for the business. Being too weird lent you a certain potency, created an unearthly aura that could serve to make you a commodity. Now the business was too weird for me. Time to get out, I thought. Time to settle down, find that special someone, give birth, swaddle myself in life insurance and investment programs, prepare meals, take up hobbies, fetch and carry, be faithful, live in enduring sweetness and comfort. My days of accomplishment and dangerous joy were done. For an instant all this seemed attractive. I wondered if every married woman I knew had been provoked to mistake by such an instant and the spell it cast. A spell that gradually came unraveled and from which you awoke saying, Jesus fucking Christ! Marriage, I concluded, was for the placid. I was not yet placid.

When Bob was satisfied with the vocal, I went immediately to the Spot. It was six in the afternoon when I arrived. The place was nearly empty. Behind the register, Aunt Bee looked as lifeless as the deer heads. Red was on his usual stool, leaning across the counter to swap spit with the bartender. I had that feeling of mild but undiluted pleasure that goes with having made a bar one's own. The dim aqueous light seemed exalted, the unoccupied chairs populated by the spirits of last night's crowd.

—Too early for tequila, said Red as I sat beside him, and I said, For shots, maybe. Not for a margarita.

We chatted while the bartender mixed my drink.

—Gonna miss you when you gone, Red said. But maybe it's for the best. I'm runnin outa stories to tell you.

—It's not a problem, believe me, I said. Lemme tell you about the music business.

I intended a long, slow planing upwards toward drunkenness, an escalator ride that would take me to midnight, at which point I would sink into a gentle sleep. For once I kept to my intention. I nursed the margarita and, to Red's amusement, exchanged views with the bartender on men. I had known her name was Sue, but had perceived her to be misnamed. She was a Sibyl, a Bronwyn. Soon I began to understand her Sue-ness. Behind that creased, unfortunate face lay the pot of sweet myrrh that was the soul of a Sue. Her implants were more natural to her than her features.

I spaced my drinks carefully over the next few hours, figuring to do my first shot on the stroke of nine. Satisfaction owned me. We'd made a good album and now the songs were digitized, packed into units, I wanted to break them open, sing them loose, erratically, free them up again. I wanted a bass line to wrap around my spine, a backbeat to slam my hips sideways until I howled. I couldn't wait to get a real band together and work them up live. In the meantime, as the Spot filled up and the juke box started telling its stories, I told Red some of mine. I told him about the Japanese Beatles, four guys who supported their music thing, an art noise outfit, by means of meticulously planned burglaries. I told him *The Strange Occurrence At The Kyoto Art Festival*. I told him *Julie Hits Hollywood, Part One*, the Shingletown remix, and *What Happened To The Famous Actor After She Fucked Him*. Red lapped it up. After I told him about Rock Island, a theme park-cum-cemetery where an Ecstasy-loving young billionaire hoped to build monumental tombs for all his favorite musicians, including yours truly, Red said, You must be bored shitless here.

—I thought I was, I said. Now I just wish I was.

—Yeah, but it's sure different where you're talkin about.

—Not really, man. People dress different, talk different. But it's all the same abnormal structures.

—I don't know. Vietnam's a helluva lot different than here.

—You might not think so, you went there now.

With an odd delicacy of tone, Red said, I believe we may be talkin bout two separate subjects.

We were friends because we didn't know one another and this moment in which we simultaneously understood that carved a breach between us. To repair it I ordered shots, though it was not yet eight-thirty. I told Red he was right. Everywhere was different from everywhere else. It just depended on your perspective.

Two shots past nine o'clock, Larry, Curly, and Moe walked in. Johnny was wearing one of Vince's black Italian shirts. Vince dragged along behind him, head down, like he'd been whipped and rode hard. Bringing up the rear, his contentment a ruddy aura, was Pork. I gave them a second look, but no more, and played poker dice with Red and his friend Menckyn, a prematurely gray, fortyish doofus who owned a Radio Shack franchise in the next town over. The tequila cooperated with my general mood, allowing me to laugh and act stupid and not care about other people's stupidity. Patsy Cline was falling to pieces, her juke box voice warped and crackling, but I felt fine. Menckyn began staring with such frank admiration at my breasts, I was tempted to flash him. Observing this, Red, whom tequila had transported to a fatherly protective zone, said, Damn, Menckyn! Whyn't you just quit lookin at her chest for a second or two? You're embarrassing me! Menckyn grinned and blushed like Bashful and said, Sorry.

—Hey, I done my share of looking, I said. I signaled Sue and held up three fingers.

When Sue brought the shots she leaned to me and said, One of your friends 'peared to be ill and that Johnny Bigelow walked him outside.

I was so disconnected from the studio, the recording, all that, for a moment this information had no context. I glanced over to the table where they had been sitting. Pork was alone, eyeing a thin blonde who was bending over to talk with some guys at the adjoining table.

—I thought you might want to go see what's wrong, Sue said. If it was me I'd be uneasy one of my friends took sick and Johnny went off with him.

Female bartenders sometimes assume a powerful maternity. I was annoyed at having my flow broken, but felt I'd lose face if I didn't check on Vince. I told Red I'd be back and went outside to find him. The sky was clear. Stars above and a China White moon hung up in the boughs. As I came down the

steps into the parking lot, I saw Johnny and Vince go around the corner of the building. It was no business of mine what they did, but I was on a drunk's mission from Sue, the Mother of Us All.

The pines closed in behind the Spot, the rough ground angled up. Forty feet ahead of me, Vince and Johnny were walking so close together, they made a dark two-headed shape. Every now and then they'd pass through a patch of moonlight and I'd see their hair and the colors of their shirts. I expected I was about to sit front row for an act of woodland sodomy. Not appealing. The second they got started, I told myself, the mission would be complete and I'd scoot back inside for another dram of tequila.

The ground angled upward more steeply, leading to a moonlit rise, a hillock with a rock that thrust out from its summit above a shallow valley like a Flintstones diving board. When Vince and Johnny reached it, Johnny got down on his knees and appeared to be writing something on the rock. Vince stood uneasily, shifting his weight back and forth. I went full into mission mode and sneaked closer. These were things Sue might need to know. I hid behind a pine trunk about fifteen feet away. Johnny finished writing. He stood beside Vince, both looking off over the valley while the wind made a heavy, sorrowful rush. The moon brightened as if the wind had washed it clean. Johnny dug something from his shirt pocket. A plastic pill bottle. He unscrewed the cap, tipped the bottle to his lips. Worked at swallowing. He tipped the bottle to his lips again. Swallowed. His pale face framed by wings of shiny black hair, his black shirt and his stillness—I could love a man that cold and steady, though not for long.

Johnny said something to Vince I couldn't hear and turned him by the shoulders so they were confronting one another. My angle didn't allow me to see Vince's face. I thought that this was wrong, this wasn't a thing that should be happening, whatever it was . . . but I didn't think of intervening. I wanted to know what would happen more than I wanted to stop it. People are like that. We all love to watch. I breathed quietly and ignored the mutterings of guilt and conscience.

The shadowy outline I had noticed around Johnny the night before became visible again. It flickered up around his head and shoulders like graphite flames, animated pencil shadings, and then began to swell out of him, to grow. It leaped high, all one gauzy, gray flame now, twice his height, surrounding

him. Undulating, not flickering, like gray sea life, and it grew again, suddenly billowing fatly out to enclose Vince, to enclose them both. Vince was no longer shifting his weight. He was as soldier-still as Johnny. The wind sounded once more, blowing harder, but it had no effect on the gray thing, which was undulating to its own rhythms. The rippling muscles of a belly dancer's smooth stomach—that's what its movement reminded me of. I was afraid, but fear was part of the show I was watching, another reason to watch. Time had gone solid, hardened around me. I pressed myself to the pine trunk. The gray flame, the sea feather, the phantom, the pencil shadings creature, however you'd call it, started to shrink, drawing away from Johnny. When its edges broke contact with his flesh, he sank to his knees and groaned. Nothing dramatic, just a shuddery, sick animal noise. A string of saliva hanging from his lip flashed silver-and-diamonds in the moonlight. The gray shape began sinking into Vince. Shrinking itself inside him, I realized. Johnny toppled onto his side and made another, weaker noise. His head lay in a dark patch, his legs jerked convulsively. Vince now had a shadowy outline. I could hardly see it, and then I couldn't see it at all.

The first thing Vince did once the shadow vanished inside him was to take a handkerchief from his hip pocket, kneel down, and briskly wipe away whatever Johnny had written on the rock. When he got to his feet, he brushed off his hands, stuffed the hanky back in his pocket. The second thing, he stared at the pine trunk behind which I was hiding and came straight toward me. All the fear that had gathered in me, that sat beside me and shared my popcorn as I watched, now turned and snatched at my heart. I broke and ran. Vince's footsteps thudded at my rear. Wobbly from tequila, I made a race of it nonetheless. No stumbles, no sprawls. But he caught me at the edge of the parking lot. Spun me about, wrapped an arm around me and drew me close to smother my attempts to kick him. His chest smelled of talcum powder. With his free hand, he pulled my head back by the hair and stared into my eyes. He was giving me the Look, but this was the Look amped up a millionfold. It scoured me. I couldn't pull a thought together. Even my panic was snuffed. I lolled in his grasp, saying feebly, Vince . . . Vince? I had the feeling he was going to say something. Pronounce a curse or offer a threat in an unknown language, or that a gauzy, gray tongue would flick from his mouth and lick my cheek, coat it with poison. But he never got it out. His eyes switched toward

something in back of me and I was thrown aside, dumped on my butt, rolling halfway under a bush that overspread the asphalt. I heard a shout that didn't sound like Vince, then a smack. Somebody caught my arm, hauled me to my feet. A wild-eyed, rawboned, turkey-necked old geezer. Red. Vince was on the ground, braced on his elbows, blood on his mouth.

—The son-of-a-bitch hurt you? Red asked, all high-octane tequila outraged.

If I said, yes, Vince would be in deep waters. But I didn't believe the guy on the ground was altogether Vince and that made the proposition shaky.

Vince struggled to stand and Red said, You stay right where you are, cocksucker, or you fuckin dead! Vince complied.

—Sue said you was out here a long time, Red said to me. She said I oughta come find you.

—How long was I gone?

—Hell, I don't know. Twenty minutes, maybe. Little more.

It hadn't seemed that long, but I could accept it. My head was clearing. I felt shaky but stable, as if Red's presence and the hard yellow lights of the parking lot somehow confirmed me. I glanced down at Vince. That he hadn't challenged Red caused me to think maybe my drinking buddy could take him without getting hurt. But I knew the moment when I could order Red to kill had passed. He was grinning at me, proud of what he'd done. I'd buy him drinks now.

—Want me to call the cops? he asked eagerly.

—I'll call 'em, I said. I think something happened to Johnny.

Red didn't look to register the last part. He nodded toward Vince. He try and rape you or somethin?

Vince sat up and dusted his trousers. He appeared to be his old self. Almost. A brighter tension in him. On cruise control, but sparks gapping the former stillness of his brain. The way he was sitting, his knees drawn up, hands clasped around them. Like at a garden party, watching the badminton. I pictured a white sweater draped over his shoulders.

No, I said. I don't think he'd be up for rape. Would you, Vince?

—You don't think at all, he said calmly. You don't know anything.



People in New York told me Vince came back from California a changed man. He was ten thousand percent behind the album, they said. Everybody loved his scheme for promotion. The guy was a dynamo. Full of energy and ideas. A real ball of fire. Where, they asked, had he been hiding all that talent? I told them I doubted this new Vince would last.

They retitled the album, called it *The Feeling*. They redid the cover art as well. Now it was a photograph of me sitting on Johnny Bigelow's tombstone. I suppose you might call my pose insouciant, but at the time they shot the picture I felt depressed and ghoulish. The deification of Johnny as a cult guitar hero, the fact that a human being had been harmed during the making of the album—that was at the heart of Vince's promotional scheme. Plans were being firmed up to release old Mister Wrong demos along with *The Feeling* and the hope was that Johnny-mania would become a minor cottage industry. I suggested they add in a woodpecker somewhere on the cover as a memorial to Corky, but was informed that my suggestion was in bad taste. You learn to laugh at this sort of thing.

I saw Vince a few months afterward, the opening night of my tour, backstage at the Hollywood Bowl. Pork was at his side, wearing a white Hugo Boss jacket over a Tasmanian Devil T-shirt. His beard was trimmed, his hair coiffed and colored. Vince was carrying a new briefcase, black leather with a runic figure embossed on the lid. The same design Johnny had carved on his Telecaster. Probably the same he had drawn on the rock out back of the Spot. All Vince said to me was, Ready for the big night, Julie? And Pork said, Yeah, you go out there and kill 'em, lady! There were so many people around us, I couldn't separate what I felt about them out from my anxiety, my desire to get away from everyone. A couple of minutes later I was walking across the stage, the spotlight pointing me out, like God's golden white finger, the applause healing me, and the instant I snatched the mike off the stand, the power I had over the crowd, the power they had given me, grabbed my ass and sent me pacing like a dangerous hooker to the edge of the orchestra pit. "Oh, I got this feelin," I said into the mike and the crowd let forth with the noise of a sick desiring beast at hearing the phrase they'd come to love on the radio. I washed in that noise, I drowned in it, I took it into myself as if it were a gauzy, gray, empowering flame.

Sometimes I play this movie in my head. After leaving the Spot on the night Johnny Bigelow committed suicide, I return to the studio and retrieve Johnny's list. Over the next days, with the help of Bob's hacker friend, I discover that all the suicides on the list used pills to end their lives. I become obsessed with what happened to Johnny. Things he said and things Pork said begin to make a strange kind of sense. *You're not right for me. Johnny can be very destructive with relationships. He latches onto people. You know how I get . . . I'm bout to move on.* From these statements, from what I observe, I conclude that we are not alone. There is a gray shape that comes to inhabit some of us. It seeks out those to whom it is attuned and prepares them to be its host. It relies upon a human ally to protect it when it's weak and employs a design resembling a runic figure as a concentrative device to enable this preparation. It uses the fuel of our souls to flame bright for a while and when the fuel is exhausted, it seeks out a new host and kills the old. With that in mind, I keep tabs on Vince. When the shape inside him grows weak, I lure it forth and kill it by means of a method I have devised. I've assumed that the gray shape is a demon, a spirit, but I stumble across a courageous group of people, an underground devoted to hunting these creatures and destroying them. They tell me the gray shapes are not demons. They have been mistaken for demons, but in truth they're more like intelligent bacteria. A contagion with a Plan For Us. It kills its old hosts because they come to know its dire schemes. I join with them. I devote all my strength and resources toward the battle. In doing so I become purified. I meet a man. Not a particularly handsome man, but one who sees down through the dirt of my life to the woman I want to be and brings her into the light and loves her.

It's a terrific movie. I see Ed Norton (I almost had a thing with Ed and I'm certain we would have been hardcore together) as The Man, and I see me playing myself. But it'll never get made. I'm just not qualified for the hero trip, and love . . . well, I'm not sure I want more of anything that possesses you, makes you flare bright, drains you and leaves you ready to commit suicide. If I were the heroic me, I might take a note upon having thought this. I might suppose that the gray shapes were a form of love-gone-bad. That was their true nature. I'd persuade the underground to develop an emotional weapon to neutralize this hideous strain. But like I said, that's just not Julie Banks. It's easier to pretend nothing happened or to say so what. So the human race has

yet another predator. What's that make it? Six trillion? Six trillion and seven? Alert the armed forces, pull back from the War on Terror, forget AIDS. There's a new Bogeyman in town. Write your congressperson, tell them to Act Now! If everyone knew about the gray shapes, it would be the same old, same old. A big push, a brief flurry, then CNN would shift its focus back to the Middle East. And nobody would care. I have to think I wasn't the only one who saw the gauzy shadow flickering around Johnny that night in the Spot. Probably half the people there saw it. They said, Huh, and chalked it up to new eyeglasses or that last belt of well whiskey or Jaegermeister, or else they didn't bother to explain it at all. It was merely another imperfection in the movie everyone's starring in. Another of life's inexplicable little buggy mistakes. Scarcely worth mentioning.

On occasion I give thought to driving up to Shingletown and checking out the Spot. Doing some shots with Red and Sue and the rest. Getting so plastered I could win a staring contest with the deer heads. I always decide it would be uncomfortable to go back. By now, I figure, I'm one of Red's stories. An exotic event, like a fat red zircon stuck in the Shingletown mud. I might not live up to what he says about me. I might embarrass him. Truthfully, I don't have a strong desire to go back. It's a whim, a momentary nostalgia for another place that once served as home, another guy who may or may not have saved my life from yet another guy who may have wanted to take it. I'm happy where I am . . . or maybe I'm not happy. Maybe it's like with Johnny, like the thing that owned him, I've just moved on to other lives.



## AFTER ILDIKO

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**P**EDERSON, AN IDLER, A SELF-DECEIVER, AN AMERICAN FOOL OF no consequence, on vacation from a life of petty crime and monumental indecision, fell in with Ildiko on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala, and together they traveled by barge up the Rio Dulce toward the oil fields at Lake Izabal. Ildiko was Swiss, a mousy woman in her early thirties, a few years older than Pederson, pale and slight, with boyishly cut brown hair and a thin face that generally displayed a withdrawn look. She had spent the previous fourteen months hiking through the jungles of Central America, accompanied only by Indian guides. Prior to that, she told Pederson, she had worked for relief organizations in Africa.

That was all he knew about her after a month of intimacy. It was not even clear to him why they had hooked up. There had been some talk, a hint of flirtation, but nothing conclusive, at least not to his mind, and then one night she had slipped into his hotel room, offering herself with a casual, rather maternal tenderness, as if sex were no more significant an act to her than helping him on with his coat. Her air of vulnerability, at such apparent odds with her history of self-reliance, intrigued him; yet he found her only marginally attractive. Perhaps because he had been the pursued in this instance, he tended to think of her with proprietary disdain, viewing her as an interim solution to the problem of female companionship. She was damaged goods, he thought. Some old trouble lurked beneath her diffident exterior. Yet despite all of this, their relationship had deepened in ways that left him uneasy, mystified by unaccustomed feelings of affection and tenderness.

The captain of the barge, Joseph Rawley, was a gruff, stocky, sun-darkened man of sixty or thereabouts, with thinning iron-gray hair and a seamed face that might once have been handsome, and a tattoo celebrating his naval service in the Gulf of Tonkin. Under different circumstances Pederson might

have enjoyed his company. With his colorful stories of expatriate life, Rawley was just the sort of character whom Pederson relied upon to lend his experiences a Heart-of-Darkness credential when telling his own stories back in New York City; but from the outset it was apparent that Rawley was taken with Ildiko and had no use whatsoever for him. Pederson understood that Ildiko, by contrast to the flashier tourist women to be found along the coast, would seem accessible to an older man, and in this context, Rawley's distaste for him was predictable. Yet his contempt was so pointed, it caused Pederson to revert to a city paranoia, to think that his history of middleman drug scams and yuppie duplicity was an open book to Rawley, and that this horny old swabbie was gazing down at him from some moral Himalaya, taking note of his every perversity and failure.

Early on the second morning of their voyage, Pederson stationed himself on a blanket in the bow, a spot bounded by empty oil drums from which he could see both the jungle and the wheelhouse, and gobbled down the magic mushrooms he had bought from a Guatemalan hippie in Puerto Juarez. He spent the day in queasy, feverish, affrighted communion with old Indian men who stepped forth from the vegetation to offer confusing counsel; and with an indefinable presence whose pronouncements boomed from beneath the water, outvoicing the labored chugging of the barge and the ripping noises made by the motorized canoes that served as river taxis, plying back and forth between Livingston and Reunión. His body seemed to wax and wane—at one moment he was aware of every twinge and tremor, every increment of nausea, and the next he would lose contact with his physical being and find himself immersed in opulent hallucinations, all variations on a single setting: a vast cave floored by a dark blue lake in which he swam, desperately seeking to reach a shore where a radiant white glow bloomed from the rock, passed now and again by galleylike craft with figureheads carved into beasts and serpents, rowed by small men with reddish-brown skins who paid no heed to his cries for help. To Pederson's relief, the mushrooms were not, as had been advertised, a twenty-four-hour trip; after about half that time the hallucinations ceased and he was able to perceive the world more-or-less as it pretended to be.

In late afternoon the barge came to a place where the river widened, the banks lifting into sheer cliffs that shadowed the green water, forming a cup-

shaped gorge, and the humid stink of the jungle was overwhelmed by a profound freshness like the smell of an ancient cistern. Birds, their shapes simple as crosses, wheeled in a platinum sky. Propped against an oil drum, enfeebled and slick with a foul sweat, Pederson felt the beginnings of peace. His nerves jumped and his eyes were still afflicted—each leaf, each tree trunk and vine, were shadowed by an orangish aura, and the movements of his fingers trailed ribbonary afterimages through the air. When Ildiko emerged from the wheelhouse, wearing only a bikini bottom, her ample breasts quivering, he would have called out if Rawley had not appeared a second later, dressed in sweat-drenched khakis, and pulled her back inside. It was, Pederson soon realized, a game they were playing—Rawley making mock lecherous grabs, Ildiko allowing herself to be caught, then slipping away. The scene grated on him, but he had neither the energy nor the will to express displeasure. He let his thoughts drift up away with the circling birds, their flights level with summits of the vine-enlaced cliffs, and with the palm trees atop the cliffs, spiky crowns swaying like savages in a drunken dance.

**D**arkness closed down over the barge, seeming to amplify the engine noise, and the jungle, too, grew louder, resonating with the loopy electric cries of frogs. Buttery light chuted from the wheelhouse windows, illuminating a stretch of rivet-studded, orange-painted iron deck. Pederson's joints ached from chemical punishment, and he was tired, grungy. The hot oily smell of metal unpleasantly thick in his nostrils. Moths whirled whitely overhead. Eusebio, Rawley's Indian mate, a squat man with pitted skin, came into view, visible in the upper window of the wheelhouse, and for an instant Pederson assumed him to be a visitation of the drug. Then he spotted Ildiko walking toward him, wearing a green T-shirt over the bikini and carrying a can of Coke. She kneeled beside him, gave him the frosty can, and asked if he was all right. He had forgotten about her fooling around with Rawley until she handed him the can—it was as if the act of kindness had settled the last roiled-up fragments of his personality, restoring his normal reflexes, and he lashed out at her.

“Did you have fun?” he asked, in a harsh, ragged voice. “Did you fuck him?”

She looked at him without expression. "I think it would not be so terrible if I had. He's a nice man . . . He's lonely."

"Not so lonely as he used to be, huh?"

The effervescence of the Coke stung his throat. A white flash zippered his field of vision. Then another. The world coming apart like the print of an old movie, cracks showing the projector beam behind the scenes.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm still a little ripped. But I can pass for human." The second swig of Coke didn't sting as much. "You shouldn't lead him on. You know he takes it seriously on some level."

"It makes him feel young," she said. "That's all it is. He knows I'm with you."

A breeze came steadily off the bow, drying Pederson's sweat, and he felt suddenly strong, back in the flesh. He ran a hand along Ildiko's pale thigh and up under the T-shirt. "*Are you . . . with me?*"

She appeared to be studying him sadly, just as she must have looked at starving refugees from Eritrea, considering their pitiful condition and inevitable fate. He eased a hand beneath the elastic of the bikini, brushed the fringe of her pubic hair with the backs of his fingers; she opened her legs, permitting him to probe more deeply.

"Jesus," he said. "You're ready to go, aren't you?"

"I'm always ready," she said flatly.

He took her by the waist and lifted her astride him; then he wrangled down his shorts and rubbed against her.

"He might see us," she said, alarm in her voice.

"So he sees us."

He fingered the crotch of her bikini to one side and let her sink down onto him. Whatever constraints she felt had been abandoned, and he imagined her in a tent erected on some forlorn, dusty acreage, straddling a doctor, a Red Cross administrator, cultivating an expertise at pleasure to shield herself from the dying, moving with inventive delicacy, employing her body as she employed her compassion, bestowing a kindness, fully rendering the service, investing it with an odd detachment and passivity of mind that made her somehow sexier. His hands roved beneath the T-shirt, sampling her breasts. He thrust vigorously, his desire fueled by a flashback from the mushrooms, a



spoonful of delirium that caused him to see her briefly as a creature shaped like a white thighbone with a knobbed head and painted features. Light flared behind his eyes, tiny photic incidents, and when he came the muscles in his chest seized and it seemed everything—heart, guts, juice—was spilling out, leaving him gasping, staring up at stars that bloomed and faded too quickly to be real, while she kneeled at his side, adjusting the bikini, gazing at him mildly.

“Are you happy now?” she asked, her tone so neutral, he could not tell how she intended the question.

“Happier.” He caressed her leg, wanting to assure her of his affection. She did not return the gesture and got to her feet.

“Don’t go!” He reached out to her.

“I have to wash myself,” she said.

He waved, go ahead, and closed his eyes. Thoughts circled in his head like birds above an island, idle and unconsidered. Time flowed sluggishly, adapting itself to the rhythms of the engine, the river, and he was not certain how long he remained in that state, almost empty, registering yet not interpreting the sounds and smells that established his position, his existence. When he opened his eyes he caught sight of Ildiko, now completely naked. She stepped from an area of shadow beside the wheelhouse, and as Pederson watched, thinking he might ask her to fix him some food, she leaped outward from the barge and vanished. It happened so quickly and was so improbable an event, it took him a moment to process, and even after he had done so, he refused to accept the judgment of reason, preferring to believe the whole thing had been another white rip in his vision. He went stumbling across the deck and looked down over the side. The churning darkness beneath made him dizzy. He called out to her, overcome by a confusion of emotion and doubt. Holding onto the rail mounted on the wall of the wheelhouse, he called to her again and again.

“Hell you squawking about?”

Rawley was standing at the wheelhouse door. Khaki shorts and an oil-stained white T-shirt. His unshaven face shaded by the brim of a captain’s hat. Holding a glass of rum. A grizzled old salt roused from his solitary joy.

“She jumped!” Pederson said in a bewildered, stricken voice. “She went over the side!”

Rawley made a face of sour disbelief. “Bullshit!”

“I saw her, man! I was sitting back there—” Pederson gestured toward the bow “—and I looked up . . . I saw her!”

“Those goddamn mushrooms, you don’t know what you saw.” But Rawley looked worried. “Where’d you see her jump?”

“There.” Pederson pointed to the spot.

Rawley knocked back his rum, his Adam’s apple working in his leathery neck. “I don’t want you going over after her. Wait in the wheelhouse. I’ll check below.”

The light in the wheelhouse was too bright for Pederson. He sat on the deck, knees drawn up, head down, trying to separate out what he felt from how he wanted to feel, but was unable to determine which was which. A few minutes later he heard Rawley ascending the stairs that led below decks.

“Her clothes are gone.” Rawley put his hands on his hips and stood watching the water pass beneath them.

Pederson stared at him without comprehension. “Aren’t you going to stop? We have to look for her.”

“She took her clothes, pal. She didn’t get sucked under, and that’s a long shot, then she doesn’t want us to look for her. She’s a smart girl. She’ll find a place to wait out the night and catch a river taxi come morning.”

“We should do something!” Pederson pushed himself up from the deck.

“What? Report it to the police? Not a chance! She turns up missing, I’ll be paying bribes out my ass the next ten years.”

Pederson felt like a man in a hurricane trying to hold his hat on, everything flying off around him. “We have to look for her,” he said. “We have to fucking look!”

Rawley spat onto the deck. He appeared to have changed in a matter of minutes from a hale man of late middle age to a full-fledged senior citizen.

“C’mon, man!” Pederson said. “You got to do something.”

Rawley went chest-to-chest with him, his bitter breath fouling Pederson’s air. “Don’t put it on me, sonny. I’m not the one she was trying to get away from.”

Tears came to Pederson’s eyes, produced by an emotion that seemed a marriage of loss and self-pity. “What did she tell you?”

“She told me what a cup of weak tea you are. She told me she wanted to leave your ass, but she was afraid you’d fall apart.”

“That’s crap! We were just traveling together.”

Rawley turned away.

“Only reason we ended up together,” Pederson went on, “she begged a ride to Flores with this Guatemalan rancher. This right-wing guy carried a pistol. She got paranoid and asked me to come along. She wanted protection.”

“And you were going to protect her?” Rawley snorted. He stuck his head into the wheelhouse and told Eusebio to go below and bring up the gringo’s pack.

“What are you doing?” Pederson asked.

“I’m letting you off at Reunión. Till then you can sit on the deck and keep the hell away from me.”

“We should look for her,” Pederson said feebly as Rawley stepped into the wheelhouse and slammed the door. “We should do something.”

**P**ropped against his pack, having reclaimed his spot among the oil drums, Pederson sat, dejected, drinking tepid bottled water. That Ildiko had thrown herself from the barge, risking death in order to escape him—it was unacceptable. He tried once again to persuade himself that he had not seen it. He was still stoned, his eyes playing tricks. But her clothes, the fact that she had taken her clothes . . . What could he have done to make her so desperate? If it *was* desperation that had motivated her. Maybe she had acted independently of any consideration involving him. The damage he had sensed in her. The despondency yielded by years of watching death in Africa. It might have sparked her to want to be alone again, to go back into the jungle where she could avoid the thought of Africa, and to want it so immediately that she had taken drastic measures. Whatever her reasons, the suddenness and finality of her absence hurt him in an unexpected way—it was as if some special organ, heretofore unnecessary, vestigial, like an appendix, had been activated and was producing chemicals that were breaking him down, causing his thoughts to grow so dark and heavy, they tipped his head downward and shuttered his eyes and he saw a white leap into blackness repeated over and over, no longer certain whether it had been Ildiko or merely a flash of female light.

He glanced up to the wheelhouse. Rawley stood in the upper window at the wheel, gazing down on him. Like a funky toy in his captain’s hat, an action

figure derived from an adventure film. Dissing Rawley enabled him to stop thinking about Ildiko, and he indulged in it, painting him as a failure, a vet who couldn't cut it in the States, so he had scurried on down to Guatemala where he could be the king of Mangoland, boss around the Indians, overcharge the oil workers for the cheap goods he brought from the coast, and screw fourteen-year-old hookers, playing a tough-guy riff on *Lord Jim* to disguise his various inadequacies. But this tactic failed Pederson, and he was cast back upon the moment he wanted to deny. He felt in need of repentance, of absolution, but was not certain which of his sins required expiation.

He was still sitting in the bow, too wired and distressed for sleep, when Rawley came toward him from the wheelhouse, walking unsteadily. He had gone to drinking straight from a label-less bottle that contained a few fingers of pale rum, and he glared at Pederson with distaste.

"I should beat you up," he said.

Anger tightened Pederson's neck. "Leave me alone, man."

"I should beat you up and throw you over the goddamn side!" Rawley appeared to be summoning the will to do this very thing, but instead he slumped to the deck and sat a few feet away, braced on one hand and cradling the bottle to his belly. "You knew that girl's head was screwed up. You had no right treating her like that."

He seemed truly despairing, his turtle mouth drooping, but Pederson, on the defensive, said, "I didn't do a damn thing to her!"

"You fucked her out in the open. Right here." Rawley plunked the bottom of the bottle on the deck for emphasis. "In plain view. You think she felt good about that?"

"I didn't hear any complaints."

With drunken caution, Rawley got to his knees. "You poor dumb shit! You don't have a clue about other people, you're so wrapped up in yourself." He made a gagging noise, wobbled, and had to brace himself again. "She deserved better than you."

"How do you know I fucked her out here?" Pederson asked. "You were watching, right?"

Rawley's expression was slack, febrile, undenyng.

"You watched us." Every word Pederson spoke charged his growing sense of outrage. "You hadn't been hitting on her it never would have happened. But

you couldn't get it through your head she was being nice to you. She was just being polite."

It looked as if Rawley was having trouble absorbing this. "You knew I was watching? What were you doing? Sending me a message?"

Pederson was not certain this had been his conscious intent, but intent was a banner he wanted to wave. "You weren't getting it. I thought this way it might sink in."

Rawley tilted forward as if he was going to pass out, but then threw a sneaky right hand that caught Pederson flush, twisting his neck and snapping back his head. He heard Rawley talking and realized he was lying on his back; he could feel his left eye beginning to swell.

"... did it to her," Rawley was saying. "Maybe it was the both of us. But it wasn't me using her like a goddamn whore."

Something exploded into Pederson's ribs, and he understood that he had been kicked.

"That was a sweet girl," Rawley said. "A girl with soul. She did a lotta good in her life. And now she's probably dead... 'cause you were trying to teach me a lesson?"

Another kick, this one not so painful, landing on his hip, and Pederson rolled away, cowering behind an oil drum. He peered up at Rawley, trying to bring a smear of khaki and white into sharp focus.

"That's right," said Rawley. "You hide... you stay hidden. I don't wanna even see your shadow 'fore we get to Reunión."

There were, Pederson saw, several Rawleys, all opaque and rippling. All enraged, fists clenched and mouths stretched thin.

"You think you're such a fucking hotshot!" Rawley said. "Mister World Traveler! Well, this is the real world, hotshot, and a sixty-two-year-old man just kicked your ass. Where's that leave you?"

**T**he river wind came up strong from the north, carrying the scents of smoke, oil, dead fish, the smell of Reunión, and the jungle began to melt up from the blackness, and the sky burned a radiant dark blue. The barge labored against the current, its engine grinding like a portcullis being raised; the light from the wheelhouse grew less sharply defined. Miserable, his eye throbbing,

Pederson lay pillowed on his pack, trying to think his way out from beneath the karmic load Rawley had forced him to assume. He had almost convinced himself that Ildiko was alive. Alive and waiting for a river taxi back along the Rio Dulce. He recalled her saying that she felt protected in the jungle, that going there alone with a guide never bothered her. He had not explored this with her—he hadn't been interested in much she said. But he thought now she would have explained it in a way that explained herself, and he wanted an explanation—he wanted to know what security she found there, to fathom all her strangeness. Rawley had been right about one thing: she had deserved better. She did have a soul, a remarkable one, and he, Pederson, had failed to appreciate it. Recognizing this, he determined to find her and settle things between them. At least he would try. She'd head back to Flores, and from there into the deep jungle. If they had no future . . . well, maybe he could change her mind about that. But one way or the other, he had an obligation to fulfill.

That he admitted to this obligation satisfied Pederson's moral concern and he turned his mind to other matters. It was, he figured, another hour to Reunión. Wincing, he sat up and inspected his pack, making certain that nothing had been left in the cabin. In short order he discovered his watch was missing . . . and a gold cross he'd bought for his sister. Rawley's mate. Eusebio. He must have taken them when he fetched the pack from below decks. Pederson rummaged through his clothing, searching for the rolled-up socks in which Ildiko had stashed his cash and traveler's checks that morning. They were still there. The dumbass could have really made out if he had looked a little harder.

Eusebio and Rawley were visible in the upper window of the wheelhouse, and judging by the flamboyance of Rawley's gestures, Pederson inferred that he was telling the mate about the sucker punch he'd landed. Flimsy notions of vengeance occurred to him. He would report Rawley to the police, the American consulate. But the important thing now was to reclaim his goods, and they were most likely stuffed under Eusebio's pillow or in the stand beside his bunk.

Keeping to the shadows, he went in a crouch toward the wheelhouse door. The stair angled downward just inside the door, and Pederson was about to make his move when Eusebio came down the stair from the top of the wheel-

house, swinging on the handrails. He stared at Pederson in surprise and said sternly, “*No pase!*” Seeing him caused Pederson to recognize how stoned he still was. Instead of being alarmed, he was fascinated by Eusebio’s round, dark face, cheeks dented with dozens of pits that resembled the punch marks of a silversmith’s hammer, and the jaundiced condition of his left eye, a little yellow cloud occluding a portion of the humor.

“*No pase!*” Eusebio repeated, and gave Pederson a gentle push.

“The head.” Pederson grabbed his crotch. “*El baño. Necesito usarlo.*”

“*No pase!*” Another, harder push.

“Goddamit!” said Pederson. “Where’s my fucking watch? *Mi reloj . . . Donde?*”

Eusebio’s stare became disinterested, impassive.

“Okay, man.” Pederson held up a hand and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together to signify cash money. “*Puedo pagar. Dame el reloj y le pagaré.*”

Eusebio shouted up the stairs and shoved Pederson out onto the deck.

“This is bullshit!” Pederson made to reenter the wheelhouse, but Eusebio blocked the door.

When Rawley came down the stair he took one look at Pederson and said to Eusebio, “*Tráigame la pistola!*”

The mate hurried off downstairs.

Pederson’s Spanish was not so good, but he knew the meaning of *la pistola*. “Hey!” he said, backing away. “Fuck are you doing?”

Rawley followed him out onto the deck. He appeared to have sobered some. His eyes were steady, his manner contained and dead serious. “You don’t know where you are,” he said. “Mister Goddamn World Traveler doesn’t have a clue.”

Panicking, Pederson said, “Your fucking Indian, man! He stole my watch! What do you want me to do?”

“You better figure it out fast,” Rawley said as Eusebio clattered up the stairs.

“Listen,” Pederson said, injecting his voice with sincerity, with reason. “All I want’s my watch back. Okay?”

Eusebio handed Rawley an automatic with a bronze finish and smiled at Pederson.

“You come on board my vessel acting like King Shit,” said Rawley, checking the clip. “You treat a good woman like she’s a whore. Drive her to desperation.

Now you accuse my friend of stealing. Know what that is?" He cocked an eye toward Pederson and jammed in the clip. "It's what I call justification."

Pederson sprinted for the cover of the oil drums. A gunshot cracked the air behind him. He dived in among the drums, rolling up against his pack. Pain shot through his injured ribs. His heart felt flabby and hot. He wrapped his arms around his pack, as if it could protect him. A second shot. The round *spanged* off one of the drums.

"Want to know where you are?" Rawley shouted. He fired again, and the bullet struck sparks that showered Pederson's head. "You're in the middle of the fucking jungle!"

The implausibility of the situation caused Pederson to flounder in his search for a solution, but when another round notched a rivet close by his hand, he managed to achieve complete acceptance of the fact that Rawley intended to kill him. He hooked the straps of his pack over his elbow and told the One in whom he only believed at times such as these that he was heartily sorry for having offended Him, and ran full tilt for the side of the barge, sped along by yet another shot. He leaped high and wide, tucking his legs into a cannonball. The shock of entry forced air from his lungs; the water gloved him in its slimy fist. Surfacing, he felt the suction of the barge and bright with fear, he fought for the bank, swimming one-armed, dragging his sodden pack, kicking furiously. In less than a minute he touched mucky bottom. Moments later, he scrambled up onto a thicketed point and collapsed against the muddy incline, breathing hard. He heard a shout. Rawley; the words unintelligible. The barge was passing to the north, a huge shadow, the wheelhouse limned in light. Pederson watched it go, too wasted to feel relief.

Once the barge had vanished around the bend, he tried to establish a comfortable position; but there was no comfort to be had. Mosquitoes started to swarm. Mud oozed into his shorts. He battled the mosquitoes for a while, but they settled in his hair, sheathed his arms, and finally he gave in to them, hanging his head and trying to focus on being alive. Sooner or later a river taxi would happen past, and he would hail it, and it would take him to Reunión. He pictured Ildiko waiting somewhere downstream, stoic on her own safe perch. There might be, he told himself, some magical symmetry involved, an illumination to be had for them both, and perhaps a second chance. Sitting alone on the bank, they might come to a strange electric sense



of one another, like fireflies trapped in bottles set side by side. He suddenly recalled all her desirable qualities and wondered what had caused him to be so unmindful of them. It might be, he supposed, that her life of sacrifice had made him feel guilty over his own desultory existence. If they got back together, it would be a hell of a story. A redemptive story. He saw himself telling it back in the Chelsea Bar, Ildiko beside him, as living proof. His thoughts sputtered and he gazed dully out at the mist forming above the water, rising into the lower boughs, reducing the light of the paling sky and transforming the world into a vague blue-green luminosity hung with vegetable shadows, a limbo created for a single lost soul. Before long, he began to shiver.

He drowsed and was wakened by the trebly grind of an outboard motor. The sun was just up, orange streamers of cloud in the east, and a river taxi with a dark figure at the helm and a slighter, paler figure in the bow was slitting the jade water, passing directly in front of him. He tried to stand, slipped and fell; he called out, but his voice was weak, scratchy, and neither the helmsman nor his passenger gave any sign of notice. He peered after the boat. He could not be sure, but he thought it had been Ildiko in the bow. The longer he considered this, the more certain he became. It gnawed at him that he had missed out on catching the same ride. They could have talked all the way to Reunión, and by the time they arrived, they might have reached an understanding. He got gingerly to his feet and stood with his eyes trained downriver. He could not afford to miss the next ride or he might lose her. Gnats flocked to his swollen eye, almost closed now, and the skin above his injured ribs was feverish. The sun climbed high, and the foetid smell of the bank enveloped him. Parrots screeched, a monkey screamed. Heat lifted from the river; the water slapped against the shore. Pederson's knees trembled, his vision blurred. Sweat trickled down his arms and legs, inflaming the mosquito bites. But he remained at his post, staring into the reflected light glazing the river, listening for salvation.

**T**he boat that eventually came for him was owned by an elderly man with white hair and beard, clad in a ragged shirt and shorts. His features had an East Indian cast, and when asked, he told Pederson his ancestors had been

slaves brought over from Peshawar by the British to work on the sugar plantations in Belize. He spoke decent English and seemed eager to reveal more about himself; but Pederson was less interested in stories now that he was living one. He washed in the river before boarding, changed into clean clothes, and sat looking down into the foaming wake all the way to Reunión—a scoured acreage of red dirt set about with shanties and a few buildings of concrete block. He paid the boatman and headed for the bus station along streets rendered nearly impassable by potholes full of stagnant rain. Naked toddlers splashed and built mud structures beside them as if they were at the beach, while their mothers fanned themselves in the doorways and stared listlessly at passers-by. It was an impoverished, desolate place, and would ordinarily have stimulated Pederson, who viewed himself as a connoisseur of such places, of all things desolate, and perhaps, he thought, this was at the core of his attraction to Ildiko, an attraction he now embraced; perhaps her desolation was the charm that had gradually possessed him . . . But at that moment, the rawness of the town was lost on him, and he plodded on with his head down, infected by its stuporous vitality.

The bus station was a one-story building of white stucco with a painted Pepsi logo covering one side, like the flag of a proud nation. The wooden benches within were packed with farmers and old beshawled women; a few teenage boys were goofing in a corner, pushing each other and laughing. Pederson bought a ticket to Flores. On impulse he pulled out a photograph of Ildiko, a Polaroid taken on the first morning of their voyage. It depicted her topless, wearing her bikini bottom. He was too embarrassed to show it to the women; most of the men, however, studied it with polite interest and then shook their heads—they had not seen her. But one, a bleary-eyed *mestizo* with a crust of dried blood at the corner of his mouth, his breath reeking of liquor, mumbled something in response to the picture, and when Pederson asked him to repeat it, he said, “*Que puta! Se fue!*” and gestured loosely toward the door. “*Por el camión . . . a Flores.*” That was proof enough for Pederson. She was on the previous bus to Flores, bound ultimately for the heart of the rain forest, where she would find some counterfeit of peace. He sat at the end of a bench, fingering the photograph as if it were a rosary, an article of faith. He could still catch up with her. It would take her at least a day to secure a guide. He could ask around, follow her trail.

“Very pretty.” One of the teenage boys was leaning over his shoulder—he had shoulder-length hair and a rosy brown Mayan complexion; he wore jeans and a T-shirt adorned with a photograph of the youthful Madonna. He grinned at Pederson and said, “She’s your girlfren’?”

Pederson did not know how to answer this, but he nodded.

The boy let out a shrill whistle, and in a moment his friends had gathered round, all peering at the Polaroid; one of them pointed at it and said something excitedly in Spanish, speaking too rapidly for Pederson to understand.

“What’s he saying?” he asked the first boy.

“*Momentito* . . . wait, wait!” The boy questioned his friend, who replied at some length, accompanying his words with florid gestures. The boy turned a reproving look on Pederson. “He say she’s the captain’s girlfren’?”

“The captain?” At first this struck Pederson as a non sequitur.

“Yes, the old man, the . . .” The boy’s brow furrowed. “How you say . . . ? Like a boat, but . . . *mas larga*. Longer.”

“A barge?”

“*Sí* . . . barge.” The boy repeated the word, perhaps to imprint it on his memory. “My fren’ saw this woman with the captain of the barge. This morning in the market.”

When Pederson failed to respond, the boys went back to their foolery. The horn of the Flores bus sounded outside; the people on the benches surged to meet it, and Pederson, stunned, obeying a dull communal urge, moved with them. He saw how it could have happened. He might have hallucinated Ildiko’s leap, contrived the scene from the visual aftershocks of the mushrooms, and this had presented her with the opportunity to exchange his protection for that of Rawley. But the extent of the duplicity required to substantiate what the boy had told him; the consummate acting ability he would then have to attribute to Rawley; the freakish level of coincidence . . . For the next minute or so, Pederson was involved with forcing his way along the crowded aisle of the bus, pushing past an old woman carrying a cooking pot who was haranguing an even older man with a cane, trying to persuade him to sit. Pederson found a seat at the rear of the bus, next to a farmer wearing a straw cowboy hat, jeans, and a checkered shirt. The farmer tipped his hat and said, “*Buenas dias*.” Half his upper teeth were gold, the other half were missing, and Pederson briefly considered the question of

whether the man was replacing his teeth with golden substitutes, or if they had all been gold and were falling out one by one.

Its gears shrieking, the bus lurched forward, and Pederson's knees were compressed painfully against the seat in front of him. This brought him back to the question of real moment. It was not possible, he decided. The boy's witness had been no more reliable than the drunk's. Rawley was incapable of the necessary pretense, and Ildiko incapable of such deceit. He had seen what he had seen. Yet as the bus pulled away from the town, dipping into potholes, setting its passengers bouncing and swaying against one another, following a winding red-dirt road between walls of foliage, the violent, dark green and poison jungle where he and Ildiko had found each other, and would find each other again, Pederson's purity of purpose was assaulted, marred by feelings of anger and betrayal, by the possibility, however slim, that he had misinterpreted everything about Ildiko, and about the world, and the second lie he told himself was that he only wanted to fuck her again.

# CHINANDEGA

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*Have you never been to Chinandega, my friend? It is no place for tourists.*

**A**T SUNRISE A THIRD-CLASS BUS FROM THE CAPITAL WHEEZES and grinds across the coastal plain, the passengers packed so tightly they might be chained together in the darkened interior. The driver hunches over the wheel as though bound to some grim purpose. There are no empty seats so the fare collector stands with back braced against the windshield, holding hard to a stainless steel grip, enduring jolts and sideways lurches, his weary face cast in chiaroscuro as he looks into the east toward three volcanoes limned against the reddening sky. Stars in the west still shine in ancient configuration above the Gulf of Fonseca.

Waking amidst the staleness of sleeping bodies and the smell of diesel, Alvaro Miguez cannot feel his foot and bends to rub it, pushing a drooping wing of black hair from his eyes. A copper-and-roses complexion bespeaks his Mayan blood. His head is large, and his prominent features register emotion slowly if at all. His hands, too, are large, but his frame is compact and this lends him a dwarfish aspect. Straightening, he's startled to discover the seat beside him, empty when he fell asleep, occupied by a gaunt old farmer with an apocalyptic eye, clouded like an embryo and crossed by a machete scar that notches both cheek and brow. His jeans are creased, his plaid shirt buttoned at the wrists. He tips his straw hat to Alvaro, bids him good morning, and asks where he's going.

Chinandega, says Alvaro.

And what will you do there?

I'm on vacation.

The farmer looks askance at him. Have you never been to Chinandega? Unless you have relatives there, or some pressing errand, you would do well to take your holiday elsewhere. The heat is infernal, better suited to tarantulas than men. Half the town remains in ruins from the earthquake in '72, and

drunken sailors overrun the other half. The whores outnumber the cockroaches and are equally as vile. It is no place for tourists, my friend. A town without a soul.

Alvaro, who studies literature at the university, recognizes that the farmer is an old-fashioned sort and speaks from a Catholic perspective; but nettled by the implication that he is a tourist in his own country, he replies that he does not expect to stay in the city—he plans to find transportation to El Cardon, the island where Ruben Dario wrote a number of his most famous poems. If he intends this comment to demonstrate his intellectual superiority (and perhaps he does, for Alvaro, though not snobbish by nature, has a temper), it has minimal effect. The old man nods, tips his hat down over his eyes and goes to sleep. An hour or so later, the bus pulls up beside a freshly tilled field and, without a fare-thee-well, the farmer climbs down and strides off along the rows. The field extends to the horizon and Alvaro can see no sign of habitation, not a shed or a shack or even a clump of trees that might shelter a *casita*. It's as if the old man's destination is an infinity of black dirt and pale cloudless blue, as if he has been produced from that medium solely for the purpose of issuing his warning.

**H**e took breakfast at a restaurant frequented by railway workers, a place of blue-and white painted boards isolated in a landscape of cinders and weeds, close to the tracks of the *Ferrocarril Pacifico* that crossed the western edge of the city center. After eating, he walked among the tables, showing his sister's picture to the other diners. The photograph was of a pretty fourteen-year-old whose looks were more *mestiza* than pure Mayan and he told the men she was a year older now than portrayed and likely had exchanged her schoolgirl uniform for a more provocative costume.

She is a whore? The man who asked this question was middle-aged, grizzled, fat, and covered with soot, having just come off-shift at the railway.

So I have heard, said Alvaro.

Well, if she's whored for a year, she's had more dicks in her than there are hairs on a goat, said the man, making sure everyone in the restaurant could hear him. She probably looks like a goat by now.

The other men laughed and, encouraged by this response, the fat man said, Are you sure she is your sister? It appears to me that your mother was shot by two different pistols.

Laughter trailed Alvaro out the door, his cheeks burning with anger and shame.

Though not yet nine o'clock, it was already hot. He removed his shirt, knotting it about his waist, and went along a wide treeless street, Calle del Pacifico, lined with cantinas, shops, restaurants, and hotels whose rooms rented by the hour. Mostly buildings of one or two stories, concrete block done in pastel shades of pink, tan, blue, with lifeless neon signs: they bore on their walls false promises of what lay within: shiny billiard balls and green felt tables adorned a pool hall with warped cues and tattered tables worn to a mossy hue; quarter notes cavorted among bubbles rising from champagne glasses that were tilted at angles suggestive of merriment, decorating the façade of a cantina that had never known the pop of a cork. Many of the businesses had been open since seven, some never closed, but others were just opening, men spraying the sidewalks to wash away the night's debris and rolling up their several corrugated iron doors with a horrid rattling like a portcullis being raised. Vendors squatted curbside, offering cigarettes and sandwiches, displaying cheap jewelry and T-shirts and toys on spread blankets. A few cars jounced over the potholed asphalt and scooters zipped past, making sounds that seemed the amplified buzzing of the flies fussing over a dead cat in the gutter. Greater sounds came from the sky, faint metallic shrieks and drones that formed an umbrella of industrial noise over the town—Alvaro imagined they derived from the container port at Corinto, though it lay miles away.

As he ranged the street, showing his photograph to whoever would look, the sun climbed toward meridian, leaching vitality and color from the scene, appearing to shed a ghastly white pall, almost palpable, as if a gauze winding sheet had been prematurely wrapped about his eyes. Heat pressed in on him, like the heat from a burning forest. The thought of his sister in that heat, among these men, in a windowless back room on an iron bed with stained sheets, it never left him. At the end of the street stood an old frame hotel of forbidding aspect, like a castle without turrets: the Hotel Circo del Mar, three stories of dark green boards with a peaked roof and windows glazed with

dazzling reflection that gave no evidence of the interior, its entrance guarded by a burly man with a bandito mustache and a holstered pistol. Alvaro showed him the photograph and asked if he had seen his sister. Her name, he said, is Palmira Miguez. The man told him to fuck off.

That afternoon, he bought a *bocadillo* from a vendor and sat in the doorway of a closed cantina, the only shade available. A starving yellow dog stared hopefully at him from the curb, until Alvaro shied a pebble at it. The stringy meat of the sandwich expanded in his mouth, and he thought that the dog, which had not gone far, sniffing at rubbish in the gutter, might have been attracted by the intoxicating odor of an ex-brother-in-misery. A ragged boy sat beside him in the doorway and, his face arranged into piteous lines, held out his hand and muttered, I am hungry, *Senor*. Give me a cordoba. My belly aches. Five centavos for bread, *por favor*. Alvaro told him to beat it, but the boy persisted and finally Alvaro broke off a corner of the sandwich and gave it to him. The boy looked disappointed, but popped the fragment into his mouth. He chewed for a while, appearing to assess Alvaro, and then said, Do you wish to buy drugs, *Senor*? Marijuana? Heroin? Cocaine? I can take you.

I am searching for my sister. Alvaro let him see the photograph.

The boy reacted excitedly. I have seen this girl, *Senor*. Perhaps I can assist in your search.

Bullshit, said Alvaro.

No, I have seen her! May Dona Basilia take me if I have not. Where she sleeps, I do not know. But I have seen her . . . on this very street.

Alvaro examined the boy's face. You're lying.

The boy shrugged. As you wish. But I can guide you to a man who can tell you where she is.

Who is this man?

The Recluse.

Now you're fucking with me.

No, *Senor*! I am not. Everyone knows of the Recluse, and he knows everyone. He lives in Colonia San Jeronimo. It is very far, but I will take you there for three cordobas. You will not regret it, I promise you.

They negotiated a price of two cordobas, to be paid after the boy had discharged his duty, and started off in the direction of the container port. Colonia San Jeronimo was, indeed, very far. As they trudged over dirt roads,



past garbage dumps and through disastrous slums, Alvaro chastised himself for allowing the boy to hustle him. At last they came to a shack with a rusting tin roof in the midst of a patch of cocoa-colored earth, set well apart from others like it. Alvaro knocked and a man's voice said from within, Who is it?

Alvaro Miguez, from the capital. I wish to speak to the Recluse. I am looking for my sister.

After a silence the man said, You may enter.

The boy snatched the money from Alvaro's hand and ran off. Alvaro shook his head. What an idiot he had been.

The gloomy interior of the shack was as expected, though its owner was not. Sacks of flour, beans and rice hung from the rafters. A bicycle rested in one corner; in another, a small charcoal stove and some pots and pans. Magazines and shoes, heaps of clothing, piles of notebooks and an assortment of tools littered a packed dirt floor. Wearing a pair of shorts, the Recluse reclined in a red-and-blue hemp hammock strung at the center of the room. He was not the ancient of days that Alvaro had presumed. In his late twenties, pale and handsome as a pop star, with long hair hanging over his shoulders: he gazed languidly at Alvaro and indicated that he should have a seat on a nearby stool. The tattoo of antique box camera, realistically achieved, on his left arm and a gold piercing beneath his lower lip were his only visible adornments.

Do you have a picture? he asked.

Alvaro handed him the photograph. The Recluse angled it so that it caught the light from a rear window. After considerable study, he said, Her name is Palmira, is it not?

Surprised by this, Alvaro said, You know her?

I have seen her.

Where is she? Can you tell me?

First there is the matter of payment. How much money do you have?

If I am frugal, enough for a week.

What did you pay the boy?

Again surprised, Alvaro asked how he knew about the boy, and the Recluse said, He ran past my window. How much?

Two cordobas.

The Recluse made a disapproving sound. You should have paid no more than one. Give me thirty cordobas and you will not need to stay a week.

Reluctantly, Alvaro passed him the money.

Your sister is with Dona Basilia, the Queen of the Whores, said the Recluse. Or so she is called.

Alvaro recalled that the boy had made mention of Dona Basilia and informed the Recluse of this fact.

Because she is an exotic, people invest her with the powers of a witch . . . or a goddess, said the Recluse. I tend to believe she is neither.

Surely you *know* she can be neither?

Death and the mystery of death are the only certainties. Dona Basilia is not without power. In the mystical order, she stands between the seven and the nine. The Recluse reached down blindly to the floor, groped for and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. You can find your sister at the Circo del Mar, but you must wait three days. The Queen is hosting a private party for a group of government officials and fruit company executives, and the hotel is closed to all but the invited.

And my sister will be there?

Your sister is a favorite of the house. She commands the highest prices. It is nearly inconceivable that she will not be there. But it may be possible to approach her when she is outside the hotel. Sometimes she takes a promenade in the early afternoon, during the siesta. There is an arcade two blocks down from the hotel—*Juegos Galaxia*. She enjoys playing the racing games when few customers are about.

A car engine turned over outside, but faltered; someone cursed in frustration.

How do you know these things? asked Alvaro. You are called a recluse, yet I cannot imagine you acquired this information without leaving your house.

To be reclusive demands isolation, this is true; but isolation need not be a matter of geography. The Recluse lit a cigarette and directed his smoke toward the window. I realized early on that I was cut out for an idle life. I cast about for a profession that would allow me to indulge my disposition, but found none that met my requirements. And then it struck me that people were always asking questions and that they would pay to have them answered. Since I had no intention of relocating, I began gathering information about Chinandega.

The car engine fired up again, rumbled to life, and then died. Several people began shouting at once.

The Calle del Pacifico was the perfect conduit, said the Recluse. Everyone in town had reason to go there. I wandered up and down the street, mainly at night, when it was most alive, and I listened, I watched. I spoke to no one, interacted with no one—I merely observed. In the midst of revelry and strife, pleasure and pain, I remained distant. Before the year was out people began coming to me, asking if I had seen this person or that, or if I knew where the cocaine dealer with the little black dog had gone. I have performed this service for thirteen years. The longer I performed it, the more expert I grew in interpreting information, in understanding the principles of connectivity. My thoughts became less thoughts than meditations upon the world's facticity. I know so much about the Calle del Pacifico, I am able to anticipate events from changes in the patterns of information. Indeed, thanks to this gift I have learned the answers to larger, albeit trivial questions. I can tell you, for instance, when the world will end and how it will transpire. I am always . . .

You know the exact date? Or do you mean something imprecise like, let us say, sometime during the next century?

I know the precise hour and minute, the Recluse said, irritated by the interruption. May I continue?

Yes, of course.

I'm always cataloguing information, the Recluse went on. Always excising inessential and outdated details. As a result I have very little interior life relating to my personal concerns. So you see, I am more of a recluse than a hermit in his cave. And my ambition has been satisfied. Many people pay me considerably greater sums than thirty cordobas, thus enabling me to live idly.

What of friends? Alvaro asked. And women? Do you not feel the lack of them?

Friends! The Recluse seemed to ridicule the idea, passing it off with a laugh and a dismissive wave. As for women, they, too, have a need for information. Occasionally I permit them to pay in a currency other than cordobas.

You say you can anticipate events. What do you anticipate, if anything, for me?

The Recluse flipped his cigarette out the window. I will not disturb the order by telling you what may or may not happen. It is enough to know that you will find your sister.

Well, then, said Alvaro, seeking some way to validate the Recluse's information. Tell me when the world will end. Surely my knowing that will change nothing.

It is a peculiarity of men that they tend to place a value on information in inverse proportion to its relevance, said the Recluse. This seems strange to me, but it is a rule I am, out of financial necessity, compelled to obey. For the answer to that question, you must pay a thousand cordobas.

**A**t dusk the Calle del Pacifico woke from its daylong lethargy. The crowds thickened; the vendors became aggressive, shouting the virtues of their wares, setting up grills on the street, these small fires adding to the suffocating heat, and soon the smells of barbecued meat and frying dough mixed with the vague industrial odor of the town; the neon signs were switched on, girdling each block with an embroidery of glowing words, with lime green parrots, purple sombreros, indigo cats, a winking, glittering bestiary, and, as the stars materialized, the sky yielded its dominion to the greater magnitudes of the street below, growing unimportant, an afterthought like a black cloth dropped over a child's model railroad. Walking in groups, sailors from China, from Poland, from Cuba and Angola and America, added their voices to the rubric of music from the bars, pop laments and *punta*, salsa, reggae, and rock. Seething from doorways, the whores of Chinandega pounced on them, tugged at their elbows, fondled their genitals, sleek young girls and fat *mamacitas* and dried-out addicts, their breasts overflowing tube tops and halters, their asses sculpted by mini-skirts and hot pants, peroxide blonds and natural brunettes, black girls from Bluefields and Corn Island, sallow girls from Grenada and Jinotega, all cajoling and demanding and laughing shrilly. A drab infestation that marginally corrupted the general hilarity, beggars shuffled and limped and crawled about the edges of the crowd: shrunken widows in black shawls; abandoned mothers with infants-in-arms; mutilated victims of the Dole Corporation, some missing a hand, some an arm or a leg, but most suffering from the kidney disease that afflicted cane workers and banana workers alike, turning their skins saffron and causing them to piss blood when they could piss at all, barely able to stand, their black stares tunneled inward, empty of vitality, so enfeebled that when they murmured

their entreaties you heard only a faint sibilance like the speech of dead men, a few last words extracted by dint of magic from desiccated lungs and bloated tongues, offering inaudible cautions as to what lay beyond the borders of life.

Alvaro had witnessed such scenes in the capital, yet despite its chaos, he sensed that this one possessed a hint of ritual, of organization, and, as he skirted the crowd, passing a clump of young men with cruel mask-like faces and lavaflows of black hair and sharply drawn eyebrows and scythe-like mustaches, smoking in the doorway of a shop, he saw that eight or nine smiling men were gently urging people back, creating an aisle down the center of the street that allowed the passage of a yellow-skinned woman with masses of black curls and swelling breasts, a magnificent woman in the full bloom of maturity, clad in a black bustier, high heels and a diaphanous nightgown worked with black lace. She, too, smiled and her smile broadened whenever she stopped to address someone, before proceeding onward in the direction of the Circo del Mar. Behind her came six . . . no, seven men of grim mien and erect carriage, whose eyes shifted to the left and right as if seeking out a threat.

As the woman drew near, Alvaro pushed to the front of the crowd, the better to see her, for he knew the woman must be Dona Basilia. She paused to exchange words with a whore not far away, and the whore inclined her head as if receiving a blessing. The lace pattern on her nightgown was composed of interlocking scorpions and the material of her bustier was worked all over with a design of satin faces that appeared to change expression as the light shifted across them. A gold choker with a green stone, the green of the Circo del Mar, encircled her throat. She moved on from the whore and, to Alvaro's surprise, stopped in front of him, engaging him with a steady look and eyes as shiny and depthless as chitin.

What is your name, boy? she asked in a deep yet feminine voice, and touched his naked chest with a tapered black fingernail (or perhaps it was dark green, for he realized now her bustier and robe were of that color).

He told her his name. She repeated it and then asked, Do you know me?

He intended to respond in the negative, yet he felt thickheaded and all he could manage was a nod. Though she stood eye to eye with him, he had a sense that he was in the presence of a giantess, that she was in actuality immense and her apparent normalcy was a disguise, or else this was the way men saw her, their senses incapable of grasping her true dimensions. She

continued to talk, chatting about the possibility of rain, about this and that, the sort of things a politician might say to charm a voter, and he came to think her voice was produced by a system of pipes connected to a great organ miles away, and that he heard only its faint resonance. One of the nine who had preceded her staggered sideways, as if overcome by fatigue, then slumped to the pavement and lay still. No one came to his aid and, although she noticed the fallen man's plight, Dona Basilia did not appear to be in the least perturbed.

You must come to see me, she said to Alvaro, a pronouncement that had less the ring of an invitation than of a statement of simple fact, and walked on toward the Circo del Mar, whose windows blazed with many-colored lights.

The crowd closed in behind her, hiding the body from view, and Alvaro, dismayed by the man's apparent death, by the indifference shown by those in the vicinity, and equally dismayed by his reaction to Dona Basilia, wandered onto a side street, where it was darker and comparatively quiet, hoping to sort out his impressions. On a corner, under a streetlamp, some kids, five or six of them, were sniffing glue from paper sacks with wet bottoms, and he noticed that one was the boy who had guided him to the home of the Recluse. He waved, but the boy, though staring straight at him, gave no sign of recognition. His face had acquired a sullen aspect and he and his fellows, who all wore the same expression, the same ragged clothing, shuffled aimlessly and bumped shoulders and stumbled beneath the lamppost, like a troop of imps separated from a larger force, cut off from the vigor and direction of their master's will.

**H**e spent the night in La Gatita Blanca, a brothel that also served as a hotel, in a room that smelled of stale joy, windowless, with a standing floor lamp that shed a bilious light and walls of unfinished stone and a round bed fitted with a plastic sheet. It had a mirrored ceiling, but the mirror was so befogged and bespeckled that all he saw standing beneath was a rough caricature of his face—he imagined that the act of love would show as an indefinite thrashing, more disturbing than arousing. The plastic sheet felt greasy to his touch. He sat in a wooden chair against the back wall and thought about Dona Basilia; but the whores refused to leave him in peace, tapping on the door and whis-

pering temptations through the thin plyboard. Eventually they stopped, but after an interval of a half-hour there came a knock and a girlish voice said, May I have a moment of your time, Senor? This approach was so direct and child-like, he opened the door and found a young *mestiza* standing in the corridor, wearing a white cotton shift that reminded him of Palmira's night-dresses. She asked if she could talk with him, saying that the malediction was upon her and thus she could not work, and further that she was lonely. Would he mind if she kept him company for a while?

He admitted her and she perched on the edge of the bed in the dungeon-like room, sitting with her hands between her knees. She looked no older than Palmira, resembling her somewhat, and had about her a playful air that further reminded him of his sister. Her name was Adalina and she hailed from the neighboring town of Chichigalpa. The death of her father from the kidney disease had forced her to become a whore. He felt at ease with her and talked of Palmira, saying that he intended to remove her from the Circo del Mar and bring her home.

Adalina's mouth tightened and then she said, Perhaps she had a reason for choosing this life.

We are not wealthy, said Alvaro. Yet there is always enough food, enough for clothing and schoolbooks. What other reason could she have had aside from desperation?

There may have been trouble at home.

Alvaro denied this vehemently.

You seem defensive, she said teasingly. Did she catch you staring at her *tetas*? If you're going to talk like that, get out!

Calm down! I was making a joke. Once she had succeeded in placating him, she said, You will have to ask her why she ran away, but I can tell you this much: Dona Basilia will never permit her to leave.

Who is this Dona Basilia that people are in such awe of her?

Cocaine dealers have their saint; whores have their queen. It's as simple as that.

She is the queen of *all* whores?

All? I cannot say. But her influence is wide. Men come from America, from Chile and Argentina, to speak with her. She has great wisdom. From her window, it is said that one can see the floor of heaven.

Once you scratched the surface of how people felt about Dona Basilia, Alvaro thought, the oil of superstition came welling up.

She stands between the seven and the nine, Adalina said. She . . .

Does that refer to the nine men who led her down the Calle del Pacifico last night? The seven who came behind?

She shrugged. It's just something I've heard.

What else have you heard?

Adalina gave the matter some thought and said, That a man can die from standing too near her, yet in her embrace he can be reborn.

Alvaro cast his mind back to the weary manner of the man's collapse on the Calle del Pacifico, and remembered how drained and unsteady he had felt when she spoke to him, as if affected by some radiation emitted by her flesh. He questioned Adalina further, but she grew petulant, saying that people talked constantly of Dona Basilia—how could she be expected to retain it all? She coaxed him to join her on the bed, to get some rest, assuring him that the sheet was clean, and Alvaro, overcome by stress and fatigue, surrendered to temptation and lay beside her, thinking they might find innocent solace in each other's arms. Looking up at the mirror, he saw his reflection with relative clarity, but of Adalina he saw only patches of her white shift—clouds of grime and discoloration obscured the remainder of her image and this seemed to devalue the notion of innocence. After a minute or two she began to caress his chest and stomach, and offered to gratify him orally for ten cordobas. He gave her five and evicted her from the room. She stood in the corridor, complaining loudly that he had cheated her and that he had taken up more than ten cordobas of her time; but as she walked away he heard her telling another whore how the fool in Room Nine had paid five cordobas for nothing.

**J**uegos Galaxia contained three rows of video games, with a cashier's counter at the rear and posters of movie villains and rock stars affixed to the walls. After satisfying himself that Palmira was not inside (there were barely a handful of customers firing chain guns and energy bolts at a variety of monsters), Alvaro went outside to wait. Because it was Sunday, the street was almost deserted. Beggars drowsed in the doorways and a drunk staggered



zombie-like along the opposite side of the street, seeking shelter from the dynamited white glare of the sun. A bearded man sat in the gutter, repeatedly touching the blood that matted his temple, disturbing the flies gathered about the wound, and singing brokenly to himself. It seemed a place from which the tide had retreated, leaving behind this debris. Half a block from the arcade, a middle-aged woman in a thin dress, its pattern effaced by repeated launderings, paced agitatedly in front of a doorway, accosting strollers and shrieking at passing cars. Another drunk, thought Alvaro. Yet rarely did you see a woman make such a public display. Curious, he moved closer. Huddled in the doorway behind the woman was a dead man. His eyes were open, but had begun to glaze, and a grayish pallor suffused his saffron-colored skin. Apparently he had been set there to beg the previous evening and had succumbed to the kidney disease during the night. When the woman noticed Alvaro, she ran at him and clutched his shirt and begged him to help move her husband's body. Her worn face was contorted in anguish, her hands patting and clawing at his chest.

I cannot, he said. I have an appointment. But I will call the authorities to help you.

The woman seemed only to have heard *I cannot*. Wild-eyed, she cursed Alvaro and spat at him, calling him a coward and the son of a whore, and she continued reviling him as he backed toward *Juegos Galaxia*, calling upon God to punish him. Once inside the arcade he approached the cashier and asked him to make the call. The cashier, who was of the approximate age of Alvaro, said it was none of his business; but Alvaro, shaken by the woman's ferocity and the sight of her husband in the awkward rectitude of death, gave him money and the cashier relented.

Chinandega, Alvaro told himself, was all that the farmer on the bus had said it would be: hot and vile and soulless. He took a seat in front of a shooter game and for the next half-hour tried to smooth out the tumble of his angry thoughts by slaying demons that were turned into yellowish ooze when struck by a sufficiency of bullets. He looked away from the screen now and again, checking the entrance, and came to realize that a woman seated at a game closer to the street bore a resemblance to his sister in coloration and carriage. She wore skintight pink jeans and an off-the-shoulder blouse. Gold bracelets encircled her wrists and dark curls frosted with blond highlights framed her

face. Her lips were sketched in carmine and she had on so much eye shadow that from a distance her eyes appeared to have been replaced by deep pits. She looked to be nineteen or twenty, but as he came toward her he saw more youthful and familiar lines emerge from the shell of make-up.

Palmira? he said, still not convinced that this slut could be his sister.

She glanced up sharply and her face hardened. She returned her attention to the roaring, tire-squealing game, maneuvering a red bullet-shaped car between two others and taking the lead in the race. He was tempted to drag her into the bathroom and scrub her face until her natural beauty was restored.

Palmira, he said again and, when she gave no response, he put his hand on the steering wheel, sending the red car flipping end-over-end into the infield, where it burned with unnaturally steady digital flames.

*Cono!* Palmira said, and pricked the back of his hand with a fingernail, drawing a drop of blood.

That's what you have to say to me? Alvaro asked. After a year?

Don't exaggerate! It hasn't been a year.

All right. Eleven months.

It's closer to ten.

If he hadn't been so furious, Alvaro might have been amused at how quickly they had dropped back into a pattern of childish bickering. Fine, he said. Whatever. Is that all you have to say after leaving without a word? Mama and Papa . . .

What should I have told them? That I was running away? That would have been self-defeating.

She looked pleased with herself, as if the concept of self-defeat were something she had only recently mastered. He caught her by the arm and tried to pull her to her feet, but she clung to the seat and said, What are you doing?

Taking you home.

She shook him off. I go where I please, nowhere else. I am one of Dona Basilia's girls.

So you want to be a whore? You sound as if you are proud of it.

And why not? I love to fuck. Men like me. A good whore is the remedy for the illness of marriage. Just ask Papa. Do you still believe he spends his Friday evenings in church? He's on his knees, all right. Licking some whore's *pipote*.

Though Palmira had always been a rebellious girl, Alvaro was shocked to hear her talk in this manner. He tried another tack. Mama thinks you are dead, he said.

Well, now you can tell her I am alive, she said pertly. I am not Mama. I have no wish to make a respectable marriage to a man I do not love and live like a mouse in his shadow. That was my future if I stayed. It's different for you. You are a good scholar. I only had two choices . . . and I have chosen.

What is your future now? Is it any better than the one you would have had at home?

Who can say? Whatever it may be, it is not Mama's. Dona Basilia is my mother now.

Alvaro felt like slapping her. How can you say such a thing? Have you forgotten the woman who gave you life . . . who nurtured you?

Mama may have nurtured me, but it is Dona Basilia who has given me life. Soon she will rise to her true estate and I will share in it. She picked up her purse, snapped it shut, and her distant, reverent tone grew terse. Anyway, what do you care? We were never close.

That's a lie. Who walked you to school each day? Who walked you home at night?

Palmira seemed about to say something, but she bit back the words and stood. I have to go.

Alvaro followed her as she went toward the dark green fortress of the Circo del Mar, trying to think of some logic or persuasive truth that would move her; but he was at a loss for words. He had expected Palmira to be grateful for his intercession or, if not grateful, sympathetic and glad to see him. He could not have predicted her utter disdain for what he had to say. He began telling her about her friends, how they were faring, seeking to awaken nostalgia, but though she expressed mild interest, her step did not falter and, on reaching the corner across from the brothel, she kissed him on the cheek and wished him a safe trip back to the capital.

I want to talk more, he said. Tomorrow. Can you meet me tomorrow?

So you can argue with me? What's the point?

I am your brother! Despite what you say, I have missed you. I haven't seen you for a year.

Ten months.

I have missed you, Palmira, he repeated. Can't you spare an hour to take a cup of coffee with me?

She hesitated and then said, If you promise not to argue, I will meet you at noon in the arcade.

He promised, she kissed him again and walked briskly off. Two men guarded the entrance of the brothel and, as she passed between them and ascended the stairs, she exaggerated the swing of her hips, causing one of the men to shake his hand loosely in a gesture of lascivious appreciation and share a laugh with the other.

**A**lvaro was angry with himself for not having been more forceful, although he blamed Palmira's shallowness and self-absorption for sapping his aggression. After months of searching for her, their reunion had been anti-climactic—he might have come back from the corner store for all the enthusiasm she had displayed on seeing him again. His face grew hot and numb, as if he were a jilted lover. He should have dragged her from the arcade, he told himself. He should have locked her away in a hotel until it was time for the bus to leave.

He walked up and down the Calle del Pacifico, half-inclined to leave her to her fate, yet determined to make some effort, however futile, on her behalf. As evening approached, frustrated, he bought a Coca Cola and a bottle of cheap rum, and wandered into the waste that lay behind the Circo del Mar, a tract of weedy, broken ground littered with paper trash and flattened cans, patrolled by pariah dogs who looked at him anxiously, and sat on a hummock of dried mud, mixing rum and Coke in his mouth, staring at the rear of the brothel as if its hulking shape and green boards were a puzzle he had been challenged to rearrange in a more comprehensible way. Lace curtains fluttered in the windows on the second floor; heavy yellow drapes were drawn across a high, narrow window on the third. Now and again, a blocky young man with a Mayan complexion, wearing a baseball cap and a white apron over his clothes, emerged from the back door carrying a garbage bag, which he deposited in a bin. After each of his appearances the pariah dogs would come to sniff the ground near the bin, hopeful of fallen scraps, and seagulls, strayed inland from the port, would swoop

down to reconnoiter before resuming their aimless aerials above the town.

Drunkenness overcame Alvaro at dusk and he slept for a couple of hours, curled up on the ground, using his shirt for a pillow. He woke with a throbbing headache and a sore back, and with the notion planted firmly in his mind that he should make a bold effort to rescue his sister that very night. He told himself that such a precipitate action would likely get him beaten or killed—if he tried to force her, she would cry out or find some other means of raising an alarm that would bring men with guns. And yet the idea was irresistible. It was as if a spirit had visited his dreams and lodged a message in the front of his brain, urging him to flee Chinandega before its poisonous heat could steal his will. He staggered to his feet, gazed dumbly at the patternless scatter of pinprick stars showing through a thin cloud cover, and picked his way across the waste to the side of the trash bin, stopping once to pick up a loose board. He squatted in the shadow of the bin, his thoughts reduced to a fretful static, listening to the romantic ballads issuing muddily from the brothel. When the kitchen door banged open, he went on the alert and, when the bin was flung open, he jumped up, startling the man with his load of garbage, and whacked him on the back of his head with the board, dropping him to his knees. A second blow and the man fell forward onto his face. Alvaro bound and gagged him, wedged his limp body behind the bin. He put on the man's apron and baseball cap, jamming it down onto his ears, and, without pausing to reconsider his decision, he pushed into the harsh lights and bustle of the kitchen of the Circo del Mar.

Ignoring shouts that might or might not have been directed at him, Alvaro kept his head down, slipping a steak knife into his pocket as he passed a warming table, and made for an inner door. The door opened onto a corridor that led away to the interior of the brothel. He took the first turning and ascended a stairway to the second floor, where another corridor lay before him—a wide passage carpeted in dark green, with wall lamps shedding a soft light and recessed doors and shimmering, sea-green wallpaper bearing a sparse design of tridents and conch shells and seahorses. The hubbub of the floor below was muted, the air laced with perfume. Made uneasy by the quiet, he started along the corridor, hunting for a place in which he could shelter and take stock. Between rooms were niches in which fleshy, broad-leaved plants in

brass urns were set and, on hearing a door open, a man speaking in American English and then a woman's voice, also in English, but with a Spanish accent, Alvaro sprang into the nearest niche, pressing back among the pliant stalks and greenery. There was insufficient space behind the plant to crouch, so he stood peering through the leaves as the man, a thickset sort with bushy gray hair and white sideburns, stepped from a room just down the hall and stood adjusting his belt beneath the overhang of his belly. He patted his sides in apparent satisfaction and strode off toward the stairs. Alvaro went to the door from which the man had emerged. He put an ear to it and listened, then turned the knob and slipped inside. The room, which echoed the color scheme of the corridor, a blending of softly lit greens, was unoccupied, but he heard water running behind a door to the left of the rumpled bed. He took a position beside the door and waited for the woman to be done with her ablutions, his eyes ranging over the furnishings. After a minute or so, the door to the bathroom opened and a pale, dark-haired girl no older than he, wearing a loosely belted robe of emerald silk, came forth. He caught her from behind, muffling her cry with his hand, and showed her the knife and cautioned her to be quiet. She signaled with her eyes that she would comply and he allowed her to sit on the bed, where she began brushing her hair with a jade-handled brush that she took from a bedside table, appearing unconcerned with him.

He asked if she knew where Palmira was and, with an annoyed expression, she said, Why do so many men ask for Palmira? Am I not more beautiful?

She let the robe slip from her shoulders, continuing to brush her hair. Though entranced by her, Alvaro asked again where Palmira was and the girl said, On the third floor, of course. I'll take you if you like.

Don't think you can trick me, he said. If you are tempted to give me away, remember I have the knife.

The girl laughed, a chilly, bright sound, like two ice cubes dropped into a glass one after the other. Do you believe Dona Basilia is unaware of your presence? She knows you are here. She knows everything about you, whoever you are.

She stood, the robe puddling at her feet, and struck a seductive pose. Her secret hair had been trimmed into a complicated shape, one from which he averted his eyes before he could discern its exact outlines.

I am Josefina, she said. Stay with me and I'll make you forget that skinny bitch Palmira.

I doubt that.

Josefina affected injured pride, but he could tell she was merely playing with him.

Tell me about Dona Basilia, he said. How can she know anything about me?

She is Babylon's daughter, born of the union between the stars of commerce and pleasure. Josefina winked at him. You know. It's the same old story. You've heard it a hundred times.

Be serious! I'm trying to understand her.

Serious? Very well. Josefina pitched her voice into a spooky whisper. She has been ordained by the light of certain stars to rule over the lower depths.

Stop fucking around, okay?

She is a woman like any other, but soon she will ascend to her true estate. Josefina walked to the door, paused with her hand on the knob, and smiled at him. It could happen at any second. You'd better hurry.

As he followed her up the stairs, he began to be afraid not of being caught, but of the unknown, of Dona Basilia, his rational outlook giving way before his superstitious nature. At the top of the stairs was a closed door and, as Josefina made to open it, he caught her wrist and said, Keep close to me. Pretend we are together.

We are together, she said drily. But if you think I can protect you, I cannot.

Let me be the judge of that.

She patted his cheek. Don't be afraid. You are lost already, but it is good to be lost, to be free of one's past.

He tucked the knife under his shirt. You may be free of the past, but I am not. Palmira is my sister.

Oh! And you have come to rescue her, I suppose. Again she laughed. Had I the time, I would tell you a story about such a rescue. But you'll know the truth soon enough.

Men standing in groups, smoking and laughing and talking together, populated the corridor beyond the door. American men in casual dress, Latin men in sport coats and suits—they gazed incuriously at Alvaro as he passed, gripping Josefina's arm, and several greeted her and patted her on the ass. He

thought he recognized some of them from the newspapers. They were anonymous, well-groomed men of the type who gathered at the elbows of public figures in photographs captioned by the announcement of a new trade agreement or a leasing of mineral rights. They were the powers behind the throne, the corporate functionaries, architects of political betrayal, princes of bureaucracy, defilers of the public trust, dispensers of the kidney disease, liars, thieves, and murderers with summer palaces in Cozumel and Cancun. Alvaro knew people at the university who would sacrifice a great deal (or would claim as much) for an opportunity to be armed and at close quarters with such men; but his personal concerns dulled his revolutionary sensibility and he was more aware of them as potential threats to his safety than as political adversaries.

This corridor was truncated, scarcely half the length of the one on the second floor, terminating in dark green double doors; both it and the rooms along it (twice the size of the rooms below) were papered in shiny gold foil that was worked with a design too small to make out, their entrances unencumbered by doors or curtains, furnished with yellow sofas and chairs and deep pile rugs upon which men and women were having sex, singly and in groups. Alvaro could hear grunts and cries of delight over the conversational murmur, but nowhere did he spot his sister. There were too many people in the rooms and some wore masks, making identification even more difficult. He asked Josefina to help him and she told him he would find Palmira beyond the green doors at the end of the corridor.

When they entered the room (furnished like the others, yet much larger, filled with a babble of voices and an insistent electronic music), they became separated almost at once, forced apart by the densely packed crowd around the door. Alvaro, certain that Josefina would betray him, tried to hide in the press along the walls, edging along, drawing the occasional stare, but generally going unnoticed in the hubbub. He eased behind a sofa and, between shoulders, caught sight of a girl who might have been Palmira, bent over a chair, her head down as a bearded man took her from behind; but when he pushed close, calling to her, she brushed the hair from her eyes and, shaken by the man's fierce thrusts, looked at Alvaro stuporously, proving to be older and thinner and coarser of feature than his sister. He retreated, bumping into people, wedging past them, until he reached the security of a corner and stood



with his back against the wall, his heart jumping in his chest, alarmed by everything, by the milling crowd, the pulsing music, the yellowness of the room, the naked bodies splayed on couches and the men looking on, the gold foil wallpaper . . . The design it bore was varied yet of a pattern. Close at hand was the image of seven tiny *guanacaste* trees juxtaposed with nine oranges, and higher up were seven dogs and nine crosses, seven birds and nine roses, seven children and nine rakes. Always there were seven of one object and nine of the other. He could not grasp the significance of this, yet knew that it must be significant. Moving deeper into the room, he spotted the Recluse in a small open area, his handsome features composed and watchful, and he had a glimpse of Josefina being fondled by a group of men. He came abreast of three men who were engaged in an intense discussion, standing by an unoccupied sofa, and realized to his astonishment that they were debating aspects of the poetry of Rueben Dario. Here, he thought, was a conversation in which he could hide, blending in with these professorial types (all of them wore shabby suits and beards salted with gray, smoking pipes and cigarettes, dribbling ashes whenever they gestured) until he was able to get his bearings. Their concern seemed to be whether or not Dario's *Songs Of Life And Hope* had announced the modern era or if they were the last mutterings of the Neo-classical period dressed in new clothing.

Gentlemen, Alvaro said, inserting himself into their circle. Dario's impact is clear. He shrugged off the decaying mantle of the Neo-classical and adopted new poetic themes.

He paused, summoning lines from memory, and quoted the following lines from *To Roosevelt*:

You think that life is fire,  
That eruption is progress,  
That wherever you shoot  
You hit the future . . .

Even the syntax was new, said Alvaro. Without Dario, there would be no Paz, no Lorca, no Neruda.

The poem is political, a populist slogan, and thus constitutes an aberration, offered a lanky man with a prominent Adam's apple. Within this same

volume, Dario provides us with a text—a major text—that embraces anew the structures of the past. I am speaking, of course, of *The Optimist's Salutation*.

Surely you realize that the antiquated language of the poem is an irony? said Alvaro.

The discussion grew heated and Alvaro lost track to some extent of his purpose for invading the Circo del Mar, though each time a woman passed by the sofa, he looked to see if she was Palmira. He began to hear a ragged unanimity in the voices of the crowd, as if some of them were repeating the same words. This rattled him, but he fixed his mind on the argument, assuming that some ritual—a drinking contest, perhaps—encouraged them to speak in chorus. As he attempted to refute a point by quoting from *The Optimist's Salutation*, reciting the lines, Abominate mouths that foretell only misfortune/ abominate eyes that see only ill-fated Zodiacs, he heard the crowd uttering the lines along with him and broke off, knowing that his presence had been discovered.

The crowd finished the quote, hundreds of voices sounding the lines:

... abominate hands that stone the illustrious ruins,  
or that wield the firebrand or suicidal dagger.

The music ceased, and the professorial men, the government officials, the whores, the Americans—they fell silent and began to move back against the walls, assisted in this by nine men of pleasant manner, who shooed people to one side or another. Alvaro found himself looking along the avenue that was created at Dona Basilia. She was enthroned in a yellow easy chair, and she wore a dark green latex cocktail dress that cinched her waist and pushed up her breasts. Her black curls gleamed as if fashioned of polished obsidian. At her back, in casual array, stood seven solemn and unsmiling men, and behind them was a high window partly concealed by yellow drapes. She beckoned to Alvaro and, having no choice—the crowd at his rear was packed in solidly, making escape impossible—he walked toward her, stopping a few feet away.

My sister, he said. Where is she?

You have no sister, said Dona Basilia.

Alvaro nudged the knife beneath his shirt with the back of his hand. Palmira! he shouted.

Oh! So it is Palmira you wish to see. Dona Basilia mocked him with her smile. Why didn't you say so?

Palmira stepped forth from the crowd, naked except for a necklace with a green stone, her body agleam with oil. At her side stood a short, muscular man with skin of a ruddy copper hue, a mask in the form of a snarling mastiff covering his head. He was also naked and in a state of tumescence.

Are they not beautiful? Dona Basilia came to her feet, a movement that captured Alvaro's attention, and posed with her hands on hips, her voluptuous figure tortured into the shape of an 8 by the green latex. Yet their beauty is not that of brother and sister, she said. No more than would be the case if you were at her side. She is not your sister, but the child of your father's favorite whore, Expectacion. She told your father the infant was his.

That's a lie, Alvaro said weakly, his eyes returning to Palmira—he had not known she was so womanly.

Whores lie, said Dona Basilia. It's true. And Expectacion lied. She saw in your father a fool who would take a nuisance off her hands. Blood knows blood, Alvaro. If she were your sister, could you look at her as you are now?

Turning to the man beside her, Palmira removed his mask; as she lifted it from his head, he misted away as though he had never been, vanishing before Alvaro could register his features. The crowd seethed. Palmira approached to within a foot of Alvaro, her expression empty of emotion, and held out the mask.

The man's disappearance did not affect Alvaro—he had seen more spectacular tricks at country carnivals. He stared at the slim perfection of Palmira's body and the blank indifference of her face, half-wanting to believe she was not his sister, yet refusing to take the mask. Dona Basilia stepped up beside him and slipped her arm through his elbow. The pressure of her breast against his arm seemed to drain him of strength and will.

Will you not entertain us? No? Dona Basilia gave a dusty laugh. Come with me, then. I have something to show you.

One of the seven unsmiling men sprang to the window behind the easy chair and drew back the drapes that concealed it. As Dona Basilia guided him to the window, Alvaro cut his eyes toward her. She had, he thought, the simplified beauty of statuary, the statue of a sexual goddess carved from yellow stone, with breasts and hips like sculptural principles, and black eyes

like cabochons; yet there was nothing sexual about her, no hint of warmth or humanity. Her smile did not develop, but shifted into place, as if it were an artifact she summoned up whenever necessary, and the perfume that clung to her was a coarse, heady odor like incense. She instructed him to look out the window, which he did briefly, seeing nothing other than the waste that lay behind the brothel. Suddenly timid, overwhelmed by her closeness, he asked what he was supposed to see, and she said, The world . . . of which the Circo del Mar is not truly a part. You must look deeply or else your journey will have been for nothing.

The darkness appeared to ripple and bits of phosphorescent life bobbed about in the air, as if the night were an ocean beneath which the brothel was submerged . . . and then he realized that what he had mistaken for phosphorescent glints were the scattered lights of Colonia San Jeronimo. He rubbed his eyes, trying to rid himself of the rippling effect, and when he looked again he found that he was peering in the window of a house, a shack, a foul nest built of canted boards inhabited by two creatures that might have been the fantasy of a medieval artist, an emaciated man and woman, grotesquely malformed, scarcely more than skeletons dressed in rags of flesh and flaps of pallid gray skin, their shoulder blades so pronounced that they resembled stubby wings. They crawled into their matrimonial hammock, croaking love noises and mauling one another, exhausted tides of emotion filming across their faces like washes of scum, their feelings as easy to read as the intent of spiders. He tried to look beneath the surface, to see behind their lives as Dona Basilia had told him to do, but—though he came to recognize that the window was a lens through which he could view every quarter of the town (and perhaps afforded a wider view than that)—there was no greater depth to perceive, no roots twisting down beneath the houses that tapped into a black reservoir, no snickering demons perched atop the roofs and manipulating those within, no apparent cause for their grotesquerie. Monstrosities populated every house in the colonia, and he knew to his soul that what he saw from the window of the Circo del Mar was literal and real, shorn of all illusory beauty and grace. Each new thing he saw was a blow that weakened one or another of his fundamental assumptions, that abolished some rule of order, and forced on him an unvarnished view of the world. Along the Calle del Pacifico, whores with leech-like mouths and sagging

bodies hustled big-bellied American swine, and broken-down old men with goiters the size of pineapples and old women with hairs sprouting from their skin cancers sheltered in the shadowed doorways of unlit shops, their faces seamed with bad life, with ugly hungers, with brutish contempt and blue-movie dreams, the faces of hawk-rats and bat-roaches and scorpion-dogs, and in the more prosperous sectors of the town, wife-beaters and child abusers and priests with their fatty self-absorption and their penchant for sodomy and their love of guava jelly, the average meat nobodies of a dying age, stared into nowhere with lechery and avarice. They breathed in brown gas, breathed it out as sulfur; their bones were petrified shit, their hearts were empty leather sacs, their minds were stinging vibrations; pink insects were glued to their groins, and their screams were all the music there ever was; they had larval visions of huge wallowing and gulplings, earthquake moans and enormous torsions of suety flesh. Life had betrayed them . . . or rather betrayal was the medium of their lives. They fed on the dung of lies, flies orbiting the garbage of illusion. They clung to nothing, squeezing sticky handfuls of nothing hard in hopes that their grip would transform it into a bright something that they could sell themselves, that would provide them with a reason to continue.

Alvaro had always believed that the world was a wasteland and evil, but seeing things in this hard, sudden light toppled the tissue-paper castles of philosophy behind which he had been hiding, banished them beyond recall and unhinged him to such a degree that a powerful hatred of life was bred in him. When he turned from the window and saw grotesques of a kind with which he was familiar, sleek women and well-dressed men, and realized that the illusion of beauty was somehow sustained within the Circo del Mar—this deceit so inflamed him, he could no longer contain his rage and despair. Letting out a yell, he drew the knife from his waist and slashed at the air.

You see, said Dona Basilia. Here you have found refuge from the world. Here you are free to please yourself however you will.

She made a gesture and the man who had opened the drapes now hurried to close them.

There, she said. You need never look at it again. Now Palmira can be yours. I think she likes you. She has always liked you, and you her. Now you can express yourself fully one to the other.

She moved closer to him and, though she was draped in firm yellow flesh and a dress of dark green latex, he knew the hateful thing she was, he felt her vile, venereal heat on his skin and understood the release she offered.

You can be my kitchen boy, she said, and smiled broadly. I believe I have need of a new one.

She moved closer yet, the points of her nipples grazing his chest, and just that touch, that slight stimulus, triggered his rage. He stabbed down with the knife, yet he lacked a murderer's conviction—the blade bit into her flesh an inch or two. Dona Basilia yielded a soft feminine moan, a breathy exclamation of pleasure, and that moan seemed to be echoed throughout the house, as if every woman in the Circo del Mar had experienced a sweet pang. All the whores within sight stood with eyes closed and lips parted, mirroring Dona Basilia's stance. Blood welled from the slope of her breast. She clutched Alvaro's knife-hand and placed the tip of the blade against the wound he had made.

Strike deeper, she said rapturously.

When he did not respond, she spat into his face, thick spittle that hung from his nose and chin, and when that did not move him to act, she struck him in the face and said that he was not a man. Without knowing why, for his rage had fled, supplanted by a bleak, uncaring emotion, Alvaro pushed the knife home.

A second moan issued from Dona Basilia's lips and from every portion of the house, louder and longer than the first, a finishing cry, a gush of sound that might have signaled lust well spent. For an instant she appeared to ripple and billow, as if he had penetrated illusion, and he thought that the image of the yellow room and the crowd might be sucked into the rent he had carved in her breast, leaving behind a nightmarish environment populated by sub-humans; but she collapsed on the floor with a meaty thump, looking more vivacious in death than she had in life, with black curls partly obscuring her face and her legs akimbo and the rivulet of blood running down across her skin to pool on the golden carpet.

Alvaro expected to be borne under by an angry mob, but—following a momentary silence—the crowd erupted with shouts of joy and delirium. She has ascended, they cried. She has claimed her estate. The seven and the nine mingled, shaking hands with one another. It seemed that the punishment for

murder committed in the Circo del Mar was to be smothered in congratulations. Men came to clap Alvaro on the shoulder and embrace him, women to kiss him on the mouth and cheek. Confused, he shoved them aside, but they lifted him to their shoulders and carried him aloft, all the while exclaiming a shrill, nonsensical litany. She has ascended! She stands between the seven and the nine! He understood none of it, but was infected by their merriment and soon he raised his arms in triumph, joining the celebration, happy that no blame attached to his crime.

At length Dona Basilia's body was borne away, and thereafter the room emptied swiftly, everyone going off to their separate revels, leaving Alvaro and Palmira alone in that vast yellow space. She walked up to him and wordlessly offered him the mask worn by the man who disappeared. Alvaro did not know what to say to her or, for that matter, what he would say to anyone, so he took it and turned the thing over in his hand, pretending to examine its snarling, toothy mouth and alert ears, sticking his fingers through the eyeholes.

Put it on, Palmira said.

He hesitated.

No one will disturb us, she said. Go ahead. Put it on.

Why did you run away? he asked.

You know why. I wanted you, and I knew you wanted me, though you would never admit to it. Imagine if you had. We would have become lovers and then the situation would have been even more intolerable.

He started to deny it, but could not. What happened here tonight? Dona Basilia . . . I don't understand.

It's not important that you understand. I don't understand. No one does, really. Now put on the mask. It will make things easier.

She reclined on a sofa, positioning herself so as to give him a full display. He pulled the mask over his head. It was hot and smelled of sweat and fit snugly to his ears, making his breathing sound like a beast pausing open-mouthed over its prey. The tiny eyeholes limited his view. He could see her belly or her breasts or her thighs, but not the entirety of her body. When he lifted his gaze, he noticed there was a pulse in her throat, and her face, ardent and flushed, the mouth distorted by a mature passion, did not resemble his sister's at all.

**W**hores lie.

All men being whores, for Dona Basilia to have made this statement, one that implied a distinction, was, Alvaro thinks, unnecessary. He wonders if she intended the words to be self-referential, if she lied when she told him Palmira was not his sister. It matters little now, yet nonetheless he wonders. He sports with other women of the brothel, but Palmira is by far his favorite and their hours together are his sole treasure. Their affection is thin, as are all affections, but the sex is good and suffices to sustain it.

Sometimes they walk hand-in-hand down to Juegos Galaxia and play the racing games. Alvaro keeps his eyes lowered, not wanting to see things as they are, though he is aware that the illusion he has accepted is a strong one, made even stronger by the ascendancy and death of Dona Basilia, and he would likely see nothing out of the ordinary. It has been explained to him that he and Palmira and the seven and the nine were part of a design that permitted Dona Basilia to assume her place among the gods, and it has been pointed out that a new constellation hangs above the Gulf of Fonseca, one shaped roughly like an 8 or an hourglass—this is proof, it's said, that she watches over the folk of the Circo del Mar and guarantees their continued well-being. But the explanations are words, merely, and there are so many stars above the Gulf of Fonseca that one could arrange them into any shape. On occasion he sees her taking a promenade along the Calle del Pacifico, standing between the seven and the nine, and chatting with bystanders. On other occasions she strolls through the corridors of the brothel. In both instances, the wound on her breast is plainly visible, still bleeding. Alvaro is not entirely free of guilt where she is concerned and it is possible that these apparitions are a kind of self-punishment. None of their *proofs* are persuasive, yet he cannot discount the idea of her divinity. It is simply unimportant.

He works in the kitchen of the brothel and sometimes it seems that he has always worked there. The former kitchen boy, whom he struck with a board, has disappeared as completely as the man in the mask. Since both men were stocky and of Mayan blood, like him, and as he never saw their faces, he suspects that they were doubles fashioned of illusory stuff and served some unfathomable purpose; but he is not in the least curious about them. Curiosity is no longer a function of his personality. He no longer cares about



literature or politics. He no longer wishes to embrace life's complexity, its cruel simplicity having been confirmed to his satisfaction. He goes through the days ploddingly, carrying trash to the bin out back, scraping off dishes, mopping floors, and taking pleasure wherever he can find it, inspired to this dogged continuance by a single goal.

Money is not difficult to come by at the Circo del Mar and Alvaro does not have to spend much. His meals and a place to sleep are provided, drink is plentiful, and Palmira sees to his other needs. Now and then he buys her a present, a cheap trinket, a CD—she requires no more—but otherwise he saves his tips, the change he finds on floors and in ashtrays, and the banknotes that the whores slip him in return for favors. Someday soon he will walk deep into Colonia San Jeronimo and hand the Recluse a thousand cordobas and then, not with dread, as one might expect, but with eager anticipation (it is one thing that he remains curious about), he will ask to be told the precise hour and minute at which the world will end.



# THE EASE WITH WHICH WE FREED THE BEAST

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**M**E AND MOLLY BRUIN WERE LYING ON OUR STOMACHS ATOP A sea cliff overlooking Droughans Beach, fresh from a fuck and lolling there, our skins stuck with bits from the weeds and tall grasses that cloaked our sin, with the wind in our faces and our lives yet to be lived. For want of anything to say, I scooted forward and hung my head down so I could see beneath the overhang. Just below the lip, a chunk of earth had been ripped from the cliff face, laying bare a tangle of roots, some thick as a child's arm, from which sprang the spindly shrub that poked up beside me, producing from its topmost twig a single pink bloom, the sum of all that tortuous subterranean effort. It annoyed me, that flower, the way it was dandled, bobbing in a stiff breeze like vegetable laughter, and I snapped it off, intending to crumple it in my fist.

"For me?" asked Molly with mock delight, knowing I hadn't meant to give her the flower. She plucked it from my hand and sat up, fixing it in her black hair. Her torso was decorated with green and blue ink. Traceries of vines and leaves interwoven with the random grace of natural growth coiled about her breasts, trellised across her belly. With the flower capping her curly head, she might have been a nymph born of some mystic union, and not the daughter of a drunk and the bloated misery that was his wife. Even the scatter of acne across her cheek seemed put there by design.

"We should go down," she said.

"Not yet."

A hill sloped upward from the edge of the cliff and, just below its summit, gone to nature amid a wrangle of bushes and stunted trees, there stood a ruined cottage with a caved-in roof and a gaping doorway, home to mice and spiders, shadows and snakes. By unfocusing my eyes, I could make it into a soldier's remains, a giant fallen during an assault, his body collapsed to rib

bones, tenting up the brown-and-black camouflage of the boards. A cover of soft gray clouds was being drawn across the sky.

“We should see what the others are doing,” Molly said. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“In a minute.” I rolled back onto my stomach. “You took the sauce out of me with that one.”

Pleased, she lay down in the grass, nudging against my shoulder and hip, and went to braiding grass blades together. She stretched a hand out beside mine, as if comparing the two in size and pallor, then rested her head on her arm and said, “Let’s stay here tonight.”

“Where?”

“I saw a couple places back in town.”

“Too expensive.”

“We don’t have to find a place, we can stay awake all night.” She rolled over and grabbed a baggie from a purse, showed it to me—it held a quantity of white powder and, in a little plastic bottle, a rainbow confection of pills. “We have this,” she said, and shook the baggie, making it rustle.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said. “I don’t care.”

She pitched her voice low in imitation of mine. “Whatever. I don’t care.”

“I don’t.”

“It’s all so depressing.” She threw herself down in the grass and pressed her forearm to her brow, as if overborne by the world’s brutishness. “Whatever. I don’t care.”

**T**here were five of us that day and, it seemed, all our days. Molly, me, TK, James, and Doria. We traveled in a small, disheveled pod, when we traveled at all, and we liked to ride the driverless white buses that trundled up and down the coast, controlled by electric cells along the road. Often we rode them to Droughans Beach. I had stolen a tool from a repairman’s kit that enabled me to open a panel on the floor and control the stops and starts. If there were other passengers on board, they would ask to be let off, and so we stretched out across the seats, scrawling our names (though not our true ones) and affections on the windows and walls, shouting, and pissing in the aisles, knowing that by the time anyone responded to the signal sent by the wounded bus, we would be off into the next chapter of our vandal’s tale. We

were none of us eighteen (I had almost reached that defining age), living in a city squat with half-a-dozen of our peers, surviving by means of stealing, prostitution, and panhandling, and these little excursions were the height of our criminal joy. We could all tell each other the same true stories of abuse, deprivation, rape, but there was no point to it, so we told one another the same lies, an equally pointless and dissatisfying exercise, but more fun. We lived to lie, we were professional quality liars, and the finest lies we told were the ones we could not help believing ourselves.

Close to where Molly and me lay, a wooden stair led to the beach, descending in two tiers past boarded-up cottages, though not ones so ruinous as the one on the cliff-top. Near dusk we climbed down the stair, a precarious route due to broken steps and a rickety railing, and out onto the sand. Droughans Beach was approximately a hundred fifty yards wide at low tide and stretched unbroken for nine miles. The sand was so fine that when Molly slid her bare feet along it, she produced a distinct musical tone. Facing the stair, a fragment of a giant's fossilized jaw thrust up some thirty feet from the shallows, gone a dull grayish green with age; two worn teeth of the same color, a molar and a canine, showed clear of a light surf—it had been lying there for so many centuries, it had blended with the landscape and might have been mistaken for a natural formation. To its right stood a massive rock over two hundred feet high, shaped like the giant's ancient tool shed, its peaked roof topped by greenery that sprouted from a thick layer of birdlime left by the gulls and puffins that roosted there in the thousands. That evening, water foamed around its base and waves broke over its sides, sending sprays into the air; once the tide receded, however, you could stroll out almost to its seaward end and keep your shoes dry.

Molly ran off to find our friends among the thirty or forty people who were walking the beach, and I hunkered on the sand close to the tidal margin. There was scant wind where I sat, but it was blowing hard atop the rock—the gulls went off-balance as they landed, beating their wings to stay level, getting one foot down and tottering before they settled on their perch. Their distant cries sounded like a baying of tiny, trebly hounds. The landward face of the rock looked to have been sheared away down to a skirt of rough stone that spread out from the base; inscribed thereon, covering a quarter of its surface, was a great design of whitish lines that, although it, too, might have been a

product of wind and weathers, revealed the aspect of the embryonic creature that had been sealed within the rock centuries before. I thought about that half-liquefied monstrosity, left to mature in the solitary dark, and wondered what shape it had taken, and whether it had grown to the limits of its prison or been stunted and deformed by the blackness.

I sat there for what seemed an hour, my thoughts plunging to places as black as that prison and soaring into bright fantasies wherein Molly and me, TK, James, and Doria, all our friends in the city, lived in a circumstance with good health and good food and drugs enough never to know a vengeful feeling or bloody desire; and then I lay down in the sand, not because I was sleepy, but because I was oppressed—it was as though a hand, irresistible in its power, were pushing me onto my back, I was so overcome with hopelessness, with the understanding that our fates already had been decided. As surely as I saw that design of white lines left by the ancients to warn against what was sealed within, I also saw lesser lines that described Molly beaten by a trick, TK overdosed, James done in by an untreated disease, Doria with her throat cut. All still young, still wanting life. The only death I could not see was my own, but I felt it closing around me.

Eventually I did sleep and when I woke it was dark. Most of the strollers and shell collectors had left the beach, and Molly and the rest, made visible by moonlight, were gathered around a boulder that the tide, receding now, had left bare. I was angry at them for letting me sleep and I walked toward them, brushing sand from my clothes, thinking how to express my displeasure. They were talking to an old man in a plaid cap and shabby clothing. He was holding a battery lamp that, now and then, he switched on, underlighting the others' faces and his own as he shined it over the pool. I could tell they were screwing with him. TK, with his rabbit bones, a few hairs on his upper lip playing at being a mustache, still a boy; James, sullen and muscular, yet half-a-head shorter than I; and Doria, her hair part-blond, part-blue, with a bitter, sexy face: they, and Molly as well, each wore sober looks, as if intent on what he said, but I knew they were repressing their derision.

"When I was no older than you kids," he was saying, "I was on patrol down here."

"You were a cop, huh?" asked TK.

“Oh, no! I was part of an environmental patrol. The town hired seven of us kids to make sure no one disturbed the tide pools. We’d catch someone sitting on the rocks, like you were doing, and we’d tell them they were sitting on living creatures.” He played his light over the boulder. “See there? Acorn barnacles and tube barnacles. Anemones. Tiny ones. If you look close you can see ‘em poking out their tongues.”

“For real?” said Dory. “Sitting on them might get a girl off, huh?”

James said, “Why seven?”

The old man acted confused; he glanced at James anxiously.

“Why’d they hire seven?” asked James with studied thickness. “Cause it was like a magic number?”

“It was just for the summer,” said the old man weakly.

“Did you guys call yourself something?” asked TK. “Like did you have a name? The Seven . . . you know. Whatever’s.”

“Beachmasters!” suggested Molly, provoking laughter from James.

“Assbags!” Dory looked to the group for approval, but no one found her remark funny.

“We weren’t . . .” The old man blinked, licked his lips. “We . . .”

“Suppose you saw someone doing this?” James went tromping, splashing through the tide pool. “What would you do? Blow your little whistle?”

“I’d probably fucking kill you,” I said.

The old man shined his lamp full on me.

I threw up an arm to shield my eyes and said, “Turn that damn thing off!”

For the reaction it brought, my voice might have been a roar. The old man dropped the lamp into the tide pool and stumbled back against TK. I shouldered past Doria and said to him, “You know this is an evil place. Especially at night.”

He stared fearfully at me, one red-veined eye rolling like a horse’s, a horrible, unlucky thing, and I told him to look away from me. When he had done so, I put my mouth to his ear and said, “Suppose you’re here when the beast breaks loose? It would tear you apart.”

He started to turn his head and I said, “Don’t look at me!”

I laid a hand on his back—he was trembling—and told him to go. His trembling increased and I repeated my instruction. “Go now,” I said. “Or I won’t be responsible.”

He took an unsteady step. I spanked his bony rear, setting him into a hobbling run; the others hooted and laughed.

“Shut the hell up,” I said.

They fell silent, except for James, who said, “Fuck you! Who made you God!”

“I thought we cleared that up last month,” I said. “Those ribs heal all right? That tooth still giving you trouble?”

I won the staredown and, to cover his shame, he bent to pick up the old man’s lamp.

“Leave it,” I said. “It looks cool.”

And it did, it made the pool appear sacred, green watery radiance streaming up.

“Why were you bashing that old fart,” I asked.

“We weren’t going to hurt him,” TK said.

“You know how it goes. You start off fucking with somebody, just fooling around, and it gets out of control. Someone takes a bite and the feeding frenzy’s on.” I sat on the boulder, unmindful of dying anemones. “We’ve all got wicked tempers and it doesn’t take much to make us snap. That’s how we hurt ourselves. Right, James?”

“I guess,” he mumbled.

“Consider it a lesson,” I said. “Why waste your anger on someone whose pain can’t profit you? You have to conserve anger, nourish it. Like the beast. Imagine when it gets out, how strong it’ll be. All those years with no place to vent . . . except on itself. It’ll be strong enough to break the world. You need to be that strong.”

Doria laughed nervously.

“It’s not funny,” I said.

“Hey!” she said. “It’s just you talk so much shit, man, I can’t keep it straight.”

“You have to think,” I said. “You have to decide what you need to survive and use your anger to take it.”

They listened, but I detected boredom in their faces. They were too inured to my words to hear them. Of them all, only Molly displayed the wit to survive, and even she looked bored. I continued to lecture, hoping that sheer repetition would put the brake to their course of self-destruction. I told them



to muzzle their whims, to devote themselves to strategies that would sustain them. And yet the more sense I made, the more certainly I lost them. They had begun to view me as they would another species. Soon I would be as irrelevant as the old man.

After I stopped talking, Molly distributed the pills. She offered me none, knowing that I would abstain. Drugs brought me perilously close to the source of my rage. The others wandered off along the beach, but I remained seated on the boulder. The light from the pool made me feel like a wizard who had, by means of some occult process, opened a portal beneath his feet into a bright submarine continuum, and, having used up the pleasures of this world, was contemplating a dive into those uncharted waters. I pictured myself as a shadow raised against a greenish glow, a demonic figure in a Buddha's pose.

The battery lamp had fallen into a niche in the rocky bank and nearby rested an anemone that had the approximate size and oblong shape of a woman's coin purse. It was a fancy thing, pale jade in color, beaded around its outline with what looked to be dark green florets. I was tempted to reach down and grab it, but feared it would be unpleasant to the touch or sting me with its acids. Best to imagine it in hand, I thought. Smooth and firm, a living stone. On the bottom, a crab no bigger than the joint of my thumb was negotiating a rise between two collapsed strands of kelp. I stared into that shallow depth with such intensity, it seemed I became a citizen of that savage, tranquil place.

**W**hen I was fourteen I struck my father in the face, putting an end to a decade of torture both mental and physical. The blow raised a lump the size of a hen's egg above his right eye, swelling up instantly, but had a more lasting effect on me. Frightened by what I had done, certain that he would call the police, I ran to Spetlow Hill and climbed the church tower (it was then under construction), and there I spent the night huddled under a tarpaulin, gazing out through a skeleton of masonry and steel at the tumbled roofs of the town and the listless ocean beyond. God knew me now, I thought. I had violated one of His taboos, no matter it had been in self-defense. His fierce eye had marked me. Yet when I recalled my father on his knees, clutching his injury, I felt a vicious satisfaction and joy. It was the best feeling I'd ever had

and I wanted it again. I wanted to piss God off, I wanted another bloody victory. If I returned home, I believed he/He would kill me, and so, after stealing clothes and some money, I fled to the city in search of that feeling. I never found it, but I found lesser feelings that sufficed. Amazing, how impotence itself can be rendered impotent by the sound of someone groaning in an alley or the impact of a boot on bone.

For nearly four years, I brawled and bullied my way through life. Not that it was all a triumph. Many nights I made my bed in an abandoned factory or railroad yard, beaten and degraded, terrified by every indistinct sound, by the rats that nested there; but I became, at last, the king of my own rats' nest. And now I felt the world pulling me away from childhood, from my hard-won sinecure. Even as I had lectured my brother and sister rats, recognizing they would suffer without my guidance, I was envious of their state. Seeing them at play on the beach, zooming about, falling to their knees, puking up the poisons they had swallowed, then vanishing into the dark, I felt love for them; but love was an emotion they did not respect and so, to honor their feelings, I dismissed them from my thoughts.

The tide had gone out. I walked toward the rock, scrambled up the skirt of rough stone, and found a spot where I could sit. It smelled of ruin, like a drowned cathedral in which the vestments and candles and incense had rotted away. The waves broke against it less vigorously than before, but cold sprays still splattered me with shrapnel bursts and my face grew numb from this constant booming assault. And yet I felt secure, sheltered by its darkness, as I had felt when, after a beating, my father would lock me in a closet and forget me for the night or longer—I thought that the beast, even in its desperation, must feel similarly secure. I tried to isolate its scent from the greater smell of the rock, the stink of the silent birds in their black nests.

Molly flitted past on the sand, pursued by another, less defined figure, both going out of view behind the rock. The sight gentled my thoughts, giving rise to a memory. I had stolen a car from the parking lot at the mall, punched through the glass and hotwired it, and the five of us tore out onto the interstate. Molly had called shotgun and, as I drove, she leaned out the window, shrieking, her hair flying, flashing her tits at the people in slower cars. She must have resembled a ship's figurehead stuck on sideways and come to life, yet they looked at her with dull, unsurprised faces, as if every day of their life

they were blessed with such insane beauty or else this was something their television sets had warned them against and thus they were prepared to put up a stolid front. I could have written songs about their stuporous response.

Darkness closed down, a light rain fell, and once we turned off the interstate onto Highway 26 things grew quiet inside the car. James, sounding paranoid, asked where we were going, and Doria fired up a pipe, and TK was getting all film-geeky about a movie we had seen, pointing out flaws in its logic, saying that the metal tripods had been buried in the rock for millennia, withstanding a million tons of pressure, okay? So how come Tom Cruise could blow one up with a grenade?

"Because he's Tom Cruise, man," said Doria, trying not to exhale. Talking caused her to hack up smoke. "Shit!" She handed the pipe up to me, nudging my shoulder, leaning so far forward that I could feel the bristle of her dreadlocks (she had since changed her hairstyle) on my neck.

Molly snatched the pipe from her and that was good with me. I was high on crime and violence. Whenever a car rushed toward us, its headlights dazzled the raindrops decorating the windshield and it would seem I was driving into rings of fairy light; then darkness would swallow the road, a curving two-lane slicing through a spruce forest, and I had to refocus in order to steer. I needed to come down a notch and I told Molly to look out for a place where I could buy beer, explaining that I was having some difficulty.

"You can't see?" She laughed merrily, delighted by the prospect of my blindness.

"Want me to drive?" James asked. "I can drive."

"Fuck no!" I punched the gas, accelerating to shut him up. James could be a real pisser. His parents were religious zealots and that was most of his problem.

Molly switched on the radio, found a station playing rock and turned it high, putting an end to conversation. She rolled down her window and played with her tongue stud, popping it in and out between her lips like a little gemmy bubble.

Twenty miles down the road we came to a convenience store with carvings for sale off to one side, gigantic things made out of stumps and fallen logs, animated by magic. It had stopped raining. Puddles like shiny black eyes dappled the gravel lot. I went inside, bought beer, stored it in the car, all

except a forty, which I cracked, and went over to where my friends stood, checking out a huge fir stump that some redneck necromancer had carved into a troll that kept walking into its cave house, casting a sour look back over its shoulder before shutting the door, then backing out and repeating the process.

“Who do you think buys this crap?” I karate-kicked the troll in the side, not disrupting its course in the slightest, though its eyes flickered redly.

“Nobody,” TK said.

“I don’t know,” Molly said. “I think it’s cool.”

“Molly thinks it’s cool!” Doria minced about, affecting the guise of a connoisseur. “It’s so . . . so relevant, so . . .”

“It’s absolutely relevant,” I said. “The things going on today, the ancient magical shit that’s reappearing . . . like these sculptures, the beast. And the new stuff. The white buses, the people with machines inside them. The fucking mind control exerted by Chairman Channel Twenty-five. It’s all starting to come at once. Witches, mad science, stupid magic. All the things that were going to happen, that might have happened, are being crammed into our days. A sort of pre-apocalyptic meltdown. And it’s going to get weirder before it’s through.”

They gaped at me, waiting for a punch line.

“It’s still crap, though,” I said. “We don’t have to deal with it any different from anything else.”

I set down my forty, unsheathed the hunting knife I kept strapped to my calf and began hacking at the troll, slicing thick shavings from its bulging forehead, stabbing it until its eyes ceased to glow. The clerk yelled at us from the doorway. I started toward him, but James caught me from behind and wrestled me back.

“Jesus! You’re a fucking wildman!” TK said as we piled into the car.

“Did you see the guy’s face?” said Dory. “He was tripping!”

I was breathing fast, light-headed, but I got the engine going and jammed it; we sprayed gravel past the front of the store and fishtailed onto the highway.

“We should get off this road,” James said.

I slowed, braked, and made a U-turn.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked.

"I left my forty back there," I told him.

Molly rested her head on my shoulder and sang a la-la-la song.

"Fucking wildman!" said TK happily.

"You can consider it a lesson," I said to James.

"What're you talking about?" he asked. "What kind of lesson?"

"A lesson in risk management," I said. "And in beer conservation."

**A** couple of hours after I had climbed onto the rock, I began to feel a vibration at my back—barely detectable at first, and erratic, growing stronger and steadier. I thought it was the beating of my heart and ignored it; but then it stopped, starting up again a few minutes later, stronger this time, and occurring at such lengthy intervals I knew it could be no heart. I laid my head against the rock and listened. At length I managed to separate a faint thudding noise from the crunch of the waves.

The beast was trying to break free—that much was clear—and it was making headway, for I had never heard that noise before. I wanted to be far from Droughans Beach should it succeed. But as I thought how to organize our flight, how to weld my drugged friends into an efficient force, I began to feel a kinship with the thing, a shared sense of purpose. We both hated the world and its people. Each morning they choked down another dose of everything's-fine or whatever bland preachment they had been induced to swallow, and went forth to mindfucking jobs where they would make a paper sandwich of some poor bastard's blood and bones; to fitness clubs where they believed they could perfect the unperfectable; to movies that persuaded them this death-in-life was preferable to an existence in which they dared to confront the truth of the human condition; and all the while a horrid tide was rising higher and higher, until, one day, they would look out their windows to find streets choked with red water and corpses, and, mistaking the sight for normalcy, for another cold-meat Sunday with the living-room dead, they would open their doors and drown.

Here, now, was the antidote to all that.

I had an epiphany—I pictured the beast sated with killing, the whole world in its belly, falling asleep on the sand, going into labor and dying mid-birth, assaulted by giants come down from the hills where they had been hiding to

rip the fetus out and lock it away in its prison rock, and I saw the process of civilization beginning again, the good and bad of it, leading ultimately to a moment such as this. I understood it was my duty to assist in the delivery of the new cycle on this primordial beach with magical light streaming up from the tide pool and no one to witness. I inched my way along the rock, stopping now and then to listen. The thudding grew louder and at last I found the crack the beast had made. It ran straight up the face—I could not see its end or judge how deep it went. I unsheathed my knife and reached with it into the crack, pried with the tip, with the edge, digging crumbles of stone from around a harder object. I was at it for the longest time. Someone called my name, but I continued to pry and dig.

“Hey! What you doing?” Molly flung her arms about my neck from behind; when I offered no response, she said, “TK wanted me to go down on him.”

I felt a flicker of annoyance. “Did you?”

“No! I’m being more . . . like what you said.”

“What did I say?”

I withdrew the knife, reached into the crack with my hand and touched something colder than the surrounding stone. A metal projection, I thought. Part of a bulky mechanism.

“To respect myself,” Molly said. “I was trying to be more self-respectful. TK really wanted it, so I came to find you. So he’d leave me alone.” She turned my face toward hers and kissed me. “Let’s go up on the cliff again.”

In the moonlight, her pupils were enormous and her expression flowed from seductive to deranged to stunned, reflecting the action of the drugs she had ingested.

“Later.” I reinserted the knife into the crack and pried at the metal, felt it shift the slightest bit.

“What are you doing?”

“Listen,” I told her.

She cocked an ear and said, “Listen to what?”

“Try to tune out the sound of the waves. You can hear it.”

She listened more attentively. “I think . . . maybe I hear something.”

I encouraged her to put her ear to the crack.

Again she listened. “I think . . . Yeah. It’s kind of a . . . a . . .”

“A thudding.”

“Yeah! I hear it!” She looked at me in alarm. “What the fuck?”

“It’s trying to get out,” I said.

She was bewildered for a second or two, then her eyes widened. “The beast, you mean? That can’t be . . .”

A rending noise broke from the crack and I pulled her back, edged away along the face of the rock, for now that my part in things was done, I was afraid to see the issue of my labor. Despite all I felt about the world and its worth, I feared for my life and for Molly’s. And TK’s. He strolled into view, doubtless looking for Molly, and stood by the tide pool, staring down into the glowing water. He appeared to be picking his nose.

The thudding grew louder, more insistent, and, as if in sympathy with such relentlessness, a wave detonated against the seaward end of the rock, showering us with spray. Molly’s shriek must have outvoiced the rush of water, for TK glanced toward us, and it was at that moment the beast broke free. I had expected a gush of blackness, the wall to shatter, slabs of stone to rain down, but all I saw was a dark shape eeling from the crack. It seemed a pipe had broken within the rock and was leaking oil. Yet as it continued to pour out, the beast gathered its substance into a more fearsome formlessness. It was fluid, it was living smoke, it was power adapted to the black medium in which it had been steeped. It boiled up into a cloud three times our height, and then condensed into a shape no bigger than a man’s. It seemed to turn to Molly and me, though it did not truly turn—it rearranged its parts, moving its front to its back and hanging a face on its inky turbulence, a parody of rage with shadowy fangs and eyes emerging from a storm-cloud chaos . . . then it went flowing over the broken ground toward TK. I sprang after it, shouting a warning, but I was a foot short, a split-second late. By the time I dropped to my knees beside him, the beast had condensed a portion of its substance into an edge and sliced him across the throat. He lay with his head in the water, his blood roiling out in a cloud that crimsoned the light cast by the submerged lamp.

Grief, fear, and urgency were mixed in me. The beast had merged with the night. I could no longer see it, though I felt its presence along my spine. I shouted at Molly to stay where she was and jogged down the beach, peering left and right. The tide pool dwindled to an eerie chute of red light. The rock

became a shadow and the giant's jawbone was lost to sight. After I had gone, I'd estimate, a quarter-mile, I regretted having left Molly alone, but I decided to keep searching a while longer, and shortly afterward I spotted two figures lying together in the sand. Not sleeping, though. One waved an arm, as if describing the wide arc of his existence. It had to be James. Though restrained in my presence, whenever he thought himself unobserved he was given to dramatic gesture.

I broke into a run and James came to his knees, wearing a look of terror. He must have misapprehended my intentions—I cried out, seeking to reassure him. Doria, too, got to her knees and screamed as the beast, materializing from the dark, flowed over them, a furious smoke that hid them from view. I flung myself atop it, stabbing and slashing with the knife, but it was impervious to my attack, and, when it had done with them, it flung me aside as if I were nothing and dissipated on the night wind, leaving behind a bloody human wreckage. I did not linger over their bodies—they each bore a dozen wounds that might alone have been fatal, cruel gouges made by teeth hardened from the beast's all but immaterial flesh, and I had no time to mourn. My mind was a flurry of red and black, a confusion of dim urges and fears, but I knew where the beast had gone. Molly. She would, I realized, have stayed by the rock for some minutes, but then, overcome by fright, she would have headed for the stairs leading up from the beach.

I ran, unmindful of my safety. She was all I had left, all that remained of my shabby kingdom, and I ran myself breathless in hopes of saving her. I felt the beast's sides heave, panting in its self-made shadow, and knew it to be near. She had started to climb the second tier of steps when I caught up to her. Seeing me, she sagged against the railing and said in a helpless voice, "Oh, no."

"It'll be all right if you don't run," I told her.

She said something I didn't catch and then, "God! This isn't happening."

I eased close, not wanting to alarm her with a sudden move, realizing I must be a sight, covered in blood, and that she, like James and Doria, may have misinterpreted my appearance.

"It's not what you think," I said.

"I saw you," she said. "What you did to TK . . ."

"You can hardly see at all, you took so much acid and speed," I said. "What you saw was me trying to protect TK. It was the beast killed him. But you're



going to be all right. It's grateful to me for releasing it. At least it hasn't tried to kill me yet. As long as it knows you're with me, it won't hurt you."

A flicker of belief showed in her face, but only a flicker.

"Okay," she said.

"Please don't run! I understand you're scared, but you don't have to be scared of me."

"Okay."

I noticed a tension in her body and said, "Don't!"

She sprang up the steps.

This time I made no attempt to intervene.

I ran down the stair and out onto the beach, howling in grief and rage. I held my arms up to the jolly moon balanced on the peak of the prison rock, begging for blood to rain down and for everything to cease. I flung the knife into the ocean and fell on the sand and there I remained until the gulls made their first circling flights. When the sky had gone the deep holy blue of pre-dawn, I went to the edge of the water and washed myself clean. I was almost empty, without purpose or direction. And then, glancing inland, I saw the beast gather itself into the form of a giant and go striding off over the hills, toward the mountains beyond. I was disappointed—I had hoped for the destruction of cities. The mountains were a place of rest, a country for old men. Yet I had no choice but to follow.

**I**t's hard to be hopeful these days. I cling to life like an ant to a leaf blown along a storm drain, watching the world rip itself apart. I am old now, not so old as the decrepit old man we met on the beach that night, but old enough to value certain things I once perceived as foolish and unworthy. I don't go out much, don't have many friends. I live in a small mountain town with my family. My wife, a magical creature, though she would strenuously deny it . . . Each morning she walks out the door and vanishes. What she does with her days, I have no idea, but when she returns home of an evening, she brings with her otherworldly scents and I will discover scraps of paper in her purse on which are written the fragments of wicked spells. She hisses when I make love to her, she grunts in a language unknown to me and sometimes locks her teeth in the meat of my shoulder.

I edit the town's weekly paper, which I also founded. Each week I write a column citing some symptom of our cultural decay that is a predictor of doom and madness, columns that cause great amusement among my readership. They email excerpts to friends in other towns and label me an eccentric, though lately, since I have won several regional prizes for journalism, they have been more respectful. Despite this, I know the prizes are awarded for my idiosyncratic style, that hardly anyone listens to me, that few believe in beasts, in apocalypse—they believe, instead, that they will pass through the black wall toward which we are all speeding, that it is permeable and may even form the gateway to a better life. Thus the paper no longer interests me, and for some time now I have devoted the bulk of my energies to my son, a sturdy eleven-year-old.

I don't entirely understand what the cycle of giants and children and beasts means in the scheme of things, but I suspect that my son will understand. Whereas my father's training was haphazard, born of his intemperate nature, mine is carefully thought-out, scrupulously planned. I beat my son, I lock him away, I control his reading, I keep him friendless, but all apportioned so that these torments have formed a bond between us. I have told him that it is done to strengthen him, and he has accepted the pain as part of a crucial teaching. Day by day, he grows more stoic, more malleable, and I expect soon there will be no need for discipline. I have promised to give him a woman when he is twelve and he exerts himself toward that goal. I have promised other enticements as well, criminal pleasures such as may be enjoyed in the adjoining towns. Perhaps when he is a man, he will strike me down, but he will have a sound reason for doing so and not strike prematurely, as did I. In all ways, he will act with a greater circumspection.

I tell him that the beast he frees will be more powerful than mine, that it will achieve terrible things, wonderful things. He is intrigued by the possibility, but not quite certain I have told him the truth. Last week, we were eating sundaes at the new Baskin-Robbins over in Ridgeview, a hang-out for junior high kids similar to those whom I have prepared him to dominate, and he asked for the hundredth time, at least, if I thought the beast was real.

"Of course it was real," I said.

"Do you think it was real like, you know, different from you? Separate? Or do you think it just worked your arms and legs and made you do things?"

“In here . . .” I tapped my chest. “I know it was separate. Not that it makes a difference.”

“Where is it, then?”

“Somewhere around. Taking a nap in the woods, maybe. Snoring and all covered with gray hair like your old man. It’s retired. Once a beast leaves you, it’s done its duty.”

We had placemats that depicted, against a blue background, cartoon butterflies hovering around a banana split, and my son began jabbing out the butterflies’ startled round eyes with a ball-point pen. “I don’t ever want my beast to leave,” he said moodily.

“It’s bound to leave eventually. But if you keep up the good work . . .”

“I will!”

“ . . . it’ll be with you a long time.”

The waitress, a pretty brunette with tattooed bracelets on her wrists, refilled my coffee. He stared at her and once she was back behind the counter, I asked, “Do you like that one?”

He nodded, embarrassed. “Uh-huh!”

“Tattoos are a clear signal.” I ruffled his hair, sparking a grin. “You’ve got a good eye.”

We ate for a time, not saying much, and then he asked me to tell him about the man I’d met on the beach after my friends died.

“You don’t need to hear that again,” I said, but I was pleased, because that part of my story went to the core of my teaching.

“Come on, Dad!”

“Okay.” I slurped my coffee. “I was at the water’s edge, I’d just finished washing off the blood when this man, a big man, came along the beach. He had a fancy fishing pole and big tackle box. He was planning to do some surf casting, I guess. He stopped beside me and stared. And then he said, ‘That’s a lot of blood on you, son.’”

“‘Where you see blood?’ I asked.

“‘All in your hair. On the side there.’”

“I touched my hair and my fingers came away gooey with blood. I knew right away I had to kill him. If I didn’t, he’d call the cops. But the beast was gone, I’d thrown away my knife, and the man was immense. I was scared, I wasn’t sure I had the strength or the will to do it. And then he asked whose

blood it was, and I replied, 'It's mine.' I wasn't trying to lie my way out of trouble. The blood belonged to people like me, people the man wouldn't spit on if they were dying of thirst, and I was speaking for them. I wasn't telling a lie. That made me strong. I took him down and kicked him in the head until his skull broke. I had his brains on my shoes. I puked all over myself after, but I did what I had to."

He dribbled hot fudge onto his cream with the edge of his spoon. "I sorta don't get it."

"You get the important parts," I said. "What's that I say when you don't get all of something and you need to think about it more?"

He sat up smartly, like a little soldier, and said, "Consider it a lesson!"

# VIATOR

## 1

“... the husband of the linden tree ...”

**W**ILANDER HAD GROWN ACCUSTOMED TO HIS CABIN ABOARD *Viator*. Small and unadorned, it suited him, partly because his aspirations were equally small and unadorned, but also because it resonated with dreams of a romantic destiny, of extraordinary adventures in distant lands, that had died in him years before, yet seemed to have been technically fulfilled now he was quartered aboard a freighter whose captain had steered her into the shore at so great a speed, she had ridden up onto the land, almost her entire length embedded among firs and laurel and such, so that when you rounded the headland (as Wilander himself had done the previous month, standing at the bow of a tug that brought mail and supplies to that section of the Alaskan coast, big-knuckled hands gripping the rail and long legs braced, the wind whipping his pale blond hair back from his bony, lugubrious face, the pose of an explorer peering anxiously toward a mysterious smudge on the horizon), all you saw of *Viator* was the black speck of her stern, circular at that distance, like a period set between beautiful dark green sentences.

The cabin was situated above decks. By day, natural light of an extraordinary clarity was filtered through the ports by sprays of broad palmate leaves, those of a linden whose crown had been compressed against the outer wall, and by night, illumined by a sixty watt bulb above the sink and a bedside lamp with an antique tortoiseshell shade that Wilander had purchased from Arlene Dauphinee, the red-headed woman who managed the trading post in the town of Kaliaska, the cream-colored interior walls burned gold and the space shrank around him, conforming precisely to the sphere of his desires, secure and warm and secret, and he would have a sense of the cabin's light

filtering outward through caliginous tangles of fern and vine and root, lending a teleological significance to the riotous growth, as if the forest would have no meaning, or rather would have the random, disorderly, terrifying causality of a nightmare, were it not for this glowing cell encysted at its heart, occupied by its serene monastic dreamer.

At night the four men who had taken up residence aboard *Viator* prior to Wilander's arrival would visit him in his cabin, though this was by no means a frequent occurrence. Indeed, nearly a week elapsed before he spoke with any of them, having until then only caught glimpses of the others as they wandered the gutted bowels of the ship, and when they responded to his hailings diffidently or not at all, he had gone about his business, assuming they resented his authority because he was a latecomer, and that he would have to win them over with patience, by accommodating their eccentricities—yet on the sixth night, when Peter Halmus burst through the door, short and stocky, his muscles run to flab, his scalp shaved, his fleshy features framed to some self-perceived advantage by a carefully razored beard, a strip of dark brown hair approximately a quarter-inch wide outlining the jaw, with a thinner vertical line connecting the point of the chin to the lower lip, a conceit more appropriate to a nobleman of ancient Persia, the conversation did not proceed as Wilander had expected, which is to say, tentatively, pleasantly, building the foundation of a relationship . . . No, Halmus spoke in a gruff voice, a voice atremble with anger, saying he had observed Wilander knocking out glass from a broken port and cautioning him never to do so again. *Viator's* glass, he said, was his purview. He alone was responsible for completing a study of the glass and estimating its worth. He would tolerate no interference. And when Wilander, choosing not to confront the irrationality implicit in these statements, suggested that he had been trying to avoid an injury, nothing more, Halmus began to talk madly, mad with regard to his lack of coherence and also from the standpoint of a mad aesthetic, describing how twenty-two years of weathering unattended by any maintenance had produced discolorations that lent every crumb of glass a mineral value and refined mirrors into works of art, pacing between the doorway and the sink as he delivered this preachment, this rant, two quick steps, then a turn, punctuating disconnected phrases with a shaken fist, a slap against the thigh, his fulminant energy unnerving Wilander, who felt penned in his bunk, sitting with the top of his

head just touching the underside of a shelf that held a few books, a wallet, keys, trinkets, coins, all he carried of the past.

—Very well, he said. I won't remove any more glass. But the glass, you understand . . . it's not the important thing. We're to determine the salvage value of the metal. Isn't that what Lunde told you?

—Arnsparger is in charge of metals. This was said flatly, as if Halmus were stating an irrefutable law, an essential condition of the universe.

—Arnsparger, said Wilander

—Yes. The metal of the hull and superstructure. The rest, the fixtures, the galley, the engine . . . what's left of it. All that's Nygaard's responsibility.

—And Mortensen?

Halmus appeared to consider the question. Lately, he said, he's been preoccupied with the hold.

—Preoccupied, you say. Wilander swung his legs off the edge of the bunk and sat up. It seems you need little direction from me, but I should remind you this is a job, not a preoccupation. Lunde is depending on us.

—Lunde has no interest in what we do.

—On the contrary. He stated his interest quite clearly to me. We're to provide him with an estimate so he can decide what to do with this old wreck.

Halmus' face tightened in a scowl, as if he were displeased by the term *old wreck*. Shall I tell you about your relationship with our Mister Lunde?

—If you think it's relevant.

Halmus glared at Wilander and said, Relevant? What would you know of relevance? You've been here a week!

—I know I want to keep this job. Steady work, unchallenging work, with virtually no expenses. That's what's relevant to me.

Halmus lifted his right hand to his ear, palm outward, fingers curved, as if intending to hurl an invisible stone, and for a time he was incapable of coherent speech. Why should I talk to you? he said with disdain, letting his hand fall. You're the husband of the linden tree. You have no speciality.

Several evenings later, Arden Nygaard knocked politely and inquired of Wilander whether he might be able to obtain a tool for the purpose of stripping chrome. He was slight and clean shaven, with limp gray hair and stooped shoulders, schoolteacherish in his wire-rimmed glasses, and yet he was possessed of a gaze so mild and unvarying, it gave the impression that

he was simple-minded, dredging up Wilander's memories of dwellers in street missions and homeless shelters, men whose intellects, brutalized by poverty and alcohol, had been pared down to childlike proportions and who would happily stare for hours at a shoe or a stain on the wall, seeing there some delightful shape or a fantasy incited by that shape, and this impression of impairment, of gentle madness, was furthered by his response to the question, Why don't you walk into Kaliaska and order the tool?, which was, I don't like going there, followed by a prolonged nodding, as if he were serially reaffirming the statement, testing its validity by examining it from various angles, satisfying himself that its application to the matter was appropriate in every respect. Wilander thought to ask why he didn't like going to the village, but, suspecting that Nygaard would be no more incisive in his response and distressed by the presence of this sad little fellow who reminded him of a day not long removed when he had lived among such men and might himself have been seen as impaired by the casual eye, he sought to cut short the visit and promised that he would order the stripping tool the next time he went for supplies. Nygaard shuffled over to the sink and touched one of the faucets, petting the chrome, then smiled weakly at Wilander and went on his way.

Having had this much experience of Halmus and Nygaard, Wilander speculated that the other two members of the crew might also be mentally deficient, but Henrik Arnsparger, red-cheeked, round-faced, fortyish and plump, his belly overlapping the waist of grease-stained chinos, with thinning blond hair and an affable, garrulous disposition that seemed to fit within the parameters of normal behavior, eased Wilander's concerns, and when Arnsparger flopped into the swivel chair beside the tiny writing desk affixed to the cabin wall and let his burlap sack drop with a clank onto the floor and started in talking as if they were great friends who hadn't seen one another for a while, Wilander thought that here was an ally, someone in whom he could confide, someone who would give straight answers to his questions and not carry tales, and thus he asked Arnsparger to explain a few things: Why had Halmus called him *the husband of the linden tree*, what had he meant by saying that Lunde had no interest in the crew's performance, and why was Nygaard reticent about going into Kaliaska?

—You can never be sure what's going on in Nygaard's head, Arnsparger said. That guy's got no roof on his attic. Things fly in and fly right out again.



But none of us like spending time in town. You've seen it. It's a horrible place. Drunks and snarling dogs and hostile stares. As for Halmus, I suppose he was talking about this linden tree. The one outside your port.

—I can't think what else he could have meant.

Arnsparger leaned back and blew out air through his lips as if snuffing a candle. Mortensen said something when I first arrived. We were the only two here, then, and he took me under his wing. He was a real talker in those days. Not so much now.

—How long has he been here?

—I'm not sure. He said he came when the snow was still deep. He's the one who set up the generators, you know. And he got the plumbing going, too. Anyway, he told me *Viator* had penetrated the forest and consummated a marriage between the organic and the inorganic. His words, not mine. I still don't know what the hell he was talking about. He said we were all part of the marriage. I was wedded to iron, he said. And he told Halmus he was beloved by glass. He's always going on like that. Spouting philosophy.

—It sounds more like fantasy.

—Is there a difference? Arnsparger nudged the burlap sack with his foot. What I'm saying, maybe he expanded the metaphor and told Halmus you were the husband of the linden tree. Halmus isn't smart enough to make something like that up. The guy went to college, but he don't have a clue. You should ask Mortensen. If you can persuade him to talk, I bet he'll have a hell of an explanation.

Wilander unscrewed the cap on a bottle of water, but did not drink, puzzling over what had been said.

—It's an odd situation, Arnsparger went on. All of us have wondered about it. Doesn't it seem odd to you? Four guys . . . five, now. Five men of Scandinavian heritage down on their luck. They all seek employment at a temp agency run by another Scandinavian guy. They get to be friends with him and then he sends them to live on *Viator*. That how it happened for you, right?

—You were friends with Lunde? All of you?

—You thought it was just you, eh? That you were a special case? Me, too. I figured we'd be pals for life, me and Lunde. He bought me lunches, took me to movies, we talked about Sweden . . . not that I know shit about it. My family emigrated when I was three. For a while I thought he was an

old fag, but eventually I decided he was just lonely, he wanted to reminisce.

—It was the same for the others?

—Yeah, but once we got here, Lunde wasn't so eager to talk to us. He keeps things businesslike on the phone. Anything to report? he'll ask. And you say, no . . . or maybe you tell him some bullshit. Then he'll ask if you've noticed anything out of the ordinary. Nope, not a thing. Okay, he'll say. Keep up the good work. God knows what work he expects we're doing. There's not a damn thing to do.

Wind stirred the branches of the linden, its leaves splayed across the port like simple green hands lovingly massaging the glass, and Arnsparger held forth on the folly of Lunde's plan, how ridiculous it was, the idea of bringing in forty or fifty men to break the vessel into scrap—you'd be deep in the red after paying for labor, living expenses, all the rest. Now if *Viator* had reached her destination . . . had Lunde mentioned to Wilander that she'd been headed for South America to be scrapped? That's right. One of those places where shipbreaking is the main occupation. It must be a hellhole, wherever it was. And they must not care about cancer. These old ships, they were full of asbestos, every sort of poison. He'd done a computer search before leaving Fairbanks, at the public library, and the places where they broke ships apart, they were wastelands, long beaches with dozens of hulks listing along the shore, some reduced to skeletons, and hundreds of workers filing inside them, like prisoners marching into death chambers. In a place like that, breaking *Viator* wouldn't make for extra overhead, and nobody cared how many people sickened and died as a result, not so long as they earned a few bucks. Here you'd have start-up costs. Nothing but overhead. You'd have unions looking at you. Labor do-gooders. All that for one ship? It made no sense.

Arnsparger pushed up to his feet, shouldered his sack, and shook Wilander's hand. Well, Tom, I'll see you around. It's okay I call you Tom, is it? Thomas seems too formal under the circumstances.

—Tom is fine.

Arnsparger smacked himself lightly on the forehead. I almost forgot. He fished a cell phone from a trouser pocket and passed it to Wilander. Your turn, he said.

Wilander looked at him quizzically.

—We all took our turn, except for Nygaard, Arnsparger said. Making reports and all.

—Oh, right.

—I hate to put you to work right away, but can you order me some jewel boxes? Those plastic cases you keep CDs in? I could use a couple of gross. They're dirt cheap when you buy them in bulk.

—Why do you need them?

—For my samples. Come over to my place some night and I'll show you.

—I'm not sure I understand what you're saying about Lunde, Wilander said. It's your opinion that he sent us here for no real purpose?

—What can I tell you? When I call him, I always throw in some figures, some revised estimates. To keep him happy, you know. I like this job. But if I try to draw him out, if I ask about the project, when will the rest of the men arrive?, or even just say, What's up?, he either says he's got another call or that someone in the office needs his help. I used to think he was doing his pals a favor, giving us this easy job, but he doesn't act friendly anymore. Maybe he'll explain it to you. After all, you'll be making the calls now. You're the man in charge. Arnsparger grinned and threw Wilander a snappy salute. You're the husband of the linden tree.

## 2

“ . . . the queen of Kaliaska . . . ”

**V**IATOR HAD COME TO REST IN A NEARLY HORIZONTAL POSITION, wedged into a notch between hills (a circumstance, Wilander noted, that lent a certain clinical validation to Mortensen's imagery of penetration and consummation), her port side braced against an outcropping of stone that had torn a ragged thirty-foot-long breach in the hull as the ship scraped past. An aluminum ladder was positioned at the lip of the breach, affording access to the ground. To reach the ladder, it was necessary to descend a many-

tiered stair to the engine room, all but engineless now, a monstrous rusting flywheel lying amid bolts, wires, couplings, the mounts and walls painted a pale institutional green, dappled with splotches of raw iron, and then you would pass through a bulkhead door into the bottom of the cargo hold. Light entered the hold not only through the breach, but through hundreds of small holes that Arnsparger had cut out of the hull with a torch, removing triangular pieces of metal and storing them in jewel cases, and when the sun was high, hundreds of beams skewered the darkness with an unreal sharpness of definition, putting Wilander in mind of those scenes in action movies during which villains with assault rifles turn spotlights on an isolated cabin, a collapsing barn or the like, and fire a fusillade that pierces every inch of the walls yet by some miracle fails to kill the hero and heroine, as if their true purpose had been to produce this dramatic effect.

Two days short of a month after taking up residence aboard the ship, Wilander descended into the hold, clambered down the ladder, and set out under an overcast sky for Kaliaska, where he intended to make a few minor purchases and hoped to spend the evening, and perhaps the following morning, with Arlene Dauphinee. Their friendship, after several long walks and hours of energetic conversation, had reached that awkward stage at which it would necessarily evolve into something more intimate or else plane back into the casual, and he was not confident that things would proceed as he desired, nor was he confident that what he desired was the best possible outcome—he had been without a woman for years, wandering from mission to alley to sewer grating, a world wherein the only women available were filthy, deranged, dangerous, like the young girl he'd befriended in Seattle, saved from the threat of rape and fed and otherwise helped, never once touching her, and then she had stabbed him as he slept because, she told the police, his eyes had begun to glow, shining so brightly, redly, hotly from beneath his closed lids, they had irradiated the refrigerator carton in which they sheltered and set it afire, and he didn't know if he was prepared for the stresses of an adult relationship, he valued the peace he had found aboard *Viator*, the lazy mornings, reading under the linden boughs, writing in his journal about the ship, its curious crew, the woods, with the sounds and sights of natural life surrounding him. And yet Arlene was unique. That was the only word for her, beautiful was insufficient a term, perhaps not an entirely appli-

cable one, for her outer beauty had been worn down to the dimensions of middle age, her face whittled by years and eroded by the heart's weather, so that on occasion he thought of her as a figurehead supporting the bowsprit of a three-master, voluptuous and calm of feature, her core strength undamaged, but her paint faded, wood cracked by seas and storms. Even this minor stress, that created by the dissonance between his desire and his sense of security, was hard for him to bear, and he thought about staying home that night, going into Kaliaska the next morning to offer her excuses, apologies, because he believed he needed a fresh start with her, another week or two to pull himself together, and then he would be ready; yet as he walked along the starboard side of *Viator* that day, passing beneath the linden, idly patting the trunk, he began to feel less anxious, less out of sorts, and though he did not reach a conscious decision, he soon left behind all thought of returning to his cabin.

The forest in close proximity to *Viator* was improbably lush, a micro-environment that would have been more appropriate to the Pacific Northwest. The black soil was carpeted with ivy, ground apple, and salvia; sword ferns sprayed upward from banks and hollows; mushrooms sprouted in gullies and beneath fallen trees; fungi and moss furred trunks and rotting logs; and, about thirty yards from the ship, a massive uprooted stump lying on its side, twelve feet in diameter, was so artfully decorated with lime green moss, it looked to have undergone an alchemical transformation—the dark circular underside of the thing, ragged with root fragments, some forming a witchy halo, had come to resemble those intricate reliefs depicting the Great Wheel of Life that embellish the walls of Hindu temples, except this particular wheel was not painted in many hues, but done solely in green and black, and rather than illustrating the passage of a soul along the path of dharma, it appeared to present a demonic alternative to that passage, a different course altogether, a far bleaker course complete with gnarled homunculi who appeared to have been banished, evicted, or otherwise brought forth from the emptiness at their midst, and whenever Wilander contemplated it—you couldn't just glance at the stump; it drew the eye in; it sent your eye traveling over the circuit of incarnations suggested by the twisted postures of the little root men and the ornate symbology written by flourishes of moss—he half-expected to look up and discover that he had been transported to one of the stations of the wheel, a land ruled by an opal moon floating in a maroon sky where black

dragons wheeled above spindly onyx towers. The nearer he came to Kaliaska, the less dense and diverse the vegetation; the ground cover melted away. After a mile and a half, the forest gave out altogether and from atop a brush-covered rise he could see the town strewn across an acreage of gravelly dirt the color of weak coffee: close by the shore, a collection of two-story buildings that had been erected at odd angles to each other, not in a row, not facing one another, but strewn about like pieces left over from a larger town that was still packed in crates and waiting to be assembled, all five plated in beige-and-brown aluminum siding, one of which contained the trading post and Arlene's living quarters, another enclosing a beauty salon/barber shop and a number of cubicle-sized rooms that were sometimes occupied by men from the freighters and fishing boats that stopped for supplies or were driven to anchor in the bay during storms. There was a swaybacked wooden dock to which a tug was currently moored, and a gray beach with gray water lapping at it and a rubble of dark rocks jutting up from its southernmost reach; and, farther inland, more than a hundred small houses with tarpaper roofs, many of the pre-fabricated variety, idiosyncratic in structure, but most of them white, with smoking chimneys, their unfenced yards littered by derelict snowmobiles, abandoned construction equipment, upside-down sleds and boats, dog houses, ATVs, car parts. A couple of dogs nosed along a deserted street near the shore, sniffing at debris. Parked behind the trading post were two state-owned yellow Caterpillar vehicles used for earth-moving and snow removal, and in each of their cabs, unidentifiable behind windows so smeared as to be opaque, someone was sleeping.

Before Wilander arrived in Alaska he had imagined that Alaskan trading posts were uniformly rustic, dimly lit places with log walls, venerable woodstoves, animal heads and antlers mounted everywhere, disorderly shelves stocked with soup, beans, rice, candy bars, fifty-year-old copies of *National Geographic* containing articles on the area, locally prepared foodstuffs sold in mason jars, gutting knives, French soap, Russian pornography, bullets, whale jerky, slinghots made from fir and reindeer hide, whiskey, mukluks, sacks of flour, fish hooks, hard candy, fossil fragments, rope, fix-it-yourself manuals, work clothes, a few pretty dresses, canned moose meat, snowshoes, long underwear, ballpoint pens, native handicrafts of a surpassingly indifferent quality (carved ivory, paintings on bark, handmade dolls), an accordion, a

guitar or two, dog muzzles, spark plugs, cooking oil, bongos, feminine hygiene products, grease traps, framed photographs of sunsets and mountains, paperback novels, tinned hams . . . but though Arlene's TP (so read the sign above the door) stocked all the aforementioned items and more, there was no hint of disorder, everything was shelved neatly and laid out in display cases, and the atmosphere was of a stripped-down functionality, the fluorescent lights blazing, walls and supports of unpainted planking and posts, dustless floors, a single enormous room divided by racks of merchandise, animal snares and chains and such dangling from hooks, and instead of the colorful types Wilander had pictured sitting around the stove in his imaginary trading post, the only person in evidence that afternoon was a long-haired Inupiat kid named Terry Alpin who helped Arlene out in the evenings and was standing by a bin of CDs, picking over the heavy metal section. Wilander asked him if that was his kind of music and, after a pause, the precise measure of which, Wilander had learned, was designed to convey Tony's contempt for white non-Alaskans moderated by a degree of respect due a friend of Arlene's, Terry said, No, man. It's for the seals. And when Wilander expressed bewilderment at this response, Terry said, The pups, man. Baby harp seals. They love the shit. You go down to the beach and hide out in the rocks with your Walkman. You slap on some Slayer, kick up the volume. Pretty soon the pups, they hear it, they come over to the rocks. You jump up and bash their heads in and get the skins. It's a lot easier than chasing them.

—You're serious? That's how you catch them?

Terry shot him a surly look. We useta stay up all night chanting to the seal god. This way, it cuts down on the brain damage.

—I thought the season . . . when they give birth. I thought that was in the spring.

—I'm just checking out some tunes for next year. Terry inspected the playlist on a Queens of the New Stone Age disc, set it to one side. I kept one pup alive from this last time and I been testing tunes out on him. He's getting maybe too old, though, to be reliable. The adults, they fucking hate music.

—Where's Arlene? Wilander asked.

—Out back. Selling some guy a flat of beer.

Wilander idled along a row of display cases, putting his nose close to one and peering at a grouping of men's rings with cubit zirconiiums in ornate

settings. He leafed through a fishing magazine that lay open by the register. He stared out the window at two men wearing jeans and denim jackets having a conversation in the middle of the street. He laid a dollar coin on the counter to pay for a Butterfinger bar, which he ate in three bites. I'm going out back, see if I can find Arlene, he said.

—It's your world, dude, said Terry.

**A**rlene Dauphinee's face was not a face that instantly drew men's notice. Unlike the hot color of a sign advertising a restaurant along a highway or the brightness of a lure dragged across the surface of a lake, it wasn't suited to serve as an initial attractor, to inspire certain hungers; at least she did not employ it as such. She wore no make-up, no jewelry. All her expressions, especially her smiles, were slow to develop, as if she didn't wish to reveal anything about herself, as if, in fact, she wished to deflect attention by minimizing her reactions, and when Wilander first saw her, his eyes had skated away from her face, lingered on her red hair, clasped in a barrette behind her neck, the pale shade of red that often (as with her) accompanies freckly, milky skin, and then he had taken an inventory of her body, her slack, soft breasts, her slender waist and long legs, and it was not until their second meeting that he was struck by the astonishing composure seated in her face, emblematic neither of passivity nor of any quality that might imply resignation, but of an active principle, a potent, ringing composure that announced the type of person she was, a woman who had not been stranded in Kaliaska, stuck with the trading post because, say, her husband died and left her in charge (she had never married), but had chosen this solitude nine years ago, this unsightly scar of a town on the edge of a thousand nowheres, because she had elected to live in a place where things were uncomplicated and self-sufficiency was a useful virtue, not—as was the case in much of the civilized world—a vestigial function, as useless as the stubby tail that briefly manifests on the human fetus; and once he had been made aware of this quality, he found it impossible not to see the unadvertised beauty of her face, the strong mouth and olivine eyes and lines of character that sketched a femininity considerably more alluring than that of the flashier, showier women with whom he had frequently become infatuated. She seemed a woman who



might be someone's fate, who might be waiting patiently to perform in that capacity, and though he hoped she might be *his* fate, he was plagued by insecurity and prone to believe what he felt was a foolish preoccupation, a form of desperation, or else a dream he was having about some as yet unidentified subject that she was an emblem of—yet as they sat that evening in Polar Bear Pizza (which occupied half a house on the outskirts of town, the other half given over to a coin laundry), sharing a large double pepperoni at a picnic-style table covered by a checkered plastic cloth, beneath a painted wall menu with all the prices effaced that heralded, among other items, Our Stupefying Super Spicy Stromboli Sandwich, it may have been that her companionship shored up his self-doubt, for he felt that his business failures, the drinking and drugs and the vampire people with whom he had associated while he drank and drugged, the stages of the slow collapse that had led to his homelessness . . . those things were behind him now and he was ready to build on the wreckage, to address any problems that might arise with maturity and confidence.

—Living with such unbalanced people, she said, and paused to sprinkle parmesan over a slice. It must remind you of the shelters.

—They're not all unbalanced, he said. Arnsperger's okay. A little obsessive, maybe. And I haven't talked to Mortensen yet . . . though judging by the way he avoids me, I assume he's not quite right.

—You've been here a month and you haven't spoken to him?

—Oh, we've spoken, but at a distance. We've said hello and waved. I've tried to catch him in his cabin, but he's never there. All I know about him is that his beard and hair are gray, and he's thin. He did leave me a note a few days ago. Slipped it under my door. A note concerning you . . . obliquely, anyway.

—What could he possibly say about me? We haven't exchanged a hundred words.

—He seems to have a definite opinion of you.

—That's strange. Even when he was alone on the ship, he never talked to me. He'd come to the post, drop his list on the counter, and wait outside in the cold until I filled it. What did the note say?

—He said, Don't you think it's time you paid less attention to the Queen of Kaliaska and took your duties aboard *Viator* more seriously?

Arlene smiled. It's amusing to think of Kaliaska having a queen. Well, I've been called worse. But what's he talking about? What duties?

—I have no idea. Both Halmus and Arnsparger have told me they don't believe there is a job. They think Lunde sent us here for his own purposes. And yet they go about their days as if they're on deadline.

—Lunde?

—Jochanan Lunde. He runs a temp agency in Fairbanks. He's the one who handed us the job. A nice old fellow. He treated me with great kindness. He treated all of us that way, apparently. Arnsparger said he originally thought the job was an act of charity. Lunde was giving us a place where we could rest and get strong.

—Oh, yes. JL Enterprises.

Wilander gave her a doubtful look.

—JL Enterprises. Jochanan Lunde. They pay your bills. She sprinkled parmesan on a slice. So he's changed his mind about that? About giving you a place to recuperate?

—Maybe . . . I don't know. You see, whenever I call Lunde—I call him weekly to give reports—he's very crisp. Perfunctory to the point of rudeness. It's like he's too busy to talk. Arnsparger thinks that he was only pretending to befriend us and he sent us here for a reason he hasn't explained. Me, I think Arnsparger was right the first time and it's more a case of Lunde's done what he can for us, now he's on to something else. Perhaps he's found someone new to befriend, someone he'll send to join us. Charity or not, I'm grateful to him. I'm glad to be here. Glad to have this time.

Arlene mopped up excess parmesan from her slice with a napkin, taking—Wilander thought—an inordinate time to do so.

—What are you thinking? he asked.

—If I tell you, we'll talk about it, and if we talk about it, it might make you self-conscious.

—I'm already self-conscious.

—Why don't you trust me on this? I'll tell you later.

—Maybe it won't be necessary.

—No, probably not, she said and laughed, two bright notes that reminded Wilander of the stairstep notes a soprano might hit before essaying high C.

—What's so funny?

—I was thinking how economical a little scene that was we just played.

He thought he grasped her meaning, but not being altogether familiar with her ways, he decided not to comment.

One of the two teenage Inupiat girls behind the counter, framed by a white arch on which a mural of polar bears romping across pack ice had been amateurishly attempted, sat on her stool and gazed glumly out at the tables, at two elderly women in blond wigs and anoraks and jeans sitting close to the door, speaking in whispers as they ate (a lesbian couple originally from Portland, Arlene said), and the other employee, a slightly younger girl, possibly the sister of the first, was leaning on the counter beside her and aiming a remote at a television set mounted on the wall above the tables, channel surfing—she settled on MTV, brought up the volume, and a faint music was heard. Arlene swallowed a bite and said, I can't picture you as an investment counselor.

—I wasn't a very good investment counselor, Wilander said. I probably shouldn't have majored in business. But at the time there wasn't anything I was passionate about. Might have worked out if I hadn't followed my own advice.

—That's what I don't understand—why you chose such a career in the first place.

—I thought it'd be easy money. What sort of career should I have had?

She tipped her head to one side, studying him. A landscape architect, she said firmly, and had another bite.

Wilander laughed, and when she asked what was funny, he said, I wasn't expecting a specific answer.

She shrugged, chewed. What will you do after you leave the ship?

—For work, you mean?

—Work. Yes.

—I'm not sure. I know I don't want another career. Nothing that'll make me crazy, take all my time. Just honest work. Simple work. Physical labor, maybe. I wouldn't mind getting back in shape.

The Inupiat girls burst into giggles behind the counter and Wilander, suspecting that he and Arlene might be the object of their amusement, glanced at them over his shoulder—they were turning the pages of a magazine with brightly colored pictures.

—You should eat, Arlene said. It'll get cold.

Though not particularly hungry, Wilander devoured a slice in three bites, leaving the crust. Duty done, he gazed out the window at twilight houses and

the dirt street and mountains in the distance with exposed ridges of black stone and snowy slopes, pyramids of white meat larded with black fat, and tried to think of something to say, something that would nudge the conversation toward a plateau from which they could gracefully ascend to the central topic of the evening, the topic he considered central, at any rate. His instincts with women, once sure, had long since been stripped from him and, his confidence beginning to erode, he worried that he was rushing things, that he had misjudged the moment. Everything he thought to say seemed overly subtle or childishly manipulative, and soon he began to worry that instead of rushing things, he might be letting the moment slip away.

—I may have some work for you. Arlene dusted a slice with red peppers, using her forefinger to tap flakes of pepper from the jar, taking great pains to distribute them evenly. The afternoon boat brought me a shipment. A lot of it's heavy stuff. Generators and TVs. I could manage myself, but I've got calls I'd like to make as soon as business opens on the East Coast and the boat'll be pulling out around seven. You'd have to start before first light.

—That sounds possible, Wilander said. I could probably . . .

—I can put you up. Be easier than walking into town at three in the morning.

She glanced up from her plate and engaged his eyes long enough to convey that this was both a functional invitation and a personal one.

—Okay. Yeah, sure, he said. I'll be happy to help you out.

Arlene smiled. I can't pay much, but at least it's not a career.

### 3

“ . . . an awful dream, terrible, not like a dream at all. . . ”

**W**ILANDER'S DAYS LAPSED INTO A PLEASANT ROUTINE. IN THE mornings he would sit on deck beneath the linden tree, engaged by boughs that overhung the rail, leaves trailing across his neck and shoul-

ders, bathed in greeny light, hidden from all but the most penetrating eyes, and he would write in his journal and doze and dream, often of Arlene, with whom he spent his nights, walking into Kaliaska in late afternoon and helping out with the stock until closing and then retiring to her upstairs apartment, which proved to be a place of rustic and eclectic disorder such as he had imagined the trading post might be, the rooms carpeted with Turkish kilims and throw rugs from Samarkand and prayer rugs from Isfahan, one overlying the other, and the furniture—second-hand sofas and chairs—draped with silk prints and faded tapestries, and on the walls were oil paintings in antique gilt or brass frames, the images gone so dark with age, they seemed paintings of chaos, of imperiled golden-white glows, gods reduced to formlessness, foundering in black fires deep beneath the foundations of the world, and only by peering at them from inches away could one determine that they were stormy seascapes and pastoral landscapes and portraits of aristocratic men and women in comic opera uniforms and gowns, all wearing the constipated expression that during the nineteenth century served as standard dress for the ruling class, and upon the end tables and dressers and nightstands were innumerable lamps, lamps of every description, bases of cut glass, ceramic, brass, malacca, polished teak, and onyx matched to shades of parchment, eggshell-thin jade, carved ivory, lace-edged silk, blown glass, and tin, yet no more than one or two were ever lit at the same time, and thus the apartment was usually engulfed in a mysterious gloom from which glints and colors and lusters of these objects (all gotten at barter from sailors, travelers, adventurers) would emerge, creating a perfect setting for Arlene, the rich clutter of a pirate's trove wherein she looked to be the most significant prize. These dreams were sometimes prurient, sometimes funny, sometimes sweet, and this heartened Wilander—the fact that his subconscious displayed a range of feeling toward her nourished his hope that the relationship would grow and become more than two lonely people having sex.

Shortly after he began spending his nights with Arlene, one morning as he lay on the deck of *Viator*, Wilander was visited by a dream that was to return to him again and again in variant forms. He had no presence in the dream, no sense of intimate involvement, being merely an observer without attitude or disposition, bodiless in a black place. Superimposed on the blackness was a tan circle, like the view through a telescope of a pale brown sky and what

appeared to be five dark birds (always five) flying at so great a distance, they manifested as simple shapes, shapes such as a child might render when asked to draw a bird, two identical curved lines set side-by-side and meeting at the point between them. Something about the dream, which lasted only for a few seconds prior to waking and seemed less a dream than an optical incident that may have been provoked by the sun penetrating his lids, unsettled Wilander, yet he failed to identify the unsettling element until the third recurrence of the dream, when he recognized that the winglike lines comprising the individual birds were not beating, but rippling, causing them to resemble flagella wriggling in a drop of water under the lens of a microscope. The bird things flew ever closer to the viewing plane and he came to suspect that their bodies might not conform to avian anatomy at all; but they kept so far away, they remained rudimentary figures without the slightest visible detail.

None of these dreams was of considerable duration, and though they disturbed Wilander, the disturbance was not so onerous as to distract him overmuch—far more disturbing was the demeanor of the men aboard *Viator* now that he had hooked up with (this being Halmus' appreciation of the relationship) the Queen of Kaliaska. Had it been asserted that he could be more isolated than he already was, that his shipmates might treat him with greater indifference, he would have pronounced the statement laughable and replied that the increment of indifference involved would be infinitesimal; yet he discovered that the atmosphere aboard ship underwent a marked chill, that Nygaard averted his eyes whenever Wilander came near, and Halmus no longer extended even a cursory greeting, and Mortensen ignored him completely, and Arnsparger's smiles were reduced to formalities, his chatter to ten-second assessments of the weather. Wilander classified their shunning of him as adolescent, the kind of wounded reaction that eventuates when a woman begins to dominate a young man's time and thus earns the resentment of his friends, of a group whose center he has been; but since the men of *Viator* were not young, not friends, acquaintances only in the strictest sense of the word, Wilander could not fathom the reason for their hostile reaction, nor could he understand the depth of his reaction to their coolness.

—To hell with them, he told Arlene. They act like I've betrayed them. Like we're frat brothers and I've broken the sacred bond. It's ridiculous.

Yet once back on board the ship, he felt injured by their treatment and, while he had no intention of apologizing or placating them in any way, he sought them out, hoping that a meeting in a passageway or the hold or the galley would provide an opportunity for them to vent their displeasure and permit them to work past this problem and reinstitute the old, more amiable order. He made no discernable progress toward a rapprochement, but he came to anticipate the time he spent searching through the ship, because on each and every occasion he would stumble upon some fascinating object—for instance, a pale green section of the passageway wall outside the officers' mess where the paint had flaked away in hundreds of spots, small and large, creating of the surface a mineral abstract like those found on picture stone, from which (if one studied the wall, letting one's eyes build an image from the paintless spots, from scratches, dents and scuffs) there emerged an intricate landscape, an aerial view of forested hills—firs for the most part—declining toward water, and a large modern city beneath the hills that encircled a lagoon and spread along the coast, with iron-colored islands in the offing; or he might achieve a fresh perspective on some portion of the ship, much as happened when, standing in the engine room one night, he glanced at the relics of the engine and the stairway ascending through the tiers, and realized that this towering space and its contents had the appearance of a mechanistic church that had been violated and abandoned, its altar wrecked, its symbol of spiritual ascendancy rusted, some of the railings fallen, the floor littered with twenty-year-old trash—oil-stained cloths, bolts, shattered bottle glass—and as a result of these dalliances, he found himself becoming more intrigued by the ship, less curious about its history than the beauty of its decay, the monument to dissolution it was in process of becoming.

Three weeks after he and Arlene had initiated their affair, while napping on *Viator's* deck beneath the low-hanging linden boughs, Wilander experienced a recurrence of the dream that was unlike any of its previous visitations. At the outset, all was as usual. He lay disembodied, in blackness, staring at the pale brown circle wherein the five birdlike creatures flew, mysterious with distance, when one separated from the rest and approached with apparent purposefulness, as if it had noticed something of interest and were coming for a better look. It must have begun its approach from a good ways off—for what seemed two or three minutes, he could detect no change in its aspect, except that it

proved to be a dark earthy brown in color, not black as it had appeared at a greater remove, and then it rushed upon him, or upon whatever dream-object it had noticed, and that simple shape of two identical curved lines resolved into two glistening, ropy segments of flesh, united by a ridged structure . . . and yet it swooped past so swiftly, he could not be sure he had seen anything of the sort; he might have supplied details from his imagination to give form to what had been, essentially, a blur. Nor was he certain of its size, though he had an apprehension of enormity and tremendous power. Viewed at a distance, the bird things posed a far more unsettling image than had this fleeting close-up—their rippling stasis conveyed an air of menacing patience, the patience of carrion birds waiting for something to finish with death—but when he woke with his heart racing, he knew with a paranoid certainty that their waiting was done and that the creature had flown out of the dream and into the sky above *Viator* and was wheeling about, preparing to make a second pass.

He scrambled to his feet and stood with his head and torso pushing up among the lower boughs of the linden tree, feeling more secure surrounded by greenery; but as he steadied his breath and tried to put the dream and his relation to it into a reasonable frame, through an aperture in the leaves, roughly oval, a lovely Edenesque frame itself, he saw a gaunt, bearded face like those portrayed by the ikons in his late Aunt Rigmor's collection, enshrined in a china closet at her home in Portland, a stately old house that he had hated as a child for its apparent fragility (he had been forbidden to touch anything), yet now recalled with inexplicable nostalgia—inexplicable, unless it were the ikons themselves that inspired nostalgia, for he had been quite taken with them and, curious as to their worth, their meaning, he had often stood on tiptoes and peered at them, as now he peered at the elongated, hollow-cheeked face of a suffering Swedish saint shrouded by matted shoulder-length gray hair, his waxy skin webbed with broken capillaries, and having a bladed nose and brown eyes as beautiful and profoundly sad as the eyes of a young woman disappointed in love, eyes that had registered everything essential about the world of men and forgiven them their lustful natures, and a mouth all but obscured by a ragged beard that still showed here and there a few blond hairs: Mortensen. The shock of seeing him close at hand was nearly as disabling as the shock Wilander had absorbed from the dream, and he could think of nothing to say.



—Good morning, Mortensen said. Or is it afternoon? I often lose track. His voice was unexpectedly high-pitched and adenoïdal, ill-matched to his appearance; its resonance made him sound a little like a boy trying to force his pitch lower in imitation of a man.

—Morning, I think. Wilander glanced up into the crown of the tree, trying to find the sun. Yes, it's getting near noon.

—Ah! I should have thought to look at the sky. I've been inside so long, my instincts have eroded.

Wilander became aware that Mortensen must be seeing him the same way he saw Mortensen, in a leafy frame, and the image this conjured, two men communicating by means of a weird organic technology, magical forest mirrors, caused him to chuckle.

—I'm not a social man, Mortensen said sternly. We won't have very many opportunities to talk. Perhaps we should make the most of this one and try to be serious.

—You have something to say to me? Say it.

—Only that we need you to be responsible.

—And what would you have me be responsible for?

—You spend most of the afternoons and all of your evenings with that woman. You sleep the mornings away and then you're gone again. How is that responsible?

—What should I be doing? Collecting scrap metal like Nygaard and Arnsparger? Pondering over broken mirrors like Halmus? Or would you have me haunt the ship like you?

—You're quartered in the captain's cabin. Surely that's an indicator of what you should be doing?

—So I'm the captain? Captain of a ship that will never travel another inch? I suppose I should be studying charts, plotting a course.

Mortensen made a diffident gesture. You're the one in charge, aren't you? You can hardly do other than determine our course. And then you have your reports to make. How can you make them when you know nothing of what's going on?

—I make the reports in a timely fashion.

—But what do you say?

—I tell Lunde the work goes well. Occasionally I throw a few numbers at him.

—In other words, you lie to him.

—It's what Arnsparger told me to do.

—Arnsparger! When Arnsparger made the reports, there was nothing to report. It's your job now and you need to redefine it. It's you who was meant to have the job when things reached this stage. To do the job correctly, you must observe what's going on.

—You're suggesting I tell Lunde what we're doing? He'll fire us. If I tell him Halmus stands around examining bits of glass like a jeweler inspecting diamonds, or that Arnsparger and Nygaard cut little holes in the hull, in pots, in bulkhead doors . . . he'll have them committed.

—Those are the very things he wants to hear.

—How the hell would you know?

Mortensen's eyelids drooped and he seemed to be gathering strength through prayer. I was the first to come, he said. Therefore I'm the first to know things.

An image from Wilander's dream, the pale brown circle and the birdlike creatures rippling in the distance, floated up before his mind's eye. Unnerved by this, he was eager to have done with Mortensen. It was early to be thinking of heading for Kaliaska, but he intended to do exactly that.

—If you know things before I do, Wilander said, why don't you tell me some of these things only you know?

Once again Mortensen paused before responding. You'll learn them soon enough.

—But I'm not ready for such knowledge now? It's too volatile, too alarming? Too scholarly, perhaps? I wouldn't be able to understand?

—Ridiculing me will benefit no one.

Wilander might have argued the point. Should I report that to Lunde? he asked. That you have secret knowledge of the future?

—I see no reason why you should not.

—I've got a better idea. Since you've been here longest and know more than any of us, why don't you make the reports?

—I have my own responsibilities, Mortensen said. They require all my energy.

—Yes, I can imagine.

—Your duties are not so challenging as mine, but nonetheless they're crucial and you can't perform them in Kaliaska.

Angry now, Wilander said, These responsibilities that require all your energy, that are so challenging . . . why don't you explain them to me?

—There's a passage in the Bible that states one must be born again . . .

—I've had to pay for my dinner too often by listening to religious crap. I should imagine it would be the same for you—you've been in as many missions as me. But whatever, I don't have to listen to it here.

—It states that one must be born again to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, Mortensen said. I believe that's true of every significant passage.

—What are you talking about?

Mortensen shook his head ruefully. Perhaps we'll speak later. I have things to do.

—What things? That's all I'm asking you! What could be so pressing you can't take a few seconds to tell me about it?

—It would take much longer than a few seconds, Mortensen said. And it would serve no purpose . . . not so long as you maintain your current attitude.

—Then convince me to change my attitude, Wilander said, but without another word, Mortensen stepped from view and did not answer when Wilander called to him.

A bird chattered somewhere above, a patterned call that had the sound of a warning. Wilander glanced up through the leaves, trying to locate it, and was captivated first by the architecture of the tree, the axle of the trunk and the irregular spokes of the limbs, making it seem as if the linden were a spindle designed to interact in some fashion with the ship, and then by the uppermost leaves, almost invisible against the glare of the sun, and those just below showing as half-sketched outlines and a hint of green, giving the impression that the tree had not sprouted from the soil but was materializing from the top down, spun into being from a formless golden-white dimension whose borders interpenetrated with the world of men.

**W**alking toward Kaliaska, Wilander's frustration with Mortensen abated and he chided himself for having confronted the old fool. With every step, his mood was buoyed further by the prospect that in less than an hour he would be with Arlene, and by the beauty of the luxuriant growth, the sunlight

filtering through the canopy to gild trembling leaves and nodding ferns, a feeling that peaked when, looking back, he saw *Viator's* prow, made black and mysterious by ground fog, thrusting between two hills; but once he passed beyond sight of the ship, he was possessed by the feeling that the dream place into which he had gazed earlier that morning had a physical presence, a geography, and the ground whereon he walked was part of it, the firs, the mossy logs, and the carpeting of salvia and ferns, all of them were elements of an illusion that had taken root in the pale brown medium that enclosed the ship, growing there like fungus on a stump. The notion was, of course, irrational. He rejected it, he went at a measured pace, he fixed his thoughts on Arlene. But each step now seemed attached to mortal risk—at any second his foot might breach the tenuous solidity of the trail and he would plunge into the pale brown void beneath and fall prey to the menacing undulant shapes that inhabited it. The certainty grew in him that a fatal step was imminent, that some dread trap he could neither anticipate nor characterize was about to be sprung. Before long, his uneasiness matured into panic, and, unable to restrain the impulse, he fled through the forest, soon forgetting what had so frightened him, afraid of everything now, of shadows and glints of light, of stillness and a surreptitious rustling among the bushes, and he went stumbling, tripping over roots, scraping his hand on a stone, thorns pricking his arms, falling, scrambling up again, until he reached the rise overlooking Kaliaska and collapsed atop it.

He had intended to catch his breath, then proceed to the trading post, but the town looked vulgar and forbidding in its plainness, the color of the dirt on which it stood virtually the same as that of the sky in his dream, the paranoid scuttling of dogs and the movements of people and vehicles conveying an aimless, annoying rhythm. Under the strong sun, Inupiat men and women trudged along the streets, some stopping to exchange a few words; a red pickup pulled up next to the trading post; three children played clumsily on the shingle, while their fathers patched a net. Wilander felt defeated by circumstance, stranded between two inimical poles, and wished he were back in the comfort of his cabin. He sat on a flat rock, flanked on one side by a bush with dry yellow-green leaves and on the other by the remnants of a fire and some charred fish heads upon which flies were crawling, and watched the sluggish creep of commerce with an utter lack of interest and no little dismay. Some-

thing was wrong with him, he decided. The past few years must have cracked him in some central place. His behavior was becoming as eccentric as that of the men aboard *Viator*. Not as eccentric as Mortensen's, but given what had just transpired, his flight through the forest, he doubted it would be much longer before he began collecting paint flakes or pressing linden leaves between the pages of his books. It seemed he had posed this—to his own mind—overly dramatic self-diagnosis in order to provoke a denial, to energize himself, but it had the opposite effect, weighing on him as would a criminal judgment, and, oppressed by the idea that he might be slipping, he sank into a fugue, staring at the town, seeing in its plodding regulation and drabness an articulation of his decline.

In mid-afternoon, Arlene, wearing baggy chinos and a green T-shirt, stepped from the door of the trading post, shielded her eyes against the lowering sun, and peered at the rise. She spoke to someone inside and then walked toward Wilander at an unhurried pace, hands in her pockets. She stopped on the incline a few feet below his rock and said, Terry says you've been sitting here a couple hours. You okay?

Wilander wanted to assure her of his well-being, because she was intolerant of weak men, a by-product, he assumed, of a previous relationship, and yet she was also, if her depictions of former lovers were accurate, attracted to weak men—he did not want to think of himself as weak, nor did he want to play on her weakness for the weak or engage her intolerance by planting the idea that he might be on the verge of another collapse; but the way she looked, sensual and motherly at once, her breasts enticingly defined by the green cotton, a hint of sternness in her face, roused in him a childlike need for consolation. He caught her hand and pulled her down beside him.

—What is it? she asked, slipping an arm about his waist.

—I've had a hell of a day.

She leaned into him, her breast flattening against his arm, and that yielding pressure was enough to break the last of his resolve, turning him toward confession.

—I've been having this dream, he said. It's an awful dream, terrible, not like a dream at all, really. It's more like a place I've been given to see. Hardly anything happens. But it keeps coming back and . . . I'm not sure what to make of it.

He described the dreams, focusing on the one he had dreamt that morning, and when he had done, she said, You need to get off that ship.

—I don't think it's the ship, he said, feeling an odd flutter of alarm.

—I wasn't talking about the ship itself. I'm talking about the isolation, and those crazy bastards you're isolated with.

—I suppose you're right. But, uh . . . that's where I'm stuck.

—You could move in with me. On a temporary basis. Until we can find you your own place. That is, if you're planning to stay in Kaliaska.

Surprised, he said, That's very generous . . . and flattering. But Lunde wouldn't approve.

—Lunde! The way you talk about him, it's like he's your lord and master. Your Moses.

—He's been generous to me, but he's not my master. Just an old man who runs a temp agency.

—But what do you know about him? This is such a weird thing, this job! He may be using you for something illegal. A swindle, maybe. Maybe he's using your residency to establish a claim or . . . I don't know. It doesn't feel right.

—Whatever his motives, I need the job. And he specified that we had to live on the ship.

Arlene roughed up the ground with the toe of one sneaker and stared at the furrow she had dug. What I'm saying is, why don't you tell Lunde you quitting? I can use you fulltime at the store.

—I can't do that! He said this more vehemently than he intended and tried to compensate for his bluntness by saying, I'd feel I was shirking my responsibilities.

—You're starting to sound like the people you're complaining about.

—I don't mean my responsibilities to the job. If that were all it was, I'd move in tonight. You know that, don't you?

She sat with her folded arms resting on her drawn-up knees; a breeze moved some strands of hair that had been tucked behind her ear down to feather her cheek, and he gently brushed them back. She gave no sign that she noticed his show of affection, her eyes pinned to the trading post, where a group of teenagers on their way home from school, identifiable by their energy and the pink and red and turquoise packs on their backs, were jostling one another.

—The other men seem to be deteriorating, Wilander said. I'm worried what might happen if I leave.

—Are they having bad dreams as well? Arlene asked coolly. Is that a symptom of their deterioration?

—I haven't asked . . . but I get your point.

—Do you?

He slipped his left arm about her waist, the knuckle of his thumb grazing the underside of her breast. We're still trying to see whether we fit together, he said. You agree?

A pause, and then she nodded.

—I've wanted to say certain things, he said, but it was too early to say them. I'm not sure I have grounds to say them, given where I've been the past few years.

—You know that doesn't matter.

—But now I think we've reached a point where somebody has to say something. You know, make a declaration. Would you agree with that?

—Yes . . . maybe.

—Well, I'm going to take a stab at it, okay?

As he talked, Wilander believed he was speaking from the heart, but at the same time he had the suspicion that everything he might say would become true and by giving voice to only a handful of potential truths, he was being effectively dishonest and thus, perhaps, obscuring the thing he wanted to express—this supposition was informed by the last occasion upon which he had spoken at length, when, coerced by the dictatorial priest who managed the North Star Men's Christian Refuge into offering public testimony regarding his devotion (completely specious) to Jesus Christ, he had experienced a similarly confusing interrelation between intent and performance, having brought a number of lost souls forward into the Lord's embrace, despite entertaining substantial misgivings about the benefits of Christianity to the disenfranchised. Yet as he talked that afternoon, telling Arlene that he wasn't arrogant enough to predict where the relationship would lead, though he hoped it would lead to deeper intimacy, to an unfailing union, his emotions fell in line with his words, or at least he no longer perceived so wide a distinction between them as he had during his impromptu sermon at the mission, and his tone grew impassioned, and he accompanied his message

with caresses that, while intended to comfort and persuade, served also to inflame him. It was as if by admitting to love—to the desire for love, at any rate, since he did not mention the emotion directly—he surrendered to a thirst that had been half-wakened in him and now, thanks to his admission, was fully alive, fervently demanding. He wanted to be inside her, not later, but at that precise moment; he wanted to shuck off her chinos and sit her down on his lap and bury himself in the heat and juice of her, to touch her between the legs as they made love in view of the teenagers crowding together in front of the trading post, and was almost at the point of exploring her opinion on the subject—no one, he thought, would be able to see what they were doing at the distance—when Arlene lifted her hand, hesitantly, and touched his cheek. He kissed her fingertips, her wrist. It's not you making me reticent, he said. It's me, my lack of confidence.

—I know. It's just . . . I know.

—There's another thing I'd better tell you. It's really the most important thing.

She waited.

—I think you're hot.

She made a sputtering noise, an unsuccessfully stifled laugh, and shook her head vigorously, saying, I must be crazy! God!

—No, I swear. He grinned. You're seriously hot.

—Thank you. She composed herself and said, I haven't heard you talk that way before.

—Which way is that?

—Saying I was hot.

—It's Terry's influence. He's mentioned a couple of times he thinks you're pretty hot for an old babe.

—He said that? I'll have to give him a raise. She toed the trench she had dug in the earth. I guess you want to take things more slowly.

—I worry I'm going to have problems if I go too fast. I don't feel solid yet.

—Problems? Like . . . ?

—The kind of problems that started me drinking. I don't want to fail with you. You don't deserve to have another wreck on your hands.

—Aren't you're running a bigger risk of becoming a wreck by staying where you are? Arlene rested her chin on her knees. Living on a wreck. Among wrecks. It's clearly affecting you.



—It’s a challenge. But that may be what I need. And I don’t have to worry about ruining things with you.

She was quiet for a while and the shouts of the teenagers, as rancorous as the cries of gulls, filled in the gap. I have a challenge for you, she said.

—Oh, yeah?

—It’s an urgent challenge. One that requires your immediate attention.

Puzzled, he said, Okay? What is it?

She gave him a soft rap on the forehead. You’re a little thick today, aren’t you? I was attempting courtly speech.

—I’m not familiar with it.

—I thought you were such a big reader! It’s how knights and ladies flirted back in the Middle Ages. You know, the lady would say something like, Careful, sir, or you will prick me with your sword, and the knight would go, Could I but find the proper sheath, milady, it would do you no injury. And then she’d go, As it happens, sir, I have in my possession the finest and softest of sheaths, one that will never dull your blade. And then if he was having a bad brain day, like you, he’d say, You talking about sex?

—See, I heard no mention of swords and sheaths. That’s what perplexed me.

—You’re not perplexed anymore?

—Try me. Engage me in courtly speech.

—All right. Arlene appeared to deliberate. Why don’t we go on up to the apartment?

—Sounds good, Wilander said. I could stand a little sheath.

## 4

“ . . . I’m not sure what I’m seeing anymore . . . ”

**T**HOUGH WILANDER HAD NO COMPELLING REASON TO FEEL responsible for his shipmates, he took renewed interest in their comings and goings following his conversation with Arlene, as though his expres-

sion of concern for their welfare had not been—as he intended it—a flimsy tactic designed to reject, temporarily, her invitation, but a self-fulfilling prophecy with the dutiful properties of a vow. This adjustment in attitude had a minimal effect upon his relationships with the elusive Mortensen, the habitually surly Halmus, and simple-minded Nygaard, but it did strengthen the tenuous bond between him and Arnsparger. They had coffee together now and again, most often in Wilander's cabin, since it was the bigger of the two, and one evening, later than was customary, Arnsparger invited himself in as Wilander was preparing for sleep, bringing with him a cardboard box filled with triangular pieces of metal, each labeled and secured in its own jewel case; after urging Wilander to sit on the bed, he displayed them with a connoisseur's pride, offering pertinent commentary, and though Wilander was not surprised to discover that Arnsparger's samples had nothing to do with the job, with evaluating the worth of *Viator's* hull, he was astonished to learn that his guest's obsession involved the classification of (in a thoroughly idiosyncratic fashion) the varieties of rust.

—This one, now. Arnsparger opened a case and exhibited it with the panache of an upscale salesperson presenting a pricey necklace to a prospective buyer. This is *chian*. He sounded the name out—Ki-ahn—and cautioned Wilander to be careful handling the piece; the flaking was extremely fragile. See how the metal appears to have effloresced. Here . . . and here. Like little arches. Almost a Moorish effect. And the blue . . . isn't it wonderful? I guess you'd call it peacock blue. It must be a nickel alloy. I got the sample from the railing outside the bridge.

—Why do you call it *chian*?

—The name just hit me one morning. It seemed to fit. He allowed Wilander to examine the piece a few seconds longer, then took back the case. Now here . . . here we have an example of *ozim*.

*Ozim*, a delicate overlay of black rust on red—like a Gothic lace, said Arnsparger; a scorpion's idea of beauty—was followed by *quipre*, which Arnsparger characterized as a piece of chiaroscuro, and that was followed by *shaumere*, *cuprise*, *noctul*, by *catrala*, *mosinque*, *tulis*, by *basarach*, *drundin*, *ichthilio*, *ceranze*, and more. Seventy-three varieties catalogued in accordance with aesthetic criteria whose determinants were either too subtle for Wilander to perceive—though he acknowledged that many of the pieces were

lovely, like miniatures wrought by a tiny, deft hand—or else were a product of dementia. After listening to a two-hour lecture on the elegance of rust, he was convinced that Arnsparger, though more socialized than the other men, must be every bit as mad, and yet it was not the fact of his madness that dismayed Wilander, it was the effete, quasi-professorial air that Arnsparger affected while talking about his samples, a style that clashed with his usual bluff good humor and seemed incongruous coming from this overweight, slovenly fellow who looked less like an academic than he did a beer truck driver.

—You seem quite knowledgeable about art, Wilander said as Arnsparger packed away his show-and-tell.

—Me? Hell no! Arnsparger beamed. I know what I like. That's as far as it goes.

—But you're familiar with artistic terms.

—Oh, I ordered a couple of books after I started collecting. Maybe I picked up a few things. Arnsparger stowed the cardboard box beneath the wooden chair and took a seat. When I get home, I might do some painting. If I can get some technique down, all I have to do is copy my samples. They're a damn sight prettier to look at than most of the stuff you see in museums.

Wilander settled back on his bunk, plumped pillows beneath his head. What's interesting to me is that both you and Halmus have become artistically inclined while aboard ship, yet neither of you have any arts background.

—Huh! I hadn't thought of that, but it's a coincidence, for sure. Time on our hands, I guess. This old ship—he patted the wall beside him—she's got lots to show you, you take the time to check her out.

—Does Nygaard have a similar artistic passion?

—The poor guy imitates everything I do. He attached himself to me when he first came and he's never gotten over it. So, yeah. He's collected a boxful of kettle tops and stove parts . . . that kind of thing. But—Arnsparger nudged the box with his heel—it's not the same as this.

—No, I imagine not. Wilander reached up and fumbled about blindly on his overhead shelf for a candy bar, located two Paydays, and offered one to Arnsparger, who said that his teeth were bad enough, thank you. From outside the cabin there came a long, thin cry, metallic-sounding, that planed away into a whispery frailty—Wilander pictured a tin bird with gem-cut glass orbs for eyes, perched high in the dark crown of the linden tree, mourning an

incomprehensible loss. What about Mortensen? he asked. Does he have a hobby?

—It's funny about Mortensen. There's times I think the guy's nuts, but he's too damn smart to be nuts.

—Intelligence is scarcely proof against insanity. The fact is, intelligent people tend to be more prone to certain types of mental illness.

—You couldn't prove it by me. I peaked in the fourth grade. Arnsparger chuckled. Mortensen, though . . . I tell you, crazy or not, he's a smart son-of-a-bitch. But he's not into collecting.

—Halmus told me he was doing something with the hold.

—Yeah. Usually he never stays with anything. He reads it and then he moves on to someplace else.

—Reads? What do you mean?

Arnsparger explained that Mortensen claimed the ability to interpret the ship through the signs manifest in its many surfaces. The rust and the glass, the raveled wiring, the accumulated dust, the powdery residues of chemicals—they were languages and Mortensen spent his time in mastering them, translating them. It sounds crazy, Arnsparger said. But when Mortensen talks about it, I get what he means, you know. It's like with my samples. When I come across a good one . . . they're like these concise statements that pop up from the rusted surfaces. They come through clear, they seem to sum up what I'm seeing, what I'm thinking about what I'm seeing. Like with a slogan. A decal or something.

—But the hold . . . you seem to be suggesting he has a special relationship with it.

—He spends a lot of time down there, writing stuff on the walls. But I don't know. He's liable to move on to something else.

Wilander pressed him on the subject of Mortensen, but Arnsparger, after answering a couple of questions, tucked his chin onto his chest, pushing his lips in and out as might a sullen child, his replies growing terse; finally he scooped up the cardboard box, surged to his feet and said he needed to get going, there were things he had to do, and when Wilander, bewildered by this shift in mood, asked if he had in some way offended, Arnsparger said, I'm fed up with you pretending to be my buddy so you can pick my brain. I'm not a fucking reference library!, and stormed out, leaving Wilander to consider

whether he had been insufficiently enthusiastic about Arnsparger's samples, or if the man's reaction was attributable to an irrational fit of temper, or if he, Wilander, had inadvertently crossed some impalpable boundary, one of many such boundaries for which *Viator* appeared to serve as a nexus.

The homogenous quality of the delusions that gripped the crew of *Viator* intrigued Wilander—although he had previously observed a sameness of mental defect among the men, not until his conversation with Arnsparger did he recognize how deep that sameness ran, and this gave him to recognize, in turn, that their presence on board *Viator*, something he had theretofore thought of as a peculiar circumstance, might be a mystery of profound proportions. During his daily tours through the ship, in hopes of shedding light upon the mystery, he made concerted attempts to connect with Halmus and Nygaard and Mortensen—and with Arnsparger, who apologized for his flare-up, though he offered no excuse for it; but despite all Wilander's efforts, only twice did his contact with the men result in anything approaching an illumination, the first instance occurring one morning when he entered the galley, a room with stratifications of petrified grease darkening the ceiling whose contents had been ransacked (whether by vandals or a rebellion against shipboard cuisine, no one could say), the shelves knocked down, a sink ripped away from the wall, the top of the stove—a black iron monstrosity blotched with rust (*ictihilio*), but still functional—cracked, one of the oven doors missing, and there he discovered Nygaard cuddling a corroded saucepan in his arms, talking in a tender tone of voice, a hushed, consoling tone, as if the pan were a sick kitten that he was encouraging to suck milk from an eye dropper. Wilander asked him about the pan—what was its attraction, its point of interest?—and, receiving no response, pried it from his grasp, whereupon the gray little man fell back toward the door, gazing morosely at the prize that had been stolen from him. The inside bottom of the pan bore a whitish discoloration that resembled a ship plowing through heavy seas, a similarity that seemed unremarkable until Wilander noticed that the overall shape of the ship was identical to the shape of *Viator* and a ragged dark line along the bow corresponded exactly to the placement of the breach in *Viator's* bow. He suspected that the questions he wanted to ask were beyond Nygaard's ability to answer, but nonetheless he pointed to the discoloration and said, This looks like a ship, right? What do you think it signifies?

Anxious as a mouse, eyes darting this way and that, Nygaard retreated into the passageway. Wilander offered him the saucepan. Here, he said. I only wanted a look. But when Nygaard came forward to take the pan, Wilander hid it behind his back. First answer my question. What do you think it means? The picture of the ship.

Nygaard stared at a spot on Wilander's stomach, as if he were employing X-ray vision to peer through flesh and bone and see the pan. *Viator*, he said.

—This is a picture of *Viator*? That's what you're telling me?

Nygaard gave a tight little nod.

—Why do you think so?

—Because it's traveling.

—What's that got to do with anything?

—*Viator* means *traveler*.

—The name, *Viator*? Who told you that?

Nygaard's stare never wavered.

—Did someone tell you that's what it meant? Wilander asked. Who was it?

—Halmus. Nygaard stuck out his hand. Give it to me.

Wilander extended the pan, but kept hold of the handle when Nygaard tried to snatch it. What else did Halmus tell you? Did he talk to you about the ship?

—*Viator* means *traveler*.

—That's all he said? You're sure?

Using both hands, Nygaard wrenched the pan from Wilander's grip, but instead of running, as Wilander expected, he stood hugging the pan and said, I need some metal polish.

—What else did Halmus tell you?

—Metal polish, Nygaard said stubbornly.

—All right. I'll order it tomorrow. Now what else did Halmus say?

—Promise you'll bring the polish?

—Yes, I promise. Now what did he tell you?

With the pan cradled in his arms, a crafty smile playing over his lips, Nygaard had the look of a husband who had been caught just as he was about to cook up his murdered wife's liver and thus no longer had any reason to hide

the beautiful glare of his insanity beneath a humble exterior. He told me to fuck off, he said.

Several days later, as Wilander descended the stairs toward the engine room, he encountered Halmus, who was climbing the stairs, going with his head down, carrying a toolbox, and asked him what he had told Nygaard about *Viator*. Scowling, Halmus pushed past him, and Wilander, who—albeit taller and stronger—had previously been quailed by Halmus’ temper, felt a burst of heat and hatred so all-consuming, it seemed to have been produced by a chemical reaction, the ignition of some volatile agent in his blood, a childish response buried beneath years of socialization, muffled by the practiced constraints of a business life, and—eventually—suffocated by reflexes born of poverty and failure and dissolution, by an appreciation of your own unworthiness that leads you to avert your eyes whenever an insult is hurled your way, and yet had never been extinguished, hiding like an ember beneath a board, waiting to be rekindled. He caught Halmus’ elbow and slung him into the railing, which broke free with a shriek and went spinning down to clang against the floor thirty feet below, and Halmus, arms windmilling, teetered on the brink of a fatal drop until Wilander hauled him back and pushed him against the opposite railing and asked his question a second time.

—I don’t know what you’re talking about! Halmus struggled against Wilander’s hold.

Goaded by the man’s foppish beard and the contemptuous set of his mouth, Wilander knuckled his Adam’s apple and said, You told him *Viator* means *traveler*.

—That’s what it means, you ass! It’s Latin! Didn’t you go to school?

—The school I went to, we didn’t learn faggot shit like Latin! You know what I learned? While you were studying Latin and going to art movies and jabbering about political injustice in coffee bars, preparing yourself for a life of taking drugs? I learned statistics, cost accounting! I learned how to make a fucking living!

—Yeah? And how’d that work out?

Wilander forced Halmus harder against the railing. What else do you know about the ship? What did you tell Nygaard?

—I didn't tell him anything! I don't know anything! Halmus twisted his head, trying to see behind him. Let me go! The railing's loose!

Though tempted to push harder yet, Wilander shoved Halmus down onto a step and loomed over him. From now on, when I ask you a question, drop the attitude and give me a straight answer.

As was typical, Halmus glared in response, but the wattage of his glare seemed reduced. You're crazy, he said.

—That's your diagnosis? I better get myself checked out, then. Someone who goes around all day picking up little pieces of glass, you need to listen to someone like that when they talk about mental health issues.

Wilander noticed the toolbox, which Halmus had let fall, and picked it up.

—Be careful with that! said Halmus.

—Is there something breakable in here? Wilander gave the toolbox a shake.

—Don't . . . okay? Please! Halmus had lost all hint of arrogance.

Inside the toolbox was a dagger-shaped shard of glass wrapped in an oil-stained rag.

—Put it back, Halmus said.

—Did you find another prize for your collection? Wilander unwrapped the shard, nothing remarkable, a piece of clouded mirror glass that gave back a partial reflection of his face, but as he made to toss it aside, catching sight of it at an angle that no longer reflected his face, he noticed movement on the surface and, upon peering more closely, realized that the apparent movement—it had to be apparent, he thought, caused by his hand trembling, a shadow misapprehended, something of the sort—looked to be occurring *beneath* the surface, as if the glass were not a mirror fragment, but a dagger-shaped aperture opening onto an overcast sky clotted with real clouds, storm clouds, grayish black and tumbled by the wind, and it seemed he was diving down through them, they went rushing past, blinding him for long moments, intermittently affording a view of the ground far below, an indistinct landscape of forested hills ranging a seacoast and, as his angle of descent lessened, like that of a flying creature flattening out over the hilltops, he glimpsed something ahead, an interruption in the flow of the forest over the hills, along the shore—buildings, perhaps—and then the mirror was ripped from his grasp and he was looking at Halmus, stunned and shaken, trying to reconnect with



the feeling of triumph that had gripped him the instant before the mirror was snatched away.

—You saw something, didn't you? Halmus said, tucking the mirror into his toolbox. What was it? What did you see?

Wilander had half a mind to wrestle the toolbox from him, to look into the mirror once more and identify what he had seen, yet he was unsettled by the triumphant feeling that attached to the sight, not a sense of accomplishment, of having overcome travail or succeeded at some difficult task, but an exultant relief such as might be felt by a gladiator who, having beaten down his opponent, was prepared to deliver a killing stroke, and yet that was an inadequate comparative, there was nothing in his experience or imagination to inspire this particular feeling, nothing that could have provoked anything approximating so unadulterated and fierce a joy, and he thought he must have been possessed by the feeling, or that he had taken possession of an entity whose emotions had no commonality with human emotion, with either the fleeting passions of an ordinary day or the desponds into which a man might sink, as with grief and unrequited love, but were symphonic in their scope, wider, deeper, and infinitely grander than his own. Halmus demanded again to know what he had seen, and Wilander, hearing frustration in his voice, frustration and, he thought, an undertone of envy, suggesting that Halmus himself had seen nothing in the mirror, or had hoped to see more than he had, decided not to respond lest by doing so he negate an advantage won, an advantage whose value he had yet to grasp. Ignoring Halmus' protestations, he continued down the stairs toward the engine room, toward the completion of an errand, the exact nature of which he could now no longer recall.

Though he did not understand them, the things he had seen in the mirror troubled Wilander over the ensuing days, but thanks to their singular character, he was able to dismiss them as aberrant, a symptom of nerves or some related complaint. He was less successful, however, in explaining away the powerful emotion that had attended his vision; it seemed to have stained his soul, adding a new, unwholesome color. He subjected himself to analysis, thinking he might unearth something from his psyche that, amplified by stress, could have produced such a sweep of feeling; but in examining the passages of his life, his unruffled childhood, his curiously blank adolescence, a period during which he had become, for no perceptible cause, alienated from

everyone, friendless and unhappy (though not monumentally unhappy as were several of his peers, like Miranda Alley, a brainy girl with whom Wilander had sex on one flurried, forlorn occasion, yet had been unable to persuade her to remove her brassiere, because—it turned out—she habitually slashed her breasts with razor blades; or Jake Callebs, a popular kid who swallowed an overdose of Xanax while sitting at the edge of the athletic field and died watching a pick-up soccer game, the green expanse blurring, his being curving up with the cries of the players and fading along the air, at least this was Wilander's overly romantic view of the event) and given to long solitary walks, his mind not focused on any particular subject, merely idling, and thereafter the renewal of college, a vital rebirth, a burst of social interactions and diverse pursuits that continued on for a couple of years after graduation . . . in contemplating this, he felt he was pulling at a loose thread and unraveling the garment of self in which he had been cloaked until there was nothing left except blankness. That, he thought, was the dominant pattern in his life, cycles of hyperactivity and blankness, as if he were prone to unravel after having acquired a certain amount of experience, and he thought perhaps that same pattern could be discerned to some degree in every life and what made you unique was no more than a handful of easily unraveled threads woven across a blank template.

**T**he canopy of the linden tree was so dense that the leaves shielded Wilander from rain whenever he lay beneath them, but one Sunday morning a stiff west wind blew in off the sea, driving the rain sideways along the deck, and he was forced to retreat into the officers' mess, where he sat at a long table, drinking coffee, feeling submerged beneath the noise of the storm, staring out the open door at the lashings of the crown and gazing at the walls, hoping for a let-up so he wouldn't get drenched when he walked into Kaliaska later that day. Like the majority of *Viator's* walls, those of the mess were painted green and the paint had flaked away in spots, hundreds of spots, creating a design of pale lime and brownish black from which, as Wilander's eyes moved across it, there emerged an astonishingly detailed image rather like one that might be obtained from the xerox of a photograph done on a copier whose toner was running low, a landscape contrived of darkly etched shapes and

blank spaces: it seemed he was looking from a great height between the tops of two firs, down across a forested slope and lower hills toward a circular lagoon at the edge of the sea; surrounding the lagoon was a considerable city. It might have been, he told himself, a variant perspective of the image he had noticed some weeks previously on the passageway wall outside the mess. The impact of this casual observation did not strike him at once, but when, after the span of half-a-minute, it did, he stepped out into the passageway to determine if the similarity was actual or imagined. He went back and forth from the mess to the passageway, comparing details, and it became clear that, although the image on the wall of the mess offered a more distant view of the lagoon than did the one in the passageway, there were too many correspondences between them to ignore. Each portrayed a large building with a humped roof, like a sports arena or a convention center, on the inland margin of the lagoon; and on the thin strip of land separating the waters of the lagoon from the sea stood a palatial structure, its uppermost floor a third the size of the floor below, atop which was mounted some sort of array; and there were also correspondences, he believed, between the two images and the forest he had seen in Halmus' mirror: not only were they aerial views of the same landscape viewed from different angles, that landscape was in its hilly conformation, in the shape of its coastline, very like the forest that enclosed *Viator*, albeit this one was more extensive and had a city at its heart.

Wilander was a realist, an espouser of statistical truth, a believer in coincidence when no better theory arose to explain the inexplicable, but his rationalism did not completely immunize him against fear, and the idea that the ship was showing him pictures, that it possessed the unreasonable power to do this, frightened him. He did not believe in ghosts, in the symbolic weight of hallucination, in magic, in extrasensory perception, in oracles (though once his Yahoo horoscope, pointed out by a girlfriend, an ex-Goth with lacy black tattoos columning her spine, a vine-like structure made of spiderwebs in which tiny women were trapped that evolved into a curious evil blossom spreading across her shoulders, had proved uncannily accurate, predicting that he would receive good news from a banking institution about a private venture on the day his business loan was approved); nor was he credulous about miracles or people who communicated with the spirits of the dead or those who had dreams that allowed them to divine the locations of

the victims of kidnapers and serial killers—he was impervious to such claims, he resisted them with adversarial fervor, and while he found it difficult to sustain this denial of the supernatural in the face of Halmus' mirror and the pictures emerging from the walls, he managed after a prolonged study of the wall in the officers' mess to control his uneasiness, countering speculations as to what the pictures might be—views of another world, another dimension, the work of a poltergeist—with the notion that it didn't matter what they were; so what if a ghost was sending signals or the ship was coming alive or some more equivocal madness was involved, because nothing had happened, nothing bad, in all the weeks, the months now, that he had lived aboard *Viator*; and what was there apart from these piddling anomalies, anomalies that might very well be supported by a logical framework, one he hadn't yet discovered, to suggest that anything bad would happen? If a scrap of ectoplasm were acting unruly, an imp or spirit making sport, it didn't change the fact that he was healthier and more psychologically sound than he had been in years, that he had a woman who cared for him and hopes for the future. He set about tidying his mental processes, trying to sweep aside anxiety, but his cell phone rang, seeming to leap against his chest from the breast pocket of his shirt, and the superficial calm he had established was demolished. He switched the phone on and said, Hello, assuming it would be Arlene, but half-expecting to hear a grinding tonality, the voice of the ship announcing itself for some grim purpose.

—Where are you? Arlene asked.

—*Viator*, he said.

—I know! I meant, why aren't you here? Did you forget? You were going to help me this afternoon.

—Not until two.

—It's after three.

—I've been waiting for the rain to let up.

—It stopped raining hours ago.

Wilander glanced at the open door. The rain had, indeed, stopped; the wind had subsided and the sun was out. I'm sorry, he said. I'll come right now.

—You sound funny. Are you all right?

—I'm just distracted. I've been . . . I was looking at something weird.

—Something weird aboard *Viator*? Who would have thought?

The detail of the forest and the city on the wall seemed sharper than before, as if the image were setting, like a print in a bath of developer.

—So, she said. Are you going to tell me what's weird!

—I don't know how to explain it. I . . . I'm not sure what I'm seeing anymore.

Wind swayed the linden boughs; the clustered leaves rustled and appeared to be spinning, clever, shiny green paddles registering the flow of light and air; the hidden metal-throated bird gave its long, declining cry. Wilander had an eerie feeling of dislocation, as if—were he to turn around—he would discover that the walls and the body of the ship had dissolved and he would see, instead, a forest and, below, a lagoon and a city.

—Should I be worried about you? Arlene asked.

—I don't suppose it could hurt, he said.

## 5

“ . . . betwixt and between . . . ”

**W**HEN HE CALLED IN HIS REPORTS TO JOCHANAN LUNDE, AS HE did one sullen, gusty July afternoon not long after this conversation with Arlene, Wilander would usually take himself to *Viator's* stern, where reception was the clearest. Approximately forty feet of the stern protruded from the forest, the ruined screws hanging like two huge crumpled iron blossoms above a shingle littered with weathered shards of trees that had been crushed and knocked aside by the ship's disastrous passage, and strewn with mounds of dark brown seaweed that Wilander, though he knew better, often mistook on first sight for the bodies of drowned men. Standing by the rail that day, he felt exposed, vulnerable to the open sky and the leaden sea, its surface tented by innumerable wavelets close to land, but heaving sluggishly farther out, making it appear that a submerged monster was shouldering its way toward the wreck, and he had the urge to duck back under the canopy of

boughs, because the view from the stern was menacing in its bleakness—it seemed that the treeline marked a division between a lush green security teeming with life and a cold, winded purgatory populated by crabs and shadows. He gazed down at the shingle as he delivered to Lunde a litany of partial estimates and hastily conceived plans, responding to the old man's terse questions, yet only half-involved in these exchanges, and so, when Lunde asked if he had noticed anything out of the ordinary aboard the ship, instead of offering his usual pro forma answer, distracted by a movement on the shore below and to the right of the hull (an animal, he thought; one whose coloration blended so perfectly with that of the motley pebbles and the shattered, silvery gray wood, he could not discern its shape), he asked, What kind of thing are you talking about?

Following a pause, Lunde said angrily, How can I answer that? I'm not there. I don't know what's ordinary for you.

—It's all out of the ordinary, isn't it? Living on a wreck's not what I'd call normal.

—It bothers you? It's becoming stressful?

—No, I'm not saying that. I . . .

—Is the job wearing on you, then? The solitude? If so, I can look for a replacement.

Wilander retreated from a confrontation. It's just that given the context, I'm not sure how to answer your question.

—Well, let me ask it another way. Lunde's voice held a distinct touch of condescension. In context of your experiences aboard *Viator*, using them as a standard for normalcy, has anything occurred that you'd consider abnormal? Anything unexpected? Anything startling?

Wilander would have liked to ask why Lunde wanted to know, what possible interest could such information hold for him, but he felt he had pushed the old man as far as he dared. Nothing startling, he said.

—Unexpected, then?

—Not really. There's been some . . . odd behavior.

—Which is it? Not really, or there's been some odd behavior?

The animal below cleared a cluster of wooden debris and crept across open ground, but its camouflage prevented Wilander from identifying it—it looked as if a portion of the shingle had become ambulatory. The other men,

he said. They've developed some peculiar hobbies. They don't interfere with the job, but . . .

—I should hope not.

Wilander peered at the animal—it appeared to be smallish, about the size of a badger, and moved fluidly, albeit slowly, as if gliding along rather than walking.

—Are you there? Lunde asked.

—Yes. What were you saying?

—You were doing the talking. Something about the men's hobbies.

—Right.

As Wilander described Arnsparger's passion for rust, Halmus' obsession with glass, the animal passed into a clump of ferns at the verge of the shingle, leaving him disquieted, and when Lunde expressed impatience with his recital, stating that such eccentricities were to be expected among men dwelling in solitude, Wilander, annoyed, no longer so concerned with placating his employer, felt inclined to elaborate upon the unexpected, to tell of his recurring dream, the pictures materializing on the walls, the mirror, the unseen bird with the metallic cry that hooted incessantly in the crown of the linden tree, this nearly invisible creature on the shingle (a porcupine, perhaps?), and the forest itself—now that he thought about it, wasn't such temperate growth so close to the Arctic Circle not merely unexpected, wasn't it implausible, if not impossible?—but before he could begin, Lunde said he had business to attend and reminded him that they would talk the following week, saying he hoped Wilander would have something more substantial to report, and ended the call, his bluntness giving Wilander cause to wonder if he had misjudged him, if the kindly old fellow he remembered from Fairbanks had only seemed kind in contrast to the unkindness of the shelters and the streets. That question, and the question regarding the overall reliability of his perceptions, nagged at him as he headed toward Kaliaska, and, taking into account his reaction to the forest, reminiscent of the reaction he had displayed after his talk with Mortensen, a feeling of unease growing stronger with every step, a pleasant walk evolving into a nervous, hurried flight, stopping now and again to mark an unfamiliar cry that filtered down through the boughs, glimpsing furtive movement in the undergrowth, sensing enmity in a place that had heretofore nourished him with its dark green disorder, he revis-

ited the notion that his problems might not be due to business failures, to failures of character, but stemmed from a physical condition that provoked intense mood swings. Since his arrival, he had more-or-less succeeded in dismissing this concern, yet now the idea had resurfaced, he fell victim to it as though to a sudden onset of illness, a sweat breaking on his brow, his hands trembling, unsteadiness infecting his thoughts. He decided to turn back, but, realizing that he had come over halfway, he went forward again, going at an erratic clip, briskly for a minute or two, then pausing, detouring around a suspicious hollow, a forbidding bush, and when at last he left the forest behind and reached the rise overlooking Kaliaska, he felt ambivalent about his relief, like a sailor who has survived a disaster at sea and swum to landfall on a hostile shore. The streets were empty of traffic, pedestrian or otherwise. Smoke trickled from chimneys; a few birds circled above the dock, keening. Wind struck cold into Wilander. Something was wrong. The wasted town and the barren earth beyond testified to wrongness as might an unfavorable array of cards; the line of the mountain peaks graphed a feeble vitality and its decline. Weakness pervaded his limbs, tattered his thoughts. He imagined he was fading, his colors swirling, his form blurring, beginning to disperse on the wind. Somebody fired up one of the Caterpillars parked behind the trading post; a gout of black smoke gushed from its exhaust, and a dog that had been sleeping beneath the vehicle slunk away, casting rueful glances back at the rumbling thing that had disturbed it. As if this had been their cue, two paunchy Inupiat women in jeans and sweatshirts, their hair loose about their shoulders, stepped around the corner of the post, walking at an angle that would carry them past his position. One waved with a hand holding a paper sack, the sort that generally contained a pint bottle and shouted, Hey, Tom! He returned a wave, but he didn't recognize them. They veered toward him and stumped up the rise. Their chubby, lined faces were like those you might find on copper coins of great antiquity, well-worn images of glum, inbred, unlovely queens. He had no clue as to their identity. They smelled of whiskey and that smell sang to the weakness in him. The heavier and older of the two had matronly breasts, gray flecks in her hair, a Seattle Seahawks totem emblazoned on her sweatshirt; she asked what he was doing standing there.

—Hovering, he said. Feeling a little betwixt and between.



—Don't tell me there's trouble in paradise?

He realized she must be talking about him and Arlene. I'm just pulling some things together in my head.

She held out the paper sack. Want a swig?

His hand twitched toward the sack, but he said, No, thanks.

The younger woman, her sweatshirt sporting an American Idol logo, squinted at him; her lips were badly chapped and a shiny pink scar, at least a centimeter wide, roughly paralleled the curve of her right eyelid. Man, you look sad, she said.

The older woman gave a sardonic laugh and the younger, angry, pried the sack from her grasp. Well, he does! she said. Look at the guy. He's all fucked up over something. She drank and wiped her mouth on the shoulder of her sweatshirt.

—I'm fine, Wilander said.

—It ain't his woman, what do you figure it is? The older woman reached for the paper sack, asking this in a murmurous voice, not making it clear whom she was addressing, but leaving Wilander with the impression that the subject of discussion was of little consequence, that she felt compelled to placate the younger woman with a response, otherwise she might hog the liquor.

His instinct was to repeat that he was not fucked up, not sad, and then he remembered the women—mother and daughter, Roogie and Cat by name, they ran the coin laundry on the edge of town, and were genial, hard-working types except on the weekends, which they habitually spent drinking. He suddenly perceived them to be wise fools, like drunks in a play, existential savants capable of delivering a profound commentary.

—The thing that's bothering me, I get these mood swings, he said. One second I'm okay, I'm happy, I'm going about my business, and the next I'm paranoid. I think it might be something chemical.

The women stared at him, perhaps surprised that he had confided in them, perhaps too drunk to understand what he had said, and then Roogie, the mother, gave her daughter a nudge and said, Sounds like your cousin Alvin. What the judge told him before he went to rehab. Judging by her baffled expression, Cat did not recall the event, and Roogie went on, You know. About how he had a syndrome from his drinking?

—Oh, yeah. Cat squinted up at Wilander once again. Maybe you oughta cut back on the booze.

—I've been clean and sober for over a year.

—But you was a drinking man, right? Maybe you caught the syndrome, too, and it stuck with you.

From somewhere in the town came the flatulent noise of an unmuffled engine starting up.

—Sounds like Bert got his truck going, Roogie said.

Cat grunted. Big fucking deal! That worthless son-of-a-bitch never gonna give us a ride.

—Well, he might if you was nicer, if you didn't call him names everytime you see him.

—You want me to sleep with him? That's what it'll take. I'm not gonna sleep with him just so he'll carry you around to wherever you want.

—Only thing I'm asking is you treat him like a human being!

—He ain't no human being! He's a filthy old dog who owns a truck! Why you want to ride with him in the first place, I'll never know. Damn thing smells like he sleeps in it.

Someone—the malodorous Bert, if Cat and Roogie were to be believed—gunned the engine, racing it. The women glared at each other and Wilander, hoping to steer the conversation back on track, said, I've been thinking my problem, the mood swings, they might have to do with me living on *Viator*.

—Bitch! Cat said to Roogie. What do you care if he screws me blue? He could knock my eye out and leave me crawling in the mud, that'd be fine with you. 'Long as he drives you down to Anchorage once a month.

—I should smack you for saying that! Hands on hips, Roogie faced down her daughter.

—Go ahead! Wouldn't be the first time!

—All I done for you, how can you accuse me of not caring?

—I think I've always had them, Wilander said. But since I came here, it's like moods that used to last for months come and go in a matter of hours.

Scowling, Roogie swiveled her head toward him. What the hell are you talking about?

Cat said, You done so much for me, how come I'm living in this shithole?

Wilander decided to try another tack. Either of you ever hear any rumors floating around about *Viator*? Anything strange?

—I hear there's a buncha queers living out there now, said Cat.

—I don't know where you get your mouth, Roogie said to her. You didn't get that mouth from me.

—Naw, I musta got it from my *real* mother!

The engine shut down and, as though its operation had been tied in with the functioning of the weather, the wind died. In the quiet, Wilander heard waves slapping against the dock. There aren't any scary stories about the ship? he asked. Ghost stories . . . anything like that.

Cat scoffed at this. You seen a ghost, didja?

Wilander said that he had not.

—Then why you going on about 'em for?

Roogie put a hand on Wilander's shoulder, her expression a parody of sympathetic concern. Whatever your problem is, Tom, there's an easy solution. All you gotta do is do right by Arlene, and everything'll fall into place.

—How am I not doing right by her?

—Arlene's a good woman. You need to get off the fence and commit. You take care of her, she'll take care of you.

—A good woman don't charge six dollars for a pack of smokes, said Cat.

Roogie scowled. That's the tax! She can't help that!

—Did Arlene tell you that? asked Wilander. That she's looking for me to commit?

—She don't know her ass! Cat said. She makes up shit all the time!

Roogie folded her arms, affecting an injured dignity. Matter of fact, I did talk to her. Even if I didn't, it's plain how she feels.

Cat took a long swig of whiskey, too long, apparently, for Roogie's tastes—she snatched the bottle back and lifted it from the paper sack to check how much was left.

—That guy who came off *Viator* after it wrecked, Cat said. He acted like he'd seen a ghost. Walked around staring at shit and giving a jump whenever you come up on him. He was here for a day about . . . then they came got him.

—Like you remember! You were twelve years old! Roogie said.

—I remember it better’n you! Cat turned to Wilander. She was drinking so much back then, she didn’t know about the crash ‘til a week after it happened.

—What guy? Wilander was startled not just by her statement, but by a recognition that, until now, he had only considered in passing what must have transpired with the crew.

—The captain. Roogie re-sheathed the bottle in the sack and had a delicate sip, as if she intended to ration the whiskey from that point on. I heard it was the captain.

—How about the rest of the crew? What happened to them?

—He’s the only one I know about, Cat said, and Roogie chimed in, Mark Matchett, that’s the doctor we had back then, he told me the guy was telling some kinda wild story about how come he ran the ship aground, but wouldn’t nobody believe him.

—Mark Matchett’d tell you anything to make your eyes get big, Cat said. So when he slipped his hand in your pants, you’d think it was all part of a story.

—I’ve taken all your mouth I’m gonna take! You don’t know nothing about me and Mark!

—I know he’d give you a wink and you’d drop to your knees! I musta walked in on the two of you a dozen times.

—Goddamn you!

—Him with his back turned, fixing his zipper, and you wiping your mouth off. Didn’t take a damn genius to figure out what you was up to.

Roogie made to punch her daughter, and Wilander, trying to stop her, catching at her arm, sent her off-balance; she slipped and sat down hard, fell onto her back, somehow managing not to spill the whiskey, and, after giving him a look that went through quick stages of bewilderment, hurt, and rage, finally settling on despair, she began to sob. He bent to help her stand, but Cat pushed him away and shouted, You keep your fucking hands off my mama!

Wilander attempted to explain what had happened, but Cat screamed at him and Roogie’s sobs escalated into a wail, as if encouraged by Cat’s solicitude.

—See what you done! Cat shoved him hard in the chest and he reeled backward a few steps. You keep the fuck away!

Tears leaking from her eyes, she kneeled to console her mother, putting an arm about her, joining her in a community of grief that was founded—Wilander knew—upon no specific ill, but was informed by the sense of impermanence that tars the human spirit, the stuff that glues it to the flesh, a sticky emotional ground where drunks and addicts and other fools are prone to wander, mistaking it for evidence of a grand significance in their lives simply because it's something they can feel through their self-imposed numbness. She took Roogie in her arms, rocked her. I'll kill you, she said in a shaky half-whisper, as if the words were an endearment. Touch her again, and I'll kill you.

**T**he wallpaper in Arlene's bedroom, a gold foil-like material with black bars of sheet music printed across it, clashed with everything else in the room, but then every object in the room clashed one with the other, and thus from a jumble of color and shape and function was yielded if not a harmony, then a uniform discordance: a brass bed piled high with pillows and a wine-colored satin spread; a teak armoire hulking up at the foot of the bed, like a beast grown Gothic and gloomy from observing the activity that took place on the sheets below; curtains of Belgian lace that, when they were blown inward, reminded Wilander of filmy sea creatures gathering food from a current; a leather recliner buried beneath laundry; candlesticks of brass, silver, crystal and pewter, oddly paired, no two alike; glass jars filled with agate pebbles; a dressing table of age-darkened cherrywood covered—as was every surface—with a dozen varieties of clutter, its mirror wreathed by a string of Christmas tree lights; the sixty-inch television set, a different sort of beast, sleek and blandly modern; clothes and books and shoes and change and magazines and toiletries scattered across the floor (Arlene had foresworn the art of house-keeping); and, on the bedside table, a lamp with a lacquered green shade whose dim emerald glow lent a transitory unity to these disparate objects, hollowing the night shadows into the semblance of a mystic cave, an underwater place where might dwell a sorceress who had removed herself from the world in order to master some contemplative discipline. You could not simply enter the room, you were absorbed by it, becoming an element of its dissonance, and Wilander had occasion to think that the decor might not be, as it

appeared, haphazard, but rather was so designed as to accommodate the haphazard collection of men who had slept there.

That evening, the town still awake, music from the Kali Bar (the name due not to any devotion rendered unto the Hindu deity, but because the owner and a hired sign painter had squabbled mid-job, a slight disagreement escalating into a feud as yet unresolved) thumping in the distance, he sat in bed and tried to sound out the melody of the wallpaper, whistling it under his breath—it was as chaotic as the room itself, a tune such as a child might produce while banging on opposite ends of a keyboard. Arlene, lying beside him, asked, What are you doing?, and, when he explained, she said forlornly, as if the oversight were a sorry judgment on her, It's never occurred to me to do that.

—You'd think the manufacturer would have used a famous piece of music, Wilander said.

—Maybe it is famous. The wallpaper's Chinese. Some Chinese music sounds all fractured. Atonal.

He shifted so he could lie propped on an elbow, looking down at her body, her belly and breasts pale and unblemished, but the rest of her, even the insides of her thighs, patterned with freckles, a patterning so heavy and distinctly stated in places, it made him think of a leopard's spots.

—What sort of music do you like? she asked.

—I'm not much of a music lover.

—You must like something.

—I don't mind music, I just can't relate to it the way other people do. He pointed out the window, indicating the faint music from the bar. But I like hearing it from far away. Even if it's just a bar band, it seems to promise something good.

After an interval she said, But when you get close, it's not so good?

Alerted by a fretful hesitance in her voice, he said, That's right. What I said . . . it's a metaphor for how I relate to everything, not just music. Places, people. At a distance they're fine, but up close—he made a sour face—even-  
tually they become intolerable.

—Don't tease me!

—Weren't you trying to read that into what I was saying?

Another pause, and then she said, I know so little about you. Most of what I know doesn't apply anymore. You don't drink, you don't work in finance.

—The last months haven't counted for anything?

—Of course they have. But ever since I've known you, you've always been going through some change or another. I've never seen you solid.

—I'm not sure anybody's ever solid.

—Solid's your term. When you said you wanted to stay aboard *Viator* a while longer, you said you weren't feeling solid yet . . . or something like that.

—I was speaking about relative solidity.

—Okay. I haven't seen you *relatively* solid.

He laid his head on her belly, looking past her pubic tuft toward the freckles that spread across the tops of her thighs, tiny brown splotches like, he thought, the remnants of an island continent flooded by a milky sea. He felt the heat of her sex on his cheeks. He studied the freckles, wondering whether—if he were to stare at them long enough—an image might emerge, as from the splotchy walls of the ship.

—Thomas?

—Yes.

—What do you want after you leave *Viator*?

The prospect of leaving the ship seemed silly, like the idea of unscrewing one's arm or building a house out of cheese, and he thought he must feel this way because his time aboard *Viator* had permitted him to gather sufficient strength and confidence to look beyond himself once again, to be here, now, with this woman, and to recognize her needs and his responsibilities toward her—it was daunting to consider doing without the perspective *Viator* afforded.

—Is this something you have to think about? she asked.

He moved up beside her and threw an arm across her chest. Not the way you mean.

She angled her eyes toward him, waiting for him to go on.

—Nothing's changed, he said. I want to be with you. If things were different, I might choose to live somewhere less desolate. But that's not a real issue.

—You haven't spent enough time in Kaliaska to know it. You only know the post, the pizza place, the bar.

—There's more? He chuckled. Kaliaska has a secret life? A hidden culture?

—There's the people, for one thing.

—Oh, yeah. The people. I talked to a couple of the people this afternoon.

—You can't judge everyone by Roogie and Cat, especially when they're on a drunk.

—They're not the only drunks in Kaliaska.

—Certainly not. People drink, they do drugs, they fight. When the fishermen come back after the season, it gets worse.

Seduced by the smell of her hair, Wilander inched closer, sinking back into a heady post-coital torpor; he rubbed the nipple of her left breast between his thumb and forefinger. She stirred at his touch and he wondered what she was feeling—she was ashamed of her breasts, thought them too large and pendulous, insufficiently firm, incompatible with the slimness of her body, and was at times discomfited by his attention to them, but he loved their soft, crepey skin, their heft, how they dangled when she was astride him.

—Why do you like it here? he asked.

—Because I know where I am. When I lived in Detroit, I was always confused about what was happening around me. Anxious all the time. Now I've been here for a while, I understand the same things go on in Kaliaska that went on back in the States. Detroit's just a big Kaliaska. People coming in from all over. The difference is, in Detroit I'd never think to talk to those people. I wouldn't want to, I'd be afraid of them. There were too many people. I couldn't get a feeling for them, and so I didn't trust them. Here the ships drop anchor, ships from everywhere. Japan, Russia, Norway. The crews come ashore for a day or two, maybe a week if the weather's bad, and they tell me about themselves. It's a richer life. And it's less confusing, less fearful. Everyone's so frightened down in the forty-eight. Maybe they're right to be frightened. Life is frightening. But here . . . okay. She turned onto her side, facing him, earnest, one hand touching his chest. Sometimes when they wheel out the big TV at the Kali and show a movie. A horror movie, usually. The Inupiat love horror movies. I'll be sitting there in the midst of thirty or forty people. Some don't like me, because we've had business problems or whatever; some of the guys like me a little too much. But I know what to expect. I'm not worried. Knowing where I am, having that clear a view . . . it gives me a freedom I never felt in the States. It allows me to appreciate the people around me in a way I couldn't before. They're not all like Roogie and Cat . . . not that they're so bad. Just on the weekends.



—No, some are like Terry.

—Terry's a good kid. You have to get past the attitude. Look, I'll admit the range of people here isn't what you get in a city, but some of them are remarkable. It just takes time to see it.

—You're very persuasive, he said.

—Apparently not. I can't persuade you to come live in town.

She tried to make a joke of it, but there was an undercurrent of tension in her voice, and Wilander, recalling what Roogie had said about Arlene needing a commitment, found it strange that he was unable to give that commitment, because when he looked at her, he felt something that wanted to commit, something that once declared would bind them more tightly, and he saw the clean particularity of her spirit, her soul, whatever you preferred to call the light that flashed from her whenever the incidental clutter of her mind cleared sufficiently to let it shine through, the bright flash of her being, and he knew that despite the superficially facile nature of their connection, lonely man, lonely woman, there was something between them that seemed ordained, something he had encountered only once previously and then with a college girl named Bliss, Bliss Giddings, a tall, slender, quiet brunette who was studying to be an astronomer and was devoted to the poetry of Cavafy, poems that, when he read them to himself, communicated a haughty, defeatist sensibility, but when she read them aloud rang with a lovely sad romanticism, and everything was going splendidly for them, they were inseparable, intoxicated with each other, until one day she vanished without a warning, dropped out of the university and returned home, leaving him shocked, deranged, in agony—she refused to take his calls, refused every effort at contact, and he soon learned that she had married a wealthy businessman, a wine importer twelve years her senior, so no astronomy for her, no meteors, no pulsars, no distant suns, no erudite speculation upon whether the shape of the universe, as recently opined, was similar to that of the Eiffel Tower, shattering the reality of those who had based their faith on the theory that it resembled a football, and there would be no hazy unfathomable astronomical objects named Gidding, no prestigious international conferences in Lucerne, no moments of transcendent solitude at the lens of Palomar, the cosmos spread out before her as if she were a spy for God, just lots of expensive grape juice, unless, to humor her, the importer, one Adam Zouski (the cacophonous sibi-

lance of Bliss Zouski an abomination by contrast to the liquid asymmetry of Bliss Wilander), bought a telescope and placed it on the penthouse roof of the New York City castle where she was kept, allowing her to revisit her quaint, childish ambition, and years afterward, many years afterward, she began to email Wilander, gloomy, self-absorbed emails that professed love for him and dissatisfaction with her life, with her husband, a correspondence that grew over the months in intensity and frequency—they talked on the phone, spoke of getting together, made plans, shared sexual fantasies, yet nothing ever came of it, their plans evaporated, their fantasies remained unreal, the emails and phone calls stopped, and he still could not understand why she had left him, the reasons she gave were so flimsy, as if she herself did not understand, and though it wasn't until he met Arlene that he was able to put that episode in a drawer and lock it away, though he recognized how rare it was to feel this close to someone, the only way he could think to explain his reticence about moving into town, an explanation that would have a tired ring to Arlene's ears, was that he was not yet secure in himself, not yet solid. At last, without attempting an explanation, he told her that however the job was going, he would come to her after a month or so, when the first snow fell, early September at the latest. She said, All right, but she wasn't pleased, he could tell as much from the compression of her lips, the deepening of a frown line, and recognized that his indecisiveness (that, he knew, was how she perceived it) bordered on rejection, and might be more painful for her than rejection. He started to offer an apology, but knew it would sound inadequate.

—I don't get it. I don't get any part of it. This Lunde gives you a meaningless job, and you . . . She made a fuming noise and turned her back to him. What do you know about this guy? Nothing! You don't have the slightest idea what he's up to!

—It's only a month, he said, pressing himself against her from behind. A month! That's no time at all.

He continued to reassure her, kissing the nape of her neck, touching her breasts, and, his erection restored, he started to push inside her, but she restrained him, twisted her head about so she could see his face, and said, I don't want this to be an affair. Don't move in unless you love me. And that was the perfect moment for a declaration. She was inviting him to declare himself, making such a declaration easy, an informality, and he felt the words

and the will to say them taking shape; but then she opened her legs and, as he glided into her—that's how it felt, a glide, like the splashless slipping of a diver into a medium wherein his weight was taken away, his thoughts stripped by the purity of entry, not only his flesh but also his mind immersed, drenched in her—all he managed to say, more an expulsion of breath than a commitment, was, I won't.

## 6

“... a fifth season ...”

**D**URING AUGUST, IT APPEARED THAT VIATOR WAS BEING transformed into an enormous museum devoted to the works of a single artist, one possessed of an obsessively monocular vision, a fabricator of duotone vistas, pale green and dark iron, featuring a shoreline city and a forest. Every viable wall aboard ship was producing such an image and Wilander was initially disposed to believe this was a consequence of a perceptual bias that—as with the paranoia he felt while walking into town—stemmed from a chemical imbalance; but as the flaking walls of the passageways and cabins yielded their variant perspectives on the scene displayed upon the wall of the officers' mess, he found himself less interested in why they had manifested than in what they might represent, and undertook to create a composite map of the region portrayed, treating the forest and the city as if they were real. He thought to ask the other men to verify that the images were there, but August was not the best of months for relationships amongst the crew: Mortensen was rarely to be found and Nygaard, as he had done since their set-to in the galley, scurried away whenever Wilander drew near; Arnsparger grew truculent and Halmus stalked about the ship, his customary arrogance swollen to the proportions of hauteur, and responded to Wilander's conversational openings with imperious stares, as if rehearsing for a role as a pharaoh or a headwaiter. For his own part, Wilander felt no special

urge to communicate; he was absorbed by his new passion, snapping photographs of the walls with throwaway cameras he bought from Arlene, assembling the prints into a montage on the dining table in the mess, and painstakingly sketching from these materials maps of a nameless country (he attempted to name it, but the names he chose—North Calambay, Skiivancia, Vidoria, Alta Marone—failed to resonate with his nebulous conception of the place) that was very like *Viator's* forest, just larger, hillier, and with more prominent landmarks. Not that he possessed a comprehensive knowledge of his surroundings. He was familiar with the trail leading into town and little more; yet he perceived these distinctions in the same way you intrinsically understand the conformation of a room in which you're sitting, and that sense, that effortless apprehension of two environments, one immediate, one imminent (that was how he thought of the nameless country, as imminent, something on the horizon, a landfall not yet sighted) led him to surmise that *Viator's* mystery was emblemized by its name, Traveler, and that the ship had been frozen mid-voyage like the *Viator*-shaped stain on the bottom of the pot Nygaard had exhumed from the vandalized galley, and was straining to continue on its journey. That conjecture steered him once again toward the idea that his fixation with the walls was akin to the dementias that afflicted the other men, that he would soon, if he had not already, equal them in madness, and yet, if he accepted that prognosis, it followed that Halmus, Arnsparger and Nygaard were seeing comparable vistas in their collections of glass and rust and scrap metal, and that Mortensen's ability—as Arnsparger phrased it—to interpret *Viator* through its many surfaces also allowed him to envision a forest and a city. And what did that, in turn, suggest? One morning Wilander went in search of Halmus and Arnsparger, determined to learn what they had seen, what they knew, what they believed, but when they rebuffed him, he did not chase after them. He was beginning to understand the reason behind their unwillingness to talk: though intrigued by the mystery of *Viator*, they were not eager to solve it; they were afraid that what they had gleaned concerning the ship's murky potentials might be true and thus did not care to validate as fact what was for now merely a suspicion.

Fear became dominant in Wilander's life. His recurring dream continued to plague him and the act of walking through the forest into town demanded

that he steel himself, for everywhere he turned he spotted uncanny movement and unfamiliar tracks and peculiar signs, as for instance the matte of feathers he found on a fir trunk, making it seem that some large feathered beast had rubbed itself against the bark, and he believed these were not due to wind or the scuttlings of ordinary animals or events, but to the passage of creatures with an otherworldly origin, like the one he had watched from the stern while talking to Lunde, a sluggish, translucent animal native to another forest, another coast, to a metropolitan Kaliaska encircling a lagoon and separated from the town he knew by an imperceptible and indefinable barrier. The bird with the metal throat kept up its keening and, indeed, Wilander had become convinced that more than a single bird was responsible, since those declining, dolorous cries now sounded throughout the forest, and he thought that the original bird had, upon finding a suitable roost, summoned its fellows and they had proved to be a reclusive species who nested one to a tree and whose solitary calls were designed to provoke no answer, but were like a sentry's announcement of all clear. Perturbed by these thoughts and by his casual embrace of their patent irrationality, he debated whether he should give up his job; scarcely an hour passed when he did not entertain the idea—*Viator* had served him for a time, but now it had begun to unhinge him, to terrify him. During a mild yet persistent anxiety attack, one that lasted several hours, he decided to visit Arlene, but was unable to bring himself to endure the suffocating atmosphere of the hold, the hold where Mortensen muttered to himself, imbuing its darkness with a Cabalistic weight, and so he lashed a length of rope to the railing near the stern, a point fifteen feet above the crest of a massive boulder, and descended to solid ground by that means. Each time he went into Kaliaska, he would decide that he had done enough for Lunde, that he had taken all the isolation he could stand (despite his trips to town, his nights with Arlene, it *was* isolation, for he never truly left *Viator* behind, he carried its isolate nature with him), that he would send Terry out to collect his clothes and his books; yet his fascination with the ship drew him back. It was not just the walls, the half-glimpsed animals, and the birds that pulled at him. Gazing at a fitting or a corroded hinge, at any portion of the ship, though he could measure no appreciable difference from how these things looked one day to the next, he understood that a deeper change was taking place in *Viator*, and,

one stifling afternoon as he paused to wipe his brow beside a bulkhead door, a bulging oval with a bar handle, studded with bolts, its green paint scarred and incised with initials, like a hideous iron blister, something that might have developed upon the hindquarters of a mechanical beast, it occurred to him—a thought that seemed a direct result of his study of the door, as if he were tuning in its vibrations—that *Viator* was not, as might be intimated, experiencing an awakening or an enlivening (the ship, he felt, had always been alive, its vitality evident at first sight, its energy spilling out to nourish the improbable forest that formed its nest), but that it was moving, that, although engineless, *Viator*, though the agency of some imponderable process and through some unfathomable medium, was shifting closer to that other forest, the natural environment of the metal-throated birds, close enough so their cries could be heard, and yet they remained invisible because the ship had not succeeded in physically penetrating their habitat. Informed by this insight, this hallucination, this fantastic narrative skeleton that could only have been constructed by an ex-drunk, ex-addict whose mind, having undergone years of abuse, the penultimate symptom of which was the narrative itself, was so diminished that he might be persuaded of the reality of the most laughable rumor, and it was fortunate, he told himself, that the priests of his mission-dwelling days, men for whom charity was more drug than virtue, weren't around or else he would be down on his knees, howling to Jesus, while one of them, maybe the Jesuit with the hair plugs in Seattle, Father Brad, what an asshole!, clasped his hands and beamed at him fatuously . . . Informed by all this, then, Wilander returned to his maps, attacking his cartographer's problem with renewed zeal, making corrections, refining his vision of a nameless country populated by transparent badgers and invisible birds and gigantic flying worms, adding detail to a map of the city encircling the lagoon (the buildings inland undistinguished, one- and two-stories, like low-end housing developments; those nearer the water arranged in complexes that radiated outward from the palatial structure on the peninsula), and also detailing the well-notched coastline beyond the city and a grouping of six islands that bore signs of habitation, laboring long into the night, damping his fears with work, quelling his rational concerns, forgetting everything.

**A** chilly morning in late August when frost sheathed the railings and mist clothed the firs in ghostly rags at dawn, thickening to a dense fog as the day wore on, hiding the world, the sun showing at its zenith a weak pewter glare, and Wilander lay beneath the linden tree, drowsing, clad in T-shirt and boxers, wrapped in a blanket, now and again opening an eye to squint at the grayish white grainy stuff into which the deck disappeared, then falling back asleep, having a trifling dream or two, and, when he woke to see a dark shape in the mist, a phantom shape, he rejected it and shut his eyes, but when he looked in that same direction a minute later, it was still there, closer, darker, more fearsome, undeniably real, and he sat up, clutching his blanket, shouted, Hey! Hey!, and stumbled to his feet, overbalanced, caught himself on the railing, and so was standing in a half-crouch among the linden boughs, gaping, his heart slamming, as Terry Alpin hove into view wearing his official uniform, black leather jacket, jeans, T-shirt, holding a cigarette that released a thread of smoke, making it seem as if that slim white tube had once contained all the mist and was down to its last trickle.

Wilander straightened and adjusted his blanket, striving for dignity, and pushed aside one of the boughs to give himself a more complete view of Terry. Where the hell did you come from?

—Boat. Terry glanced off along the deck. Damn! It must be eight, nine years since I been out here.

—Boat, said Wilander dully.

—My dad's launch. Terry gestured at the door of the officers' mess. I can get down to the engine room that way, right?

—What do you want down there?

—I'm gonna see if I can find my Uncle Frank's initials. It's where he used to sleep.

—Your uncle was part of the crew?

—Naw, man. When *Viator* ran aground, when people were coming out to rip shit off, Frank, he thought it was pretty cool, this big-ass ship in the middle of the trees. Him and his wife were having problems, so he says, Fuck, I'm moving to *Viator*. He didn't stay long. Maybe a month. He said it was making him sick.

—Sick . . . like how?

—Sick in the head, dude. He was having fucked-up dreams and shit. Hey, your bathroom work? That's one thing really messed up Frank. Having to

walk through the hold, so he could go outside and piss. It was so dark down there, it freaked him out.

—Everything works, Wilander said, muzzily trying to frame a follow-up question.

Terry tore off one of the linden leaves and examined it. Weird. These should've started to turn. Couple, three weeks, we'll be into winter pretty much.

—Yeah, well. We're having kind of a fifth season out here. Lots of weird stuff. Feeling a chill, Wilander caught the blanket more tightly about his throat. What do you want?

—What do *I* want? Not to be here, man. I got shit to take care of. Arlene wanted to find you, so I rode her out.

—Arlene's here?

—Yep. Terry flipped his cigarette over the railing.

The idea that Arlene had boarded the ship both dismayed and pleased Wilander, and for a second or two he was unable to react. Where is she? he asked.

—Trying to find you, dude. You might want to clean up before she sees you. You look like you been sleeping with the dogs.

Wilander hesitated, uncertain in which direction to move—to his cabin, for a clean-up, or should he try to find her now? The latter, he decided; otherwise she might encounter one of the crew and he did not trust their reactions.

—'Course, said Terry, I guess she's seen you looking funky before. So what the hell.

—Is she below decks?

—I think, yeah.

Wilander started away, paused and said, If you run into anyone else, tell them you have my permission to be on board.

—Why? You think your buds are gonna jump me? Terry removed a second cigarette, previously hidden by his long hair, from behind his ear. I been coming here since I was a kid. I don't need nobody's permission.

One of the metal-throated birds took that moment to cry out and Terry, with a puzzled expression, turned to look for the source of the sound.

—The place may have changed, Wilander said. You never know what you might need.



He hurried along the passageway of the officer's deck, thinking Arlene might be down at the opposite end, by the galley and the stairs leading to the engine room, but as he passed the mess he saw her standing beside the dining table, wearing a red-and-black plaid wool jacket and jeans, her hair tied back, peering at his maps, which were scattered about on table, chairs, and floor. The light from the ports seemed ancient light, the light of centuries past, the pearly gray glow that Vermeer used to cast a glum benediction upon the subjects of certain portraits—it limned her figure and lent her skin a low polish, as of marble. 'Morning, he said, and she flicked a glance his way, the sort of look you'd give an incompetent waiter before turning your eyes away and asking for the check in a surly voice. She indicated the maps and asked, This is why you needed the sketchpads?

—It's just something to pass the time.

—You felt a need to pass the time? The tedium was that great? Being with me is so boring, you prefer . . . what? She swatted at the maps, knocking several to the floor, anger breaking through her neutral pose. What's this all about?

—Maps. Wilander went a few steps into the room. How can you say I'm bored with you?

She put a forefinger to her chin, making a show of pondering the question. Let's see. Not hearing from you for three days, that was my first clue.

—It hasn't been three days!

—Does time pass more slowly in town? How long do you think it's been?

Wilander couldn't come up with a number, but realized it might have been longer than he thought. It's been three days? Really?

Arlene spat out a disgusted noise and stared down at the table once again. Maps of what? she asked.

—I'm sorry. I don't understand how it happened. I must . . . I don't know. Maybe . . .

—Maps of what? She slapped the table with her palm and shrilled at him. What? What is this?

Again, Wilander was so disconcerted, he could only offer a stammering reply. I told you, it's nothing, just . . . just a . . .

—They have something to do with *Viator*, don't they? She idled along the table, inspecting more of the maps. You're crazy like the rest of them.

—It's not crazy. I'm not sure how to explain it, but . . .

—I'm dying to hear your explanation! Are they, like, your rust? Your broken glass?

—There's no point getting angry.

—I'm not angry. Not anymore.

—I can tell.

—Okay, I'm angry. Three days without a word, I was . . .

—We didn't sign any papers, said Wilander resentfully.

In Arlene's stare, in the configuration of fine lines around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth, he saw scorn directed at him and also at herself, the self-ridicule of a woman who had committed an act of folly, one she had committed many times before and had sworn never to repeat.

—I was worried, she said. I thought you might be sick. I didn't realize you had such important work to do. She took a less aggressive swat at the maps. You're damn right, I'm angry. And I'm sad. She snatched up a sheet of sketch paper and thrust it at him. Go ahead. Explain it to me.

—So you can make fun of me? That's what you want?

—So I can understand what's wrong with you. Her voice broke and she struggled to control her features. I know there must be something wrong.

The tension between them softened and wavered, but when neither one moved to close the distance or to speak, Wilander sensed it hardening again, and their silence might have held if Terry hadn't entered the mess, asking Arlene how much longer she intended to stay, then, on spotting the maps, brushing past him to have a look and saying, *What's all this shit?* And Wilander, forced by Terry's interruption to adopt some stance, called their attention to the wall and asked if they saw the landscape thereon. He pointed out firs, hills, city, lagoon, the coastline, the islands, feeling foolish as he did, certain that he was confirming Arlene's characterization of his behavior, but at the same time feeling defiant, secure in what he believed, as if her challenge had confirmed something in him, the knowledge that he was not crazy, and given a reliable value to all the things he half-believed about *Viator*—they were true; perhaps not wholly accurate, but nonetheless true. He was on to something here. Do you see it? he asked, and, grudgingly, Arlene said, *Yeah, I see. So?* Terry fiddled with his lighter, clicking it open and shut, appearing disinterested. That's what the maps are of, Wilander

said. You can see different views of the same place coming in on the other walls.

Arlene said, They're becoming visible . . . the pictures? They weren't always there?

—That's right.

She fingered the edge of one map, studying it. Let's say that's true . . .

—I can show you! Every wall—almost all of them—has an image of the same exact place. It can't be coincidence.

—Fine. But I don't have time for a tour, so let's say it's true. Arms folded, she came to stand facing him, a foot away. That's the reason you're staying here?

Wilander examined the question for traps, found none, and decided not to lie. Sometimes I don't want to stay, but yes. That's not the whole reason, you understand. It's . . .

—You're staying so you can make maps of a place you claim the ship is showing you. Do you see anything wrong with that?

—I'm not crazy.

—I'm not saying you are! I'm accepting that what you say is true. It's a supernatural event. Pictures are materializing on the walls of the ship and you're going to stay on board and make maps from them. That doesn't scare you? It doesn't make you think the situation might be unhealthy? Dangerous? That you might be safer elsewhere? Somewhere the walls aren't turning into pictures?

—I think, Wilander said cautiously, I need to be here for now.

She put a hand to her brow and let out a breath. How long do you figure *for now* is?

—Arlene. Wilander reached out to touch her shoulder, but she pulled away. He glanced at Terry and said, Why don't you give us some space?

—No, don't! Arlene signaled Terry to keep still. I'm almost done.

—I'll go back to town with you, Wilander said.

—Not tonight, you won't! You need to stay here, you need to give careful thought to what you're doing.

—What does that mean?

—It means I want you to decide! Take a few days if you want. Take a week. But decide. I can't handle this anymore. I shouldn't have to.

Terry ambled toward the passageway. I'll be on deck.

—It'd be nice if you called, Arlene said to Wilander. You know, to tell me what you've decided? But either way, if I don't hear soon, my door will be closed. I won't live like this.

—Live like what? I told you I'd leave after the first snowfall. I thought we agreed to that.

—I don't believe you. You don't believe it yourself. Whatever's going on with you, with the ship, it's not good. You're not in control.

—Look, I know this has been tough, and I wish things were different. I wish we'd met at a more propitious time. He took her hand, applied a light pressure. She let his fingers mingle with hers. But all this . . . all coming at once. You, the job, *Viator*. It's been . . .

—I don't want to hear about your problems. She stepped around him and went to stand in the doorway. I worry about what's happening to you. I worry all the time! But I've lived long enough, I've learned I can't save anybody by hovering over them while they work out their problems. They take it for license; they convince themselves that on some level I must enjoy watching and waiting, or that I can tolerate it . . . or something. I'm going to worry about myself from now on. And you have to worry about yourself. Or not. That's up to you. Do you understand?

Wilander couldn't think what to say. Words occurred to him, too many words, words attached to feelings that, if not contrary to one another, seemed unrelated, as if he were feeling everything at once—anger, regret, love, several varieties of fear, even a perverse satisfaction at having so splendidly and relentlessly mishandled the relationship. She asked again if he understood, demanding an answer, and he said, I think I've got it. Yeah.

She looked to be gathering herself, preparing, he thought, a goodbye; then, suddenly alert, she said, Oh! I have some news. It's really the reason I came. I wasn't going to, but I learned something you should know, and my phone was acting up. I did a search on the Internet for your employer.

—Lunde?

—There wasn't much information. He's spoken at a few conferences on unemployment. Things like that. But here's the part that'll interest you. Guess who *Viator's* captain was when she ran aground?

Wilander gawked at her.

—Jochanan Lunde. Your benefactor. Her eyes flashed to his face, then away, as if she were assessing the effect of this revelation, yet didn't want him to catch the malicious expression that briefly surfaced, a malice he had sparked in her, that had remade an intended kindness into an intent to wound and confuse him, as she had been wounded and confused. What do you make of that? she asked in a tone too bright to communicate concern. Maybe he doesn't have your welfare at heart after all.

Once she had gone, Wilander tried to balance the implications of Lunde's duplicity with his own appreciation of *Viator*, and, finding no logic to diminish the sinister light in which Arlene's news cast Lunde's motives, he hurried to his cabin, threw on some clothes and headed for the stern, hoping to beg a ride into town with Terry. Given what he now knew, to spend another night on board would be foolhardy. Whatever Lunde had in mind, it had nothing to do with salvage (apparent from the start) and still less to do with charity (something now apparent), and Wilander believed that he and the others were being manipulated along some extraordinary and, almost assuredly, perilous course, like lab rats in a run. Upon reaching the stern, he called out to Arlene, unable to locate her in the fog, and, receiving no response, he shinnied down the rope that he had tied to the railing. As he hung above the shingle, he heard a motor cough, stutter, and catch. Arlene! he shouted, and quickened his descent. Trotting along the margin of the shore, he shouted again. He slipped on the wet pebbles, his right foot raising a splash, and spotted a dark shape gliding off, barely identifiable as two figures in a boat, there for an instant, then not there, the trebly grind of the motor growing muffled, dwindling and dwindling, soon outvoiced by the lapping tide. He dropped into a squat, rendered energyless by a feeling of loss. As soon as the weather eased, he told himself, he would walk into town. Not at night, though. He didn't trust the forest at night. A damp west wind gusted, thickening the briny smell, giving things a stir, the boughs, wavelets, seaweed, and stirring as well the becalmed waters of his thoughts. He wished he had made himself clearer to Arlene from the inception of the affair; instead of simply saying that he wasn't solid, leading her to think that his recovery was the main issue, a matter of getting things straight in his head. He should have said that he wasn't strong enough to take on her entire life. That's what she was looking for, someone who would embrace her hopes and dreams, someone

who would cherish them and, even if unable to share them, would consider them in every situation. He should have told her he wanted to be that person, but she had to be patient with him, because—as he'd often cautioned her—it was disorienting to have so much life after years of having none, and he needed time to understand how much was left of him. How much strength. How much capacity for love. How much honesty. He should have done all that and more. The wind gusted harder, the fog eddied, and the shapes of the firs at the south end of the shingle sharpened into the dark green ghosts of trees. No sound came, except for wind and the slurp of the tide. Limbo, he thought. Purgatory. Neither heaven nor hell, yet deemed closer to hell for the absence of heaven. At his feet, black water edged with a lacy froth filmed among the pebbles, creeping to his toes, floating up twigs and dried needles. He clenched a pebble in his fist; its coldness steadied him and he imagined that if he continued to hold it, it would infect his flesh, turning him to stone, and years hence he would be found squatting on the shore, a small boulder weathered by magical storms (so it would be said) into the crude approximation of a man, and be worshipped by the elder Inupiat, those who had not yet learned to discredit the miraculous nature of existence—they would drape him with kelp necklaces, they would paint images of the sea upon his eyes, they would dress him in bark and feathers, leave him food and drink, give him names, and when the last of them were dead, then he, too, would die, a negligible transition, since even prior to his transformation, his life had been nothing more than a flicker of self-awareness.

Unaccountably weary, his joints cracking, he stood and sidearmed the pebble across the water, listening for the plops, and then started back to the ship. The hull loomed overhead. She appeared larger than he recalled, as if some gross internal disorder had caused her to bloat while he was distracted. With her abraded belly, listing a few degrees to port, centering the ragged frame of the forest, veiled in drifts of mystic gray, the convulsed screws and the bolt-stitched plates adding a brutal Frankensteinian touch, *Viator* no longer posed a vast metal incongruity, no longer seemed a surreal element of the landscape, but had acquired the monstrous, mythical aspect of a mighty life stranded, like an old whale confounded by pollution and driven to beach itself; yet she was still vital, generating by her restive vitality the pulse of the silence that engulfed the place, and, though Wilander approached the ship

fearfully, his fear was not a shriveling fear, a fear of the unknown, the supernatural, but the anxiety of someone who had happened upon a moribund beast (gigantic, yes, but ordinary, a creature of the natural world) and was worried lest it lash out in pain and desperation, and inadvertently crush him. Four figures materialized at the rail above, occulted by the fog, and he slowed his approach. He couldn't identify the figures, but when three of them withdrew, he assumed that the one who remained at the rail, its outlines blurring and sharpening with the alternations of the fog, was Mortensen. Not a word passed between them, but an unspoken message may have been exchanged, some frail accord summoned, for Wilander, inspired by a sympathy more poignant than the sympathetic reaction incurred by two strangers sharing a solitude, lifted his hand in salute. The fog weaved a cocoon about Mortensen, returning him to the cloudy dimension where he hermited. Within seconds, he was hidden from view and, though Wilander waited for a response, his neck craned, the fog thickened until *Viator's* keel had been reduced to a phantom shape and the figure did not reappear.

## 7

“... Cape Lorraine and environs...”

**W**ILANDER LOST TRACK OF THE FOG'S DURATION (IT HELD FOR days, certainly) because he wanted to lose track, to muffle his fears, to blunt his every understanding, and, toward this end, channeled his energies into the creation of maps: terrain maps of the hills that built inland from the coastal city; a street map of the southernmost quarter of the city; maps of the island grouping, rudimentary except for that of the largest island, shaped like a tail-less sting ray and supporting a town on its seaward end; maps of the coastline to the north, recently revealed by images emerged from the walls of the bridge; maps roughed out in pencil and, once he was sure of their accuracy, painstakingly redrawn in ink and shaded with pastels,

as he once had done for extra credit in his fourth grade geography class, attempting to curry favor with Mrs. Louise Gatch—a gaunt, fiftyish, death’s head Marine colonel trapped in a teacher’s body, she still patrolled the halls of Wilander’s memory, ready to pounce at the slightest sign of smudged lines or bad penmanship. He strayed from his station in the officers’ mess to cook and piss and sleep, but for no other reason, pausing now and again to phone Arlene, who was probably screening her calls and refusing to pick up; however, he could not bring himself to phone Lunde—he dreaded what the old man might say and decided to wait until he was well away from *Viator*, when the information, whatever it might be, would have no power to menace him. Soon the desire to talk with Lunde left him and the maps came to occupy him to the exclusion of all else and he began to add details that were not shown on the walls, making these additions surehandedly, swiftly, as if he were remembering things about the city and the shore, and, as this apparent familiarity deepened, he took to naming portions of his imagined landscape. The names bubbled forth from the depths of his mind, solitary words and random syllables, sounds that aligned with other sounds: Sirkasso Beach, a sandy crescent along the inner edge of the lagoon; Cotaliri Bay, a notch in the coastline to the south; Mutikelio, one of the islands, and the islands themselves, the group, he named the Six Tears, a reference to the legend that, millennia ago, tears had spilled from the eyes of a giant as he died and these were the seeds about which the islands had grown, whereas his bones had petrified and now constituted a section of the coast, the waters of the lagoon being enclosed by an orbital socket, and it was claimed that threads of protein from the giant’s humor still drifted at the bottom of the lagoon and swimmers there were thus prone to see things that he had seen in life, relic visions of the barbarous world in which he had thrived, and occasionally some feature of those visions would become real, a predatory fish or a mosasaur or an undersea castle, an architectural fantasy of curving pink towers, dozens of towers, a veritable anemone among castles to which an expedition had been dispatched, all of whose members vanished when the castle rippled and faded and washed from sight. Further scraps of lore attached themselves to every name Wilander applied to the maps, and before long he recognized that he was creating not merely a series of maps, but the traditions and natural history of the area mapped, a section of coast known as the Iron Shore due to the



color of the rocks that guarded its length, its forests populated by wiccar (the sluggish, wonderfully camouflaged ground animals) and qwazil (the always hidden metal-throated birds), and, among other elusive creatures, the whistlers, a shy, slender, physically beautiful subhuman folk with whom it was forbidden to mate, although such liaisons were commonplace due to the pheromone-laced perfume they could release at will, and were especially common during the winters, when famine drove the whistlers into the outskirts of the city, searching for food (the remainder of the time they subsisted by hunting small animals, killing them with piercing whistles pitched too high for the human ear to detect); and from the skies the worm-like fliers of Wilander's dreams would swoop over the city, never attacking, never damaging life or property, too high for any eye to see, as if they maintained an intellectual interest in the place and were inspired to check it out on a regular basis. Cape Lorraine was the name of the city, a name deriving from the fact that the original settlement had been established on the peninsula that formed the outer edge of the lagoon, and when Wilander arrived at the name, he was intrigued by its commonality in contrast to the rest and explored his memory, trying to recall if there might have been a consequential Lorraine in his past, but he knew no Lorraines and the sole Lorraine he could recall was Lorraine Scheib, a friend of a friend during his college years, an attractive lesbian girl who wore overalls and wrote violent anti-male poetry and had never been of moment in his life, and he thought this might indicate that he was not inventing the names, that he was remembering them, and as *Viator* sailed closer to the Iron Shore, moving in its mysterious fashion, coursing along its metaphysical northwest passage, he—borne along with it—was receiving increasingly elaborate impressions of their destination, just as a sailor peering from the bow of a landward-bearing ship would receive impressions of the coast, its scents, its colors and configuration. Though not a new thought, it was newly credible, and the possibility that he was somehow seeing what lay ahead for them made him afraid. He set aside the maps for a night and sat at the table wrestling with the problem of whether to call Lunde, but couldn't keep his focus and began drowsily leafing through his memories of Arlene until one stuck in his head: watching her put on her bra, standing naked by the bathroom door, with lemony dawn light behind her, bending at the waist so as to let her breasts fall into a shape that would more readily

conform to the cups, a pose an artist might choose for its intimacy, its graceful female specificity, the nearly perfect horizontal of her back, her legs positioned as if she were a ballerina bowing into a curtsy, responding to imagined applause, alone in an empty theater where she one day hoped to triumph. He couldn't fathom why the memory seemed sad, he remembered that morning well, a good morning, a happy morning, and he supposed that remembrance itself was by nature sad, or perhaps women's relation to their breasts was intrinsically sad, perhaps something about their simultaneous gift and limitation, how they served as emblems of both ripeness and inadequacy. Lonely for her, he dug out his phone and called. To his surprise, she answered on the fourth ring.

—Please don't hang up, he said.

—Thomas. Her voice was tired. What do you want?

—Just to talk.

—I don't think that's a good idea.

—If you didn't want to talk, why'd you answer?

—I was falling asleep—I forgot to look at the caller ID.

—What time is it?

—After eleven sometime.

—Sorry.

She made a diffident noise and he said, You wouldn't have answered if you saw it was me?

—Is this what you want to talk about? About whether or not I want to talk?

—No.

He would have liked to tell her about Cape Lorraine, the Iron Shore, but it wasn't the kind of thing he could explain over the phone, he'd have to sit her down face-to-face and persuade her to listen to everything, to react unemotionally. He thought to ask how she was doing, canceled the notion because she was bound to respond with an irony, and finally said, I miss you, and added hurriedly, I realize that's my fault, but it's true nonetheless.

She was silent, then an indrawn breath, signaling that she had started to speak; then another brief silence. Would it make you happy if I said I missed you? she asked.

—No, it wouldn't make me happy. Arlene, I . . .

—Why did you call? What do we have to talk about? Should I tell you the latest gossip? I got in the plasma TV Gary ordered for the bar. Is that what you're after?

—If it works for you . . . yeah. I'd settle for it.

Despairingly, she said, God! Why did you call?

—The truth? I was remembering watching you get dressed one morning. I got lonely.

He heard her television switch on, a male voice blaring.

—It's been ten days, she said.

That seemed too big a number, but he couldn't prove it. I'm past the deadline, huh?

—That wasn't my point. I was remarking that it's taken you ten days to get lonely.

—Not really. It didn't take ten minutes.

—All right. It's taken you ten days to feel lonely enough to call.

—I didn't mean it to go ten days.

—I know. You got busy. With your maps. Time just flew by!

Visible in the deck lights, a curl of fog squirmed against the glass of the port; over the phone, he heard a comedian telling jokes, an audience laughing. If I was to come into town tonight, he said, how would that be?

—I'm not going to answer that. It's not a real question. You're not coming in tonight. You won't come in tomorrow. Eventually, I suppose, you'll drag yourself into town, but I'm not expecting you anytime soon.

Her tone, in the span of those five sentences, had gone from embittered to angry, and he tried to mollify her, but she wouldn't allow it, she kept talking over him, and at last she yelled, Shut up! Okay? Don't say anything for a minute! Please!

They had always been at cross-purposes, he realized. Always off by at least a degree or two, never quite equal in commitment or desire, in the direction they were seeking to push the relationship, always making slight, off-center shifts that left them imperfectly aligned—even at the beginning, when Arlene had been seductive and sweet, he had feared a disappointment and suppressed his emotions. Most of that was his fault as well. He'd had responsibilities.

—After tonight, she said, calmer now, I don't want you to call for a while.

—How long's a while?

—I'll tell you when I know.

He let four or five seconds drag past and was about to speak when she said, It's okay to call if there's an emergency. Or if it's about supplies. Then I'll put you on with Terry. But otherwise . . .

—I understand.

The recognition that she needed to be alone so she could kill off her feelings made him hate the world. He flung himself out of the chair and walked along the wall opposite, trailing his fingers over the Iron Coast, touching the Six Tears, six spots of rust in the lime sherbet sea, taking consolation from their strangeness, their valuable, validating strangeness, from all the strangeness of *Viator*. The immensity of the ship seemed to solidify around him; he thought he could feel its shape and weight and dimensions particularly, the long, honeycombed half-cylinder of the hull wedged in place, as if the iron were a skin and he the nerve through which *Viator* transmitted its nightly report.

—Where are you? Arlene asked. In your room?

—Cape Lorraine and environs, he said, picking at a flake of paint on the edge of Mutikelio Island, wondering if he were to pull it loose, if the island existed in the world next door, would that alter its geography?

—What?

—I'm in the mess.

After a pause she said, Did you call Lunde?

—I make my reports, but if you're asking did I bring up what you told me . . . no, I didn't.

—Why not?

—I haven't got around to it. I'll call him again soon.

—Don't you want to know why he sent you here?

—I'm not sure him being *Viator's* captain has anything to do with that. All it means is he knew about the ship.

—But why wouldn't he tell you he was captain?

—Why would he?

—He was your friend! Telling you he was captain of a ship that he was sending you to salvage, to live on . . . that would be natural for a friend. He'd tell you things only he knew. He might want you to report on how his cabin looked, or if you found where he carved his initials.

—Swedish men of his generation don't tend to be chatty about their pasts.

—Perhaps not. But this was such an important part of his life. Did I tell you . . . I can't remember. About him losing his license? His company was going to prosecute him. He must have gone through hell. What happened with *Viator* changed everything for him.

—All the more reason he wouldn't talk about it. He's probably ashamed. Maybe he was drunk when he wrecked the ship. Maybe that's all that happened. He got drunk and ruined his career.

He no longer heard the comedian and assumed that Arlene had gone into the living room and pictured her throwing magazines off the sofa and lying down, wearing her plaid flannel pajamas, the phone tucked between her shoulder and jaw; he went out onto the deck so he might feel closer to her, removing the barrier of iron, separated from her now merely by darkness and trees and cold.

—The maps, the other things you've talked about, Arlene said. Aren't you anxious to learn what he knows about them?

—I'm interested. Not anxious.

—I don't understand this. Ever since I met you, you've been dying to know what Lunde had in mind, and now you're all blasé.

—I'm going to call him. It's just not the most urgent thing on my mind. All right?

—What could be more urgent? It's not like you're overtaxed out there.

He started to say, no, he wasn't overtaxed, not like her, he had no important inventory to take of spark plugs, tampons, Diet-Rite, string cheese (a favorite Inupiat treat), nothing so pressing as that, but he didn't want an argument, no more of one than was already in the air, and he said, I'll take care of it soon. I promise.

—We're past making promises. Do it or don't do it. It's none of my business anymore.

He walked along the deck, moving toward the bow, passing beyond range of the spill of light from the mess, keeping a hand on the rail to guide himself through the dark. We don't have to be enemies, do we? he asked. Even if you think I'm worthless, an idiot, we can treat each other with respect.

—For now, I have to be your enemy . . . a little.

He had the idea that the silence surrounding him was pouring out of the phone from Arlene's apartment, which was flooded with an endless supply. The damp and chill of the night worked beneath his skin. He wanted to ask what would happen between them if he came to her a week from now, a month, but knew that whatever answer she gave, it would serve to harden a negative attitude. I guess I should let you go, he told her.

After a pause, she said, Yeah, I've got to sleep. Another early morning tomorrow.

—Okay. Well . . . Good night.

—Good night.

He had felt only intermittently connected with her during the call, sparks and flickers, the sputtering of a faulty connection, but after switching off the phone, he felt that a protective envelope had dissolved, the cold rushing in to fill the vacuum, and he shoved his hands into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, gripping the rail at the very peak of the bow (was there a word for that precise spot, the last firm footing behind the prow, some Latinate term, the perigolum, the spitaline, or maybe a vulgar British naval term dating from the days of the lash?) amid the spicy smell of the firs, peering off into the night, unable to make out a trunk, a bough, a fern, and then seeing shapes melt up from the darkness, amoeboid blotches of a shinier black than the air, shiny like patches of worn velvet, drifting and jittering across his field of vision, a whole zoo of them slipping about, and he thought that here in this forward position, at the edge of *Viator*, aloft from the world, he should have a perfect angle on things, a true perspective in every direction, even inward, unless such an angle was impossible and no matter what promontory you scaled, hoping to penetrate the incidental distractions that blinded you to your life, to understand its central circumstance, you discovered that you had no central circumstance, no fundamental issue, no rational compass by which to steer—it was all a distraction, all a flowing (according to Heraclitus, at least), a flux impossible to navigate, and you were borne along on unknowable currents and tides until you, the mad captain of your soul, ran yourself aground on the reef of a heap of white powder, a homeless shelter, an abandoned ship, an abandoned relationship . . . and sometimes that tactic worked out for the best, as it may have for Lunde, as it might have for Wilander if he'd had the good sense to strand himself on the shoal of the trading post and cultivate the illu-

sion of a central circumstance with Arlene. It could work out for them, yet. He would have to surrender himself to the principles of the relationship, principles they would establish, but a week or a month from now, perhaps longer, he could walk into town and, after a probationary period, after hurt feelings had been soothed, she would take him back. He hated the confidence that knowing this gave him; it tempted him to believe she loved him more than he loved her, and he refused to accept that. Despite their misalignments, tentativeness, and ungainly steps (and how else could a dance like theirs have proceeded, two people so unaccustomed to each other, so variant in their experience, going from strangers to lovers in the space of a few weeks, a few walks, a few conversations, very similar to how things had developed between him and Bliss Zouski, except there the situation had been reversed, she had been the one drawn by some mysterious force to withdraw from the affair, money or security, some more practical incarnation of *Viator*, some powerful edifice or mass of philosophical iron that magnetized her will, pulling her toward a false north), he believed they were equal in their mutual attraction and, once past this blunder, once he ridded himself of his obsession with the ship, once he felt solid . . . This thought, a trial balloon floated, an attempt at bravado, didn't have enough lift to complete itself, because he was no longer sure he had the desire to take that walk. *Viator's* hold had tightened on him; in that, he was no different from Arnsparger or Nygaard or Halmus. Mortensen, now . . . perhaps Mortensen was different, or perhaps he was simply farther along the path. Wilander leaned forward over the prow, imagining himself to be the ship's figurehead, wishing that he felt as unassailable as a figurehead. His vision had adjusted to the dark and he could see intimations of trees, of a limb half-snapped away from its trunk, drooping in front of *Viator*, and he had an apprehension of the great entanglement in which he lived, the vines and toadstools, the rotting logs and mattes of compressed, decaying branches, the beds of salvia carpeting the earth, the vivid productions of mold and moss, the chains of his life, verdant and virtual. Everything was still. Then a noise broke from the depths of the forest, a faint but distinct groaning. Not a sound generated by flesh and bone—it was unmistakably the groan of metal under stress. Simultaneously, in the distance, farther away than he had thought it possible to see in a straight line, given the obstructions of hills and trees, a coruscant white light flared and shrank, flared again, like the sputter of a

welder's torch. The groaning escalated into a shriek; the light fluctuated wildly, growing so bright, it threw into silhouette the shapes of interwoven coils and loops that looked to be close by the radiant source. Vines? Wires? They were gone before Wilander could make a more informed guess. The light fizzled, winked out; the groaning lapsed; a breath of warm air touched his face, carrying a richly bitter scent and then something sweet, almost a chocolate smell, a smell such as might be released from a barista's cart; and the stillness of the forest was abolished. Qwazils lamented on high. From the hill to starboard came a concentrated rustling, as of small animals stampeding through the brush. Wilander squeezed the rail, all his muscles tight, intent upon these sounds and other, less familiar cries: a repeated passage of seven rapid, hollow notes, reminiscent of notes on a glockenspiel; a shrill attenuated quavering, like the whine of an open frequency; a soft mammalian chuffing. He did not seek to rationalize what he saw and smelled and heard, nor did he stand long at the rail. The cold began to bother him. He turned from the prow and walked toward the yellow glare chuting from the door of the officers' mess and, as he stepped inside, the qwazil that haunted the linden tree gave its cry, louder than usual, its articulations plainer, as if it had roosted lower in the tree, and what had previously come to his ear as sorrowful now seemed to illustrate a weary yet joyful relief, like the cry of a look-out who had been aloft for days and—having sighted a dark green line on the horizon or a seagull riding a landward current—called down to his mates that their long voyage was nearly done.



“ . . . What the fuck's wrong with you . . . ”

**T**HE MORNING FOLLOWING THE FIRST SNOWFALL, A LIGHT SNOW that sugared the tops of the fir boughs and the boulders along the shore, and left the decks slick, Wilander, sitting in the officers' mess, phoned



Jochanan Lunde to make his report, and when the old man asked if anything out of the ordinary had occurred, Wilander related the tale of his months aboard *Viator*, omitting nothing, spitting forth each incident with a kind of venomous relish (You want out of the ordinary? Take a bite of this!) that, he thought, must have been fostered by his long repression of the story—he told Lunde about the recurring dreams, the ropy flying creatures that dominated them, about Mortensen’s apocryphal admonitions, about the maps that appeared on the walls, about the wiccara and the qwazil, about the blazing lights and the groans that issued from the heart of the forest (a phenomenon repeated on three occasions thus far), and he further related his thoughts and feelings about these matters, his ongoing invention of a history and ecology to suit Cape Lorraine and the Iron Shore, his *idée fixe* that *Viator*’s journey might not have ended. And after the old man failed to offer an immediate response, other than to mutter a curse in Swedish, not a wicked curse, but profane words used in astonishment, Wilander asked Lunde to explain why he had sent them to live on board the ship, saying that he refused to believe that they were doing preliminary work for a salvage operation.

Lunde kept silent a few seconds longer and then said, I don’t wish to talk about this. Perhaps we can touch on it next time.

—Why not now?

—I have business to attend. But keep me informed, will you? It might be helpful for you to call more frequently. Every few days or so. Now . . . are you all set with supplies?

—We have food and water for three months. We could stand to lay in some more gas for the generator. It’ll take longer to order once winter’s here.

—Very well. Order it. And call me. Call me Friday. From now on why don’t you call every Friday and Monday?

At this juncture, Wilander, after months of worrying that the old man might become angry and terminate them, caught something in Lunde’s voice, an undercurrent of excitement breaking through his stern manner, that made him realize that he, not his employer, held the upper hand. You’re not hearing me, he said. I want to know what’s going on.

—I beg your pardon?

—With *Viator*. I want to understand what’s happening to us.

—You're not making sense. How can I help you with that? I'm not there with you.

—Yeah, you've said that before. But you were *Viator's* captain. You were aboard when she ran aground. That's what I want to hear about.

—How did you learn this? Lunde asked.

—Don't worry about it. Just tell me what went on.

Flustered, Lunde said, It's not in my interests to discuss the subject. I'm not permitted . . . There are legal issues, you see. I can't . . .

—Let me be clear. If you won't talk to me, I'll pull the crew off the ship.

Lunde fell silent again and, afraid that his bluff would be called, because he wasn't certain that he could pull himself off the ship, let alone the others, or that he could even find them all, because it had been a week since he'd seen Mortensen and several days since he'd seen Halmus, Wilander decided that the wisest course was to raise his own bluff and said, I'll pull them off today. I may not be able to move Nygaard. And Mortensen may resist. But neither of those guys is capable of making reports. Nygaard's a borderline idiot and Mortensen's turned into John the fucking Baptist. And that's what this is about, isn't it? The reports? You need somebody to tell you what's going on. There's something about *Viator* you want to know. You must be desperate to know it. Why else spend so much money and effort to send us here?

—I can't tell you anything, Lunde said weakly. You've already gone past . . .

Wilander waited for him to continue; finally, to prompt him, he asked, Past what?

—Maybe I know enough. Lunde's breath came ragged. Maybe it's time to end this.

—If you think you know anything, Wilander said, I want to hear about it.

Lunde chuckled. I know I'm not just a crazy old man. That's more than I expected.

Wilander was dismayed by the chuckle—it implied that Lunde was looking from a remote, whimsical perspective upon a situation that he, Wilander, found deadly serious and far from remote. Do you want me to pull the crew? he asked. Or are you going to explain things to me?

—You may be disappointed with what I have to say. You've told me far more than I can tell you. But . . . why not? Hang on. I need to speak with my

secretary. Muffled voices; papers rustling; a woman's laugh. All right. I'm back.

—I'm waiting.

—I was with *Viator* for less than a year, Lunde said after a substantial pause. The company had promised me a new tanker, but there was a labor dispute. The tanker's construction was delayed. They gave me *Viator* as a temporary command. At the time she serviced a route between Yokohama and Magadan in Siberia . . . and on occasion down to Vladivostok. She was seaworthy, but in constant need of refitting and not long after I came aboard they decided to scrap her. The crew were Russian, mostly. They disembarked at Magadan, and five of us, five officers, a skeleton crew, were ordered to take her to Panama, where she would be broken. We were a few days . . .

—Five officers? Were they of Scandinavian blood, like the five of us?

—They were Swedish, Lunde said. The company's Swedish. The majority of officers are Swedish.

—What in God's name are you up to?

—You asked to hear my story. Now let me tell it. I'll explain as much as I'm able. Lunde made the sort of mild complaint that old men tend to make when they shift in their chairs and went on: A few days out into the Bering Sea, we encountered a storm. It was nothing special. The sort of blow one expects in those latitudes. But we had no weight. Our cargo consisted of two small crates. Gifts from a company official to friends in Panama. That was all. The sea tossed us about as if *Viator* were a rowboat. On one occasion we nearly capsized. The engines failed, and it was a miracle we stayed afloat. If the winds had lasted an hour or two longer, I doubt we could have survived. Uhlgren, my engineer, did an inspection. He told me that if given two or three days, he could have the engines running. I consulted with my superiors and they consulted with theirs. It was decided that we would make repairs and continue our voyage south. Should another emergency arise, they would send rescue. Despite Uhlgren's estimate, the repairs took more than a week. Eleven days, to be exact. He found it necessary to fabricate parts. The weather was holding. There seemed no cause for alarm. But during that time, things changed.

Lunde coughed and had difficulty in clearing his throat. This happened so long ago, he said. It's difficult to know how memory has transformed events.

As I recall, the change was seamless. There were no moments of recognition when I said to myself, Aha! This is what's going on! It all happened so quickly, much more quickly than it's happened with you. Yet it was gradual. I noticed the changes, of course. The shifts in behavior, the differences in the way I thought. They seemed odd, these things. Odd enough to comment upon, but not anything I needed to be concerned about. Initially, the men became secretive. I became secretive. And I began to have dreams. This is where our stories have the closest correspondence. My dreams were very like yours, except the flying things . . . I saw them as well, but they made me think of microscopic life. Like the creatures I observed under a microscope when I was a student.

—I recall thinking that myself, Wilander said. It was how they moved. It looked sometimes as if they were swimming, not flying.

—Swimmers, yes. That's how I perceived them. But the most compelling change was the sense I had—the sense we all had—of a subtle presence. I suspected that something had come to us during the storm. Nothing so ordinary as a ghost. Something not so easily describable. At times this feeling rose to the level of a *frisson*, but for the most part it was something I was minimally aware of, something disturbing in the back of my mind. Ulghren claimed the presence was *Viator*. *Viator* was alive, he said. Spekke and Ottendahl, my first and second mates, sided with him. Since they'd been assisting with repairs, I assumed Uhlgren had influenced their opinions. And Kameus . . .

—You said you were secretive, all of you—yet you discussed what was happening?

—We had sailed together for almost a year. Kameus and I . . . Peter Kameus. He was my radio officer for almost eight years. So, yes, we discussed it. That was our training, our habit. But we discussed it superficially. We did not tell each other everything we thought. Not by a long shot. And as I was about to say, Kameus, my friend, my best friend . . . he deferred to me, he sided with me. But eventually I discovered he had been paying lip service to my opinion.

—The point I'm making, Wilander said, is whatever the similarity between our stories, there's one major dissimilarity. You discussed what was happening among yourselves and we've done very little of that.

—It's as I said. We were a crew, conditioned to work together. If I could have recruited Swedish merchant officers to live aboard *Viator*, I would have

done so. I hoped to recreate the conditions of the voyage as closely as possible. As things stood, I was forced to recruit five strangers. Men who had suffered psychological damage due to their homelessness and were conditioned to be distrustful. That you discuss the matter less than we did is hardly surprising. In retrospect, I think I may have been overly exacting. I think I could have put anyone aboard *Viator*. Their racial heritage, the number of men—I doubt these things were crucial.

Seething, Wilander said, A moment ago, when you said you weren't just a crazy old man . . . what the fuck's wrong with you? What gave you the right to use us?

—For twenty years I've been obsessed with what happened to *Viator*. I will admit to . . .

—I don't give a damn about your obsession. You had no right to make us part of an experiment.

—I won't deny it. But stop a moment! Think! Mortensen and Nygaard would not have seen the winter if I hadn't intervened in their lives. As for the rest of you, look at yourself. When you came into the office, you had nothing.

—No, no, no! Wilander said. Don't try to paint yourself as Saint Lunde. That's not going to fly.

—You had nothing, Lunde insisted. No prospects, no money, no friends. No hope. How much longer would you have lasted if I hadn't extended a hand? Another year? Two? Tell me how I've injured you.

—That's the problem. I don't know how. That's what we're talking about.

—Well, let's talk about it, then. I'll finish my story. That addresses your problem. After that we can discuss these other issues.

Wilander left his chair, too angry to speak, annoyed by Lunde's patronizing calm, and went to stand in the outer door of the mess. The day had grown bright and still, the air crisp, the firs were etched against the light. He stepped out onto the deck and walked toward the stern.

—Hello? Lunde said.

—Go ahead. Tell your story.

—Very well. Where was I?

—Repairing the engines. Discussing things.

—That's right. Yes. Lunde coughed again, a delicate cough this time, like punctuation. Our discussions were informal. If I was on the bridge with

Spekke, say, the subject would come up. When I went to the engine room to check on the repairs, Uhlgren and Ottendahl might mention it. Yet we never sat down to hash things out. We didn't talk at all when we were off-duty—off-duty, the men hid in their cabins. There was no more socializing. No drinking, no chatting about home. Nevertheless, the discussions, such as they were, grew heated. And it became apparent that our thoughts concerning *Viator* were developing along similar lines. The central thought, the one we agreed upon, was that *Viator* did not wish to die. What we failed to agree upon, however, was what should be done about this. On that matter, there was no consensus. Kameus, for instance, believed *Viator* had her own purposes and that we were interfering with them. Our very presence was an impediment to her will. If an outsider had been listening in, he would have presumed us mad. But . . . well, you've experienced life aboard *Viator*. You understand how the insane can come to seem rational. Whenever I was alone, on the bridge or in my cabin, I plotted courses north and east from our position. I did not rely on the master charts, I made my own. Another officer would not have been able to read them—I coded their referents, wanting to keep them private. They, I believed, expressed *Viator's* will. She guided my hand as I drew. I knew her mind. I believed this implicitly, although I tried to doubt it. It terrified me. If true, it was beyond my ability to understand. If false, I was crazy. And yet I also felt . . . blessed. I knew something remarkable was taking place, something that I could characterize generally, but couldn't put a precise name to.

—It's the same, Wilander said. There are differences, but the same thing is happening again.

He had stopped at the point on the rail where *Viator's* stern emerged from the forest. Beyond, the sea stretched a glittering blue beneath a sky crowded with white clouds so huge and stately, they might have been migratory nations bursting with the purity of their founding ideals. The sight comforted him, not by its beauty, but by the fact that he seemed removed from it, as if it were something he was seeing through an airplane window.

—It's happened much more slowly for you, Lunde said. And perhaps the rest of my story speaks to that. By the time we finished the repairs, the relationships among the five of us had become strained. It remained my intention to continue south to Panama. Despite having faith in the charts I'd drawn, despite my belief that *Viator* had influenced their creation, I refused to

acknowledge that *Viator's* will was of more consequence than my career concerns. I wanted that new tanker. None of the others agreed, however, and tensions were high. One morning I was in my cabin, preparing for the day, when Kameus asked to speak with me. My memories of what occurred thereafter are unclear, but I imagine I turned my back on him. The next I recall, I was lying on the floor, my head throbbing. Kameus was standing above me, shouting something about *Viator*. I lost consciousness again and didn't wake until the mid-afternoon. Kameus had bound me and the sun was low before I managed to free myself. I took my sidearm and went searching for him. The ship was empty, the launch missing. They had abandoned me. I ran up to the radio room, intending to call for assistance, but Kameus had destroyed the receiver.

Lunde paused and Wilander heard a faint rapping that might have been the old man drumming his fingers on the desktop.

—I knew they must have made for Gambell on Saint Lawrence Island, Lunde said. It was less than a day from our position. But I have no idea how they managed to act together after being so thoroughly divided. No clue as to what informed their decision . . . or even if there was a decision. One of them may have taken control by force. At my hearing, they told the company I had gone mad and thrown them off the ship. How could I refute their story? They were four and I had run *Viator* aground. Those facts outweighed everything I said, anything I could have said. After I'd been stripped of my license, I telephoned Kameus and begged him to explain why they had done this, but he didn't trust the phone and he refused to meet with me. All he admitted was that he had been afraid. You know what I said to him? I said, You should have been alone aboard *Viator*. Then you could talk to me about fear. He hung up on me. My friend had abandoned me again and this second occasion was more painful, because he was no longer influenced by *Viator*. He was serving his own interests. Lunde let out a sigh. I'd never been afraid of the sea. I understood, of course, that it killed men and ships, but I had long since come to terms with that. Yet alone on *Viator*, I was afraid. The weather continued to hold. If I steered due east, I would harbor at Gambell in a few hours. I had no reason to fear, yet I was panic-stricken. Partly this was due to the feeling that I was a flea riding atop an enormous metal beast. The ship's life seemed larger and more important than my own, and that of itself was frightening. But to

this day I believe it was mainly *Viator's* fear I felt. The product of her understanding that she would not survive another storm. Her desperation to reach land . . . though not just any landfall. She had a specific destination in view, one defined by my charts. With the engines half ahead—I didn't dare run them full—I steered north and east, bypassing Saint Lawrence and making for the Alaskan coast. Those next three days and nights, so much was going on in my mind. I had so many strange thoughts. Of that time I can only clearly recall that I was afraid. I didn't sleep, I ate little. I trembled before the prospect of death, living in a fearful delirium, surrounded by my enemy, the sea. Until the very end. Until I saw that green haven north of Kaliaska. Then I was deliriously happy. It was early morning, mist everywhere, but I knew where to aim the bow. I lashed myself to the pilot's chair and ran the engines full ahead. To starboard, a fishing boat emerged from the mist, bearing straight for midships. There was a moment when my heart was in my throat and I feared we would be rammed, knocked off-course. But whoever was manning the fisherman's wheel avoided a collision. Watching the shingle widen ahead, I grinned as if I'd won some great contest and had no thought that I was about to destroy my career. The hull grating across the sand sounded like the bottom was being ripped out. If I hadn't secured myself to the chair, I would have been flung about and likely killed. And then the trees came up. *Viator* slewed and veered to port. I thought we would go over, but the boulders on either side kept us on an even keel. The noise . . . it might have been the end of the world. Groans, shrieks, concussions. A wall of boughs loomed close. I ducked my head as the windows exploded inward. We kept on plowing forward, smashing deep into the forest, chewing up towering firs as if they were papier-maché. And at last *Viator* was still. There were settling noises, and then silence.

Lunde made a clicking with his tongue, a vocal gesture that seemed to signal regret. I was dazed, he said. Dazed, and groggy from lack of sleep. From stress. Mist sifted through the shattered windows. I felt the peace of the firs and was overcome by a sense of calm. Yet I had no sense of finality. There was more to do, I thought. What had gone before was just the beginning. I untied myself and made my way out onto the deck, going on wobbly legs toward the stern, intending to inspect the damage. The fisherman had followed us in. The boat had anchored so close to shore, I could read its name and port of



origin painted on a white tire hung from its side: the *Fat Allie* out of Mayorkiq. They put forth a small boat bearing half-a-dozen men—Inupiat, judging by their complexions. They jumped into the shallows and scrambled up the shingle. Some carried rifles. Had I witnessed a ship run aground in a similar fashion, I would not have investigated without benefit of arms. Who knows what one might find on board? But I assumed these men were bent on thievery and capable of worse. I hid in a storage locker off the bridge until I could no longer hear shouts and movement. Then I sneaked into the stern and watched them load their boat with tools, the big microwave from the galley, the crates consigned to Panama. Later I discovered they had stolen some personal items from my cabin. And they were only the first vultures. Before the *Fat Allie* could get under way, people began arriving in outboards and on foot through the forest. There must have been a hundred of them. Entire families bent on acquisition. Women with toddlers and old men with canes accompanied those who did the actual stealing. They swarmed over the ship. I didn't bother to hide. I wandered in a fog among them, all but unnoticed. Soon I felt light-headed and I took a seat on a hatch cover. I must have passed out and someone must have noticed me, for I woke later that day in Kaliaska. The following morning, a company plane flew me to Anchorage. Two days later, another plane flew me to Stockholm. I haven't set foot on *Viator* since.

—Why not? Wilander asked. You came back to Alaska.

—I was many years in Sweden, attempting unsuccessfully to resurrect my career. The strain took a toll. I spent my health in the effort. *Viator* was always in my mind. I was convinced she was alive and I wanted to understand her, to explore her. But I had no means of satisfying those ambitions. I worked for a nautical supply house. My commissions brought in scarcely enough for food and shelter. And then my parents died, passing within months of each other. My father had been prudent in his financial dealings, but the size of the inheritance was a shock for all that. I had the wherewithal to do anything I chose. My physical condition, however, was frail. I would not be able to endure life aboard a wrecked ship. I needed to be close to a decent medical facility.

A fishing boat steamed out from behind the headland, moving north and west, dark against the glittering blue water, heading—it appeared—for an empty quarter of the sea. Wilander felt an almost physical affinity with it. And so you came up with your plan, he said.

—There was nothing to keep me in Sweden. I had no children and my wife had initiated divorce proceedings as soon as she saw how things would go with my career. I flew to Alaska and bought the agency. And now I know I was right about everything.

—About *Viator* being alive?

—That . . . yes. And about the presentiment I had after we ran aground—that there was more to be done. More I had to do. I gave this short shrift in my story, but that feeling was stronger in me than any other I had during the entire experience. The company dragged me away so quickly, I had no opportunity to understand the role I was to play in *Viator's* future. I knew she needed me. Whatever happened during the storm . . . and I'm not sure now the storm was significant. Or if it was, if it served to awaken the ship, no spirit came to us on its winds. I've come to think it was our lives, through some affinity, some freakish unity, that provided *Viator* with the energy she required to live. I believe she manipulated Kameus and the others to isolate me on board, so she could then direct me to run her aground in a specific place. I think her control over the five of us was imprecise and she needed to be precise in controlling me. For years I've believed as much, but I've had nothing to flesh out my belief. What you've told me makes my experience comprehensible.

—I'm glad you comprehend it. I don't.

—It's not that I can explain it in rational terms, Lunde said. All events have a genius. When two people meet and fall in love, it can be explained. Biology. Natural selection. Social reasons. But there is an inexplicable genius at the heart of it. Since we can't explain it, some of us pretend we're being rational by ignoring the inexplicable. You and I, though . . . we realize the genius of certain events cannot be ignored. Somehow *Viator* came to life and saved herself from the breaking ground. She has lain dormant for twenty years, denied the energy she needed to continue on her way. By the time men returned to her decks, she had rusted. Her life, her newborn vitality, had rusted as well and it took her months to be revitalized. To make repairs. Well, she's made them and now she's on her way. Where she's bound, you have a better idea than I.

—I don't know, said Wilander.

—You doubt it, then? Even after hearing what I've told you?

—Do I doubt *Viator* is bound for . . . another world? Or that she's piercing a dimensional barrier? Those seem to be the options, don't they?

—I'm sure you have some degree of doubt. It would be impossible not to. But can you deny what's happening? I don't think so.

Wilander's anger, most of it, had been dissipated, diffused by his attentiveness, but now it resurfaced. I have to tell the others, he said stiffly. What they'll decide, I don't know. After that I'm going to pack and walk into Kaliaska.

—What will you do in Kaliaska?

—Not that it's your business, but I'm going to try and repair a relationship.

—With the Dauphinee woman?

—How did you know that?

—She called the office some weeks ago. She made several calls, I believe. Judging by her manner, I thought there must be more than a casual involvement.

Wilander chose not to comment.

—One night at dinner, Lunde said. Not long after we met. You told me how as a child you dreamed of being an explorer, of standing in places where no man before you had stood. Do you remember?

—If you say so, Wilander said, amazed that he had been so open with Lunde, but then, thinking back to those days, he recalled with some revulsion how desperate he had been to get off the streets, out of the shelters, the missions, and his eagerness to be befriended, to be acquired as a charitable venture.

—Will you walk away from that dream when it is so close to fulfillment? Lunde asked. Will you give it up for an ordinary life?

—Dreams change. Having any sort of life seems extraordinary to me now.

—Childhood dreams sound the true depth of our desires. You can make accommodations, you can settle for less, but when such a dream offers itself, surely this is not your response?

—I'm not certain it is offering itself.

—I grant you, what lies ahead is unknown. There is risk, but it's one we all dare even if we're not daring by nature. The unknown is always with us.

—If you're convinced this is the right path, and you believe *Viator's* truly on its way somewhere, why don't you join us? Why not reclaim your

command? You won't have to endure a long wait now things have proceeded to this point.

—I would be pleased to join you, but even a trip to Kaliaska might finish me off, Lunde said. I have a few months, they tell me. Less, perhaps.

The fishing boat had turned due west and dwindled to a speck, and the masses of clouds were also westering, as if the boat were towing them along on an invisible rope; the sky directly overhead was vacant, a pure wintry blue.

—I'm sorry, Wilander said, a comment that summarized an emotion more complicated and much less poignant than sorrow.

Lunde grunted. As am I. Look, I'll pay you to stay on board. I'll pay you a lot of money.

—Why would you do that? You said you knew enough, your curiosity's satisfied.

—Perhaps because it's all that's left me to do. And it would be pleasant to wake one morning and learn that *Viator* has vanished to another sea. That might reassure me as regards the nature of the voyage I'm soon to take. To tell the truth, I have so many reasons, you could likely construct a reason of your own and it would be at least partially correct.

—How much will you pay me?

—Twenty thousand.

—Fifty thousand, Wilander said. Put fifty thousand in my account by tomorrow, and I'll consider staying.

—You'll consider it? I would expect some sort of guarantee.

—That's a risk you'll have to take. In fact, I can assure you the money will have a minimal impact on my decision . . . though it may have sufficient weight to make a difference. Give some money to the others, too. Ten thousand each.

—Why less for them?

—If things don't work out for us here, Wilander said, if we end up with nowhere to go, alone on this filthy wreck, I don't expect they'll need as much as I will to drink themselves to death.

“ . . . Come here . . . ”

**H**AD HE GIVEN IT THE LEAST THOUGHT, WILANDER MIGHT HAVE anticipated the reactions of his shipmates on hearing Lunde's story. Arnsparger wanted to know if they would continue to be paid, and Halmus scoffed, saying, Why should I believe you? Or Lunde, for that matter? If that's really the story he told, what proof can you offer? I don't know what you're up to, but I'm not buying it. Nygaard barely listened, perched on the edge of Wilander's bunk, his attention commanded by a faucet handle he was holding, admiring it as if it were a chrome daisy with four petals, and as for Mortensen . . . After failing to find him, Wilander was at the table in the officers' mess, idly working on his maps, entertaining the notion of walking into Kaliaska, worrying that Arlene might turn him away, when Mortensen appeared in the door that opened onto the passageway, gaunt and ghastly-looking, his shoulder-length hair matted, his beard begrimed, yet uncustomarily cheerful—he smiled as Wilander retold Lunde's story, compromising his image of revenant saintliness with a display of crooked brown teeth, looking as if he were the spiritual relic of an especially noisome odor or the astral guardian of a landfill, and, once the story was complete, instead of responding to it, he poked at the maps with a bony, whitish gray forefinger, like a parsnip in color, and praised Wilander for having devised so intriguing a destination (he had taken the liberty of studying the maps while Wilander was otherwise occupied), saying also that while he had doubted Wilander's suitability for the captain's cabin, he doubted it no longer. And when Wilander asked why he had used the word *devised*, Mortensen said, Weren't you listening to Lunde? It should be obvious what's happened. The life force of Lunde and his officers fused with *Viator* during the storm. They were wedded to the instincts of the ship, her instinct to survive, to travel, just as the ship's life was ultimately wedded to the life of the forest. Since Lunde proved to be most in accord with her instincts, the ship chose him to plot the course of her survival. And now you've taken Lunde's place, in union both with *Viator* and the forest, you're not only

creating the maps of the land to which we're traveling, but also the land itself, the (he shuffled the maps about, peering at their legends) . . . the Iron Shore.

This astonishing recitation, so glibly delivered that it seemed practiced, left Wilander speechless.

—Arnsparger and Halmus, now . . . they see things somewhat differently, Mortensen went on. I wouldn't call their views contrary. Variant, I'd say. Complementary.

—Wait. Are you saying you knew about the storm? And about Lunde?

—Not in so many words, but it was obvious something of the sort had happened. It happened to us, after all. Maybe you've been so wrapped up in your mapmaking, you haven't had a chance to step back and take the long view.

—So you believe my maps, are defining this place? Making it real?

—Don't you believe it? Mortensen made a sweeping gesture, like one a preacher might employ when enthusing about promised glories, and said, There are worlds of possibility out all about us. Real as a mirage. Real as mist. Your mind, in alliance with *Viator* and the forest, with their power, their steadfastness, is influencing one of those worlds to be, to harden into physical form. The signs of its three creators are present in your maps. The forest, the sea, the city. Surely you can see it? Even Nygaard sees it in his simpleminded way. Every reality is given form by means of a similar consensus.

The conversation evolved into a lecture, a dissertation upon the topic of *Viator*, Whence, Whither, and Wherefore, Mortensen pointing out the resonances between Lunde's story and their experiences, and pointing out distinctions as well. He declared that the storm's fury and the power of the sea had served as a battery that enabled the forging of a bond between *Viator* and its previous crew, essentially the same that had been forged between *Viator* and themselves, yet it had taken longer to complete that second bond because there had been no crucible of wind and waves, only the battery of slow time, and the union produced by this gradual process was stronger than the original, and necessarily so, for it was no simple passage that lay ahead, no few days of wind and sea, and great strength and endurance would be demanded of them. But the primary focus of his disquisition was upon the link between Lunde's charts and Wilander's maps, those acts of the imagination that had created and were creating an appropriate landfall for *Viator*. In response to

Wilander's comment that, as far as he knew, the forest adjoining Kaliaska was not Lunde's creation, it had existed for centuries prior to Lunde's birth, Mortensen said, Yes, yet not in its current form, Lunde had authored a change that prepared the forest for *Viator*, a small thing compared to Wilander's creation, to be sure, but Lunde's forest was the precursor of the Iron Shore, a stage in the journey, perhaps the first of many stages, and wasn't Wilander aware of the innumerable theories deployed about a single fundamental idea, that the observer creates reality? My God, it was a basic tenet of philosophy, implicit in every philosophical paradigm, every religion, even Christianity—at least it had been part of the Christian belief system before the Council of Nicaea scrubbed the doctrine clean of its Asiatic influences—and both the most primitive conceptions of universal order (sympathetic magic, for instance, the notion that a voodoo priest could heal a sick man by feeding a bull meal in which a drop or two of the patient's blood was mixed, forming a bond between animal and man that would permit the bull's vigor to subdue the disease) and the most sophisticated insights of physics (fractals, the behaviors of sub-atomic particles, etc.) gave evidence of the interconnectivity of all matter, and it was this interconnection that had permitted Lunde and Wilander to channel their energies with such efficacy; and then Mortensen, with a triumphant expression, his point having been firmly established (to his own mind, at any rate), proceeded to embellish his theory, his estimation of the event that surrounded them, that enclosed them, by tying the concept of an observer-created reality with the phenomenon of crop circles, the casting of spells, and thence with the summoning of demons, exorcisms, séances, the hierarchies of the angels, astrological conjunctions, with top-secret scientific breakthroughs known to nine anonymous men in the government and the Satanic strategies codified by the webs of certain South American spiders, with the entire catalog of lunacy from which middle-class neurotics the world over selected the crutches that allowed them to walk the earth without crumbling beneath the merciless stare and brutal radiations of a god who was nothing like the images in the catalog variously depicting him to be a gentle dreamy shepherd, a mighty bearded apparition, an architect of fate (*God's Blueprint For YOUR Heavenly Mansion* by Dr. Carter P. Zaslow, \$22.95 plus shipping), a universe-sized vessel of love, and after Mortensen had ended his discourse and returned to the shadowy places of *Viator*, Wilander, who had

been halfway persuaded by the initial portion of his remarks, decided that Mortensen's mad-prophet pose masked a pitiful, ordinary madness, a madness that he had nourished while abusing himself with fortified wine on the streets of several Alaskan cities, and, recognizing that he could trust not a word that had been said by either Mortensen or Lunde, he made a rashly considered call to Arlene, told Lunde's story yet again, and asked her to check out the details on the Internet. She replied frostily that she would if she could find the time (she called back a day later, at an hour when he typically shut off his phone, and left a message saying that she had substantiated the basics of the story—the survival of the crew, Lunde's dismissal, and so on—and she had asked a hacker friend in the Lower Forty-Eight to do a more thorough search) and said that she didn't believe this qualified as an emergency, she did not want him calling whenever he became anxious, did he understand?, okay then, goodbye. And Wilander, feeling isolated to an unparalleled degree—even sleeping alone beneath a cardboard sheet in an alley, he had heard voices, traffic, and known himself to be part of the human sphere, but here there was only the silence and the inhuman vibration of the ship—stepped out onto the deck and discovered that an inch of snow had fallen and more was coming down, big wet flakes that promised a heavy accumulation and vanished when they touched his palm, and he was so affected by this consolation of nature, by the whiteness of the deck, by the soft hiss of the snowfall, by the smell of heaven it brought, he stood with his face to the sky, watching with childish fascination as the flakes came spinning out of the incomprehensible dark, letting them melt and trickle down his cheeks like the tears of a vast immaterial entity which—eyeless and full of sorrows—had seen fit to use a lesser being to manifest its weeping.

**W**ith the snow came bitter cold, and by the weekend *Viator* was resplendent in a glittering drag of ice and snow, an old battered queen overdressed for a ball, wearing every bit of gaud in her closet, ice sheathing the rails, plating the decks, icicles depending from the toppled winch, from every protruding edge, and the forest, too, was shrouded in white—although during even the worst of the weather, a blizzard lasting for almost two days, the fir trunks and sprays of blackish green needles showed amidst the white-



ness like splotches of dark metal on a wall from which the paint was flaking—and through the falling snow, Wilander would glimpse flashes of coruscant light emitted by an indeterminate source in the middle distance and hear the complaint of tortured metal, a display he associated not with *Viator's* penetration of the Kaliaskan shore twenty years previously, but with a new penetration, one just begun, powered by an immaterial engine and forged by a ghostly prow. Though he alternated between fear and disbelief in regard to what was happening aboard *Viator*, he had given up all thought of abandoning the ship. For one thing, Arlene's manner made it plain there was nothing for him in town; for another, the forest was alive with secretive movement, with the cries of the qwazil, with other unfamiliar cries, and something large had taken up residence in the linden tree (which, against logic, had retained its leaves, although they had gone brown and papery and were now beginning to fall), shaking down snow showers whenever it moved, and he had on several occasions spotted what appeared to be multiple tracks on the shingle. But the most telling reason behind his reluctance to leave was an unstudied disaffection with the idea of leaving, a non-reason that eventually translated into a sense that he was better off where he was, that life in a fantasy of his design, albeit one whose existence he did not wholly credit, was preferable to anything he might encounter elsewhere. And once he embraced this passive choice, a spark of certainty was kindled by his every lesser choice, as if by staying he had come to terms with all life's problems, and perhaps Halmus, Arnsparger, and Nygaard had achieved a similar peace of mind, for the atmosphere aboard ship grew more cordial, with pleasantries and nods and brief, cheerful dialogues exchanged in passing, and, after the storm blew off, the diamond weather that followed seemed an additional validation that a sea change had taken place—long perfect days of white sunbursts and pale blue skies; hushed, enduring twilights that washed the snow lavender; blue nights with haloed moons and hard bright stars when Wilander, alone with his maps, felt like a magus imprisoned in a crystal, laboring over the casting that would set him free, detailing the coastlines of the Six Tears, adding a notch to the tip of the peninsula that bordered the lagoon, putting the finishing touches on the city of Cape Lorraine, adding marginalia beside portions of the forest, noting a concentration of whistlers or some other imaginary creature, not quite believing the fantasy, playing with it,

obsessive in the way of a hobbyist or a gamer, and yet telling himself maybe, perhaps, what if, supposing it were real, tempted to belief. Sometimes he would walk out into the forest (not far; he remained uneasy with the environment) in order to gain a perspective on the ship, to think whatever thoughts the sight of it would generate, contemplating it as a connoisseur in a gallery might linger before some Flemish masterpiece in hopes of receiving a clue to the genius that had created it, staring at the moonstruck superstructure, so pristine-looking, a clean yellow light spilling from the ports, here and there a refracted crystalline glint, and the sharp black prow lifting from between hills and boulders as if cleaving a swell, far different from the brooding image it had once presented, resembling a stranded luxury craft wherein a party of minor dukes and their begemmed ladies, confident of rescue, quietly celebrated themselves and the moment with the roast flesh of mythical beasts and a bloody wine fermented centuries before by eunuch saints in a Serbian castle, and one night, returning from such a walk, as he clambered over the aft rail, having shinned up the frozen rope from the shingle, he saw a shadow drop to the deck from the linden tree. At that distance, he was able to determine only that the shadow was human. He crept closer, keeping low to the rail, more intrigued than frightened, imagining that it must be someone from town. The shadow flattened against the outer wall of the officers' mess and had a peek in through the port. Wilander would not have sworn to it, but the face that flared for an instant in the light from the port appeared to be that of a woman with extremely long hair. He crept closer yet, placing his feet carefully so as not to crunch patches of ice, and dropped into a crouch as she opened the door of the mess and moved full into the light, proving to be a slender young girl, naked, with dirty blond hair falling past her shoulders, small-breasted, her skin onion-pale. She darted inside, leaving the door ajar, and, easing forward, Wilander found an angle that allowed him to peer into the mess. The girl moved with furtive quickness about the table . . . and perhaps she was not a girl. Her body exhibited the development of a fourteen-year-old, but her face was womanly, a beautiful, sensual face with high cheekbones and a mouth too wide and full for the width of her jaw. She pawed at the maps, tipped back her head as if catching a scent; she picked up a colored pencil, bit it, tossed it aside, and then sped through the door leading to the interior of the ship. Dumbfounded,

Wilander held his position. It would be easier to intercept her when she returned to the mess than to pursue her through the darkened maze of the ship; but as he debated whether it would be more effective to wait inside the mess, she sprinted back onto the deck, carrying a loaf of bread, leaped to the rail without breaking stride and vaulted up into the linden tree, bringing down a shower of snow and dead leaves. An air of unreality settled over Wilander. That a woman was inhabiting the tree, existing in freezing temperatures without the benefit of clothing, failed to meet even his lowered standards of what was credible. Unless she were a whistler, in which case the concept of judgment itself would suffer. Shy, slender, physically alluring. Driven to steal food when winter made game scarce. She fit the description and, if he could trust the evidence of his senses (and why would he not?), she was proof positive that Mortensen's assessment of his (Wilander's) connection to the ship was accurate, or at least not far off the mark. He started for the larder, curious as to how she had negotiated the lock, curious about her in every regard, and then recalled that he kept bread, peanut butter, and tinned sardines in his cabin. The sardines and peanut butter, he discovered, were still on the shelf above his bunk, but the bread was gone and his bedding was rumpled and damp from the passage of her wet feet.

Over the next few weeks, Wilander devoted significant thought and energy toward the woman in the linden tree, putting aside his maps (he had more-or-less completed work on the Iron Shore and was well along in detailing the lands beyond the Six Tears) and his concerns relating to the white lights and the noises, and the increasingly active, invisible population of the forest. Since a normal woman could never withstand such cold, and her behavior suggested an animal intellect, he came to accept that she was a whistler, and he set himself to capture her, leaving food out to lure her down from the tree, hoping to habituate her to the process and eventually trap her in the mess; but one night, watching from hiding as she secured the wedge of cheese he had provided, he became aroused by the play of muscles in her thighs and abdomen, and by facial expressions whose sensual delicacy seemed evidence of a human sensitivity. She was a lovely creature, but first and foremost she was a creature, and he was dismayed to think his motives might be prurient, yet what purpose apart from the sexual would trapping her serve? The phrase with which Halmus had insulted him, *the husband of the linden*

*tree*: it returned to Wilander now and he wondered if, in accordance with Mortensen's theories, he had summoned the whistler from the uncreate to fulfill the curious promise of that phrase. He decided that he would befriend her, not attempt a capture, and he placed food at the end of the table nearest the outer door and sat at the opposite end, waiting to see what would happen. For three successive nights, he heard her tread on the deck, yet she declined to enter; on the fourth night, however, she slipped into the mess, snatched the food and, as she darted away, panicked by the sight of him, she smacked into the edge of the door, causing it to slam shut, trapping her. She whirled about, pursed her lips; he felt a pinprick of pain behind his forehead, but it faded, amounting to nothing. He made soothing noises, urging her to calm, and stood, intending to close the interior door (he didn't want her loose in the ship) and then open the outer door, allowing her to escape; but she dropped to her hands and knees, presenting him her hindquarters and, a second later, he smelled a sweetly complex scent, reminiscent of the cachets his mother had strewn about their home, seeking to mask odors that only she detected (the taint of a failing marriage, the effluvium of his father's many affairs) with tiny cloth bundles containing dried flowers, and he was struck by the thought that although he and his parents had never gotten along, though they had never been affectionate with one another, it nonetheless seemed strange how infrequently they sprang to mind, especially since they had been so successful creating in their son a warped replica of their emotional inaccessibility. The scent, more pervasive than those remembered scents, dizzied him. He gazed with growing lust at the whistler's pale buttocks. What would be wrong, he asked himself, if he were to fuck this consenting animal child-woman, this fantasy figure with a perfumed pussy he had dialed up from his subconscious, and what possible significance could morality and conscience have when everything he imagined was coming true? Still dizzy, he sat down again. The whistler rose to one knee, staring at him, her breasts peeping beneath tangles of hair. Wilander gestured at the door. Go on! You opened it before, he said. She came up into a crouch and reached behind her, groping for the door, keeping her eyes on him. He told her once more to leave, his tone peremptory, and, with a lunge, shouldering the door open, she flung herself out onto the deck and, judging by the furious rustling that then ensued, scrambled high into the linden tree.

It was three nights before she entered the mess again and two nights after that, an especially cold night with the temperature hovering near zero, a thousand glittering teeth of ice hung like a hunter's trophies about *Viator's* deck, and an overripe moon whose light at meridian was so strong, a portion of the ice-sheathed railing at the stern looked like a curve of gemmy fire suspended against the more diffuse brightness of the sea, it was then that Aralyn—this the name he had given her, the name of a cousin in Goteborg whom he had never met—chose to hunker in a corner of the mess while she ate the chicken breast he had left for her; the following night she balked at returning to the linden tree. Not only had the cold affected her (she was trembling when she entered, which made her seem younger and frailer), but the leaves of the linden had thinned to such a degree, it no longer served as an effective hiding place, and this offered a possible clue to the size of the qwazil, who continued to call from the upper branches, tucked behind a spray of leaves, marking it as a tiny bird with a big voice or else, like the wiccara, it was invisible. With gesture and word, Wilander encouraged Aralyn to leave, but she curled up on the floor under the table as if she planned to sleep there, and though it was unlikely that any of the crew would have reason to enter the mess during the night, it was a possibility and Wilander did not trust that they would have a protective attitude toward her—her presence had cut his loneliness to a tolerable level and he was beginning to dote on her, to think of her a cross between a niece and a pet. He made notes on her height and weight (a shade over five feet; ninety-ninety-five pounds) and physical condition (healthily sinewed; skin unmarred except for a pinkish two-inch-long scar shaped like a smile under her right breast; large eyes with dark irises and clear whites), and he also noted how clean she was aside from her snarled hair and wondered if she washed herself like a cat or if, as with certain breeds of dog, Samoyeds and Akitas, she were blessed with a naturally pleasing odor. He indulged in a serial daydream in which, upon reaching the Iron Shore, leaving *Viator* to sail unknown seas alone and un-captained, a living ship bent upon her own fulfillment, he became the whistlers' protector, a figure part-Moses, part-Che Guevara, and pictured himself standing with Aralyn at the forefront of a host of whistlers, all dressed in homespun robes, freshly civilized, the forest ranked behind them, gazing with ennobled mien across a vista rife with promise and hope and beauty. Okay, he told her. But you can't stay here. And he urged her

into the passageway and along it to his cabin, where, after displaying some anxiety, she curled up on the floor and slept. Wilander lay awake for a while, listening to her breathing, recognizing that he had established a dangerous precedent—she couldn't stay in the cabin, or maybe she could, maybe it would be for the best, and if *Viator* was, indeed, on course for the ultimate elsewhere, another plane of existence, a world he was in process of creating, then she wouldn't have to stay long, a week or so, if the nearness of the lights and the increased volume of the groaning noises were indicators, and in the midst of these considerations, he fell asleep, a sleep undisturbed by dreams, unless waking to discover himself enveloped in sweetness, a complex perfume, and Aralyn's fingers stroking him, making him hard, unless all that were a dream, and he came up from the fog of sleep, meaning to push her away, but when he touched her, his disgust—a flicker—was subsumed by desire, and his hands clamped to her hips, and then she was rising above him, a shadow in the dark, fitting herself to him the way Arlene liked, only Arlene enjoyed sitting astride him and touching herself, whereas Aralyn was savage and erratic in her movements, shaking her hair and clawing at his chest, and that was his last clinical observation until he had spilled into her and lay stiff with self-loathing, bothered by the weight of her head on his chest, her hand on his stomach, but reluctant to push her roughly away—it wasn't her fault, she had been trying to protect herself, acting on instinct, having wandered into an unfamiliar place through a cosmic rip in the walls of the world made by *Viator's* push to survive . . . yet it was possible that he had characterized her actions incorrectly, and the whistlers were not animals, creatures of instinct, but fully human, a variant form of the species capable of making informed choices based on criteria other than survival. In an attempt to validate this thesis, he managed to teach Aralyn to say *Tom* and *food*, but since she banged on the floor with the candy bar he used to illustrate the idea of *food* (mimicking the frustration he displayed while teaching her), he could not be certain that she understood the meaning of the word, nor was he certain—if she did understand, if her intellect was more advanced than he had presumed—whether this would put him in the clear ethically speaking. He doubted it would. Ethics had not been a strong point of his for many years.

The weather dirtied up, cluttered gray skies, sleet and snow flurries driven by off-shore winds, dazzling explosions of light, like huge photic rips in the

landscape, no more than fifteen or twenty yards ahead of the prow, and the din of metal under stress grew so articulated, Wilander could imagine the precise injuries being done to *Viator*, the iron plates gouged, dimpling, tearing. Wind howled about the ship, playing a skirling atonal music; fir trees dumped loads of old snow onto the decks, and snow blew across the shingle, building drifts against the boulders. At night they would venture into the mess for an hour or thereabouts and during that time Aralyn would race outside to do her business, while he leafed through his maps, adding a detail or two, wondering if they were accurate, and after she returned, they would again lock themselves in the cabin. Lunde called on Friday morning to hear his report (Wilander having failed to call) and, recognizing the number on caller ID, not wanting to talk, Wilander switched off the phone and left it off. If they were leaving the Alaskan coast, and he harbored no reasonable doubt that they were, he did not wish to spend his last minutes on earth supplying Lunde with a blow-by-blow of the passage, committed to routine like an astronaut, forced by duty to immerse himself in the details and ignore the glory of the passage. He sat brooding on his bunk, despairing of himself for having traded in a decent life with Arlene for a trip to nowhere with this womanly animal, who was at the moment playing with his toothbrush on the floor. A pretty animal, a housebroken animal, a comparatively intelligent animal, yet she was not a terrific conversationalist. She had forgotten *Tom*, but every so often she would smile, a smile whose seductive quality was neutralized by the vacancy in her eyes, and say, Food. They had only engaged in sex the once, but that night Wilander, who had reminisced about Arlene for much of the day, tormented by the idea of abandoning *Viator*, knowing he could not, came to feel so desolate that he could no longer psychologically afford to give weight to the question of whether or not he was debasing himself—he wanted to forget *Viator* for a while, to forget Halmus, Arnsparger, Nygaard, and Mortensen, and most all to forget Arlene, and he beckoned to Aralyn and patted the blanket beside him. Either she did not understand or she chose not to comply.

—Come here, he said, and patted the blanket repeatedly.

Squatting on the floor, bare arms and legs sticking out from what might have passed for a vest of ratty blond hair, she looked like a feral child, and, though she could alter her expression by a shade and appear less the savage

innocent, that did not soften his comprehension of what he was doing, and he felt a distant displeasure, the prickly hauteur of a prince toward a disobedient chattel, angry that she was forcing him to control her. He shouted, slapped the blankets, and that confused her. At last he dragged her onto the bunk and showed her how a zipper worked—not that she would retain the information—and pushed her head down, hoping that she knew what came next. She did. Clever girl. But as he lay back on his pillow, shutting his eyes, he envisioned the photograph that was about to be mounted in his permanent scrapbook, the shot that would fix for all time the image of a derelict ex-human living in the shell of a wrecked ship with other derelicts, getting sex from an animal who was a pedophile's wet dream with a room temperature IQ, a snapshot so vivid, he could smell his own decaying spirit, the soul rotting in the rotten flesh, and he went limp, shoved her to the end of the bunk, where she sat a moment bewildered, spittle on her lips, then tried to crawl up beside him, and he shoved her back again, cursed at her until she scooted down onto the floor, huddling in a corner by the sink. Tears started from Wilander's eyes and he understood the emotional sponsor of those tears was neither regret nor loss, but a febrile self-pity founded on a knowledge of what he had become. His daydream of playing Moses to the whistlers' Israelites, he imagined it differently now, he pictured himself recumbent on a mattress of boughs, surrounded by whistler women, using them whenever the mood struck, eating the berries and meat they brought him, lord of a flyblown forest kingdom, purveyor of a petty colonialism, his hair lengthening to a moss-like robe from which his penis would occasionally protrude, growing older and weaker until he could do nothing more than digest a few berries and wait for the whistlers, gone past innocence under his tutelage, to kill him with their teeth or the flint knives he'd taught them to fabricate so they could be more efficient in the hunt. He turned onto his side, facing the wall, wishing the world would hurry up and end. He thought he must have been another kind of man once, basically good, well-intended though flawed; yet he could not recall how it felt to be that man. The wind gnawed at the iron bones of the ship, its harsh voice failing for an instant as if choking, having to dislodge a fragment from its throat, possibly a chunk of *chian* or *schaumere*, and then began to feast again.



“ . . . You’re falling into a hole, too . . . ”

**D**AYS PASSED, HE COULDN’T BE SURE HOW MANY BECAUSE HE WAS sleeping a lot, having sex with Aralyn, then sleeping the hours away, and one morning he woke to the absence of wind, of all sound, the port enclosing a circle of pewter light, and, sitting up, rubbing his eyes, he became aware, as well, of the absence of Aralyn. The door stood ajar. He felt a pang in his chest, fearing he had frightened her away, but immediately thereafter he felt relieved and hoped she was gone. He splashed water on his face, changed into clean underwear, a clean shirt, concerned that there was still no sound, no groaning of metal—not that the sound was ever continuous, it was intermittent, *Viator* forging ahead, storing up energy, forging ahead again, shattering the barrier in stages; but lately, more often than not, he had waked to a groaning, and he worried that *Viator* might have run out of energy, that they would be stuck and how much would that suck?, fuck, fuck, fuck . . . He straightened out his thoughts from the skid they’d been in, from chaos, from derangement, from this and that, here and there, these and those, and saluted his image in the mirror, *Bon soir, mon capitain!*, and walked briskly along the passageway toward the mess. Which, coincidentally, was a mess. His maps were strewn about the floor and the outer door was wide open, letting in the wind. He bent a knee and began picking up the scattered papers, but an animal chill touched the back of his neck and he stood, knowing something was wrong. He stepped out onto the deck. The air was warm, the icicles beading at their tips, the snow underfoot mushy, and it was difficult to read the tracks, but there looked to be two sets of footprints leading toward the stern, one shoeless. A soft, rhythmic grunting came to his ears. A different breed of animal might have wandered away from the Iron Shore. Wilander edged along the bulkhead. The grunting ceased. He paused, listening, and when it did not resume he eased forward again, more of the stern coming into view, more yet, still more, and finally he spotted a gray-haired man facing the aft rail some thirty feet away, buckling his belt. Nygaard? Aralyn was there as well, slinking away along the rail until Nygaard barked at her and raised his

hand, threatening a slap. Wilander took in her chastened attitude and Nygaard's masterful pose. That told the story. A horrid story, a story of the weak abusing the weaker. He let out a feeble cry, sounding as if he'd been shot in the lung, and charged toward Nygaard, tripped, and went sprawling head-first on the icy deck. Aralyn broke for starboard, passing from view, and Nygaard made a scuttling run forward, his face registering a comical degree of panic, then retreated and flung himself over the rail.

By the time Wilander regained his feet and staggered to the rail, Nygaard was down the rope and racing off into the forest. After the briefest of hesitations, he followed, furious at him for his transgressive act, for having befouled his woman, and he engaged in a debate over the accuracy of that charge as he went, wondering if Nygaard might instead be convicted of cruelty to animals or bestiality; but no (Wilander caught sight of the man heading over a rise), no, these were frontier circumstances and frontier laws applied. They hung rustlers, horse thieves, sheep stealers. Why not whistler-fuckers? He saw himself hounding the little shit to judgment—Nygaard would stumble backwards in the snow and put out his hands in defense, mutter some pitiable nonsense, and Wilander, looming above him, would marshal his sternest tone and say, I pronounce . . . I . . . Well, he would say something appropriately menacing, something whose grandeur would infect Nygaard with dread, with the knowledge that justice was at hand, and he would beg for his life, and then Wilander would go at him with his fists, with kicks, goal-scoring kicks that delved in under the ribs and dug out his bones. As he floundered up the rise behind which Nygaard had vanished, there came a metallic shrieking and an accompanying flare of brightness that burned into his eyes. It flickered, yet held and held, as if a star had fallen to earth and were sputtering in the snow. He sank to his knees and stoppered his ears. After an interminable time, the sound and light abated. He trudged to the top of the rise. Nygaard's trail gave out into a patch of disturbed snow. A second burst of light and noise farther away, off to his right, made Wilander grit his teeth. With *Viator* so near to sailing, the forest was filled with stress points, places where the world that was being created scraped against the world they were about to put behind them, and Nygaard, he assumed, had stumbled into one and perished. He would have to be very careful; he did not want to pass through the barrier between the worlds without the ship around him. Without her iron keel, the great

stress-bearer, he had no chance of survival. And yet Aralyn, the qwazil and the wiccara, they had slipped through safely with no keel to protect them. He wrestled with the idea of two-way travel, pro-and-conning, trying out the notion that a passage one way was more difficult than passage the other. He gave the thought a turn, but it was too cold to think and he started hiking back to the ship. It was tough going, the snow lay deep, the air was ice in his lungs, and, pausing to catch his breath, he was transfixed by the sight of *Viator*. The clouds had darkened, snowflakes were swirling down, and the ship, trapped between its two confining hills, looked to be straining forward, shouldering its burden of ice, battered and indefatigable, every splotch and dent, every evidence of its long labor visible in the neutral light. He felt a unity with her, a shared principle, an inelegant workers' purpose. They persevered, they hung in there, they did their job. His eyes teared on seeing his icebound sister so resolute, and he glanced heavenward, less in response to emotion than an involuntary attempt to clear his airway, and there, rippling soundlessly across the sky, was the wormlike creature of his dreams, thrillingly vast, skimming the treetops, visible in its entirety as it swept upward, a great rope of muscle given definition by a gristly central nub, vanishing into the clouds and leaving a ringing stillness in its wake. Rocked by this vision—it had, he thought, the importance and weight of a vision, a sign—Wilander did not know what to do. The firs had not bent beneath it, no snow had been shaken loose from their boughs nor had he felt any wind, so perhaps he had not seen it, perhaps he had fallen asleep and dreamed it. The creature's flight had made so potent a statement of finality, there seemed nothing left to think or say, and he waited to be gathered, to wink out of existence, to experience the instantaneous absolution that such a momentous and terminal event would surely bring, growing empty and slow. Snow sifted down through the branches, settling on his shoulders and in his hair. The sky went darker. Ice crystals knitted together on his cheeks, fitting a frozen mask to his face. And when it became obvious that he was not to be taken, that this was not his time, he collected the litter of self, pulled together the spillage of lies, stupidities, and half-truths that allowed him to go on, that he had not believed he would need again, and crammed the mess back into his head without bothering to check the fit, and went stumping dumbly through the snow toward *Viator*, a single thought crackling in his brain, the memory of that godlike

passage, the power and sweep of it (like the flight he had seen in Halmus' piece of mirror seen from a different angle), replaying it over and over until the dark brown shadow it had cast became a dark brown cast of mind.

All the next day and the day after, a cold wind prowled the decks of *Viator*, keeping Wilander inside where, ordinarily, he would have worked on his maps, but he had neither the energy nor concentration for detail work; he felt not ill but out of sorts, too restless to sleep, and so he wandered the ship's corridors, thinking he might run into Arnsparger, or that Aralyn would be driven to seek shelter again, but he encountered neither Halmus nor Arnsparger during his wanderings (perhaps they were braver than he and had dared the cold), and Aralyn did not return, and, though he would have welcomed even one of Mortensen's lectures to break the loneliness, he was not tempted to seek him out—Mortensen would be down in the hold, and the hold, with its stygian blackness, its eerie rustlings, its air of impalpable presence, was no place that Wilander cared to be. He returned to his cabin, sat on his bunk and selected a book from his shelf, but he was unable to read, his eyes bothered him, the words were blurry and vague geometric shapes drifted across the page. Some photographs he'd taken of Arlene attracted his notice. In some of them, she was outdoors, wearing jeans and an anorak, squinting in the hard sun, but in two she was naked and these he looked at the longest, not because they were arousing, but because he loved her body, its expression of her life drawn through time, like a bait drawn across the skin of the water, gradually losing color and freshness, and yet still desirable to the big mouths below, still beautiful in every important way, and he loved the little roll of fat on her hips and her breasts grown too heavy for the soft packs of muscle at her shoulders to support, and the tuft of unruly red hair from which the lips of her pussy peeked like candy—he recalled that when he had snapped the pictures, she had been embarrassed, but when he passed them to her, she said, Not bad for a woman my age, huh? I ought to charge you more. Looking at them saddened him—he missed how they were together. He didn't feel energetic enough to masturbate and set the pictures aside and switched on his radio. Occasionally he could pick up KHIL, Killer Radio, the classic rock station out of Nome. What with the cacophony of shrieks and groans

produced by *Viator* thrusting forward into the unknown (he wasn't certain when they had started up again, but was reassured that they had), rock and roll was not his preferred music, a dose of Enya would have been appreciated, but he tried tuning in KHIL anyway, found it, lost it, found it again . . . Another station kept bleeding in, getting stronger, a woman's husky voice speaking in an unfamiliar language, and then a strange electric music without drums, all pulse and shifting tone, after which the woman returned, talking to a second woman with a wispy voice. Wilander was unfamiliar with the language. It sounded like Portuguese, but more sibilant, punctuated by indrawn breaths like hiccups. He was further perplexed when a drumbeat built a fractured rhythm beneath the women's conversation and they began to sing—terse, angry bursts of song that grew shriller and more vehement (the drums also grew louder, adding rhythmic layers) until the women were screaming at the point they were drowned out by the drums, and Wilander, who had assumed the woman to be a DJ spinning records, realized the show had a more bizarre format than he imagined when a man began to talk, followed by the strange drumless music, followed by two men singing angrily until they also were drowned out by drums. The station faded, replaced by static and the Chambers Brothers doing "Time (Has Come Today)," and Wilander couldn't get it back—the station was gone as surely as though a soundproofed door had swung closed, and perhaps it had, for the groaning and shrieking stopped at the same time the station faded, and he thought about the building in Cape Lorraine with the array atop its roof—if they had arrays, they must have radio, and he stayed at it, turning the dial a micro-millimeter to the left and then the right, hearing Dr. John doing "Walk On Gilded Splinters," and now here's Iggy and the Stooges giving the middle finger to America, off the debut album produced by Mister John Cale, Nineteen Sixty-Nine okay, another year with nothin' to do, and I had a cat, man, named Van Morrison, fed him too much tuna and he got all bloated and started singing Irish folk songs, but back in the day he sang shit like this, and we're going to keep hanging out in 1969 right here on Killer Radio, because 1969, hey, that was the beginning of the end, the whole country getting bleak and crazy, and Robert Fripp, he saw it coming, he saw a zircon flash go across the sky, he heard the dead bell ring, and wrote a little thing he called, "21st Century Schizoid Man . . ." and Wilander switched off the radio, because

the DJ was reading his mind, not the exact thoughts, but stealing the rhythms of his thoughts, creating an unsettling resonance. He didn't feel well, his hands were trembling, his nose dripping, and he lay back on the bunk, hoping to sleep, a few hours' sleep might fix him right up. He'd find the station later, or it would find him.

**H**e dreamed about Nygaard; he ran into him in a frontier bar where people wore coats made of sewn-together skins, and the bartender was a bull who walked on his hind legs and dressed in a plaid shirt and doeskin trousers held up by suspenders, and it was dark inside, the light made by a TV tuned to a loud game show, and Nygaard was okay, better than okay, he was alert and intelligent and displayed no interest whatsoever in bathroom fixtures; he greeted Wilander effusively, offered to buy him a beer, which he then did, a Zalophus Ale, not bad, a painting of a sea lion on the label, and said, Wow, man, I haven't seen you since you killed me. Wilander started to deny this on the grounds that Nygaard was undeniably alive . . . and then wondered if he, too, was dead and asked, Where are we?, and Nygaard laughed and said, Isn't that begging the issue? And then Wilander remembered, the way you remember things in dreams, like you've suddenly skipped some pages, how he had hunted Nygaard through the snow, but he hadn't killed him, he was certain of it, he had wanted to, but . . . Nygaard clapped him on the shoulder and said, Hey, no biggie!, and began telling Wilander what he'd been doing since their days aboard *Viator*, something about a travel agency, he nattered on about this and that, and Wilander lost interest and strayed into another dream of which he retained only the sound of grunts and thuds and gasps, and when he awoke, when he became certain he was awake, for the border between dreams and waking seemed to be thinning of late, he was nagged by the suspicion that he might have killed Nygaard; he had been angry enough and the man had been in deplorable shape, even worse than Arnsparger, and on his worst day Wilander could have run him to ground. And perhaps he had, or perhaps Nygaard had merely been blaming him for chasing him into a stress point? It dawned on Wilander that he was debating the merits of something said in a dream by a figure who was nothing like Nygaard had been in real life, and how ridiculous was that?, and then he recalled a dream from

childhood that proved the stuff of dreams could stain our lives. He'd been nervous about Russia dropping the A-bomb on Portland, his fear caused by a movie about a nuclear incident that he'd been forbidden to watch but did so anyway during a sleepover at Jerry Baumgartner's, and he discovered in the dream he had after seeing the movie that the Russian missiles were flying and his only hope of surviving the blast was to hide in the bathtub and cover himself with a wet sheet, and when the alarm sounded, he had done so, he had watched the explosion shine through the sheet like buttery sunlight, and for years afterward he maintained a naive, magical belief that wet cotton could withstand the force that had leveled Hiroshima, so maybe there was a kernel of truth in it (what that kernel might be, he had no clue) and maybe his dream about Nygaard also embodied a truth . . . He lost his train of thought, but luckily his thoughts were running in circles and he continued to be plagued by the notion that something had happened between him and Nygaard, something he had blocked or forgotten, and in hopes of solving the mystery he put on his clothes and, thankful that the wind had eased up, retraced the path he had followed on the day Nygaard disappeared.

He felt better than he had before taking his nap and, as he walked up into the forest, listening to the cries of the qwazils, the shrieks and groans that proceeded from the area ahead of *Viator*, his mood underwent a sharp alteration—his spirits lifted and he grew less interested in the issue of whether or not he had beaten Nygaard to death. The man had gotten off easy, either way. It didn't matter how he had died, except as to how the crime would be charged if it ever came to trial, and since that was unlikely . . . well, to quote Nygaard: No biggie. But Wilander determined that it would be beneficial to his peace of mind to find out what had happened and he walked deeper into the forest. If he had experienced a blackout and killed a man, he wanted to know, though the longer he examined the question, the more secure he became that things had happened as he recalled—he had chased Nygaard into a stress point, and soon afterward had seen the enormous worm. He stopped and scanned the sky, suddenly afraid that the creature would reappear and, this time, carry him away, but the sky was empty of all but clouds. It must be poor weather for hunting Wilanders, or Wilanders, like the wiccara, were not visible in this particular light. He laughed at his joke, ha-ha, and thought the laugh sounded choked, unnatural, so he tried a variation, a-ha,

ha-ha, and that one was perfect, masculine and hearty, with just enough of a lilt to qualify as charming, a real laugh's laugh, a laugh anyone would admire, it commanded attention, yet did not demand it, a natural symptom of mirth that sailed out of his chest and lungs, apparently carrying with it the bug that had caused him to feel subpar, because shortly thereafter he began to feel strong and energetic, and he strode along knocking ledges of snow off the boughs for fun and kicking snowcrusts into sprays, delighting in the beauty of the forest, noticing how the blackish boughs and trunks configured ideographs against the white backdrop that, if one could interpret them, if their Rosetta Stone were unearthed, would give concrete expression to the poetic flights of the natural world. Thoughts flitted about his brain like schools of multi-colored fish about a reef and every so often he would spear an interesting specimen and hold it wriggling up to his mind's eye—thoughts as disparate as reminding himself to eat something, he hadn't eaten for a day, or was it two?, and the speculation that the Laws of Thermodynamics must be the fragment of a longer list, and a line from a song he'd written in high school, "... Somethin' wonderful's gonna happen to them peaches, honey..."—the rest of the song had been for shit, but he loved that line for its evocation of a 1940s cornball hillbilly aesthetic, like something you might hear in an old movie musical—and he wished he could see a movie in a theater, not watch a DVD on Movie Night in the Kali bar with twenty or thirty drunks who kept asking What's that mean? or What's he doing?, and then, to his dismay, he understood that he had walked all the way from *Viator* into Kaliaska and was standing on the rise overlooking the town. The arrangement of the larger buildings, in their beige-and-brown dress of aluminum siding, scattered randomly like a roll of poker dice across the frozen dirt, patchy with snow, disoriented him, because their pattern reminded him of a public square in the city of... he couldn't recall the city's name, or else the name had not yet come to him, but it was a famous square, the locus of great events familiar to all who dwelled upon the Iron Shore and the lands beyond, but he recognized several distinctions—Kaliaska's buildings were not anthropomorphic, as were those in the square, and had been erected at slightly different angles to one another, and instead of the crowds of vendors and entertainers that thronged the square at every hour, here there were two children playing in a snowmobile from which the engine had been removed, and



a mangy Newfoundland mix sniffing at fish bones, and a tubby woman in a red down jacket patched with duct tape talking with two men about to enter the trading post. He could walk right into Arlene's TP, he realized. It would be warm, he could dry his boots by the stove, and the old Inuit man who came in most mornings to look at the fancy hunting knives that no one ever bought except Russian sailors (who were mad for every sort of knife, especially switchblades) would peer through the display case at the hilts inlaid with designs of trout-fishing grizzlies and dueling elks with their horns locked together and silvery reflecting blades that would never know blood, but would wind up adorning a mantle in Kiev or Volgograd, and Terry had asked the old man, at Wilander's behest, why was he so taken with the knives, and he replied that he had hoped to be buried with such a knife, but knew his nephew would steal it, so he was trying to impress the image on his mind, which he believed survived after death, not in an active manner, rather in a kind of memorial stasis, and his favorite was the one with seals frolicking on the hilt. And Wilander would peel the wrapper from a Butterfinger bar and eat it in exactly four bites, waiting for Arlene to come in from the back, and when she did, well, that was where this fiction sputtered and stalled, where fantasy was blocked by reality's Gothic iron fence, because she would be emotionally shut down, she would turn a cold eye on him, an eye like a fucking force field, and he would smash against it with face-flattening impact, knocking himself silly on her resolve, and she would say, How can I help you?, or Did you pay for that candy bar?, something dead and neutral, something hurtful, something he deserved, and he backed away from the rise, half-expecting a ray of dead neutrality to shoot from the trading post and shrivel him, and, once Arlene's TP was hidden by the trees, he trudged toward *Viator*, his energy and self-esteem ebbing. Soon he felt as he believed Arlene would see him—a malignancy disguised as a man—and it appeared nature itself was seconding that judgment. Roots reached out to snag his ankles, dead vines sought to ensnare him, branches studded with thorns tore at his clothing and skin, declivities opened in the earth for the express purpose of tripping him up—whereas he had walked effortlessly into Kaliaska, the walk back was a punishment, the running of a gauntlet, and even his thoughts were punishments, the thought of Arlene followed by the thought of Nygaard, the presumptive thought of his guilt thumping in his skull like a muffled drum-

beat, and, as he dragged himself through the forest, as the forbidding shape at its heart came into view, the most terrible thought of all occurred to him: that this forbidding shape, this angular darkness segmented by sentry firs, was to be his home for the rest of his days, however long they might be.

He was too weak to shinny up the rope and, despite his trepidation concerning the hold, he climbed the ladder and slipped in through the rip in *Viator's* side, telling himself that he'd be okay, it was all in his head, the usual charms, and, with a firm grasp on a good thought, brimming with false confidence, he strode across the lightless space, making a beeline for the hatch. He had negotiated almost three-quarters of the distance when he heard a noise, a cross between a seething noise and a whisper. He quit walking—that was the best way to subdue such noises, you demonstrated an awareness of them, you dared whatever made them to breach the barrier of immateriality; but the noise intensified, evolving into a crackling, like liquid electricity, and staring into the blackness, he saw something blacker than black glistening in the corner, a shiny patch that seemed in its pulsing and shifting to reflect the fluctuations of the noise, and he cried, Mortensen!, knowing that Mortensen was behind this, he must be hiding in a corner, crumpling sheets of foil wrap . . . Wilander wheeled about, certain that Mortensen was standing behind him, but there was only darkness and he realized that he must have lost his bearings and turned to find the rip in *Viator's* side—an uneven horizontal rip filled with twilight, it resembled a gray rag stuffed into a gash and looked impossibly distant, as if he had penetrated deeper into the hold than the hold was deep. He went a couple of steps toward it, but this, to his bewilderment, served to carry him farther away, and then the noise captured his attention again, louder now, and the inside of his head felt hot, hot and cluttered, and he spun about, hoping that like a roulette ball he'd stop in the perfect slot that would afford him a view of the hatch, and when no sight melted up from the darkness, the twittering darkness, the sound of a thousand bug-sized birds chirping at once, he edged forward, his hands held out before him, unsure of what he might encounter. After fifteen or twenty feet he fetched up against a bulkhead and, grateful for its solidity, for solidity of any kind, he sank down beside it. Touching the metal calmed him, cooled him, but when he looked again for the rip, trying to orient himself, it was nowhere to be seen, and neither were the holes Arnsparger had cut in the keel, and he

wondered if some loose bits inside his eyes, scraps of protein, were hovering in exactly the right place so as to block his view, casting shadows that conformed precisely to the shape of the rip and the holes. This was a patent impossibility, at the very least an implausibility, but what explanation could there be other than some devilish thing inside his eye acting of its own volition, grown aware of the larger being in which it was imprisoned and seeking to confound, to torment, perhaps to injure, like a miniscule terrorist assaulting a fragile and easily confounded governing body from within? To fight off the beginnings of panic, he elected to pray; he was no religious fanatic, but he had no other recourse, and he said, Uhh . . . Heavenly Father, then lapsed into silence, unable to come up with a properly pious follow-up, gone blank and wordless, and so he tried again, Heavenly Father, Holy Father (two Fathers were better than one, more suited to the sonority of prayer), I want this to stop . . . No, too plainspoken by half, too blatant, too desperate, and he tried to visualize the god to whom he was praying, thinking that might help him focus: no Jehovah, gray-bearded and grim, would suffice, and neither would a graven Baal, a Moloch, a golden calf, a solar disc, any of the usual choices. He imagined a man dressed in a nice business suit and resting on a riverbank in the midst of a great city, his pants rolled up, shoes and socks lying on the grass beside him, cooling his feet in the river—sitting, he was taller than the surrounding skyscrapers, an affable enormity, good humor incarnate, who, rather than delivering sermons, told jokes that kept the passers-by in stitches, imparting his religious message by means of a spasm of laughter, and Wilander conjectured that he (or He, although he doubted *his* personal savior would stand on ceremony) might be responsive to prayer in the form of a humorous story, thus he tried the one that went, There were four Swedes who lived on a boat in Alaska, but that one wasn't funny enough, and he thought god must receive an overabundance of prayers in joke format and didn't get many ripping yarns with a hint of the satirical, and thus he related the tale of Dhazi Brasse, a citizen of the city of Ta . . . Tu . . . well, the name of the city wasn't of consequence. Dhazi Brasse, then. A low-level financier, a middleman, sometimes seller of narcotic substances—Wilander himself had gotten into dealing a little coke toward the end of his businessman days, just to friends and friends of friends, that sort of thing, and that had been how he met Cerulean, the most beautiful hooker in Fairbanks, perhaps in all Alaska,

whose name derived from her startling blue eyes, which were closer to aquamarine than cerulean, but her pimp, Def Ivan, a Russian wanna-be rapper with innumerable piercings and the tattooed face of a lion superimposed on his features, had preferred Cerulean, because it sounded, he said, like the word for *blow job* in Polynesian or Indonesian or Eurasian or something; they had become regular customers, and Wilander had taken his costs out in trade a memorable time or two (Cerulean was an expert provider), but more memorable was the way the relationship had ended, with Def Ivan dead in the street, bullets having blown away two eyebrow piercings and a portion of his mane, and Cerulean enlisted with a new pimp, who took her to Seattle, where she had been murdered, stabbed in the throat with a pair of scissors, and a couple of nights before she left for Seattle, they were sitting around Wilander's apartment, doing a few farewell lines, talking about the night when Def Ivan had jumped on stage at the Tundra and done his act, featuring rhymes like *never felt worse* and *Novosibirsk*, much to the alarm of the audience who applauded out of fear when he was done, and Cerulean, clad only in panties, she hated wearing clothes when she was high, thus keeping Wilander in a perpetual state of semi-arousal, laughed like crazy remembering, but then grew morose and said, This thing with Seattle scares me. I feel like I'm falling down a hole, and when Wilander offered to put her up at his place, no strings, until she figured things out, she said, You're falling down a hole, too, Tommy, which had proved true, and this recollection nudged his thoughts again to Dhazi Brasse who had literally fallen down a hole while walking at night through the city, the street caving in beneath his feet and depositing him on an ancient underground roadway that spiraled downward past the tombs of the wealthy and the well-born, many inhabited by the dispossessed of the city who had found their way into this citadel of death and taken up residence in the little houses of family crypts, in the palatial apartments built for minor dukes, in the necropolises constructed by a generation of laborers for the women of kings, and these trespassers appeared less real than the rich noblemen and noblewomen depicted by the friezes on the marble walls; with their grimy skins and robes, they might have been the living shadows of those fortunate dead, and they drove him from their doors, offering neither food nor shelter nor the warmth of fire, menacing him with thorned vines and clubs, and he ran until he reached a quarter that was uninhabited, a place of immense

tombs deep in the earth where according to legend the gods themselves were buried, the old gods who had founded the city and were not, like the current crop of deities, creatures of mathematical principle, instrumentalities lacking all physical form, and giant stand-up comics, but manifested as beasts of heaven such as the arquinial, a jellyfish-like being reputed to be of such supreme luminosity, it had served the earth for a star about which to orbit before the first dawning of the sun, and, with a crowd of poverty-stricken devils in close pursuit, Dhazi broke the seal on the bronze door of a tomb so vast in scale, had there been stars and a moon in this country below the earth, it would have blotted them out, a vast dark shapelessness dwarfing the various pyramids, rhomboids, and dodecahedrons of the lesser gods, and he rushed inside, into the innermost sanctum, wherein the essence of the Great God Ondaje Babbajohn, aka Natty Dread Fundamental (called the Nameless One until outed by Dhazi) was preserved as a black flame, and he flung himself down behind the onyx basin wherein the flame burned and upon which the name of the Nameless One was carved, and there he cowered, fearful for his life. And lo, the Nameless One spoke to him, describing the torments that would be visited upon him for committing this act of sacrilege, and Dhazi, although he was sore afraid, said, Hang on a sec, Ondaje Babbajohn, thereby becoming the first human being ever to pronounce the Name of the Nameless One, and only the second entity all-time, the first being the sea nymph, Dilorja, one of the Tressidae family of sea nymphs who, while sunbathing, had spotted the god peeking at her from behind a sea stack and cried out either, Ondaje Babbajohn!, or else had said, slurring the words badly (and this, according to her friends, was thought to be the case, because Dilorja was a lush, a serious juicer, and, at the moment of her untimely utterance, had a mouthful of wine), Oh God! What's going on? Taking no chances, though He Himself was unsure that a covenant had been breached, the Nameless One visited torments upon her, causing her to flee to the next world over, where she settled in the hellish region of Davenport, Iowa (as far from open water as she could get), married the owner of a barber college, raised three reasonably well-behaved daughters, and became a devout Christian Scientist and UFO cultist . . . Hold on, Dhazi said to Ondaje Babbajohn, before you punish me, listen to my tale of woe, and proceeded to tell the story of how he had fallen through the street and been chased into the tomb, embellishing his

account with pratfalls, anecdotal material, and a touch of personal history, and Ondaje Babbajohn started to chuckle and to ask questions like, What happened to the girl?, and Where did you go after that?, and before long a yellow oblong hole opened in the blackness, admitting the too-bright glare from the engine room, and a figure appeared silhouetted in the hatchway, whether Mortensen or Arnsparger or Ondaje Babbajohn, Wilander didn't care, for remembering his fear and hearing again the sound that had inspired it, he sprang toward the figure, brushing past whoever it was, and barreled up the stairs into the light of his answered prayer.

## 11

“ . . . Hell ends here . . . ”

**T**HE TEMPERATURE SOARED TO FORTY, SNOW CRUSTS SLUMPED from the superstructure with soft meaty thumps, a sound that suggested the steps of a rotting corpse moving at a faltering pace along the deck, an image born in a fevered tropic of Wilander's brain, yet his deeper thoughts were cold, in gelid suspension, brooding and slow, and as he sat atop the hatch covering the hold that first afternoon of the thaw, gazing out across the sea, which labored under a sluggish, cobalt spell, feeling himself the embodiment of a winter king who—his bleak reign done—was searching for a seal to put upon the years, a last icy flourish before fading into a sleep during which he would contemplate the general rule of the dark unspeakable until the world was reborn and his season came round again . . . as he sat there, then, Mortensen, naked to the waist, his pale, blotchy back like that of some curious polar mammal, strolled into view and stood by the rail and stretched out his arms to the waves and lifted his bearded face to the sky as though offering himself to emptiness and said, Hell ends here, and he cast such a cheerful look at Wilander, Wilander wanted to kill him and pictured himself clubbing Mortensen into unconsciousness, grabbing him by the hair and peeling away

the scalp with a bone knife, cutting and cutting, the deck awash with blood and snowmelt. Seduced by the physical lushness that he imagined would attach to carving a great peel of mottled skin and flesh from a leg or flank, he strained toward Mortensen, yearning to have that knowledge of him, to offer him that release, but discovered that he couldn't move, not a muscle, and when Mortensen leaned close and said, Didn't you hear me? No? Yes?, and prodded his shoulder, Wilander was limited in his reply to a furious blinking.

—Ah! I understand, said Mortensen. Don't you worry. It's only temporary, the paralysis. I experienced it myself, recently. At least I think I did, though I may be remembering an event that never took place . . . or took place somewhere within the realm of possibility. Men are inclined to become confused from inhaling the fumes of the possible during a voyage like the one we're beginning. But as to the paralysis, I recall it lasting an hour or two. Not long. I'd been feeling a bit under the weather, as I imagine you are. Obviously the body needs extra time to acclimate to changes in pressure and so forth as we draw nearer the exchange point to the Iron Shore. We're so close now, I suspect the atmospheres may be bleeding together. At any rate, the paralysis, I believe, enables those changes. He turned to the rail again and walked a ways toward it. In case you weren't listening, or were unable to hear due to a sudden incapacity, a ringing in the ears, something of the sort, what I said was, Hell ends here. I've been giving the notion serious thought. Let's say that by hell I mean the world of disappointments, of boredom commingled with pain, a world of entirely unsatisfactory hue and dimension. The world we're familiar with. That being the case, I think we can say with authority that hell does, indeed, end here. I doubt we'll ever sail completely past the potentials of death and pain, but the Iron Shore is of your making—that portion of it, at any rate, not created long ago—and thus incorporates, I assume, the purer half of your wish, the part less blighted by the taint of self-destructiveness, so that pain and death, when they must come, will come more softly, with a tender hand, and after several centuries of a life notable for the variety and quality of its pleasures. You've thought about this, I assume? Haven't you? You're beyond letting the Iron Shore occur, letting it just come to you in visions? You've devoted some time to design, surely? You've consciously attacked the problem of creating an architecture capable of supporting the abundance of your desires? If not, I urge you to do so. And at your earliest

convenience. Spend what time is left in the creation of a strong structural component. Provide it with a spine that's flexible, yet strong enough to support subsequent expansion. You don't want to leave design to chance. Mortensen chuckled. Been there, done that, as they say.

Wilander was astonished that he understood what Mortensen had said; though it had been expressed with exceptional precision, it did not seem something that he should have understood; he was accustomed to finding Mortensen incomprehensible, yet in this instance, not only did he understand him, he agreed with him—he needed to stop thinking of the Iron Shore in revelatory terms and get about the business of shoring up his creation, and he might have addressed that challenge straightaway had Mortensen not chosen to interrupt the process by saying, I suppose you'll have to wait until you feel better. When I was paralyzed, I remember virtually drowning in grim and grisly. My mental state, you understand. Some gulls were crying in the offing, making a horrid racket. I literally wanted to smear their blood on my face. One slight change in the weather, in brain chemistry, an increase in air pressure—that's all it takes for the serial killer or the Stalin to come out to play. The monster. We're never more than a step away from fulfilling some bloody legend, from having a cannibal dream of a world in which everyone but oneself (Mortensen put a hand to his chest, a feminine gesture) is paralyzed, and you wander among them (he wandered behind Wilander, who could not turn his head, no matter how hard he tried) carrying your knife and fork at the ready, a guest at the ultimate feast. Mortensen popped back into view. Lucky for you, I'm not that way. It's the ladies who'd have to worry if I were to adopt that shape. I'd be the werewolf and not the Ripper. Their deaths would be a natural outgrowth of my passion for them, and not the passion itself. But this voyage has bent me to a purpose unforeseen. I've become a hazard to my appetites, I've lost my taste for villainy.

Standing before Wilander, Mortensen was a pathetic figure, sickly and gaunt, with his unkempt beard wider than his chest and his rotten teeth and raccoon eyes, yet he seemed at that moment the wisest of men, someone who knew not only the core truth of things, but was able to communicate that knowledge with excellent clarity, and—most surprisingly—to display his true concerns, to clear away their outer wrappings, their husks, and shine a pragmatic light on them, thereby insuring that the person listening understood his



message. We're very close now, Mortensen went on. I imagine we're in the last days, perhaps the last day, prior to transition. It's liable to take a severe physical toll. We can both expect some distressing symptomology. But now you're aware of what must be done, I have full confidence you'll steer us through. He folded his arms, regarding Wilander with apparent fondness. We may not have the chance to speak again. Certainly we'll not have a great many more opportunities, and once we've crossed over . . . well, none of us have been what I'd call good shipmates. If it weren't for *Viator*, we would have gone off in various directions long ago. Once we've reached our destination, I have no doubt that's what'll happen. Perhaps we'll meet again, but it's unlikely. We've each spent years trying to destroy ourselves. I'd like to think we'll use our time on the Iron Shore to better effect. That portends—for me, at least—a period of solitude. I have to find a way to prevent myself becoming the man I was. He toed a rusting bolt along the rail. With that said, it's been an honor to sail with you. When you first arrived, I didn't think you were right for the job. You seemed too much a man of this world to steer us toward the next. But Lunde . . . he was the first captain, the first navigator. I should have known he'd make the proper choice. Mortensen tapped a finger beneath his left eye. He had the vision. He saw your potential. I wish I'd respected his judgments from the beginning. I'm sure I could have been of more help to you than I was. But it's like mother used to say, All that shit's been flushed into the river by now, so don't come crying about how bad the water tastes. Have I told you about my mother? A remarkably vulgar woman. She couldn't let a sentence pass her lips without a *shit* or a *fuck* attached.

He began to drone on about his mother, what an intolerable creature she had been. Brilliant, yes! A concert-master in her early thirties, but a sexual addiction had put an end to that chapter of her life and left her, in her forties, addled and empty, brain-damaged from an STD, but before that, before her decline into an early dementia, she had been domineering, as aggressive as a man, with an omnivorous sexual appetite; she had devoured brooding double bassists, virginal flautists, truculent cornetists, irascible tympanists, professorial bassoonists, deviant cellists, hyperactive piccolists . . . Musicians were her thing, musicians of every age, gender, race, and appearance. She'd slept her way through an entire orchestra (though—heh heh—Mortensen doubted she had done much sleeping), a number of string quartets and several woodwind

ensembles, ultimately hooking up with a trombonist who was her equal in his devotion to Eros, and he had dragged her through the sex clubs of the west coast to her eventual doom, and once she lost her beauty, when she could no longer command the urgent desire of men, she turned to her son for physical affection. As Mortensen spoke of his mother's abuses, painting their encounters with a lover's obsessiveness, recounting episodes that spoke to her sexuality in tones that wavered between nostalgia and revulsion, Wilander seemed to see Mrs. Mortensen standing at the rail, staring heatedly in their direction, a decaying figure clad in a shredded flesh-colored body-stocking that fell away from her limbs like peels of skin, with red-rimmed eyes and the blotchy complexion of a plague victim and graying blond hair tousled by a wind that caused no accompanying shifting among the fir boughs, and yet she had full breasts and a narrow waist and shapely hips, personifying a horrid allure that conjured the memory of women Wilander had observed while vacationing in Miami whose bodies were monuments to cosmetic surgery, yet whose faces, although sculpted and peeled, remained haggard and mask-like . . . and thinking about Miami caused him to consider words that rhymed with Miami, which caused him to note the clamminess of his shirt, which in turn caused him to recall being caught in a torrential rainstorm in Guatemala, which led him through a lengthy progression of thoughts (one during which Mortensen's voice stopped) that brought him to contemplate the films of Arnold Schwarzenegger, with particular attention paid to *Predator*, the pageantry of its jungle slaughters, and culminated with the recognition that he was alone on the deck, capable of some slight movement, and with the idea that he had been alone for some time, and with the unfounded suspicion that Mortensen had never been there at all.

**T**he bright, bright morning sun was killing Wilander's eyes, nailing them to his skull with burning spikes, but he felt marginally healthier after a night's sleep, a night's coma, and thought he should take advantage of the moment, get a little exercise, deciding to walk as far as he could along the shingle—no far, he assumed. But with each step, the unsound feeling in his head dissipated by degrees and the feverish ache began to recede from his bones and, when he reached the fringe of the forest, he kept going, trudging about twenty paces

in, until the restless shapes and eerie noises in the green gloom caused him to turn back. From the edge of the shingle, *Viator's* hull, black and blunt and patchy with ice, had a brutish quality, yet was lent a strangely delicate accent by the two crumpled screws with their defining crusts of snow, like two sugar flowers popping out from the belly of an unsodded grave, and there was a curious thing, as well, on the shore, down close to the water, a mound of seaweed, reddish brown in color, bulky, roughly man-sized, uncovered by the snow. Wilander let his feet stray him near the mound and found it was not seaweed, after all, but rust. A man, amazingly lifelike, fashioned of rust. Coming closer, he recognized the man to be Arnsparger. He stiffened with alarm, but then leaned in for another look. The body was fully clothed, the clothes cunningly fashioned of rust, and arranged lying on its stomach, its arms outflung, face to one side, gaping—it might have fallen from the stern. Arnsparger must have put it there to be found, a grisly piece of art, repellent for the coarseness of its subject matter. Wilander knelt beside the body. The detail was exquisite. All of *ozim*. Here a rusty pen protruded from a hip pocket; here the bulge of a wallet, a rusty button on a shirt collar, a rusty thread extruded from a trouser cuff. He had not believed Arnsparger capable of such. Beery, bluff Arnsparger, born in tavern light to a crowbar and keg of beer . . . he had made this? This miracle? How had he managed to fix the surface? Or did he, like the purest of artists, intend his work to be sacrificed, victimized by wind and weather? Wilander positioned his finger over Arnsparger's jowly, stupefied face, then thought, no, not the face, he wouldn't be the one to spoil the face, to disturb the perfection of the sculpture in so critical an area, and, choosing a spot near the belt, where damage would not be so noticeable, he pushed with his finger. To his dismay, it went in easily. Ah, well. He withdrew it. Sheathed in rust, tipped in blood. He stared. Delicate flakes of red and black covered the finger from the knuckle to the first joint, giving way to a coating of glistening red. Blood. Though his exterior was rust, beneath the dermal layer, the figure was Arnsparger. An Arnsparger whose skin was missing, whose flesh had a mushy consistency. That fact sank in, as did the fact of a red leakage from the hole Wilander had poked. Arnsparger was still alive, or freshly dead. Something inside the figure settled, as from an imbalance created by his invasive finger. Its cheek caved in. Grains of rust dribbled from an eye socket. Horrified, Wilander ran for the ship, nearly

running up the rope, a mad scramble. He flung himself over the rail and made for the cabins, calling to Mortensen, to Halmus, wanting to alert them to danger. But what was the danger? You couldn't yell, Arnsparger's turned to rust!, and expect the same reaction you got by yelling, Fire!. You would leave yourself open to ridicule, and rightly so.

—Arnsparger's dead! Wilander shouted. He's dead! Arnsparger's dead!

He went frantically along the corridor, flinging open doors. Mortensen was not in his cabin or the mess, he must be down in the hold and he could rot there, because Wilander wasn't about to go down there, no sir, not on his life—electric birds squabbled in its corners, blackness pulsed on its floors, a sticky, uncongealing blackness like the blood of an old god, forever possessed of a divine vitality, and he burst into Halmus' cabin, noticing the glass had been knocked out of the portholes a split-second before his feet skidded out from under him—he squawked, flailed, and slammed down onto the deck, knocking his head, yet not losing consciousness, squeezing his eyes shut to manage the pain. After the pain subsided he rolled onto his side and saw that glass was littering the floor and one of the crumbs, a chunk about the size of a marble, enclosed part of a brown eye. Groggily, he thought it was reflecting his eye until he remembered his eyes were blue. He sat up, bracing against Halmus' bunk. The chunk showed the same from every angle, as if the eye were turning as glass turned, as if it were interested in him. Exhausted, Wilander reacted with wonderment. Another chunk held the corner of a sneering mouth; another yet a section of chin and neatly razored beard. Put them all together, they spelled Halmus. He approached the collection of the pieces with the meticulous persistence of someone assembling a jigsaw puzzle, searching for shapes that matched, looking for chunks that held a portion of eye and skin, figuring if he finished the eyes first, he would have an easier time with the rest. He had almost completed both eyes before his curiosity flagged—he did not care to see the expression Halmus had worn at the moment when whatever had happened to him happened. Scattering the pieces of the death mask on the floor, crunching glass grit underfoot, he walked along the passageway to his cabin and collapsed on his bunk. Something was digging into his back. Cell phone. He switched the thing on. Lots of messages, but he didn't have much he wanted to say to anyone, just he wished this trip was over, sayonara, and like that. He was tired,

too full of angles for which there were no measures, too full of . . . the thought tailed off. He couldn't think, he couldn't count, he couldn't think. His phone rang. Watching the little dingus vibrating on his chest made for a fun few seconds, but soon grew tiresome. It stopped. Seconds later it rang again. He picked it up and, in a voice whose hoarseness startled him, said, Hello.

—Thomas? Arlene, sounding greatly relieved. I've been trying to reach you. Where've you been?

Around the world and back again. At Claude's Bahama Lounge, where the action never stops.

—Thomas?

What a shithole Claude's had been! Half the time some unfortunate could be found lying unconscious and bloody in the snowbank that had built up against the curb outside, and Claude himself, the owner, who had fled Nassau for Juneau, fearful of reprisals for unpaid gambling debts, a giant of a man, fully six-feet-eight . . .

—Thomas? Are you there?

—Hey . . . Arlene! He was happy to hear her voice.

—Listen, she said. That friend of mine, the hacker? I sent him what you told me . . .

—How are you? You okay?

—Thomas! You have to get off the ship!

—I've really missed you.

She spoke to someone, her conversation muted, then said, *The Fat Allie* out of Mayorkiq. Remember?

What the fuck was she saying?

—The fishing boat Lunde told you about, said Arlene. There is no Mayorkiq, not any more. The . . .

—You miss me?

—Yes. Yes, of course. Now listen. The people in Mayorkiq went crazy, they all died except for a couple . . .

She was starting to annoy him, but he decided to take the high road.

—I love you, he said.

That gave her pause, but not for long.

—So a Hazmat team went in . . .

The term, Hazmat team, conjured the absurd image of people wearing numbered green jerseys and helmets, carrying mops and buckets, who performed at parties . . .

— . . . found these crates . . .

His right eye began twitching and blinking uncontrollably, and, to stop it, he pushed his fist into the socket. She was trying to confuse him, doing this on purpose. The bitch! She didn't love him, she never had, but she liked the sex, oh yeah, she couldn't get enough!

— . . . the crates . . .

Of course neither could he—he hadn't touched her for days, or was it weeks?, yet he was still lost in the turns of her body, still crazy about her.

— . . . virus . . .

—I want to fuck you, he said gleefully.

—This is serious, Thomas! That thing you're always drawing? That thing you dream about? That's it!

—The . . . what?

—That thing you've been dreaming about. There's a picture of it on the web page he sent me.

—Who sent you . . . what? What did they send?

—The crates must have cracked open. You've got to get off the ship! We're on our way out, Terry and me.

Sternly, he said, I thought we'd settled this.

—Settled what?

—I'm not leaving.

—Haven't you been listening to me? Your life's in danger!

—You can't expect me to leave now. We're so close. *Viator's* close to breaking through.

—You've got to . . .

—You can't do this to me! You can't just call me up and talk! You can't talk talk talk and expect me to relate to your bullshit when I have so much . . . so many things . . . I have to do, I have to take care of . . .

—God! Don't you understand! Everything that's happened to you is the fault of that fucking ship!

He sat up and swung his legs off the bunk. Everything? No, not everything. Not everything's the fault of that fucking ship! You turned into an

animal! You didn't have to do that! An animal! That wasn't the ship's fault! That was *not* the ship's fault!

—Thomas, please. I'm trying to help you.

—You keep telling me to leave! Why don't you try it, huh? You keep telling me . . . well, why don't you try, you stupid fucking bitch! I know, I know! Because you can't understand! You don't have a fucking brain in your head! You don't have the . . . the . . . fuck!

He threw the phone at the wall and was satisfied to see it splinter into little plastic bones. The sight calmed him and he sank back onto the bed, empty of rage, empty of hope, of vitality, of delirium—he could make a long list of the things he was empty of, and for a while he checked off this item and that, yes, yes, no, almost, he wasn't sure, and it got to be like counting sheep, so he tried to sleep, but the sound and light had returned, the metallic *skronks* were nearly constant, and he lay there, listening to the groaning, watching the flashes of light, so vivid, so pure a white he could see every color in them, see anything he wanted, and he wanted to see Arlene, she wasn't really angry at him, she was terribly sad he was leaving, and it saddened him to be leaving, too. He had a long, cool thought of her, a delicious, eyes-closed thought of how she would drag her pendulant breasts across his chest, and when he opened his eyes she was sitting astride him in all her full, sweet, hot life, her hair loose about her shoulders, but as for him, his chest was bones, just a ribcage, a shriveled heart and desiccated lungs within, and he wasn't shocked by the sight—it wearied him, but he wasn't shocked, because he was leaving and she was staying, and this vision was the voice of his reason warning him away from things he could no longer have. He replaced her with the whistler. The queen of Kaliaska replaced by a kitten with vacant eyes who made lustful cooing noises and drooled. At least his chest had been restored. The weight of his thoughts dragged him under the ground of sleep and into a dream; he was back in school, something about acorns, Bliss put in an appearance, as did Arlene and a giant, and then he woke to a prolonged grating shudder, to the signal, long awaited, of *Viator* getting under way.

Feeling creaky in his joints, Wilander shuffled along the passage and came out into blustery weather, flakes of snow driven sideways by gusts of wind, and a gray sky absent of all but a tin-colored smear of sun in the west, and no more than ten or twenty feet beyond the prow was a dazzling corona twice the

height of the ship, eclipsing some of the big trees, flaring and dwindling and opening every few seconds (the way a woman opens; that was what the corona resembled in its fiery configuration, the female genitalia, so it appeared that the ship was on the verge of effecting a literal act of penetration, finally consummating the marriage of which Mortensen had spoken, perfecting his metaphor) to reveal a view of another coast, a different view each time, as if *Viator* were choosing the perfect point of entry onto the Iron Shore, and they were grinding forward, inch by excruciating inch—he could feel the living skin of *Viator* tormented by the pressure of rock, accompanied by groans, shrieks, the shrill outcries of metal swelling and constricting, pushed through a narrows like none other, and he overbalanced, caught the rail, peering into the coronal depths at Cape Lorraine, at the sweep of the virgin forest, at all the wonders of that new world, and felt life pouring through him, *Viator's* life and his own, they shared a heart, or rather his heart was *Viator's* laboring engine, embarked upon a journey to end all journeys. He'd been wrong to picture his life ending in ignominy, wrong in his conjuring of days and nights spent in seedy union with the whistlers; he would remain aboard the ship, remain her captain and sail the seas (more than seven, by his reckoning), traverse the globe, going from port to port, and once they'd done the tour, once they had gone from Cape Lorraine to Port Satine—the name came unbidden to his tongue, holding the promise of a wild tropic, of talking statues and oracular turtles, of perfumed children bearing invitations from shadowy creatures who conferred magical powers through sex, but at what price?, of blind wizards who had slept with those same shadows, of prisoners who whispered tales of fates worse than life, and willowy black princesses from the cloud forests who bore the fingerprint of God on their bellies, and back-stair madonnas who would drain the poisons from a sailor's flesh with their perfect lips and work their spittle into white beads which they sold as remedies . . . and why not another world, another escape, why not travel on and on? Ceaselessly, tirelessly. A glorious future was to be theirs, Columbus' dream of heaven, a voyage of endless discovery. And then Mortensen, Saint Mortensen, a ragged figure, his beard wider than his chest, ran into the bow just as the image of the coast of Multikelio appeared within the corona, just as fire began to chew iridescent sparks from the prow. He shouted something, but there was too much din to



hear and perhaps he was speaking silently, shaping the words carefully with his lips and not giving them breath so Wilander could read them, but Wilander couldn't read them at all, and then Mortensen smiled, a fiercely enjoining smile, and, turning to the prow, to the light of his salvation, addressing the fire as he might a deliverer, with arms outspread, he let it wash over him.

The fire continued to eat the ship inch-by-inch, the groaning and shrieking grew louder, and Wilander, aghast at this apparent act of self-immolation, made less certain of his fate, backed away, backed until he could back no more, and sat down heavily in the stern. He thought he should do something, but could think of nothing and so he began to weep, to sob as *Viator*, shuddering violently, launched into an unfathomed sea. The fire devoured the collapsed winch and reached the verge of the superstructure, and he hid his face in his hands and wept. He did not know why he wept—it seemed a matter of convenience that he not know and so he wept for the sadness of not knowing. Then hands were laid on him, soft hands, Arlene's hands, Arlene and Terry, confusing him with their daft fumbling, their clumsy touches and ineffectual consolations. What could they want? He had nothing for them. He doubted their existence; they were demons come to tempt him. He clambered to his feet and stood unsteadily, his legs miles-long and swaying. They spoke words he could not hear, but knew were entreaties; they tried to hem him in against the rail, and he fended them off with furious swings of his fists, weeping all the while. He went several paces toward the fire, now less than forty feet away. The corona yawned, revealing an uncharted territory, one he had recently begun to envision, to imagine, to create, an island continent, as yet unnamed, though he had the beginnings of a name, an S word, or maybe a C word, a name like a complicated sigh, a place where black shells littered the beaches, each holding a creature who knew one secret thing that men did not and would yield up that secret for a gift whose nature they would whisper in your ear . . . if you dared, and most did not, because certain secrets weakened the essence of he who heard them, and thus it was that the island was home to many who had grown so frail, they had the reality of ghosts and wandered endlessly, eventually forgetting all they knew except the secret told them by the shell; and in the hills, the green folded hills that bulked up from the shore at the eastern end of the continent, were villages into which a

traveler might venture and be waylaid by a woman or a job or some affliction, drawn into a life and there experience all its attendant joys and sorrows, and when he died he would find himself on the road outside the village, the opposite side from that where he had first entered, free to continue on his journey; and on the mist-shrouded heights were labyrinthine caves, once home to ascetic mathematicians who had labored to complete equations left them by a prophet in fragmentary scribblings and notations—fragmentary because he was a mad prophet, a man of inconstant tempers to whom truth occurred in fulminant bursts—and on the day his disciples finished their labors, completed his final equation, they became perfected and vanished utterly from the earth, leaving their product carved on the walls of the caves in so simple a form that anyone could follow it, anyone could walk deeper into the caves, reading the completed equations, and at a certain point they would reach—literally and figuratively—a point of pure comprehension and they, too, would be perfected and disappear, though few chose to follow the equations this far, most stopped well short of perfection, complaining of dizziness, hot flushes, nausea, and fear that they would lose the security of their imperfect world, and they came to view perfection as a trap, a demonic sleight-of-hand that would strand them in desolation; and beyond the hills lay a city that he had not yet entirely envisioned, imagined, or created, but he knew things about it, he knew its colors were gold, ivory, aquamarine, knew that a great barbaric spire lifted from its center, topped by a finial carved from the tooth of a beast that no one remembered, and he knew its lavish scents, its music, and knew that in a certain quarter of the city, on a certain corner, was a house shaped like one of those massive Olmec heads with the face of a stoic child found in the jungles of Yucatan, only the house was much larger and of paler stone, and the features accentuated with paint, and that was all he knew. The city waited on the other side of the fire for him to flesh out, to give enduring reality—his longed-for exotic destiny, his heart's dreamt-of destination—and he headed for the fire, weaving, still unsteady, but feeling a surge of energy as he drew near the flames, the beginnings of his renewal . . . and then he heard Arlene call his name, saw her standing with arms outstretched, face broken with fear. He took a step toward her, recognizing that this was the end of them, a moment requiring some memorial tenderness, and it seemed in that step were all the steps he had ever taken, all the missteps, all the firm first

steps, all the steps leading to good and evil, only this one had no end, no land-fall and sent him pitching downward, falling into a pool of blackness, like a sailor who had mistaken a puddle of rain for the sea.

## 12

“ . . . descending into bathos . . . ”

**D**URING THE FIFTY-NINE DAYS OF HIS CONFINEMENT, THE FIRST three weeks in a military hospital, the remainder in a unit that his doctors said was a psychiatric facility (he suspected it was something more sinister), Wilander was told a story that, like every story, had its flaws, its holes, but sufficed to encompass more-or-less the facts from which it had been fabricated. *Viator's* cargo, unlisted on the manifest, consisted of two containers of a virus as yet unnamed (a lentivirus to be precise, his keepers told him), one of which had cracked open in Lunde's storm and polluted the hold. It may have been intended to be destroyed with the ship, but this was thought unlikely; more likely, it was a Russian bioweapon meant for terrorist hands. The lentivirus bonded with the DNA in brain neurons, gradually driving the host mad (*You're going to have to put up with this guy for a while, but we'll try and keep him calm with drugs*). Halmus and Arnsparger had been dead for weeks and days respectively when he happened upon them, and it may have been that he discovered their bodies weeks apart. Everything he had experienced on the ship was, after a certain point, fantasy. And what about the gigantic lentivirus of his dreams, his madness? The immense brown ropy thing he had seen flying above the forest? They mumbled some business about impingement on the optic nerve and told him not to worry about it.

—What about Mortensen? And Nygaard? he asked, expecting them to say, well, now that's something we need to talk to you about, and then they would sweat him in an interrogation room, hammer at him until he admitted that he didn't know, he couldn't remember how Nygaard died, and they would smile,

they would see this as a crack in his defenses, and then hammer at him some more, deprive him of sleep, of water, until he would be eager to confess to anything, to the slaughter of Abel, to crimes as yet uncommitted, but all they said was, Who knows? I imagine they ran off in the woods. And so he was free. He never quite believed the story, but it was apparent that his doctors believed it, and he felt that he should have faith in it, because so many people told him it was true. For a time he succeeded, but there was a better story, a more compelling story, running through his head, though he wasn't sure he believed it, either. It seemed the fantastic residue of something that was happening to him, something that was continuing to happen and that—removed from *Viator*, from its source—he was unable to render as other than an approximation, but soon, though he gave lip service to the story he had been told, he gave himself over to the story he was telling and reinhabited the Iron Shore, not so vividly as once he had, for the story was no longer a river pouring, racing, tumbling through his head, it was a mere trickle, bright rivulets of narrative that grew smaller and more elusive with each passing day, and he followed them as best he could when given time, when he wasn't being poked, prodded, and interrogated, he seized onto them and went where they led him, dedicating himself to this pursuit with such a ferocity of will that when the narrative had dwindled to a single strand, he felt that strand was woven all through him, attached to his DNA. In the story, his name was Dhazi Brasse and he lived in a house that had been constructed and adorned so as to resemble a pale brown Olmec-type head, one of several such anthropomorphic buildings placed at odd angles to each other, forming the perimeter of an open space in the mangrove-dense tangle of streets and alleys of the city whose name he could not recall, a space that had been exploited for a market (Soji Simanere, it was called) thronged at every hour by shoppers and jugglers and fire-eaters and thieves, and the stalls there, tucked beneath awnings to keep off the brutal sun and sudden summer showers, sold (among their myriad wares) robes of embroidered silk; copper plates inlaid with silver script that spelled out scriptural verses, the inlay done by children who slaved in one-room factories scattered throughout the city; attar of roses, musk, perfumes derived from the glands of marine mammals, from the roots of forest flowers, from the fragile bones of strange insectile creatures native to the region that, when crushed, yielded a pearlescent fluid; wooden trumpets,

ornamental flutes, kyiangs and fazeels (harplike musical instruments of the highlands); drugs of every sort, remedial and recreational; golden jewelry and semi-precious stones; plumdarbas, loose-fitting, hooded gowns of rainbow translucence (woven by secretive shore-dwelling mammals that had been seen by the region's earliest settlers, but not seen since those days) that accented the beauty of beautiful women and lent the illusion of beauty to women who were not, thus there were no plain women in the city apart from those who chose to be (more than might have been expected, for with beauty so accessible, a cult of ugliness had sprung up), and it was said that the animals that fabricated the cloth did so for the sole reason of placating mankind, that they made this offering in order to guarantee their privacy, a supposition given credence when a government-sponsored effort to learn more about them was met with a cessation of the cloth's production (rainbow skeins were no longer found draped every morning over bushes along the water's edge) that lasted until the complaints of the city's women inspired the powers-that-be to curtail their investigation. Soji Simanere was, then, a market specializing in middle-brow luxuries, and in one other thing: by law, it was required that the men and women of the royal family, their identity concealed behind molecule-thin reflecting masks of mirror cloth, offer themselves at infrequent intervals for the sexual usage of commoners who competed for them in a series of intellectually challenging games, thereby ensuring that the government would never lose intimate contact with common folk, and the site of the games, the place where the prizes were put on public display, was the Issad (literally, the temple of commerce, for the Issadrim were a sect who had made business their religion), a building on one of the crooked, covered streets leading off the market, enclosing a single great room whose ceiling was supported by dozens of pillars painted with a spiral pattern of red, black, and pale yellow that stood out sharply against the custardy yellow walls.

Amid this gaud and chaos, then, he lived an active life, a comfortable life, yet he was not fully engaged by it, nor was he entirely comfortable—he yearned for stability, for a woman with whom he could share his life (none of the women of Soji Simanere were, to his mind, sufficiently trustworthy) and he felt he should be doing something other than serving as a middleman, enabling dealings between smugglers, merchants and traffickers, and, though he earned a good living and had the respect of his community (a community

of the disrespected), he was not satisfied and this dissatisfaction began to manifest as carelessness and risk-taking. Armed with a knife, he would walk out late at night along the devious streets of the city, stopping in low taverns and smokeries where slaves to otiar would drift and mutter while sprawled on a filthy mat, stimulated by the drug to experience lives lived on other planes, lives congruent with this one (he was drawn time and again to a plane wherein a man much like himself lived in a country called Alaska), and he would return home through the byways of Noctulis, a precinct known for the rapaciousness of its criminal classes, and early one morning, nearing his house, walking along the covered street that ran past the Issad, he stopped in at the temple on a whim and soon found himself (against all logic, for he had never entertained any desire to mix with the royals) competing in a game of Steel and Reason (a contest in which one received a cut for every incorrect answer given to questions put by the Issidrim), contending with such zeal, the other contestants were soon bled to a point of mortal peril, and all to gain the company of a woman whose face he could not see and whose form, obscured by the voluminous folds of a plumdarba, he was unable to divine, and once he had won her, once he took her home and installed her in his bed chamber, the exhilaration of the game ebbed and he was bewildered by his motives for pursuing her, discomfited by her presence, empty of desire, and he suggested that they get some sleep, that the night had been long for both of them.

—I'm not tired, she said. But if you wish, I'll rest beside you.

The voice that issued from behind the mask was coffee and cinnamon, having a contralto sweetness that surprised him; he had expected to hear a more girlish tone and, lying next to her, he caught sight of his face reflected in the mirror cloth and, curious, he asked her to remove the mask, knowing it was not permitted, that he might only have knowledge of her body, and, rather than reminding him of this, she said, Perhaps someday you'll have occasion to see me. But whether or not you'll recognize me, that I cannot tell you.

Her manner engaged him and he no longer wanted to sleep. Gray light became visible out the windows, soon golden light streamed into the room, and their conversation progressed at an equal pace from gray formalities to a level of golden intimacy, a period during which they fell to touching, to

kissing, and he had his rights of her. I don't understand, she said during an interlude. He asked what was it that she didn't understand and she merely shook her head, but he knew that what was puzzling her was the same thing that puzzled him: the sense of familiarity that attached to their physical union and the emotional charge that seemed to intensify as it flowed between them, carrying delicate non-verbal messages. The hour drew near when she would have to leave, a day to the second after she left the Issad in his company, and he asked her to what sort of life was she returning—judging by her woeful manner, her evasive responses, it was one for which she was ill-suited, one lacking all emotional security—and he asked again if he could see her face?, did she have to leave?, would they meet again?, and to these questions she responded, no, yes, I don't know, and quieted him with a kiss that lasted almost to the end of their time together; and then she was at the door, her mask a mirror to his desperation, and, as he watched her walk off into Soji Simanere with a languid step under the gray sky of morning, merging with the early crowds, he felt his heart change, the way a shadow clock that begins to register the day will change, its darkened surface washed clean of orderly spent hours by a cloud of golden disarray.

**S**till frail and uncertain, Wilander was discharged into Arlene's care and together they returned to Kaliaska. Thanks to the madness of the late Jochanan Lunde, he had fifty thousand dollars and no immediate need to work, but he helped out at the trading post as he felt able and things fell into a routine. He and Arlene ate together and talked, though they did not actually converse. Wilander felt uneasy with words, afraid of what he might say, afraid that he could not discuss politics, business, or any of the usual subjects without becoming impassioned and, in the grip of passion, he would be encouraged to bring up the subject about which he was truly passionate, the story in his head, still alive, still vital, so vital that it was bursting to be related, yet he knew that relating it would make her worry or cause her to fear him, or perhaps to ridicule him—he was afraid of that most of all, afraid that the story spilling through him, that had eaten so much of his life, would prove to be unimportant—and therefore he limited himself to pleasantries, to neutral comments. They made love less frequently than they had prior to their break-

up. The sex was as good as ever, but there was a distance between them that had not been evident before, one that seemed an amalgam of awkwardness and wariness funded by Arlene's suspicion that he was still mentally ill, and by his reluctance to let go of mental illness because he half-believed that his visions, his story, represented a grand reality now lost to him. Some nights, he invented excuses to keep busy past the time she fell asleep and would make his bed on the living room sofa and lie back gazing at the kilims and the throws, at the chaotic oils on the walls with the glare of their abstract hells showing among dark clouds of dirt and paint, and he would retreat into his story, *How Dhazi Brasse Found His Destiny Or Whatever*, into a world of his own fabrication against which the world of his senses could not compare. It was as if he and Arlene existed in two different countries separated by an invisible border—they were ghosts to one another, having intermittent flashbacks of their life together, then lapsing into a doldrum, an atmosphere so deep and thick, there seemed no escape from it. He presumed that sooner or later they would escape this doldrum, that Arlene would snap and throw him out, or he would hook onto a freighter traveling south or maybe west, maybe in Russia or Japan he could find a question to which he was the answer, taking a different route from Dhazi Brasse who, instead of exchanging one labyrinthine circumstance for another, traveled deeper into the city of his birth and deeper into his own labyrinthine structure, turning to otiar for solace after receiving an unsigned note from the palace, a note expressing the woman's yearning, her regret at the constraints that made another meeting between them unlikely, and, yes, he required a strong measure of solace after that, an unreasonable measure, because the woman had been his lover for a single day, yet he had lived with women far longer and not been affected a tenth, not a hundredth as much as he had in this instance, and he supposed this was due to the fact that he and the woman had a history in other portions of the plenum (in Alaska, for one), so otiar served him well as a palliative, and each night he would take himself to his favorite haunt, a large ramshackle building, three stories with a tin roof and unpainted weathered boards on the outskirts of the city, where the roads gave out into trails at the base of a high green hill, surrounded by a litter of shanties, like a shabby sun at the center of a rundown solar system, the sign above the front porch declaring in fat, red, much-faded letters the place to be *The Star* (the second T had been effaced) of



*a Thousand Journeys*, and he would pay the price of a private room to a plump jaundiced woman of early middle age who had been at her station in the foyer since she was a child, sitting at a desk under a globe of yellow bioluminescence, rarely speaking except to announce in a croaking voice the list of prices, which had gone up considerably over the years—it was now thirty *dorales* for a room with a woman, six for a spot on a mat in the common room, three for an evening's supply of the drug—and then, accompanied by a thin, pretty, dark-complected teenager wearing an indigo robe belted at the waist and with black hair into which crystals had been woven, hanging down in twists to hide her face as though behind a beaded curtain (she was the girl he always asked for, anyway), he would go upstairs to a room not much larger than a closet, and she would load his pipe and light it and later take it from his nerveless fingers before it could fall, and she also gave him things to stare at and to touch—a mango seed, an antique, inch-tall Cuthura of rose gold (a religious figurine, the goddess of princesses and prostitutes, of lonely women), and she would sometimes unbelt her robe, offer him her breasts, like upturned saucers, the skin so soft he felt that a residue of their dusky surfaces remained on his fingertips long after he lifted his hand from them, and she permitted him to touch her other parts as well, but never did they have sex, never did he experience more than a flick of desire's whip, and then only at the approach of dawn, when she would smoke a pipe herself and curl up to sleep with her backside pressed against him. Mainly she was a source of color and texture, of sensations that he used to concentrate, to help nudge his consciousness out of the flesh, so he could drift across reality's borders and glimpse the adjoining planes; but after several encounters, imagining that they were becoming friends of a kind, he asked her name. Lastri, she said. She hailed from Lost Hakane, a village in the foothills of the Chanticleer Range. Yet some weeks later, when (half in the arms of the drug, roving the Alaskan coast, exploring the dissatisfactions of his alter ego) he asked again, forgetting that he had already received an answer, she told him her name was Bejo and that her home lay in the southern isles.

One night, after leaving the *Star of a Thousand Journeys*, instead of going straight home, he followed a trail of white sand and broken shells up into the hills and stood gazing out across the city with its meandering streets, its centuries-old houses of pepperstone and granite, black mastiffs howling atop

slate roofs, violet-white lights efflorescing in rough-hewn windows, and, central of it all, the white dome of Snow Moon Palace, so studded with towers, it resembled an enormous glowing sea urchin, the whole thing girdled by balconies that served as promenades, and as he stood surveying the city and the glittering sea beyond, he realized that if he were to penetrate this mystery, to understand the significance of his visions of the man in Alaska, then he needed to find the woman and determine her state of mind, because if what he felt was merely an illusion comprised of a plumdarba and a single night, what was the point of risking his life further?, and he was tempted to let it go, to let this dream be a dream only, but a month later, following a period of consultation with an accomplished thief of his acquaintance, clad in a pale body stocking that allowed him to blend in against the backdrop of Snow Moon Palace, he ascended a high tower that offered access to the quarters of the queen's retinue (as good a place as any to begin his search) and sprayed a hexagonal window of blue alarm glass with a mist that caused it to dissolve with an outpouring of tiny cries, rather than the ear-splitting shrieks it would otherwise have emitted, and, once inside, he sprayed himself with a mist, coating both his clothing and his flesh with a film of molecular machines designed to confuse the eyes of men, generating images that would satisfy their expectations of his absence. His heart beat with the rhythms of a butterfly drum as he made his way to a room with a sunken pool at one end and upon whose walls was displayed a living mural of white boats passing on a lake of lapis lazuli with islands of emerald reeds, and from whose ceiling issued a music of flutes and hissing whispers, sonic charms cast by witches on their deathbeds, and there he waited several hours, watching the women at their bath and taking their ease alongside the pool. He spotted half-a-dozen women who might have been the one he sought, but was exposed to so many naked breasts and bottoms, he could not be certain, and he was preparing to investigate another portion of the palace, when Queen Kersen, clad in a white linen robe, walked by him and turned down a corridor, passing from his sight, and he knew by her pace, her carriage, her manner, that here was the woman whom he had brought home from the Issad, and that not only was he guilty of trespass, he would—should he follow through on his intent—be guilty of a crime worthy of a truly terrible punishment, as witness the two guards stationed at the entrance to the queen's apartment, women centuries old,

anonymous as beetles in crystal masks and beryllium armor, condemned for an equally intrusive crime to sleep on foot beside the door, waking when stirred to arms by a spell of circuitry, their lives alternating between brief outbursts of violence and far longer periods during which they inhabited a black dream designed to kill them over the course of a thousand years. They did not wake at his step and woke no more after he had passed, for he blessed them with a drop of poison in the crystal sockets of their sightless eyes. When he made his presence known to the queen, her mouth fell open and she took a backward step, yet she recovered her poise quickly and railed at him for putting both their lives in peril. She struck him on the cheek and attempted to strike him a second time, but he forced her down upon her bed (whose gray silk coverlet and purple satin pillow with black pearls sewn at every corner had, it was reported, been rendered from a peal of thunder by some unimaginable science), and asked if anger and fright reflected the extent of her feelings?, if she were not using them to hide a stronger emotion?, a question to which she responded by averting her eyes; and when he asked again, she continued to look away but said in a voice full of strain, I have learned to control such feelings, and urged him once again to leave, saying their situation was impossible, surely he understood that? I'll go, he said, if that's what you wish. But first you must listen to me, and he then proceeded to tell her how his heart had struggled ever since their single night together (her face softened), how he passed his days and nights (her eyes narrowed at the mention of the Star of a Thousand Journeys), and of everything he had been thinking, including his speculation that they had a history on other planes and his recurring visions of the man on the Alaskan coast—on hearing this, her face grew pointed with interest and she asked if a woman was involved in Alaska, if she too desired escape, and further questions relating to the nature of the place and so on. Once she had mulled over the information he provided, she said, It may be something can be done. I'll contact you within two weeks, or three.

That long? he asked.

Aggravated by his impatience, she said, It took months to arrange our first meeting, and, having inadvertently given away this secret, she explained that she frequently traveled incognito and without the king's knowledge into the city, and had seen Dhazi on numerous occasions, seated in cafés and walking

in Soji Simanere. At a concert on the beach . . . Did he recall it? The Society of Mirth had played. Mid-summer, the crowd clustered atop the rocks and gathered around fires along the sand, burning blue and green with tossed-in chemicals, and some people swimming or riding on the backs of torpid sea hags, who had spent themselves mating on the reef off-shore. It was there he had claimed her heart by protecting a child from bullies (an incident he did not recall) and not long thereafter she made her arrangements (including the hiring of a slender, black-haired, dark-complexioned girl to place a device so small it could be inhaled into a tarry pellet of otiar, a device that, once in his bloodstream, offered the insistent suggestion that he stop in at the Issad on a certain night) that led to a fixed contest of Steel and Reason, and its subsequent rewards.

It was then you should have controlled your feelings, he said drily, though he understood now that her heart was as committed as his own, and felt that he could trust her to contact him, and so, reluctantly, he prepared to leave; but she caught at his arm and asked him to stay a little longer, saying that she had two hours before she was due at a dinner and it would be safer for him to wait, to leave after she had gone . . . and at that moment, the story trailed off, the narrative stalled, sputtered a few last images, a phrase or two, and died. Try as he might, Wilander could not resuscitate it, and he sometimes felt it was not worth resuscitating, that the story was a ridiculous confection, that it had no relevance to his life, yet he would sit for hours each day in the Kali Bar, unable to give it up, and stare at a taxidermist's plaque on the wall above the mirror upon which was mounted the plastic head and shoulders of a middle-aged white man with a tortured, twisted mouth that had been stretched out of shape by a fishhook protruding from its lower lip—this fraudulent trophy was now and then the target of a derisive insult or a flung bottle, representative of the native population's hatred of the white race, an attitude grown somewhat memorial in nature since whites no longer wanted anything from the Inupiat and came around infrequently, their visitations generally embodied by a group of Russian sailors standing at the shoreward end of the wharf, looking in dismay at the minimal opportunities for pleasure afforded by Kaliaska and its squalid whores, and the handful of whites who lived in the town had been accepted by, if not absorbed into, the body politic and were thought of as Kaliaskans except in times of tribal emergency—or he would

look into the clouded, bespotted, decal-blotched mirror and see himself sitting alongside, for example, a couple of men in plaid shirts and a slack-breasted woman the size of an offensive lineman, with graying hair and a pink T-shirt with sequined music notes on the chest, clumsy as a bear, who was shoving and punching and laughing at the men, and there were dim shadows at the tables behind them, mired in a bluish murk, a frozen depth, and Toby Keith was singing on the jukebox; and he would focus on the nameless city, on the five anthropomorphic houses at the center of Soji Simanere, on some deeply-imagined facet of his story, visualizing it in detail, using it as he would a mango seed or a Cuthura of rose gold . . . but to no avail, and, frustrated, unable to proceed, he would drink himself into a typical loutish, falling-to-his-knees-and-puking, then-getting-to-his-feet-and-shouting-at-nothing citizen of the town, recognizing that he, like the rest, was not drinking because he had a genetic propensity toward alcoholism, or because he was prone to instability, but rather because he, like them, had been isolated, cut off from the spine of his culture, stranded on its geographical and metaphysical fringes, trapped between worlds, and who wouldn't drink under those circumstances—he recalled the white male working-class tribe on the island of Nantucket gathering in the Atlantic Café winter's day after winter's day, a crowd of blitzed, paranoid garbage men, fishermen, and layabouts, like cattle driven by a blizzard to huddle together, their rough, bearded faces stupefied and glowering, one a suicide, one crippled in a DWI accident, one incarcerated for domestic abuse, one charged with bestiality (an episode involving a filly belonging to a neighbor that cast a fresh light on the fact that the perpetrator drove around in a camper van that usually housed a dog or two), and all this occurring during the single winter he had spent on the island. It was the same everywhere and throughout time, in Iron Age, Restoration, and Victorian versions of the Kali Bar. From Phnom Penh to the Malabar Coast to Harbor Beach, Michigan, once a resort for the privileged of Detroit, the Dodges, the Fords, et al, and, now that the thin tide of tourism had withdrawn, it had been reduced to a few thousand people (most of them elderly), an MSG plant that produced an unspeakable odor that wafted through the town each morning, and kids curb-sitting beneath the sole stoplight on below-zero February midnights, watching it blink yellow. Billions of people were isolated in the same fashion as the people of Kaliaska, on islands and

remote coasts, in outbacks and desert communities, and more were being isolated all the time. Hell, before long, ninety-nine percent of the world's population would be marginalized, victims of a vast secret history, the systolic-diastolic process of the great cell they inhabited, progressing from Dark Age to Rebirth, Yin to Yang, and back again, civilization spreading, inexorably snuffing out all traces of individuality, mystery, the possibility of magic, of miraculous advent, and then, as power became centralized, civilization grew paranoid and retracted its claws, its snuffers, its very presence except for an implicit threat, and the dark yin force returned and the billions who had been marginalized and left to fend for themselves on the fringes learned how to function without the spine of their culture and began to generate new magics, setting myriad anarchic fires that came to menace the citadels of power, causing the reawakening of the light-giving yang; and on the evening these thoughts resolved into a theory, Wilander, excited at having figured things out, attempting to hold in mind how the waxing and waning of the culture affected him and Arlene personally, hurried back to the apartment above the trading post where—cut off from alcohol, from every narrative resource—he became tired and disorganized, and his attempt to explain things lapsed into an incoherence centering about UFOs and dark matter, which had fit nicely into his thesis earlier, yet now seemed unconnected and without support, the product of diseased logic, and Arlene, after listening to him flounder for a while, said, Can't you see yourself? You're besotted! You're descending into bathos! And that's not the worst of it. She looked as though she were about to tell him what the worst of it was, but instead she spun on her heel and slammed the bedroom door behind her. Despite being proud of her for using, in the heat of the moment, words like *besotted* and *bathos*, he assumed this signaled the end of them and he started to pack, anticipating that she would tell him to leave, but he fell asleep on the sofa while stuffing his possessions into a duffel bag and when he woke the next day around noon, Arlene was already at work downstairs and he was in dire need of a drink.

“... Fuck it...”

**W**ILANDER STOPPED DRINKING SHORTLY AFTER THIS confrontation with Arlene, yet he continued to feel off-balance mentally, out of sorts physically, and unable to hold a thought in his head—it was as if time (or some other fundamental current) were no longer flowing in a smooth unbroken stream, but was tottering along on stiff legs, faltering, then stumbling forward in a sudden hurry, dragging him along the way an arthritic drunk might drag a sack of groceries on a sled, shaking up everything inside it. The one thing that quitting drinking achieved was a slight improvement in his living situation, but it was merely cosmetic, a matter of politesse; the union between himself and Arlene had been severely weakened and the brittle good cheer and precision thank-yous and mind-passing-the-butters and can-I-bring-you-back-something-from-the-kitchens with which they tried to glaze over the damage could not withstand much stress; sooner or later the glaze would crack and reveal the frail skeleton of the relationship, the ligaments rotting away, ready to collapse into a heap of bones, and to put off that day, because he didn't have a clue where he would go, in which direction he would travel, and because, in spite of his many failures of the heart and spirit, he loved Arlene and wished he could forget his story, his ridiculous story, and yet he believed the story was somehow crucial, that it meant something, and unless it finished telling itself to him, he would always be lost, and maybe that wasn't the worst fate, to be lost in Alaska, to wind up keeling over in a strip club in some godforsaken nowhere (as opposed to those embraced by god) a little southeast of Nome (it seemed he was always imagining places where he might die, searching for exactly the right spot), watching a scrawny, dish-faced skank with silicon breasts the proximate volume and shape of volley balls, the last twenty from his fifty K tucked into her G-string, preparing to show off her shaved treasure for the one-hundred-and-seventy-seventh time that month to a group of pipeline workers, the priest from a nearby town in plainclothes disguise, a tragically ugly lesbian with a chest cold, an old geezer with a hundred dollars in his pocket destined

for the lucky seniorita who would also receive the benefit of the blue pill he'd just taken, the usual run of Inupiat including a pair of gawking high school kids come to see the featured act (a dancer who could blow bubbles with her hoochie), and himself, sitting directly beneath her sacred crotch, toppling sideways off his stool, hoping to maintain life and breath until she pushed aside her cache-sex and revealed the mother of all mysteries, the hairless pink glory hallelujah that made the world go round, that however many times you saw it, you could never get enough . . . and how terrible would it be to die in that head, in that gruesomely normal sensibility? How debasing to lie down on an oft-puked-upon floor, staring toward a rainbow whiteness in the void, while a hardbitten waitress with a crop of inflamed acne on her butt, wearing a Merry Widow two bust-sizes too small, fondled your dying balls as she rummaged through your side pockets, hunting for a money clip? You could do worse, he thought. But he wanted more, he wanted to understand the difference between fate and the illusion of fate, if one there were. He wanted to know if any fucking thing happened for a reason, and in order to maintain the status quo, to prolong things with Arlene, to give himself time to study these issues, he began spending his days away from the TP, away from the Kali Bar, roaming the rocky beach, walking into the barrens east of town and kicking around whale bones left from the summer hunts, watching TV at Polar Bear Pizza, affecting interest in conversations with various of the patrons about the sea lion problem; fishing lures; snowmobile repair; camper conversion kits; the biggest moose I ever saw; do angels exist?; sick sled dogs; the weather; a real band was coming to town (not Junior Aishanna's bunch who played the Kali once a month and were usually too drunk to do a second set); the annual winter games with the town of Kaktovik; who made the best reindeer jerky?; why there never were any ugly people on reality shows (Wilander argued that there were nothing but, an exchange that established the Inupiat criteria for beauty were the byproduct of a dinged and dented general self-esteem); and dozens of other topics that testified to Kaliaska's curious mixture of the exotic and the banal.

One afternoon in the dead of winter, straight past the turn of the year, Wilander borrowed Terry Alpin's launch (this annoyed Arlene no end, because—he assumed—she knew where he intended to take it), and motored out to *Viator*, anchoring just off-shore. He'd had half-a-hope that the sight of



her would rouse something in him and permit the last few strands of his narrative to unreel—the story, he thought, could not have much farther to go—but *Viator* offered nothing inspirational to the eye. Under threatening skies, sheeted with ice and steeped in the gloomy shadow of the firs, she no longer appeared haunted, merely discarded, like a rusted tin can tossed among the rocks, and this derelict effect was amplified by the listless wash of black water against the sides of the launch, and by the stillness of the scene, not a breath of wind to stir the needles and dump fresh snow on the decks, to snap icicles from the winch or breed a ghostly moan. The screws no longer resembled crumpled flowers and the hull, which had appeared bloated, now had a deflated aspect. Hazmat teams had cut the heart from her, hosing down the hold with chemicals, and left her flensed and gutted. She looked like a place where men had gone mad, and judging by what was left of her, there could have been nothing transcendent about the madness, no concealed promise, and he shrank from the image of himself bumping around inside her, walking rattling mad along her liver-spotted corridors and talking to ghosts. He had seen enough, yet he was reluctant to leave and sat for the better part of an hour, lulled into a reverie by the rocking of the launch, thinking about fate, how it was deemed capricious, yet clearly went beyond capriciousness in its insanity, devising complicated skeins that might acquire some meaning if you went short one brain chemical or took a blow to the head or fell victim to systemic shock, and he thought there must somewhere be a group of people who knew that this was true and kept themselves addled, stunned, and shocked so they could know the many-chambered world and avoid fate's simplest snare, a desolate reality shared (and perhaps created) by billions. At last he stood, weary of indulging his predictably dour intellect, and, as he hauled up the anchor, a white spark flickered in the corner of his eye, like a tear in his vision, and he heard a cry, a plaintive cry that planed away to a whisper, the issue of a tiny body and a throat that might have been fashioned of corrugated iron. A thrill ran across the muscles of his chest. The qwazil. The ones that had slipped through from the Iron Shore, they must have been stranded here, and what else might have been stranded with them? Whistlers and wiccara? Things he had neither named nor seen? Excitement shot through him, the same manic, rudderless excitement he had known aboard *Viator*, and he imagined he could feel the lentivirus flexing its ropy length,

taking tentative flights across his brain. Several bizarre business opportunities occurred to him, not the least of them the commercial exploitation of the whistlers—they'd keep your house free of pests and be a true companion for a lonely hour—and it felt as if he himself were soaring, initiating a flight that would take him once again through fever and delirium to the shores of unconsciousness; but it was only a flashback, a taste of the mad feast, and the feeling subsided. It did not surprise him that he could once more be tipped toward madness; that was biochemistry in action, the work of ye olde lentivirus. What surprised him was how eagerly he had embraced it.

He throttled up and turned the bow for home, the throaty grind of the engine shredding the silence, and shredding, too, his perverse nostalgia for the place; but as he passed the point of land that would hide the wreck from view, he glanced back to take a final mental snapshot and noticed an anomaly that caused him to cut the engine and let the launch drift on the light chop. *Viator* had receded into anonymity, showing as a black dot of solidity upon a spectral, fog-enshrouded shore. And *that* was the peculiar thing. A minute before, less than a minute, there had been not a trace of fog, yet now the entire shingle was occulted, pale strands knitting together into, roughly, the shape of a ball. Another anomaly. It wasn't warm enough for ground fog, and he'd never heard of ball-shaped fog, or fog that drifted out to sea from shore. He peered at it. Definitely coalescing into a gigantic ball and whitening. Progressing toward him. Picking up speed, looking like a great smoky grayish-white pearl hurtling over the top of the waves. Alarmed, he restarted the engine, but the fog surrounded him before he could get underway, filling his eyes with whiteness, and he fell. He lay in the bottom of the launch, his back soaking in the chilly inch of water that had accumulated there, yet simultaneously, he was in the mind and body of Dhazi Brasse, wandering the byways of Soji Simanere, in the city of Tikh'na. At last! He recalled its name and felt a hit of delight at having triumphed over his faulty memory (or his faulty imagination), but the pull of the narrative was so strong, he was absorbed into it, he was living it again, sitting in the Bo Seed Tavern a few blocks from his home, thinking and drinking, drinking and thinking, until thought became impossible and his head pounded with the fierce energy and terror that attached to love, and with a paranoia that derived from his scanty knowledge of the queen (though they had twice been intimate, she had not told him her

name, the name that only a lover might speak, and what was he to make of that?), and with the sadness relating to everything that had gone between them, to her joyless union with the king, her isolation within the palace and other such matters that she had conveyed to him. He came to think of love in terms of drunken spiders, this from watching the spiders that lived beneath the beer vats in the Bo Seed's basement, weaving lopsided webs and dropping laxly to the floor, and he saw that he had acted with equally disjointed grace and judgment ever since their first meeting. As had she. Her retreat into the sphere of royal duty smacked of instinctual behavior, a startled return to familiar ground that proved an imprisoning misstep, like that of a spider fallen into a teacup, and it occurred to him that the whole world must be drunk on its own substance, delirious and wobbling on its axis, believing all the while that it spun freely and with a formal elegance.

On the twelfth morning following his visit to the palace, he received a message in the form of a living red-and-yellow streamer, the sort grown in vats and released in droves on festival days and during the spring carnival; they commonly bore nationalistic slogans or religious sentiments, and would flutter about for a week or so before they died, leaving their brightly colored bodies draped over fences and rooftops, trampled into muck on the streets; but the one that came to him that morning was of unique design, shorter-lived than most, for he barely had time to absorb its message—*Tomorrow at dawn; the Scarab Gate of Malavoi Grasset*—before it went limp and lifeless, its legend dissolving into spidery misspelled words. He wasn't sure he could trust such an impersonal message—it might have been sent by one of the queen's enemies, or by the king; although he suspected that the king would be more direct in dealing with a man who had interfered in the royal marriage. Of greater concern was the place chosen for the assignation. Malavoi Grasset was a parkland to the immediate east of the palace, contained within high walls and beneath a dome of crystalline clarity that shielded those below from rain-fall and bird droppings, yet never displayed the slightest spotting, being formed of energy produced by a device that had been fashioned in an era long forgotten and from which a smattering of relics remained, though not the knowledge necessary to construct or repair them. It was the queen's preserve, a pocket nation over which she held absolute dominion—indeed, the park was her familiar, reflecting her every mood. There she could do

anything, commit any malfeasance short of treason with impunity. She could take a lover and let him live within the park for up to a month, but at the end of that time, when he was expelled from Malavoi Grasset, he would be subject to the king's harsh justice, resulting in his skull being painted with erotic designs and placed in a niche beside the gate through which the skull's owner had exited. The current queen had either not exercised this privilege—no new skulls had been displayed beside the hundreds set forth during the reign of the previous queen—or she had discovered a means of spiring her lovers safely away, or else the king's justice had taken less public form. Dhazi was not anxious to learn which theory prevailed, but he concluded, after pondering the matter, that he had to trust her—to do otherwise, to give up what had become his idolon and condemn himself to the ordinary life he desired to escape would be a kind of death, and early the next morning he walked along the high white wall of the park until he reached the Scarab Gate, fashioned of blackish-green wood, poisonous to the touch and worked over its entire surface with the images of beetles, thousands of them, each in a different pose, appearing to be crawling over one another, and when the gate swung inward, sensing his presence, he entered with a firm step. At sunrise, the parkland was alive with stirrings, rustlings, shrieks, and these sounds enclosed him as he verged deeper into the decorous fringe of jungle that served as an antechamber of Malavoi Grasset, following a path that led eastward from the gate, winding among spreading emerald oaks and aguadilla trees through whose canopy of waxen leaves orange light fingered down to dapple ferns and flowering weeds. Once a defective parrot (all the animals were part machine) tried to tear him with its golden beak; a rummaging bear rumbled yet did not charge; a monkey pelted him with kumquats; otherwise he came without incident to a pavilion on a green lawn, surrounded by lionseed trees, beneath one of which, close by a stream, the queen was waiting. As he came toward her, seedhusks drifted about them like tawny snowflakes, and as they kissed, the parkland sighed, butterflies collected in the air around them, as if to provide a frame for an enchanted portrait, and gemmy lights flashed beneath the swift waters, registering the queen's happiness along their sapphire wave-lengths.

—Tell me your name, he said. The name by which the king addresses you, and she told him that name was not one she cared for—it had been spoiled by

the tongue that spoke it, but the name she had saved for this moment was Sienne.

—I have a plan to save us both, she said. Let us enjoy some days together. Then we will discuss it.

She accompanied her suggestion with a gesture he recognized as the first of the Eight Enticements, but since he was already in her thrall, it had no effect, and he followed her into the pavilion, where glittering machine insects cooled the air with icy exudations, furnished with a wide couch and a cabinet containing chilled delicacies and restorative drinks, and there they spent three days, days like the arc of a gilded arrow, that was how the hours flew, hurried along by the urgency of passion, and whenever they rested, they filled every crevice of time with soft conversation—she talked of the court and its peculiar conventions and he related stories about hunts and hill carnivals, bacchanals during which the villagers ate red sugars crystallized from the blood of soo tigers that gave visions of the worlds where tigers ruled; and on the third night, with the walls of the pavilion shut, images of the Lake of Reawakening playing over their interior surfaces, sailtrees tacking and yawing across the translucent green waters in the shadow of mountain peaks, she told him about the powers of white otiar (Have you heard of it? she asked; No, never, he said), how it could, if assisted by ancient science, concentrate the essence of a life and send it across the worlds to lodge in a compatible flesh, and if the soul occupying that flesh had an equivalent desire, an exchange could be made. Such an opportunity rarely occurred, but given the man in Alaska who yearned for release, an exchange could be considered, though it must be considered carefully, for it was not without risk. Upon hearing this, letting rancor creep into his voice, he suggested that she might have told him this before he entered the Scarab Gate, since now he had no choice.

—There is another way out of Malavoi Grasset, she said. One secure in every respect. Be assured, your life will not be forfeit should you choose it. But if you so choose, I cannot follow. Shall I tell you what it entails?

The flickering walls mapped her body in blues, greens, and thin shadow; she looked like an idol amid the play of light, stoic and unreadable, and he did not know if he could trust her, she held such power over him; yet how could he not, knowing what he did of her heart?

—The white otiar, he said. Tell me what I must do.

Sienne spoke to the walls. The images were replaced by a dim orange glow, and a panel slid back to reveal a machine, a tarnished silver dome mounted in a worn traveling assembly that creaked as it came forward; dozens of uncut sunstones were embedded on the surface of the dome, spelling out characters that read *No Sleep Until Perfection—Let The True Work Be Done*, marking it as a disciple of SUN TAI, the machine mystic who authored the *Reshaping*, a reordering of the quantum universe according to the consensus wish of humankind, maintaining the essential integrity of the Grand Design, so that everything that should have happened had and some things that once were, now had never been, and this was responsible for the fragmentary science of Tikh'na, the technological relics available to the citizenry of Soji Simanere. As it approached, the dome shuddered, listed in its assembly and uttered a complaining noise, at least that was Dhazi's assessment, and then, in a voice greatly impaired by static, bid them good evening, a sequence of events that caused the queen to inquire of its health and suggest that it might be in need of some repair.

—Indeed, I am, the machine said, clacking the metal scoops attached to its assembly in a display of amusement (the machine sense of humor was often difficult for men to understand). But none, I fear, will be forthcoming. The microscopic brothers that configure energy within my brain have developed an infection. It has progressed too far for remedy. Soon I will be finished, muttering to myself and attempting to perform tasks for which I no longer am equipped. I am still competent, though. This is the man?

Sienne advised him that this was, indeed, the man, and a golden eye irised open in the dome, or perhaps it was not an eye, for it had no pupil, and from it were projected beams of honey-colored light with which the machine began to probe Dhazi—he felt them as delicate touches, as if his brain were being tickled by a feather, provoking no pain, yet making him squirm until Sienne's touch quieted him, and after the machine had probed them both, after it had withdrawn, she opened the ceiling of the pavilion and prepared two pipes of white otiar and lay down back beside him. Above, the stars burned with cold inconsistency; a sliver of a moon had strung a yellow hammock in the southern sky. Drawing in the sweetish smoke, feeling it pave the back of his throat with a residue that felt at once warm and cool, he had an immediate sense of the adjoining worlds and this grew to include worlds lying

farther afield, one consisting of a silver egg, no bigger than a hurlstone, fashioned in the caves of eastern Bukai, inhabited by minute creatures akin to men—by means of magic, they had thought to hide themselves away in the egg, yet now lived in constant terror of being crushed; and another, a desert beneath an ashen sky figured by ruined towers (wherein gray apes dwelled who perceived themselves to be kings), in their solitude standing like half-melted chess pieces on a board from which all other detail had been erased; a lush archipelago in an olive-green sea populated by lotus eaters who believed they lived in hell; a serenity of marshes and graveyard fogs peopled by the undead and the fish and eels on which they fed, exiled to this place by some human agency who had cleansed the worlds of them, yet as they became increasingly a rumor, they threatened to pass like vapor through the barriers that had been erected against them and return to their places of origin; worlds infinite in their expression of the basic human delusion, and in each of them, he realized, he and Sienne had performed this same dance, always with the same unfortunate result. He saw her ever in some cloistered or constrictive circumstance, grieving her lost love, but going on with things, married to her own misery; and he saw himself distracted and despairing, sometimes driven to self-destruction, sometimes to murder or subversion or compulsive acts of poetry, forms of desperation in which dignity foundered, though destiny was served. He put his lips to the pipe, inhaling a vintage dream, and watched a banker's wife who bore the name Sienna enchant a failed musician in a nameless country a green age ago. Of all the visions that came to him, theirs held the greatest promise—they had been so close to breaking free of the pattern that enslaved both past and future, prevented from union by chains of occurrence so absurd in their construction, it seemed the fates had marshaled their cleverest deceptions against them, or else they had been created perfect but for a single flaw that kept them from contentment. He turned to Sienne and realized she was not smoking, her pipe resting in her palm, a hand-molded white pellet in the bowl; he strained to speak, but his mouth was too dry.

—I can't go with you, she said. The woman in Alaska has no desire to seek a new prospect and there's no one with whom I can change places. I'm sorry.

—You told me you had a plan. He licked his lips. One that would save us both.

—This is it. You'll be saved and you will find your heart's desire.

He scoffed at that, but she went on: The other, the one who is to take your place, I'll see to it he is safe. And I will be saved as well, for if I went with you, I would not thrive. Wanting to be with you is not sufficient a reason to contravene the principles that govern my life.

He struggled to sit up, but fell back.

She supported his head and attempted to slip the second pipe between his lips; he pushed it away and told her she was dying, her life dwindling in this golden grave, but his words were slurred and unintelligible, and he knew by her expression that it was useless to argue. He accepted the pipe and she lay down beside him, pressing her body against his, comforting him, urging him to concentrate on the man in Alaska, and, persuaded by her, by the white smoke filling his lungs, he fixed his mind on the man and soon saw him as from a great height, floating in a small craft offshore of a wooded coast in winter, the land blanketed in snow and ice, and the whiteness of the land and that of the smoke gathered about him, forming a solid enclosure, and he felt a winnowing, as if his soul were being stretched thin, and had the sensation of motion. The smoke was sealing him away from the world he knew, becoming a vehicle of sorts, carrying him toward the world of the man in the boat at an ever-increasing rate of speed. He clung to Sienne, for though she had said he would find his heart's desire, he believed he had already found it and refused to let her go, but his head filled with wind, light, and images of unfamiliar places, images he murkily assumed belonged to this new world, but three that bore the stamp of the old: a marsh of reeds whose flexible green stems supported serpents' heads that fed on the insects swarming about them; an azure lake in the midst of a desert, so intricate and crooked in form, it seemed a character in an ancient script etched on copper plate, and a city that followed its margins with unusual precision, mapping every cut, every point of land, as might an inlay about a sacred shape, isolating the meaning of the thing from the thing that gave it meaning. Lastly, a vast steel shed, open-ended, large enough to shadow a dozen cities, sheltering a maze of light and noise and metal, every part of it alive, thousands of machine entities, the whole of it criss-crossed by narrow avenues of dirt where men and machines walked and trundled and made commerce together. The noise was that of a thousand factories, a trillion warring notes in which no music could be heard, and at its heart sat a metal monster with ruby eyes, its massive shovel-shaped



head bent to an electron furnace in whose glowing depths it knitted submicroscopic mysteries of cold light and crystal. Tiny complexities scuttered over the big machines, scavenging bits of metal. Swarms of monkey-like mechanicals scampered up hanging chains. Fans of greenish gold radiance bloomed from out of unseen crevices, spread through the air upward, giving pale body to palls of smoke that flared and vanished against the roofbeams like puffs of flaming gas. These glimpses of, he believed, his alter ego's future were the last evidences he had of the world he was leaving, and once they had fled he found himself sitting at the tiller of the launch, steering toward the bleak vista of Kaliaska.

Some portion of his being peered out at the village in stunned disbelief, allowing the greater portion, that consisting of reflexes and learned behaviors, to handle practical duties like steering, while it, the lesser, tried to adjust his expectations of the world to what he saw. Gone were the bustling crowds and brightly colored buildings of Soji Simanere . . . though the five buildings closest to shore were strikingly similar in basic hue and arrangement to the five houses at the heart of the market, there all resemblance stopped. They were not anthropomorphic (not unless you had several stiff drinks and squinted), nor were they touched by any color aside from beige and brown, and their surroundings, an expanse of dirt, a litter of dilapidated white houses beyond, a savage-looking range of snow peaks on the horizon, had the rawness and mystery of a frontier, and the people, those he could see from the dock where he tied up the launch, were squat and brown-skinned, a far cry from the motley citizenry of Tikh'na—he might have been gazing at a primitive reduction of the city, like a rusted anchor or some other bit of wreckage upon which, over centuries, coral had accumulated and built into a reef; but even as he acknowledged these differences, he underwent a sudden perceptual shift, as if a filter had dropped over his eyes, and the village lost a large measure of its strangeness and the people appeared comfortingly familiar in their bulky clothes and wool caps and jeans, and a woman hailed him as he clambered onto the dock. Where ya been, Tom? Fishing? she yelled, and cackled as if her question had mined the soul of wit, and walked on without acknowledging his wave, a half-hearted wave because, although he recognized the name as his own, it was a delayed recognition. He proceeded toward Arlene's TP by force of habit, a habit he recalled in detail as he approached the door—he knew it

was nearly lunchtime and who was waiting for him and how she would be feeling, and this, occurring as a sequence of minor dislocations, caused him to suspect that the two narratives were disentangling, that at this precise instant Thomas Wilander was waking in Sienne's arms, adapting to the name Dhazi, to that place and hour, becoming Dhazi, and he, Dhazi, was undergoing an equal transformation, becoming Tom—they were like two intertwined snakes who had slithered along together in opposite directions for a time and now were about to part company. Yet how could anyone believe so improbable a story? Despite his lingering unfamiliarity with the place, he didn't believe it himself. The story was a fantasy, and not a very convincing one. Nothing in life worked out with such exacting symmetry, unless it was the stuff of life itself, the perfect helix, the double spiral, which suggested that no matter how chaotic the universe appeared, it, too, was perfect, a perfection that human senses could not detect, every fragment of matter and energy, every urge and speck of gravel and wingbeat aligned to the completion of a chord that would achieve perfection upon its final reverberation, with no one around to bear witness, and so his story might be true . . . and then he was inside Arlene's TP, where the wood stove was going and Terry was listening to headphones, sitting in a lawn chair, his legs kicked out, reading a magazine with a dragon on the cover, and Arlene, wearing a plaid wool shirt over a housedress, sat on a stool by the register, dealing a hand of solitaire. She glanced at Wilander, but said nothing. With her hair pulled back, her lips firmed in an I-am-not-going-to-say-a-thing expression, she looked pretty. Pretty and a piece more. Terry gave him a look and made a disparaging noise. Wilander ignored him. He stripped off his coat and leggings, studying Arlene, staring at her with the intense concentration of a man warming himself at a fire, and he knew she felt his stare by the way she held herself, and he could see the injury he had done her in the rigidity of her pose; he was distracted by another face that appeared to melt up from hers, a ghost draping itself over her bones—Siene's sleeker, pampered face—but he found it now too callow and dismissed it, preferring Arlene's mature cheekbone beauty, and was possessed by memories flooding in, their conversations, their intimacies. He understood he had to make things right with her, yet he did not understand how to go about it, and he let his eye wander, taking in the rucksacks and the bottles of cough syrup, the ball point pens and cigarette lighters and baby dolls wrapped in cellophane packaging,

and remembered a young woman, Leona Ekaak, who had come into the TP last May and bought a doll, and had returned to buy many more throughout the summer, and they had speculated about what she was doing with upwards of twenty dolls—it must be, they decided, a function of some peculiar fetish, because Leona had lost a baby the previous year, stillborn in winter, but they later heard from Charlie Okakok, who worked as a fishing guide, that she had been painting the dolls and selling them to tourists, and they realized that Leona's fixation was merely a product of commerce, which made sense, since she had no husband, no visible means of support, and one day a Japanese sailor came into the TP, trying to sell one of Leona's dolls—he had purchased it for five hundred dollars and regretted spending the money, and Arlene hadn't recognized it as a doll at first, it was so transformed, resembling an antique, a grotesque piece of folk art, but then she noticed a chip through which pink plastic showed and, after much dickering, negotiated a price, substantially lower than five hundred: the doll had been made into a mummy, its face concealed beneath layers of *papier maché* that counterfeited another face, that of a dead child, shrunken and gray, its body swaddled in a grave gown decorated with painted symbols that must have comprised a personal iconography, for they could find no similarity between them and Inupiat symbols, and it was apparent that Leona had wedded grief to her need for an income and produced these artifacts, sold for as much as a thousand dollars (a bank president from Colorado on a hunting vacation had paid, it was rumored, a great deal more), passing them off as Inupiat relics, which Wilander supposed they were, and he thought that the intertwined unity of the dolls' purpose might relate to his life, to the double helix, to universal questions, but the important question, the one pressing upon him, was what to do about Arlene. Should he make a pretty speech, declare himself, promise devotion? Well, yes. He should, but he didn't know if she would buy it (his instinct was that she would be angry), and he hovered beside the door, agitated and unhappy, until Arlene said icily, Been out at the wreck, have you?, and that enabled him to speak.

—I took a look, he said. I'm back.

Arlene slapped down a card. I noticed.

He crossed to the display case behind which she was standing and rested his hands on the glass. Don't worry, he said. I'm over it.

She repressed a smile and said, Over it, as if she were slicing the words off a loaf.

—Over *Viator*, I mean. I'm done obsessing about it.

—Just like that? She affected astonishment. One quick trip . . . or I guess it wasn't so quick. Still, one trip out to *Viator* and you're fixed right up? That's amazing!

—Terry, he said. Give us a minute, okay?

Terry didn't move and Arlene snapped at him, Terry! He dropped the magazine and made a surly, backward-glancing exit, and Wilander underwent another shift, one of those weird, short elevator-drops that you get when you're falling asleep, and the TP sharpened around him, the grain on the raw boards, the hard white light, everything standing out clear and precise, as if he had grown more attuned to this world, and they stared at each other for about as long as it would take to say, tick, tick, tick, then Arlene lowered her eyes and said, You wanted to say something?, and Wilander said, Yeah, but you've got your walls up and anything I say, you're going to throw it back at me, you're not going to hear it. They stood mute a while longer, the faint crackle of the fire in the wood stove pointing up the silence, and Wilander said, I'm just going to talk, okay? You can listen if you want, and he told her how he had always been traveling, how even when he had been stuck for years in one place, he'd traveled on in his head, seeking a place that probably didn't exist, except in his head, and then he had come to *Viator*, to Kaliaska, and he told her about the two narratives of his life and that of Dhazi Brasse, of his struggle with them aboard *Viator* and since, and he said he'd understand if Arlene judged him insane, unstable, he couldn't deny it, and if she kicked him out, he'd understand that, too, but he hoped she wouldn't, because he loved her and Kaliaska, the TP, the Inupiat, this was his place, the place he'd searched for—it had taken him ten months, madness, and a final round trip to the wreck to complete the journey, to realize he had found something like destiny, if not destiny herself, and if she still thought he was crazy, too crazy for her, an unsuitable match to her own craziness, if he fell short of expectations, if what he had told her was only a further evidence of his unsuitableness, of his illness and instability . . . Well, he was sorry, he wouldn't give her any trouble, but he wasn't going anywhere, he'd fashion a life here out of a life's wreckage, and he said all this non-aggressively, not as if he had a point to make, but speaking

softly and erratically, confessing his inner life (it felt like a confession), letting his story roll forth like an oddly-shaped stone rolling down a bumpy hill, talking in bursts, losing momentum, gathering his thoughts, then another burst, and when he was done, it appeared that the fires of her anger had been snuffed out, though bitterness and hesitancy remained.

—I don't know, she said, fussing with the deck of cards, playing a red eight beneath a black nine. I don't know what you want me to say.

A young Inupiat couple entered the TP and began nosing around the front of the store, looking at baby things.

—Don't hold back, said Wilander.

Arlene gave him a piercing look. You love me? You thought you'd throw that in and I wouldn't notice? It was like part of a grocery list. One of those, one of those, I love you, one of those . . .

—I don't feel easy saying it to you.

—Gee, you think?

—I meant to say it a long time ago, but I got messed up. Not saying it became a way of staying with the ship, of keeping a distance between us. That was part of my illness, I guess. And now I'm worried you don't want me to say it and that we've missed our chance.

She turned a card, misplayed the club queen on an ace.

—The way I said it, he went on. Off-handedly like that—it was in self-defense. I didn't . . .

—You don't have to explain everything, said Arlene tartly. I can figure the rest out myself.

Wilander could see that she wanted to be angrier at him than she was, she was trying to work out a reason to be angrier, because she believed he deserved it, so he kept his mouth shut.

—What'll you do here? she asked. Terry and I can run the store. It comes in handy, you helping out sometimes, but it's not necessary.

—I'll find something, Wilander said. I want to find something.

I don't want to play games with you, she said. But I can't just let you back in. You can't expect everything to be fine just because you had an epiphany.

—That's not what happened.

—Whatever! I understand you've been sick, but I . . . I can't get . . .

—You need to give me shit, he suggested.

—Yeah! I do, I need to give you shit. These months since you got out of the hospital, they've been awful. Her eyes teared and she knuckled them dry. But that's not all. I don't know if I trust you. I've got all these stupid fucking issues!

—Give it a day. Wilander stepped behind the counter to stand beside her. If that starts to feel good, give it another day. That's all I'm asking.

He had a flicker of self-doubt, of wondering if he believed his own words as he said them or if saying them reinforced the fantasy of belief, if love was merely a story one told oneself, but he rejected the thought and, laying a finger along her cheek, he tipped her face toward him and kissed her, tasting candy mints and coffee from her mouth. The Inupiat woman giggled, but Wilander didn't look to see if the kiss were the cause of her amusement; he closed his eyes and held Arlene, resting his chin atop her head, his hands on her hips, her waist, getting cozy with her again—it was a good moment broken in a good way by Terry coming back into the TP and, as he resettled on the lawn chair, muttering, Get a room, a comment at which Arlene, clinging to Wilander, laughed and said, Jesus, Terry! Don't you ever have anything pleasant to say?

—God bless us every one, said Terry, opening his magazine. It's cold outside, but it feels like spring in here.

—All right, said Arlene. That's enough.

—Alaska is for lovers, he said.

The Inupiat woman, a girl, really, no older than seventeen and six or seven months pregnant, approached with her arms full of baby clothes and toys, which she piled on the counter; the man stayed in the front of the store, poking around, looking at chainsaws. She reached into her parka and placed a carved walrus tusk, almost orange with age, beside the clothes. Okay? she asked, with a gesture that indicated she wanted to know if Arlene would take the tusk in trade for the clothes.

Arlene examined the tusk. This is valuable, she said, and when the girl acted confused, Arlene said, I can sell it on consignment, but I can't pay you what it's worth. You'd do better waiting until summer and making a private sale.

The girl looked stricken and she called to her husband, her boyfriend, whichever the case might be; he sidled up to the counter, a kid with several

broken teeth in his lower jaw, and listened to the girl explain the situation (in Inupiaq) as she saw it; then he said to Arlene, It's not enough?

Arlene repeated the options, saying further that she could extend them a line of credit that would count against the purchase price, and Wilander took the tusk from her and turned it in his hand, and, as he did, at that precise moment, he underwent another shift, the store and the people in it, previously blurred by emotion and stress, swam into sharp focus and locked into place, and he could have sworn he heard a click, the shift was so palpable and precise, and he thought he could feel the two narratives of which he had been a part separating, the two snakes' tails touching right at their tips and then slithering off on their own, Dhazi into the queen's arms, into the next chapter of his story, becoming an irrelevant fiction (as perhaps he had always been), and Wilander to stand beside the Queen of Kaliaska as she dickered with the couple, neither of whom spoke much English and unable to decipher Arlene's inexpert Inupiaq (they were from a village farther north and spoke a different dialect, Terry said, coming over to translate), and Wilander hefted the tusk, inspected it—etched on one side were a group of men with spears surrounding a beast and on the other side a primitive map, maybe depicting the hunt and the spot where the tusk had been taken, the carved lines filled with soot, and they'd have a hell of a time cleaning it, they'd never get it all out, lamp black bonded with the ivory, and the couple finally understood, they agreed to a line of credit and, all smiles, went out into the store, looking at toys and ipods and chainsaws, the stuff for which they had traded the heirloom that might have slain the girl's great-great-great-uncle a century and more ago—he lay gazing at a fire in heaven, his blood freezing, mapping the ice, while the beast roared and died, a story transformed into their good fortune in this, the month of the returning sun, and Wilander hoped that his transformation, whether real or imagined, followed a similar track, from bad luck to good, from epic to specific, and he put his arm around Arlene's waist (she stiffened, then relaxed, and continued to answer the couple's questions about prices, shouted from the front of the store) just to touch her, to let the firmness of her waist anchor him, because without the story to fill his thoughts, he was a little empty, and he felt his heart rise up, that same heart he had believed dead, he felt it rise up with hers in unity, in joyful folly, and as she disengaged from him (giving his hand a pressure, a gentle assurance) to assist

the couple who were fiddling with the dials of a short-wave radio, trying to switch it on, he stood at the register, leaning forward slightly, a pose he had often adopted when aloft in *Viator's* bow, watching Arlene demonstrate the workings of the radio, being kind and patient with the couple—you could always fuck this up, he told himself, and even if you don't, even if you do the right thing, you might be unlucky, a beast might come onto the ice whose jaws would meet in your chest and make you fall out of life or out of love, or twist you into a malformed shape as had happened with Sam Urell, this kid he had run with in Southeast Asia for a couple of months after graduation, banging French girls and German girls and Swedish girls, Girls of All Nations, not yet ready to settle into a job, and Sam was a man with a plan—what that plan was, he had not revealed to Wilander, who had no plan, who despised the idea of a plan, whose core belief was let the day take you—and being a details kind of guy, Sam had worked his plan to perfection and smuggled a Khmer statuette into the States that provided seed money for a business that he built into several businesses, which he sold (rich by thirty, he had it all scoped out), but he had gotten into weird sex trips in Cambodia, a seed that also sprouted, and the last time Wilander saw him was in a club called Humiliation in Hollywood, wearing a pair of leather shorts and a choker, nearly broke and looking forty-five, though he was only thirty-three, talking murmuringly about the old days, the times they'd had, a ramble that neither of them had been interested in, slurping Cosmopolitans bought for him by Wilander and staring into a mirror that reflected a future of power-lifting dykes and leathery SoCal queens and guys in suits like Sam once had been. Wilander thought it odd that they had achieved more-or-less the same level of hopelessness (though Wilander's had taken longer to achieve). Plan or no plan, it hadn't seemed to make a difference. They belonged to a generation defeated by the illusion of a lack of crisis. But the point was . . . what was the point? Wilander had lost the thread and was trying to puzzle out the knot Sam and the tusk had tied in his thoughts, when the Inupiat couple began piling merchandise on the counter—a small, bright green Stihl chainsaw, a gold and crystal necklace, an X-Box—and Arlene, with Terry at her heels, came back to the register.

—I told them they should wait. She nudged the tusk with her forefinger. This is museum quality. I'll have to call someone to have it appraised.



—How much credit did you give them? asked  
Wilander.

—It's worth at least fifteen hundred, so I said I'd give them a thousand.  
And two hundred in cash.

—That'll go straight up their noses, said Terry.

The couple were digging through a bin of DVDs, the girl bouncing on her  
toes.

—I told them it might be worth more, said Arlene. I'm pretty sure it is. But  
if not, they'll have spent all their money by the time I sell it. They won't be  
happy.

—He shoulda gone with the Shindaiwa. Terry flicking at the housing of  
the Stihl with a fingernail. The man don't know jack about chainsaws.

—Fuck it, Wilander said. They're happy now.



# STORY NOTES

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## THE EMPEROR

**M**y attempt at eco-fiction. What interested me about this was the notion of the strip mine having its own machine ecology and the idea of the story being told from the standpoint of someone who's on the side of the strip mine. If I had it to do over, I'd lose the redemptive portion of the story, make McGlowrie even less sympathetic to Greenpeace folk, change the ending . . . etc. Not because I agree with an anti-ecology stance—I just think it would make for a more intriguing and dramatic scenario, and there are enough of these stories written from the victim's point of view. Oh, well.

## LARISSA MIUSOV

**I** worked in Hollywood for a couple of years during the Nineties and this story dates from that time. It's more-or-less autobiographical, just changed enough to provide it with a punchier climax and a narrative shape, and to disguise the people upon whom certain characters are based. I have a wealth of anecdotal material from those years and at one point I thought I might do a Hollywood novel or a collection of Hollywood stories, but so many of those stories, like "Carlos Manson Lives" in this volume, have a distinct similarity of theme and feature people who are displaced and wasted and terminally uninvolved, that now I wonder if it's worth the effort.

## CARLOS MANSON LIVES

**T**he first in a series of stories featuring a deracinated rock singer who goes by the stage name the Queen Mother that I wrote under the pseudonym Sally Carteret. The Queen Mother is a composite character based on several people with whom I played during the seventies, in particular a bail

bondsman's daughter whose voice, often lifted in imitation of Janis Joplin, sounded like Donald Duck with a mouthful of bee-bees (she contributes much of the smart-ass persona to the stories, and not the voice.) There were to be five stories in the series, including two novellas entitled "Money Man" and "True Hearts Like Yours and Mine", both of which I hope to complete someday soon. This particular story is based on an anecdote which is about ninety-five percent true. Like the Queen Mother says, "You can't make this shit up."

### HANDSOME, WINSOME JOHNNY

**T**he second and more ambitious of the Sally Carteret stories. I've not much to add as regards background, just that the song fragments all came from songs I played with one band or another during the Seventies and early Eighties, and that the bar in the story is based on a place I drank at one afternoon in the redneck-target-rich environment of Shingletown, California.

### AFTER ILDIKO

**T**ru-Life adventures in the Guatemalan rain forest circa 1985. Actually I met the woman in the story on a protracted bus ride through the jungle. At one point we were driving on a dirt road that ran between steep banks and the bus driver applied the brakes suddenly. Some young guys who had crowded toward the front of the bus jumped off and started to chase a small animal that was trapped between the banks. Eventually they caught it, carried it onto the bus and cut its throat. The driver railed at them for not having done this outside, and that strident conversation continued for about an hour. Then the bus broke down. While we were waiting for help to arrive, the young guys cooked the animal, an agouti, and gave each of the passengers a taste. That's how "Ildiko" and I met, sharing a piece of agouti. Of course I didn't jump off the boat as in the story, but for all intents and purposes the story should begin, "Shepard, an American fool . . ."

## CHINANDEGA

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I've spent a great deal of time in Honduras and Nicaragua, and as dangerous and brutal and oppressed as those countries were when first I came to their shores in the Seventies, they've gotten much more so in the years since, due to disease and poverty, the rise of gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha, the attack upon the middle class made by the oligarchies, but thanks in the main to the foreign policy of the United States that sustains corrupt governments throughout the region and demonizes populist leaders like Hugo Chavez.

The inspiration for this story was a trip I made several years ago to Nicaragua to work on a documentary about the actions of the Dole Corporation, which controls the banana business in that country and elsewhere, and is among the greatest corporate villains in the world. I spent time talking to banana and cane workers in the port of Chinandega, purported to be the hottest town in Nicaragua, and one of the dirtiest—a more miserable place would be difficult to imagine. Many of the cane workers were suffering from a disease that turned them yellow and shrank their kidneys to the size of walnuts and eventually killed them. Almost everyone was suffering from it to one degree or another. The poison was in the ground water. The town's cemetery was full and the sole extent to which the government had contributed to these people's well-being was that they had cleared ground for a new cemetery the size of a soccer pitch, thus making enough room for everyone. I wanted to convey something of these people's hopelessness in my story.

### THE EASE WITH WHICH WE FREED THE BEAST

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I had, to put it euphemistically, a troubled childhood and I suppose this story reflects the anger that, earlier in life, I channeled into a variety of self-destructive pursuits, though none so terrible as those of my protagonist. Anger born of such primal forces (and I consider the betrayal of a parent that expresses itself as violence to be a primal force) can alter one's perceptual bias to such a degree that the world becomes distorted. I can't say I had all this in mind when I wrote the story—I just sat down and wrote it without much

thought at all, except that directed toward matters of craft, but as I wrote I remembered having felt an intense rage like that of my protagonist. I'm not sure that any human being is more than a couple of crossed wires away from being a sociopath, but I often wonder what prevented me from being a full-blown one.

## VIATOR

**W**hile I was writing the first and considerably briefer version of this short novel, that published by Night Shade Books, I began to realize about two-thirds of the way through that I was undergoing an experience similar to the one endured by my protagonist, Thomas Wilander: I was suffering a steady erosion of my intellect and energy. I was so focused on the writing that I ignored my deterioration and kept plugging away, though every line was an effort. Each day I was less and less capable of sitting down and forming coherent sentences about a man whose intellect and energy were being eroded, and as a result was losing contact with reality. Somehow I managed to finish the book, with the helpful urging of my publisher, Jason Williams, and then I collapsed. I felt listless and couldn't keep a thought in my head. I feared the condition was permanent, so I put myself in the hands of the American medical system. In short order, I was diagnosed with everything from cancer to dehydration. I drank gallons of Pedia Lite, took a number of tests: no change. Frustrated, I went online and diagnosed myself to have clinical depression. I took Prozac and exercised strenuously. After two months of this I felt good enough to quit the Prozac. Then I read *Viator* and was appalled by the way I had ended it. Without realizing it, I'd left out a significant portion of the story.

Here then is the rewritten novel, with twenty thousand additional words. Though I wish I had been able to write it without interruption, it's as close to my original intent for the story as I can manage.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

“The Emperor” first appeared on *Sci Fiction*, December 2005; “Larissa Miusov” first appeared in *Eclipse One*, edited by Jonathan Strahan (Night Shade Books, 2007); “Carlos Manson Lives” first appeared in *Polyphony 2*, (as by Sally Carteret) edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake (Wheatland Press, 2003); “Handsome, Winsome Johnny” first appeared in *Polyphony 3* (as by Sally Carteret), edited by Deborah Layne and Jay Lake (Wheatland Press, 2003); “After Ildiko” first appeared in *The Silver Gryphon*, edited by Gary Turner and Marty Halpern (Golden Gryphon Books, 2003); “Chinandega” first appeared in *The Solaris Book of New Fantasy*, edited by George Mann (Solaris Books, 2007); “The Ease With Which We Freed the Beast” first appeared in *Inferno*, edited by Ellen Datlow (Tor Books, 2007); “Viator” is a much expanded and revised version of the novella *Viator* (Night Shade Books, 2005).







*Continued from front flap*

apparitions with muddled resolve. A town in Latin America witnesses abasements emblematic of the region's poverty. A foolish man loses his lover and pursues her image to nowhere. And the emergence of a monster on an American beach is not at all what it seems.

*Viator Plus* is a book of charismatic distinction, one of the finest collections of the year.

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**L**ucius Shepard lives in Portland, Oregon, but that is liable to change. Forthcoming are a new collection, *Five Autobiographies*, a novella, *The Taborin Scale*, and the novels *Beautiful Blood* and *The End of Life as We Know It*. His previous collection, *Dagger Key* (also published by PS), won the International Horror Guild Award, and he has won the Hugo, Nebula and World Fantasy Awards, as well as numerous others, for his fiction.

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