

Cherry Bomb

Explosive Reckonings

A Novel by

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PART ONE : PURGATORY

ONE

That evening's news hour was laden with graphic images of a murdered girl discovered lying on her side, as if asleep, in a quiet picturesque ravine — nearly a pastoral still life observant Randy dolefully mused. The TV announcer had a dulcet voice, stylish makeup, and placid manner in communicating gruesome facts.

Randolph Glasser's ailing wit then abdicated: the national audience, him included, was treated to a series of carefree snaps of the slain girl, one a knockout pinup with arms rapturously outstretched. The use of such imagery to prompt compassion struck him as the gratuity added. A sexy beat to caress calamity. To gentle Eros we commend thee. He was, of course, duly aware of the day's traffic in sensational images, and the passé premonitions of old maxims such as: the curse causeless shall not come, God does not play craps. Gamely, a later estimation, to quote Steven Hawking, averred that God not only played craps but sometimes threw the dice where no one could see the numbers!

Watching, listening to the news hour, to broadcast programming in general, was becoming a dare he might not be up to. He could acquire an immune deficiency — become susceptible to sinister notions, such as desire and assault being indivisible, brutality itself unheeded when energized by fervid want — ostensibly the assailant's blind. Somedays video fare in general, in its stintless tumult and vivid iridescence, seemed an apocalyptic curtain raiser — such that needy wastrels like him must leastwise take note of a modern axiom: the dynamic maniac got the publicity, a large audience and, pertinent to his own scribbling, many readers. Purveyors of pandemonium, of ghastly assault, were hiring, openly, without quotas or ceiling. The media chronicled all manner of flagrant deeds; bookstalls and news stands often burst with what seemed to him dewy fresh crowbait; while white folk, particularly complacent white folk, were becoming scary pariahs. In this September of 2020, a year after Notre Dame Cathedral burned.

Undeniably, solid assured fury was booking! So bemused Randy presumed.

He recalled then an early telling moment on Canadian television: the interview of two able Canadian lawyers, then joint authors of a picturesque novel about a whacko who left his victims stuck up on totem poles without their heads. The book was dedicated ‘to all Fathers/Mothers’, the ‘slash’ symbol germane Randy mused. During the interview the pleasant host unearthed one bone of concern — sections of the book seemed gratuitously smutty and sadistic he thought — an offering the dedicated authors sniffed disparagingly. One was especially disappointed when a good writer didn’t ‘go for it.’

Such reasoning held sway in the interview.

At one time, on witnessing such entrepreneurial wile, supercilious Randy might have risen and dashed off yet another plaintive monograph. Might have. But that reflex was now quite dead. He could read the writing on the wall as well as anyone: either he languished as a nerd or sought an adrenalin fix. Detailing depravity, in all its guises, was becoming a kind of choice savoury — so it seemed. He could see the scenario all too plainly: When the crazed psycho came at last to *His* household, *It* may have found the latest mindblower lacking in convulsive hideousness, and come to upgrade the raw inspiration!

He decided he must get down to real bodies. Fiddling with concepts while the state burned was getting him neither riches nor solace. Humour itself was now often slasher frenetic. Many folk seemed destined to be tasty shark bait. Succulent birds especially, ingenues and traditionalists, sometimes got flayed alive. Why not invest in an old reliable scaremongery? How did the medieval torturer decide on the ‘angle of agony’ anyway? Was it not analogous to the ancient painstaking method of ‘trial and error’, the very method that eventually served to produce things like the first wondrous Stradivarius, which gave forth a peerless ‘vocalise’, so poignant to the passionate heart? Weren’t such ideas hippocampus boggling? And wasn’t the hippocampus grateful?

...As they slowly pushed the pretty, naked, trussed form, already collapsing collarbones, into the hissing crematorium feet first, conference highballs in hand...

Now that was the ticket. None of this body snatching simply to get the dishes done or the vacuuming.

Mania: the reliable tonic.

Now, in many films, a vibrant rock score often accentuated primal throb while the nastiness surged, percolated. Afterwards — pervasive keening with old reliables like the Barber Adagio for Strings, terminal airs. Vide Platoon, Sicko. A veritable deluge of sentiment. Many soulful commitment songs came now with a sexy cadence. Even songs headlining cold-bloodedness enlisted a hot horny beat. Vide Tina Turner, Beyoncé. Well, being a dork, he was one of the last to notice — the authors of gamy scenarios letting the bestial images flow as the Flood. Having a ball, ankle deep in plush tears or spit grease, watching their tales squirm on bonded sheets. Then off again joyously — to the bank!

Of course the daunting part was Randy’s covert suspicion that he might simply be incapable of sustained employable toil — of becoming a successful fruit picker, say — a wormy idea that

could turn even a snob's fruition, and he seemed indentured to learn the terrible truth. It was but a short distance from his tree house into the tree itself. Indeed, he seemed destined to view the human scene through the parted branch — as he did now, noting that Herb, his landlord, was home from work and preparing to cut the grass.

For years Randy strolled through that quiet residential lane, inspirational notepad in hand, heeding the character of the backyards, especially the variety of arbored cabanas and small summer houses, which numbered perhaps double the average of one per block. Always he slowed before the tree house, suggestive of an enclosed gazebo, that straddled three stout maples about nine feet up. It had two sizeable windows, a cedar roof, a water connection, a ceiling light, even a cable-vision hookup and sturdy draw-up step ladder. What hermit or waif enjoyed such digs? He never saw anyone in the well-tended back yard, the alleyway garbage stall itself neat and tidy as they come.

Then the owner of the property, Herb Spooner, a professional portrait photographer, gave him his first job. Herb needed a retoucher and saw some of Randy's artwork in his high school yearbook. Herb took the graduating student portraits. Randy, one of the graduates, had drawn sketches of each grad, the deft brush work of which Herb found, in its realism, exceptional. Herb suggested the retouching job to Randy who, at seventeen, quickly learned the current retouching techniques, resorting to Photoshop in due course. Thereafter, for two evenings a week — he then additionally worked as a dishwasher at a community college — he 'brushed' away blemishes and obtrusive features from Herb's lacy brides, family members, crisp nurses, sturdy businessmen, and fey students. He also opened lazy-lidded eyes, added subtle waves to straggled hair, improved the cut of a tux or gown, spruced up budget bouquets, even vivified flower beds in late-summer parks and, when feasible, added tiny sparkles to umbered jewelry.

In due course, the many portraits began to lose their particularity. Sometimes, on a Saturday, he'd barely recognize the images he'd retouched on a Wednesday. His amusement was short lived though; what was initially engaging became tedious. His interest in photography waned, certainly the Spooner variant of it, and he impulsively resigned — but not before fixing in fond memory the maple tree house Herb had built for a foster child, who was ruefully returned to Social Services after Herb and his wife failed in six months to right a decade of neglect. "I'm too old," Herb told a neighbour. "My wife needs a rest."

A year later Randy staged a 'chance' reunion — on a day Herb often cut the backyard grass. In the interim Randy had quit his dishwasher job. The mind numbing hours there enervated a fastidious writer bent on carefully assessing the mania bewitching modern existence! He needed far more time to diligently read and write. A growing vital, indispensable necessity.

Herb, when he spied Randy, stood across the fence behind his lawn mower pushing back his sun glasses, gesturing. Finally he shut off the engine. When he learned Randy needed an inexpensive place to stay, his dishwashing stay at an end, he jokingly pointed to the vacated tree house, sturdy as ever. That was two months ago. Randy, much to Herb's surprise, initial amazement and belated dismay, moved in. Randy circumvented the lobby to remove himself by

consenting to more part time retouching, for an hourly wage, an income he might just survive on — living in a tree. Herb's wife Babs, a watchful homebody, was urged to keep her misgivings under wraps — for the time being. For Randy the austere arrangement would allow time for ample reading and writing — university being inaccessible, for he was then nearly indigent. His single mother died penniless, and long ago he estranged himself from an older stepsister. He was still loath to seek a mundane full time job that would invariably crimp diligent study time. Now he sat on the propane biffy — a key if expensive addition to his abode, along with a wash basin, cot, lowboy, small desk and essential laptop, his mind alive with wily speculation — specifically the prospect of hideous assault becoming omniscient and thus commonplace, horror writers digging in their heels, toiling to magnify and vivify monstrosity. Historic mayhem served as a die, though *its* monsters were largely ghosts in that arbitrary 'now' era. Exemplars all though — these bête noirs from the past.

The ruthless Pol Pot came to mind and the kill-crazy Argentine Colonels. Also South African tire 'necklacing'. Idi Amin was a standout, given that the Afro-Asian-Arab and Soviet bloc gave him several standing ovations in the United Nations. Amin, though, was now old hat, likely the only thing he never ate. 'Husbandry' had a new essence if all that reputedly went into his notorious refrigerator did. The resolute Amin had his early detractors of course, akin to the suspicion in many North American minds that Ronald Reagan would not be an improvement over say someone like Leonid Brezhnev — both dyed in the wool autocrats in the press. Even a CBC vizier could, in an early Vancouver Institute Lecture, imagine in Reagonomics a coming social calamity rivalling the world's fascist-authoritarian fiascos. Now you can't get much more spine tingling than that! Akin to proclaiming that freedom and independence are incompatible with fairness — today's radish taunt. Why should the lucky 'other' enjoy two good kidneys? Better bones? A hobby-focused job? A prettier wife or husband? An engaging job? Fewer ingrained misfortunes? Inequity was infinite. An inexhaustible storehouse of horrors! Retribution's coal and ice.

And underlining it all: the current smart suspicion that accord itself might be adventitious if not phoney — disparity being too impacted, ingrained — allowing for a flood of vengeance seekers. Ergo, some topical *storybook* diktats: the blood shouldn't be congealed, the violence demonic if not pandemic, the savagery nimble, inevitable, tearless (hypnotically graphic); in short, lots of splendid bods in a well garnished hell. The day's *hymnal* for would-be best sellers. So antsy Randy presumed.

It was then that the hyper-allergic Herb began sneezing. He'd been cutting the grass below Randy's hideaway — again. After a fearsome hack he shut off the motor and headed indoors.

Herb was an asthmatic who suffered from hay fever and a pervasive immunity to modern medicine. His wife Babs would glower from the kitchen window, shake her head and move away. Herb would try yet another spray, lozenge or injection, then intermittently cough and wheeze for a further week, occasionally face down above warm sink water.

But the sight of the unattended mower and long grass was too much for Randy. If he

climbed down and resumed the job he could get saddled with it. A good deed, even a modest one, is hard to slight; open kindness, for instance, remained an adulatory prompt once you made the effort; such effort, sometimes considerable, remained another sober advisement antsy Randy often duelled with. He swore at the lawnmower. Finally he climbed down and with his fake entry pass in hand headed for Vancouver and its early fall fair, a popular festival that engaged even an aloof aspiring parodist like him.

But his sense of escape was short lived. Almost at once his lingering esteem for decorum, genteel habit and seemly expression, began goading, taunting him during the ride: there were some things the discerning few mustn't do — such as yielding to ready suspicion, acrimony or doggerel flight. The world's new dynamic scolds had pretty well upstaged an earlier age's deportment, its once approved practicality, perseverance, stoicism, reliability — a mindset he envied and struggled, mainly in vain, to emulate. A disposition, temperament, he believed once helped foster the serenity in melodic ballads like *Days of Wine and Roses*, *As Time Goes By*, and his favourite, the Kazakh folksong *The Butterfly Lover*, ballads that tempered disappointment, even ire, helped make one into a reflective coping human — but not likely a snooty veteran aisle sitter like him, an unpardonable pauper who often procured his nosh at food banks. Vigilant observation was one thing, the courage to selflessly astutely act quite another!

Such was the self-calumny as he sat on the bus, noting the few blades of grass stuck to his shoes. Retribution, in all its keen assertions, reigned. So it seemed.

TWO

Vijay Kurtz, a large muscular mercenary thug named *The Juggler*, was getting bored with the *Scream Machine*, the mint monster roller coaster at the popular Vancouver fall fair which, that year, honoured transportation efficiency. Carnival, he mused, turned most Western folk into mesmerized peons. He'd listened carefully to the rapturous screaming of the sweet young buds as they arced through the vertical loops. The tease of terror. A perpetual lark. Such a short distance to stealing or making bombs. Electric circuits! A life near an edge, where the screams alone might determine the acuteness of the dream. Adrenalin seemed an invincible fix and you manufactured it yourself. Like feasting with panthers someone said.

He wandered back to the Plaza of Nations and sat beside a skinny lad with grass cuttings on his shoes. A group of exercise junkies from the B.C. Kootenays was determined to show a little sweat and a lot of form. Fancy sausage polyester he thought of it. Among them a pregnant belly showcasing a sculpted mons. The wonderful open exhibitionist mind. Beauty programmed to molest, show the world the corpus delictum, free of telltale pucker, corpulence and coyness. Pious carnality. Neo-predestination! A middle-aged gent next to him smiled raffishly, and with a wave dismissed a plain impatient wife waiting behind. The sluggards especially were galvanized. Exhibitionism often incited great hankering. Keep it up gals, another encore, yes. Show us the peeled, straining, tense, rack-taut corpus, there is no spectacle like it. The master puppeteer at play. But for Vijay it was a fleeting diversion. For a perpetrator of acute dread, the tease gave

off a mere spoor. Grateful was he the zero hour approached. A late dead letter drop affirmed the coming prodigious sequence of events. Late that night the special package would be placed in the sturdy scow inconspicuously at anchor off Point Roberts, the American penne-exclave south of Vancouver. The countdown had begun. Early tomorrow, an abducted, recently retired army lieutenant colonel in Anacortes, would be shown the innards of the package secreted in the scow and allowed to make a single phone call before being released. Within an hour or two, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with adroit Russian complicity in purloining the nuclear artillery shell, would levy many exactions on the Yankee devils. Vijay imagined an embittered warehouse master-sergeant conceiving the sale of the shell. Would he discover by now he hadn't duped his generous client as intended, but had in fact given away the real thing for his gelded facsimile? Would he ever learn of the second willing entrepreneur in his outfit? So Vijay pictured and traced the probabilities. Planning like that upstaged working the political roosts — smarmy rookeries like the U.N. And what, this time, must the Yankee Devils surrender to Allāh — intelligence, cash, requisite arms? Likely all three, including a self-imposed silence about being so coerced by the current defence strategy. Vijay had long since anticipated the broader exaction and likely outcome, Western fear of Islamic fanaticism being axiomatic after 9/11, rivalling the dread atomic warfare posed. He suspected there might be a future leak of an arms sale — as happened at least once before! — a nice involuted touch, an American administration scrambling to stay any lurking anxiety at home, or any newly perceived fortuity in its enemies. The Russians were keenly sensitive to exploitable tensions, especially between Iran and the U.S. Though Iranians were surely aware of the fragility of alliances in international politics. Partners may or may not be allies; the invocation of 'ally' in that vexed age could be a smart con. Indeed, Vijay had spent most of his life coping with cagey 'allies'. The Iranians had recruited him this time — with Russian compliance. It seemed he'd always been stuck in a perpetual juggernaut, while open freelance action took place in fenny, virginal places like Canada, the natural resource mecca, where hustlers might adopt schemes with a minimum of public scrutiny. The laissez-fair hustle. That was a finely treasured community for busy perps like Vijay Kurtz, a land where many varieties of designer licence might take on genial form! Even movements like political correctness engaged in early collegial discourse there. Some said the land of the peacekeepers was destined itself to split apart — to accommodate its two high-spirited linguistic and cultural punters. Some said. Well, he'd been upstaged before. Fate was on nobody's side.

He got up and wandered back to the fair concourse, ending finally before the Highway of the Future, a playground sculpture consisting of a grey concrete ribbon of undulating highway hosting a plethora of vehicles, from a dirt bike, to a mini sub, helicopter and fin-tailed Caddy — all in a battleship monochrome. Was the sculptor a closet diviner as well, he wondered. Given the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion and resulting ash...the roadway, with its buckled asphalt and grey matte vehicles, ended with stark empty boots and sneakers — marking the ragged severed end of the Highway of the Future.

Horror was entertaining in a promised land!

THREE

Despite his resolve not to, Randy found himself in another pavilion lineup. The exercise junkies at the Plaza of Nations were all rather homely he decided. Pedestrian bones and sinew in the latest non-disguise was not a welcome exhibit. Nor the ogre who nonchalantly took up the seat next to him, an Argus-eyed Minotaur daunting as a wild boar. A rock-ribbed enforcer Randy imagined. How assuaging to play the rectifier, the doer, Randy mused. What imminent reckoning awaited to jinx that year's seemly West Coast fair? Perhaps the sluggish lineups in a high-tech transportation fair might spawn recrimination, tumult. He waited nearly an hour to see a seven minute conjuring trick in the Spirit Lodge in the GM Pavilion with a magic Chevrolet-canoe. Touching illusion otherwise humping a piggyback message. The chronic merchandizing factor.

He recalled how one Canadian magnate sold magazines, including porno ones, through a distribution network, and how the magnate's biographer and castigator, a standpat conservative, rued the lack of an old-fashioned decorum — here the disapproval of people touting racy voyeurism! It was also the year a wily personal ad for a bi-male companion appeared in a Vancouver paper specifying 'No Socreds' (the New Democratic Party was then in power), leaving in doubt the question of past Socred performance, post-coupling chatter, or virulent morbidity.

Still, the modish fall fair proved again to be a seasonal high and people came, like today, in droves. That they were spontaneously enjoying themselves left sorely heedful Randy 'baby sitting' his skepticism.

Despite another interminable wait, this time to enter the Canadian Pavilion, he managed to smile at a historic mail-dispatch motorcycle rider — filmed in the pavilion's hyper 3-D theatre. "So I'm late — write a letter!" the rider seemed to say as he drove his vintage bike inches before your nose. As impervious was a pretty slender Chinese acrobat cautiously balancing a platter full of pretty little glasses filled with what might well have been purplish *Creme de l'Amour!*

But he had not come this day to the fair to see the exhibits and he didn't know if in the end he had the nerve to pull it off. He wanted to play a trick on the Russians. It was that piece in the Vancouver Sun that bugged him, the interview with one of the pavilion hosts — homesick for Russia and all that — no mention of things like timeless pollution or certificate rubles; no poverty in the serene Motherland, no unemployment, inflation, delinquency, major crime, drugs, unattended sick; no need for flagrant coercive advertising, so unlike gaudy American showcasing. American 'glasnost' would blush a yak, after all. No, what gadfly Randy wanted to let loose was a stinging reminder that, for Russian skills, the genial, jovial fair would one day come to an end. The Cuban Pavilion, with its elegant 19th Century carriage in front, designated 'The beginning of communal transportation', was also a tease, but somehow the Cuban communist struck Randy as the peerless cynic, Cuban dungeons, from all reports, being as low tariff as any. But detached from his commissars, the Russian, who still might be seduced by a forest mushroom — there one sensed hope. Still, the parting message had to have a bite. None of this hail-fellow-well-met, hell-of-a-swell-guy stuff, but a reminder that Russian authorities were still among the

world's leaders in spotting and isolating undesirable genes. Twice he had passed through the Russian Pavilion and carefully selected his target, a suave oily host whom he imagined flush with seemly goods amassed on this latest junket to the alien planet. (Randy had discovered some busy Russian shoppers one day, the host among them.) This day Randy circled the lower floor twice, looking absently at the hovering satellites and metallic head of Lenin. What other pavilion had such a steely icon? He could think of none. But there the prophet was, the size and might of a wrecking ball, even eyebrows and lips squared into geometric salients. As the Russian apologist Peter Ustinov once put it in a personal documentary tape, in an over-voice against a poignant soprano in an ancient, candle-thick Byzantine church, "It's not the belief that counts but the quality of the expression." Randy wondered what the selectively finical Mr. Ustinov would award the expression here on a scale from one to ten. Finally he lurched toward the languorous pavilion host. It was now or never, the time to separate the goats from the polecats.

"You look tired," he said deferentially.

"A long day, yes," said the host.

"Homesick?"

The man still seemed unsuspecting.

"Yes, a little. One is homesick always. But, Canada, is nice place."

Suave, bravura Randy was nearly splitting and must have come a hair breadth from guffawing, choking and dumbly fleeing. Somehow he kept on. Most likely the host did not know he'd been a chance target over the past week, that someone like Randy had stumbled upon a group of Russians engaged in a lengthy shopping excursion, which concluded with the host's purchase of a sophisticated Samsung cell phone. Initially the venture was little more than a jean search, taking the shopper to some exceptional bargains. Grateful, Randy bought a pair himself. Now the crucial moment had come. The host was smiling impatiently. Randy just barely silenced the exhortation, For God, Harry, England and Saint George, before moving closer and saying in a low voice:

"I've little time. I'm instructed to tell you to get rid of the cell phone. You've downloaded some malicious apps and your SIM card has been hacked by a Simjacker. Your messages in and out may be read at other hubs without your knowledge, and phishing hits can steal e-mail and login info from select apps. Your phone's a mess."

The man's face suddenly became as remote and apathetic as the flinty head of Lenin opposite.

"I know nothing of this," he said with a ready expression of disbelief if not droll, farcical amusement.

"I have no further instructions. I am very sorry."

The message delivered Randy promptly fled, keeping his face cement hard, stealthily scurrying in and out of the crowds, feeling fairly certain no one followed him. He crashed at a distant McDonalds and ordered a vanilla milkshake. Even then the laughter within was confined to a knotted stomach. He decided he had either simply made an ass of himself, again, or teased

to the quick. If the several émigrés he'd read over the years were any guide, the man might at least put in a sleepless hour or two that night, perhaps thinking how nice it would be to live in a country where you might buy a sophisticated personal messaging device without provoking career snoops. The host would surely remember the fracas at the video supermarket checkout — how a trio of raucous shoppers had complained of misleading advertising. Randy had paid special attention to the heated exchange, as had the host when he purchased the cell phone. And so a nervous scapegrace Randy now gulped the last of his milkshake, straining for the final noisily sucked-up drop. Then, his hunger temporarily slaked, he fled again as the hotly pursued, pausing in various shadows to survey the crowds for stragglers who might have a special interest in his growing and newly chaffing unease. The thought of being followed he'd considered, but only then sensed a hovering jeopardy.

Had he truly 'wigged out' this time?

FOUR

For several seconds Vijay stared at the empty niche. A full moon vivified the discovery. The small slot in an old granite formation on Burnaby Mountain Park was absurdly empty. It was the first time in his busy career that a dead letter drop had not arrived.

Half a minute later he sought a hillock off one walkway to cast about for any stray visitors at that hour. It was soon apparent he had that side of the wildwood park to himself, yet his earlier pique persisted; in a tranquil place like Canada's West Coast crucial arrangements were not supposed to get interfered with. He quickly returned to his car and drove back down into the city where his minder's cell phone number was promptly dialled and answered. After the formal exchange and brief stop test, he asked what the hell had happened to 'Lara'. Later, in his housekeeping room, the decoded reply now paraphrased in his mind to glean a mood, continued to pall. His suspicion of an unhappy GRU field man was on target: something had complicated the deployment of the nuclear shell.

The Rusky clammed up. Someone put a bug in his ear. More likely his liaison. Maybe nothing but he wants a 48 hour wait. New transfer venue to come. All action on hold.

Forty-eight hours. Vijay suppressed an uncharacteristic sigh. But he could do nothing and it would be a panic when he could. He wanted to break something yet knew that time would come. He looked down from his dim hotel window onto a bleak alley and lone rummy who paused to hawk and spit. He could have throttled the sot without compunction, snapped the spine like a withered cob of corn. As readily could he have obliterated the entire lucky lackadaisical fair population. At that moment his contempt for mankind was seething. Blipping his mind was the silly listless teenager who sat beside him in the outdoor pavilion, grass cuttings on his shoes — probably the layabout's main accomplishment that week.

He sat down and turned on the seedy room's old television. (His current stint mandated living as a drifter.) A prospective mayoral candidate eulogized Vancouver as a nuclear-free zone then complained the government was not providing all its citizens sufficient opportunity for a

decent life. Many people would be hungry, homeless and nobbled that winter because of the fair excesses; many citizens displaced, shortchanged, snubbed, forsaken...*unhoused, disappointed, unaneled*. Such ingratitude in lotus land! In a veritable Shangri-La — one of the wealthiest, easiest, least demanding places on earth, possibly in the history of the planet! Ha! It seemed scarcely believable that such obtuse sentiment might prevail here. More and more he relished the thought of blowing the asinine place to kingdom come.

FIVE

Randy could not recall Herb so self-absorbed. Then, in a soft voice that portended dread, the prize-winning photographer said, “Oh my gawd!...”

Herb stood sniffing over the well-lit viewing table in the studio’s large back room that also served as a sorting, editing, retouching, spraying, framing, packaging, mailing and storage area. Randy sat nearby on a swivel stool before a sloping trestle desk and worked on the portrait of an executive whose nose yielded vivid blood blisters against his otherwise pallid complexion. Herb still preferred deft hands-on retouching for his formal portraits, though he knew Photoshop would soon prevail over time. Randy glanced at his boss, thinking him unhappy with the finished work, then relaxed when he saw the small photographic prints — sample proofs — which Herb had marshalled before him. He held a selection of the small prints in his hairy ever nervous hands, laying them out one by one with the care of a tarot reader.

“How in hell’s name?...”

Randy could take no more and rose to have a look. Instantly he recognized the proofs from a group portrait of the graduating class in evening dress at the Winfield-Cranmer School for girls. Two group portraits were commissioned each year, one formal one informal. Specifically then before Herb was the informal set, where the assembled gals might do a bit of clowning for the camera. In the past this usually included showing a bit of leg or pulling an evening dress seductively off one shoulder. Randy knew that both group portraits were delayed that year because several students had attended a governance class in Ottawa, and that both sets of proofs were sent directly to the school from the lab to facilitate a year book selection deadline. He also knew, without initially knowing why, that someone from the school had officiously returned the informal set to the studio that morning, demanding Herb directly contact the school’s headmistress — a call Herb had yet to undertake, apparently. Now he looked as if he might bolt through the back door to his car. Then as readily he stopped, woefully undecided, as if he had just demolished a dog slurpy. “Too late,” he said finally, faintly, stoically, just before hunkering down for a further care-worn appraisal of one proof. Seconds later he resembled a numb baggage-caged spaniel Randy thought as he eyed three gamesome proofs spread before Herb — one of these singularly eye-catching.

“Dear me, a rather daunting revelation — not found in Revelations,” a newly waggish Randy fondly ventured. “Clever of the one gal to time her titty flashing with the ‘flash’. About a six, perhaps a seven, if you like soft-paste porcelain.” Randy was doing his best to be forensically

observant. “A nice pair of drawers too. You can just see the lace. Brussels point, I think. All in all, a trifle ‘overexposed’ you might say,” Randy continued, as he studied the one incomparable proof, thinking demure Herb might not have been too ‘tenty’ during the takes.

Herb then silently slouched in the viewing table’s task chair, head in hands. Randy wondered if his landlord would ever breathe again. The élite Winfield-Cranmer School was one of the economic pillars to the studio. Each year the mostly wealthy parents arranged separate top-of-the-line individual portrait sittings for their preppy daughters, often with accompanying family sittings. One year the grads wished to do ‘something different’ for the group portrait (to Herb’s easy shrug) — hence the advent of the second ‘informal’ portrait. The result was the record of an inoffensive jape, thereafter a feature of graduation the matriculated damsels apparently insisted on — showing a bit of leg or expansive shoulder. But now a rather neat fire starter!

Herb shot some spray into his nose and inhaled like a bladder wort. For a suspended interval he looked newly adaptive, anaerobic. A droll Randy ventured: “Why not say this one was airbrushed by a randy retoucher?...”

“Shaddup,” Herb said softly to nobody in particular, once more without a nose.

Later Randy did recognize the cherubic face, though he never told Herb. The face appeared among a select bevy of teenagers who figured in a jean ad for a Canadian distributor. All girls, jean clad, jumped in the air like Toyota salesmen just as a vintage airplane flew above toward the camera. An advertiser gave Herb the job of adding to and thickening the ‘Kentucky Blue Grass’ at the bottom of the frame. A fair concourse board featured the same photo, the grass and jeans cropped out, leaving the jubilant waving arms, agreeable smiles and, mainly, a larger image of the vintage airplane. Some concourse artiste had, it seemed, climbed onto the billboard’s lower ledge and drawn a moustache on one of the models, the same girl in the proof before Herb who so deftly synchronized her teacup exhibition with Herb’s electronic flash. Randy knew Herb could not have been eyeing each student during the takes and, given his nature, was likely ‘decorously’ looking away.

Randy was in the gazebo when Herb returned from his meeting with the daunting headmistress and some directors of the school. He and Herb had left the studio together, Herb to attend an inquisition, Randy a fragrant cool in his tree house — some adjacent redolent lilac bushes were then in bloom — where he resumed reading a late issue of the *London Review of Books*. Herb was sneezing when he returned and headed straight indoors. Later, as he continued sniffing like one slurping soup, Randy overheard through the kitchen window the sorry tale of the misadventure.

“The girl would be the daughter of a School Board member — a United Church minister, at that — the *venerable* Dr. Rutquist’s daughter, Maureen. You’d think from all the fuss I screwed her myself,” Herb added, less for Babs’s benefit than a careless deity.

“Herbert!” said Babs, shocked at her husband’s newfound lexicon.

“A bloody vamp, that kid. And I get shafted. Cashiered.”

“Maybe you should have been more attentive.”

“More attentive...” Herb then laughed, rather whinnied, Randy thought. But the sanguine moment quickly passed and Herb continued, more baleful than ever.

“You know what this means? Do you?”

Babs was silent.

“I’ll tell you what it means: it means doing more package weddings for that showboat Italian, that’s what it means. God almighty — more bilious home-made wine, more freebies, more fights, more bad cheques, more promises, more threats. And more damn sweat marathons in that damn Bloedel Conservatory. Jehozephats!”

Then from Babs came the ominous remark that left Randy fit to be tied in his snug hideaway.

“Well why not get that layabot out there to do some of those weddings. It isn’t as if he can’t use a camera.”

“He’s too bloody persnickety.”

Babs promptly wryly replied. “So he might do well then. A fine new challenge — for your smarty pants.”

Herb’s ambiguous silence was then for Randy a concise theatre of cruelty. With dispatch he descended his ladder and proceeded to get lost, once more taking with him his carefully forged fair pass. Jeesh — weddings — Diego weddings! God almighty!

SIX

Vijay had driven half-way down the night-dark Burnaby Mountain roadway with his new dead letter drop in hand when his car’s headlights limned an ugly scene. Two collided cars blocked the lone roadway. Because he was desperate to proceed to the inner harbour in Vancouver’s Burrard Inlet, where the remote bomb detonators would be delivered, as instructed in the letter’s message, he rammed the nearest of the vehicles, pushing it aside to allow space wide enough to proceed. The driver of that vehicle, briefly seen in profile, looked dumbstruck, speechless, as Vijay passed him.

Minutes later Vijay parked his stolen vehicle, with its tell-tale dint, several blocks from his housekeeping room, carefully wiping the steering wheel, dash and door handles. He would be in another vehicle before sun-up, restless yet happily on schedule. Not pleased, mind you, with the unusual traffic on Burnaby Mountain at 3:00 A.M. on a weekday morning, but what the hell. He was in a hurry and knew of only one roadway down from the high parkland. Soon it would all be over, with time enough for droll reflection.

But for the tense Russian pavilion host, an adjunct GRU courier who’d placed the much awaited dead letter drop minutes before, his collision with the older Lincoln was altogether hair-raising, prompting him to flee his car and run down the tree-thick slope to a lower pathway while frantically fingering his mobile phone — actually a new mobile provided by the pavilion director!

The collision — at that hour in that place — stupefied and alarmed. He would have driven off immediately but his car would not start. Then a third bloody car, an out-of-nowhere maniac, ramming the Lincoln! It would happen to him there, then. First, a speeding lunatic, then a mysterious masher. The bearded driver in the older Lincoln, the car in the initial collision, was livid as the courier fled the scene. “Hey you, shorty, where the fuck you think you’re going?”

Well, that ‘shorty’ was soon lost in the trees that bordered the roadway, feverishly running and persuading himself his rented car was clean. But the chap in the Lincoln had glimpsed his face, though not long enough to fix an identity surely, and killing the man, a momentary urge, would be counterproductive. The anxiety over the vagrant warning about his ‘corrupted’ cell phone they — he! — received in the pavilion, had never let up. So untimely, vexing, preposterous, it had to be considered! He would not soon forget the pavilion’s security chief, a lieutenant colonel, standing deathly silent in the director’s office. Such an aberrant warning chaffed.

— But the third driver that night — an unknown driving like a jerk. The first crash, yes, an accident, the driver likely drunk, but the second purposeful ramming — what was gained by it?

The courier rallied just before leaving the last stand of pines.

To be in such a hurry! Why not — the delay, the new exacting deadline — a cutout dangling by his scrotum to fetch the long awaited info about the shell detonators’ disposition. Ha! Talk about a bloody tight schedule.

Without further remonstrance, the courier scampered down the remaining slope, slowing only to recall the location he’d so hurriedly given the pavilion director — on the cell phone the director had given him! A dark car slowly approached two minutes later. Once inside he was swiftly driven along a railway track with looming elevators opposite and left two blocks from the overflow residence. He snorted. His wife said only a sweet onion got to go on holidays like that. He would tell the head of liaison services at the pavilion to report the theft of a rented vehicle. The crucial missive had been delivered, discretely. Period. Whoever picked it up was, not surprisingly, in a blood-curdling hurry!

SEVEN

Dr. Roger Allard ‘Buff’ (after his light hair and smooth manner) Rutquist, the Pastor of the smart Underhill United Church in Vancouver’s Point Grey, was recovering from a noxious dream. One he’d had before, though not nearly as vivid. Twice his wife asked him to cool it and twice Buff had turned over, but the subject of the dream was that night again immutable — a subject that defied sermon form, to wit, the modern mishmash of human sexuality, the gallimaufry that sanctioned an endless variety of looks and behaviours, men often being dourly atomized, whereas women, diffident spectators, seemed bent on joining a laugh track. That he’d confronted his *own* incestuous voyeuristic nature so *late* in his career added a further burn now. The excruciating aspect of the dream was that the provocative woman therein uncannily resembled his own too-real, exceedingly fetching daughter, whose recent impervious flashing in her school’s ‘informal’ group portrait was a salient in this recurring nightmare.

Earlier that day he'd attended a meeting of the board of directors of the Winfield-Cranmer School when the proofs of the graduation class group portraits, formal and informal, arrived. The headmistress, Mrs. H. (Hatty, or 'High Hat') McGregor received the package which came directly from the lab to expedite the selection process and meet a year book printer's deadline. Several of the graduates attended a citizenship conference in Ottawa and the two sittings were unavoidably delayed. The headmistress, proud of her school's durable tradition and record at winning scholarships, national debates, and not a few science awards, easily elected to let the board members preview the proofs. As the meeting itself was bogged down on several chronic problems — the age of the building-and-grounds superintendent (a school original who balked at retirement), another cut in the provincial budget which would interfere with the chem lab update, a leaking roof on the gymnasium, a sobering estimate on the cost of a new school uniform — the directors were most receptive to a diversion. The initial and largely patronizing laughs at the proofs of the informal portrait of that year's graduates, where the girls might do a bit of clowning for the camera — one of the yearbook's festive back pages — were replaced by an uncomfortable wakefulness when Mrs. McGregor herself fell suddenly silent. The other members had either handsomely chose not to be found looking too closely or were still denied that year's unprecedented frames, when the confident headmistress abruptly changed colour and demeanour.

"I am afraid we've been the consignee of an arrantly offensive prank," she said at last, very slowly, after determining the rest of the board must not be denied a candid look, anxious also that someone may have already glimpsed one or other of the offensive prints — three in all as it turned out. "I've decided it would be sorely patronizing to attempt to spare you this particular embarrassment, Dr. Rutquist. I have no explanation whatever, except to say that the laissez-faire attitude of our photographer, Mr. Spooner, is singularly misplaced."

She then simply handed the most blatant offering to the suave Dr. Rutquist, who smiled even more disarmingly until he realized it was none other than his baby-faced Maureen who sat with a theatrical wink holding the top of her strapless gown well below two alert young nipples of purest pink, the skin creases above, where the garment had pressed the swelling flesh, adding their own subtle parenthesis. Nearly as disconcerting was the glimpse of frost stockings and fine lace beneath the partly hiked skirt, leaving the cool image with him of an ice-fast fjord. For all of five or six seconds the urbane well-spoken Doctor of Divinity was undecided, his mind alive with gremlins cajoling him to display — ironic tenderness, resilient humanist disappointment, stoic calm, frugal anger, immaculate silence? Emphatic dismay was eliminated as the seconds passed. At last he managed a rare selfless aside. "I suspect the photographer may have been an unsuspecting dupe, Mrs. McGregor. Please accept my very deepest apologies. I will of course speak to Maureen straight away."

It was soon apparent that no less than three girls had acted so, though only callow-faced Maureen matched the timing of camera shutter and strobe light to explicit nimble flashing. The other two revealing barely half as much on different proofs on that steamy gymnasium stage,

while the mindful Ms. Scobie, the geography teacher, strolled in the back of the auditorium as a stoic warden keeping nosy distracting students outside. The directors were of course upset yet duly commiserative, given the rank social influences at large. Heavens! — the age, the times, the videos, chat rooms, twitter feeds, bantering fads, e-mail recreants — and a most careless if not malfeasant photographer who would be formally rebuked, likely fired and, if the school's lawyers warranted, charged with contributing to the public mischief, for all girls were just seventeen.

Mrs. Rutquist took the news calmly enough. She had suspected early on that Buff had developed a prurient interest in Maureen, their only child. Looking back, she believed the tomboy robustness Buff encouraged early on led to the rough-and-tumble of field sports, often in skimpy attire...she nearly despaired when the recognition of her innately voyeuristic pawing husband dawned. The irony being, the maturing daughter herself came to recognize the unseemly attentions which, latterly and unexpectedly, led her to join a theatre company whose stage shows often parodied religious convention, its masculine tenor a particular spur to salty humour. The theatre company was a prickly semi-amateur ensemble called Dog the Father Et Cetera Theatre Sports Company, managed by a 'pompous jaw smith' — Buff's conclusion. "It takes one to know one," responded Maureen as seasoned imp, to her dismayed father. The company's director was otherwise celebrated in their city's artistic community as an inimitable innovator with his clever confrontational theatre — 'which panders to all that bypasses tolerance and equanimity' Buff ruefully said to himself, his early freewheeling sometimes voyeuristic parenting now a default he had stoically acknowledged and might never be absolved from.

Yet how he had needed those moments when the beauty of his own flesh sang before him, a peerless nubile form that could grace an inspired lunette or spandrel. Surely the Maker of such beauty did it with eyes open, so Buff imagined until the mid-teens when the energy and candour of his daughter morphed into robust parody — the shrill derisive humour that had poisoned his dream *again* that merciless gaga night, where he seemed to be stuck in a kind of Commedia dell'arte theatre as a ready source of entertainment: a buffoonish prurient Pierrot skirting a focus of attention, to piercing jeers and sharper missiles, many thrown by his own singular daughter, a stellar Columbina! Buff fled the scene a seedy voyeur, finding no place that might offer sanctuary to such a dirty old man.

Then dumbly, soporifically awake, standing in the kitchen with a glass of stout, he vaguely recalled a round table discussion of church doctrine with the Council of Elders of the Seven Departments — the peculiar nature of which fused now with the eerie nightmare itself, his mind then a welter of confusion, as if derisive parody were then a doctrinal norm. Indeed, the Elders seemed bent, in his current bilious comprehension — a remnant of the dream — of actually disposing of God as a 'loving Father'. The dogmatic Mrs. Simpson was always pushing the boat out a distance, barely moving her lips as she spoke. Her unmistakable voice now plied his new bizarre consciousness, with: "Many children have no father, loving or not, and given the norm, may thank their lucky stars." She continued with, "It's no wonder He's often described as a

ghost or spirit, a swank nobody who's never home." Buff tried to smile — such words he'd surely not heard, surely not. So why would they surface in his mind now? Was he actually hearing voices? Going mad? Yet the tirade continued.

He knew Mrs. Simpson's arch statements often incited stoic nods — dumbfounding as they sometimes were. No one could follow the scent of modern drama, the new passion play, better than Mrs. Simpson. The unbelievable improbable words, he now heard, conjured as never before, seemed newly written in stone. If he doubted his recollection, even his consciousness in this bewildering fit, the voices in his reeling mind were loud clear and acutely emphatic, speaking in heraldic tongues it seemed. Was he actually *hearing* such voices? Truly going mad? He never remembered being so muddled or bemused.

Yet the resolute Sibyl's voice persevered with her upgrades, both teasingly droll and fulsomely rank, words almost audible now. "I think it's also high time we drafted a formal apology to all the Native Peoples that Christianity, specifically the United Church of Canada, has sordidly sought to convert and mainstream. We must recognize the spiritual wisdom of all pagans. Their totemism and animism should be our own animus to special study. We must apologize for our missionaries and schoolteachers. Our principal Moderator must do some begging for a change, get down there and bump with a few smart mommas." Buff suspected he'd heard words like these before...though not surely as singularly emphatic, flagrant as they came to him now. "Tolerance, acceptance, empathy are paramount. For instance, if some Anglicans can contemplate obliging Sikhs, Sunnis, Zoroastrians, Pelagians even heedful Wahhabists, an upcoming short list, we can bloody well embrace some savvy Gideans, Esters, Rolfers and Gymnosophists." In this, Buff's aberrant memory fit, the surfacing of such ideas did slyly intimate a growing social conceit if not craze. Accommodation was rife.

The Elders occasionally nodded during Mrs. Simpson's declarations — however much such spendthrift wisdom dazed, flummoxed Buff now. Had he ever really heard such words? Had the one elder who was hard of hearing not belatedly nodded? If he could barely credit such thoughts, the tone itself in this fevered recollection — or hallucination — was emphatic enough to indemnify his mushrooming pique. Was he only now really listening — to a ministry Sibyl?

"We must also consider that life begins — in the eye of the beholder. All opportunistic infections, in whatever guise or at whatever stage, become endurable when *we* give the nod." A few distinct amens followed, barely interrupting the Sibyl's exhortation.

"We must also strive to sustain asylum, to provide sanctuary for the multitudes of brutalized sisters and rare but not to be shunned brother. Not all men are Barbary nincompoops." A few gestures of optimistic acknowledgement followed — so Buff now surmised. "We will not leave hundreds of thousands of unknown unfortunates lingering on the murder and death rows of American imperialism. Personhood is precious. Like the curse of AIDS, everyone has a responsibility, especially the grubs who just may avoid infection."

This time the tempered applause included a few quiescent bravos that seemed to echo in the silent kitchen, as if coming from a town crier. Buff was aghast, convinced he must be dreaming,

hallucinating, if not going mad, hearing such voices! Yet the voices continued with admonitory disarming realism.

“As well, we dearly need validation of our gay and tranny ministry. People are entitled to their own private opinion but it is abundantly apparent our Task Force investigators speak with a single voice. There are no second-class humans. The church serves the many legions of lesbians, queens and tranies and trash any good old boy who thinks otherwise! You do not have to come to us, our Heavenly Epicene will bloody well seek you out! And to that end we hereby table our plan to Elevate the Lower Digestive Tract, to make it as eminent as any trick purse womb that pretender Mary had to offer. Blessed be the fruit of whatever. Let me be frank: a versatile tush is worth an extravagant jellyroll any day, and is every bit as durable in our sight. Also, if we may cite one exemplary union — two Bathshebas, two lady fingers, cherry bombs, setting off sparkler orgasms — as the wise woman said of gyno sex, ‘female pyro technique is a matchless blast!’ Any randy Tom who thinks otherwise can just bugger off to Rome!”

That was when Buff noisily self-consciously snorted, startling even himself, once more provoking his wife. Was he then finally awake, not dreaming, hallucinating? From the bedroom Naomi again pleaded: “Buff, for goodness’ sake. You’re nattering again. Take some Nytol!”

After a moment’s consideration Buff headed for the bathroom. He was appalled, buffaloed. Was he now in fact actually *hearing voices*...speaking in apocalyptic tongues, say? He was only slightly reassured to find the old haggard face staring back at him in the gilded mirror, not some mix-and-match hippogryph. The topical likelihood of the Creator pleading historic ineptness and temporary insanity, reconciliation uppermost in His mind, had *not*, as it turned out, been ameliorated by the late-night glass of stout. But just when he was again swaddled in his sheets, Mrs. Simpson had discovered that man mastiffs and milk snakes were kith if not kin, beef the barbarian’s meal, and assisted suicide the acme of noblesse oblige; necrophilia too was not to be slighted, being expeditious, victimless and cool for hapless lovebirds who felt that death shouldn’t crimp expressive free will!

But when he awoke, the ecclesiastical ruin seemed lucid as the coming light of day.

EIGHT

The house lights slowly began to dim. Randy had come to the packed theatre finally on his own. His few friends, acquaintances rather, were busy elsewhere. His most recent companion he sorely vexed by failing to fondly write while she was away visiting an estranged parent dying of cancer. “Christ, I spend night and day in a hospice care ward and you come up with a terse e-mail and talk like a troll.” She and her mother had for the first time a heart-to-heart and stilted figurative Randy was rebuked. So he came to the Dog the Father Et Cetera Theatre Sports Company to chasten his peck-sniff ways, though he sought a seat near the back, electing not to become one of the impromptu players — members of the audience who might assist in a specific skit. At the last minute he decided not to sign the campy Participation Release Form — the affidavit that exempted the company from any liability should a participant take away ‘lasting

metaphysical preoccupations' — though rumour suggested many of the 'solicited' skits were pre-staged.

Such participation included being singled out for an 'attitudinal' study, much as say a South African black was once summarily detained, questioned. A purgative dare Randy had yet to witness. An American analogy was, it seemed, current with newly mindful editors: Blacks suffering the half-cocked cultural aspersions of red necks. More or less. Media critics were generally liberal with praise for the 'provisional troupe', with its daunting sketches, minimalist set and diverting costumes.

The first few offerings were perhaps designed to amuse and lull. Suggestions for situational skits were taken from the audience. The perennial proposal of 'an unendurable pleasure indefinitely prolonged' was enacted as: a voyeur ogling a hard core porno video which kept stalling, and resumed only when the antsy-pantsy viewer was about to trash his TV with a baseball bat, the resumption cued by a protracted fart. The next suggestion, 'a born loser', became: a recently abducted lottery winner who had given his win to a struggling care home. The lead kidnapper, played by the director of the company, was totally convincing as a murderous, acutely distrustful questioner!

The suggestion of 'the loved one' took longer to devise. Finally the shrouded form of the Winfield-Cranmer student was carried out on the shoulders of grim pallbearers to a pianist's solemn rendering of Chopin's Funeral March. Twice the pallbearers circled the stage before placing the rigid form on a hastily set up catafalque of two end-to-end benches and lighting a candle on a side table.

In response, the shoulders of the deceased began a provocative swivel, followed progressively by the entire form — movement that startled the grave pallbearers, as did a new catchy rendering of the Funeral March. Soon a young beauty rose up to begin an unusually limber burlesque — to coincidentally reveal the best legs Randy had seen that year. As much to foil the prospect of sensational nudity, a stage hand fetched a spray of roses, which was presented to the performer as her shroud began to moult. But when the performer began tossing discretionary buds to select persons in the audience, mainly women, the pallbearers began to howl like wolves, echoed by a few wags in the audience. With dispatch the form was hastily re-draped and carried out by the pallbearers to a markedly grave performance of the Funeral March. Thereafter, a ballsy rhetoric took over.

A putative journalist, a press ID in her hat, asked questions of some members of the audience who had signed the Participation Release Form. Shouldn't the age of consent be lowered to ten or eleven — the need being great and innocence now an antiquated state? Should little white children learn to cry because they are white — to get them off on the right foot, so to speak? A second journalist wanted to know who in the audience would help fund Blacks who wished to return to, or resettle in, an African homeland where most whites had left or been kicked out, and that B.C., being principally indigenous land, who would be willing to permanently relinquish their homes. A third journalist wanted to know if altering the purity

of car fentanil and meth P2P should be a capital crime. All affably placed suggestions that provoked nervous laughter in the audience. A lad in the centre front row audibly commented during a pause to a pretty woman seated beside him, “How you fly over the cuckoo’s nest,” a comment that prompted the two actors to look stiffly vigilantly upon him, the entire cast following suit, as a spotlight vivified his presence. The lad was handsome and sported a jersey bearing a Lingam symbol, his demeanour one of durable self-assurance. A partisan amusement touched the face of the girl beside him. Suddenly the company’s talented junior, agile and cherubic-faced Ms. Rutquist, ventured forth with a rifle and offered it to the man. “Your joy stick, I presume’!” A second actor added, “It is a historic night folks, we’ve never attracted a nerdy Proud Boy before. Promising, yes?”

An amused anticipation gripped the audience. The lad dourly smiled as a new inquisitor, a male, began flaunting the success-as-excess screed, the lad emerging as the original, undeserving lout, his apparent imperturbability spurring on his interrogator. “You think lucky schmucks like you deserve their happenstance privileges? To live well in a stolen land? To burgle Mother Nature? To grin like an unconscionable magnate? To screw a flush Libra?” When the accusations waned, the rebuked lad replied, on a cue from his cute friend, “Sorry, don’t have any spare change.” The odd but not witless reply only further galvanized the grand inquisitors. *Spare change!* Was the man a stray gadfly Randy wryly wondered. But when one female actor jauntily mooned the gent, saying, “Once a career asshole...!”, the audience rekindled its laughter.

All the while, barely noticed, a heavy moustached man had risen from the side, nonchalantly approached the proscenium and for a moment seemed ready to depart the theatre. Instead, wanly smiling, he effortlessly leapt onstage, walked over and delivered a lightening swift punch to the late inquisitor’s nose then, with equal dexterity, a deft knee kick to a player standing just offstage. Both men doubled up in graphic pain the partisan audience found rather entertaining, at least at first. Not so the players. Then the man, with the same methodical ease, proceeded to assault the remaining members of the cast — the astonished few still looking on; the less flummoxed fled the moment the initial blows were delivered. The resonant groans of some actors matched in eerie counterpoint the muted wonder of the audience. Maureen Rutquist, the rifle vender, one of the last to leave, swore robustly while taking energetic but wild swipes at the attacker’s face with the candle holder, at one point tenaciously grasping his sleeve. For an ambiguous second or two the man might have been intrigued, until a single deft swing left an ugly crimson slit on his upper cheek, a swipe that also removed his false moustache. His reactive jab was barely perceived. One mainly saw the girl fall as a dropped sack. By then the audience exuded a growing incredulity, the front rows rising and backing off though not leaving, the Lingam lad addled as any. The assailant seemed undecided as he kicked down one of the stage’s minimalist doorways, then, flexing massive shoulders, turned and left, as apathetic as he came, using the rear exit. In doing so he gave watchful Randy a close scalp-tingling look. The face revealed beneath the heavy hair was the burly, brawny chap who briefly sat beside him in the Plaza of Nations. The very same!

The remaining minutes in the theatre were charged with disbelief, dismay, and guarded disapproval. At one point two policemen walked in, one of whom solemnly listened to the halting sentences of a distressed player. The second officer looked on the scene with a growing incredulity as a second actor promptly filled him in. The audience, all the while, loitered and remained cagey. “Are the policemen also some of the performers, I wonder?” one wide-eyed matron asked aloud.

When the paramedic team arrived, to attend the injured members of the cast, some in the audience still seemed to imagine the performance ongoing. Then the theatre manager spoke over the speaker system, informing the agog onlookers that the singular show had unfortunately been sabotaged and was indeed now over, and that everyone should leave as quietly and promptly as possible by the rear exit.

Randy was among the final dozen or so who pulled themselves away.

The local news of the assault the following day was replete, the descriptions of the injuries at times clinical. Photos of three unamused faces, two badly bruised, impressed the front pages of both dailies. A local TV special avidly diagnosed the episode, its host impugning any suggestion of police and paramedic collusion. The central guest, the director of the radical theatre, spoke forthrightly as he displayed a black nearly closed eye. “In early theatre production, actors were sometimes roughed up by their audience. The Shakespearean actor, for instance, came prepared.” “Will you modify your act?” the host wondered. “Not likely,” came the measured response. “The advertising has been efficacious. Ticket sales are encouraging. The show will likely be extended.” “Will you hire some bodyguards?” “I doubt it. But we’ll see. The theatre’s got to take on some of the old stereotypes and new presumptions. We live in a strung-out, antsy, interrogatory age. Civility is rarely an option any more. We strive to ‘characterize’ all-and-sundry bigotry and biases. We’ll be a little more head up in future of course.”

The mysterious assailant remained just that. There was no consensus among the police witnesses except that he was well built and hairy. Some thought he looked ethnic, others not. Randy sympathized with the confusion. He could draw that face, perhaps as expressionless, apathetic a human visage as he’d seen, its dun taxidermist’s eyes framed by heavy brows. He wondered if he should attempt such a rendering yet hesitated. He cherished anonymity. But could he do otherwise? How else was he going to distinguish between reality and the arena — the confusion of which was one of his age’s inimitable achievements. The opportunity was well-nigh irresistible to the devout snob and gifted artist.

At last he sat down before his easel and from imagination drew what he believed to be an estimable, realistic portrait — two portraits, one in profile, one three-quarter — then rose and captiously set out to find the nearest detachment of the Surrey RCMP — with a laden resignation.

NINE

Vijay brushed a towel over his newly shaved head then reached for and positioned the ‘balding’

brown hairpiece. The new disguise progressed nicely. Once again he looked carefully at the scrap of newsprint taped to the washroom mirror that featured the two credible renderings of himself drawn by the ‘Rembrandt’ who apparently witnessed his impetuous assault on the Dog the Father Et Cetera Theatre Sports Company. Flexing sore right-hand knuckles he inspected, again, the facial gouge left by the tigress he finally belted in the mouth, likely rusting a tooth or two. The slash she left on his cheek had become infected. He replaced the flesh toned bandage and added a few touches of colour to the slivers of white gauze that poked out beneath. Relax, everything cuffs and collars, pretty face. Don’t let a manicurist ruin your day.

The night before one relay mechanism was tested and found highly functional — meaning he was now indispensable. The scow containing the newly lodged nuclear shell he and his team would remove to a new anchorage night after next, to keep its presence humdrum, ‘unremarkable’. A vengeful champion of the Prophet had the day before demanded the ominous concessions from the Yankees. Within the week he would board the Steveston fishing boat and be at sea when the media locked onto the odd behaviour of the National Security Council. He had no difficulty filling in the blanks, even detailing the joint Russian-Iranian extortion ploy! Never had he been as determined. A near perfect record. But for one scarlet diacritical mark. A woman’s mark! In the meantime he would plan a bit of non-theatrical restitution.

As he left his seedy hotel the bleary-eyed tramp who infested the lane sat propped against a refuse container. Vijay paused, lifted a twenty from his billfold and tossed it at the man’s feet. “Have a ball, amigo.” As he walked away he added, “When my business here is over I put you permanently out of misery.” He imagined in the distraught form another leftover of a forlorn, addiction-prone male...a burgeoning population it seemed. The day’s histrionic feminists he could never abide; such gals were ever comparing, complaining, vilifying, disengaging from, if not mocking — *burlesquing* even! — all sinewy traditional conventions. All past norms erased. The age’s shrill, stagey, perturbing witches. Misandry’s heralds!

TEN

Randy was not happy about the ‘Surrey artist’ making page two of the Province and page one in the Surrey Review. It was the first time his cockloft seemed accessible to the mob below. The RCMP constable who matter-of-factly received his statement and sketches assured him his name and identity would be kept confidential. He phoned to complain and was told the department hadn’t anticipated the avid media interest and the matter would be investigated. “To be concluded during the coroner’s hearing,” he said to himself as he hung up the pay phone. His leafy bower was no longer safe from the mob below.

Never again would he give a private submission to a police constable in a bustling office.

Yet he was a bit of a ninny — to return to the fair as he did this day for a peek — to see if the redoubtable host had vanished or was chained to Lenin’s rock. You colossal idiot he said to himself. Idiots, he assumed, were ever conspicuous. He even sat again at the Plaza of Nations, though with heavy dark glasses and an old floppy hat. A contingent of liveried German

dignitaries, feather plumes lavish as any bird-of-paradise, strutted about the lower stage, backgrounded by some pretty rhythmic gymnasts whose essential routine was to change weight from one leg to another, almost as an elevator operator might wile away boredom. So be a cad as well, he said to himself, you're the only person not having a ball on this sun-drenched afternoon.

As the initial main-stage show concluded he was distracted by a chap dressed as a nicely suited department store mannequin affecting to be a robot, the first of the entr'acte entertainers who would mingle and interact with the crowd seated beneath the Plaza's high glass-and-tubular-steel canopy. The man shuffled and swivelled about, limbs locking and releasing like a turn-style. The marginal audience sat attentively silent. He stopped in front of Randy and jabbed a finger at Randy's soft oversize cap while lifting his own as a steam-cock. The crowd was newly expectant and Randy grudgingly relinquished his cap, replacing it with the robot's trilby.

The robot sought first to confirm, particularize Randy's pliable creation, converting it to several things, from a chef's hat to a coquette's bonnet. Giving up, he set it as the owner wore it and began a pantomime of the owner's spare but stilted disapproval. All the while Randy had the unsettling suspicion he had seen the fellow before, even as the man's eyes appeared to fix him in amber for later scrutiny. At one point Randy imagined someone in the audience being clued to his presence. When the fellow made signs of wanting his dark glasses as well, Randy snatched back his cap, returned the robot's trilby, then mugged a smile. A few in the crowd were a little miffed. Pointing to his watch, spoilsport Randy rose and left, heading toward the busy fair concourse, his anxiety newly onerous.

When free the Plaza, he remembered that a solo Quebec performer was scheduled that day to perform her expressive comic mimes to Cajun music at the BC Tel Theatre — the kind of blithe distraction he needed then. As he walked, one redolent restaurant in the South East Asia Plaza passed on his left. Again he sniffed the menu, one of several ethnic buffets and diners where he mooched a meal when the fair opened; where he'd benevolently strode in, press card conspicuous, presenting himself as the senior editor of his exclusive publication, *Troche*, which had a single edition of one hundred copies, devoted to an assiduous examination of the Lower Mainland's finer pastries — their place of purchase and appropriate accompanying beverage, only cravenly a tokay or pear kirsch, better a classic Ovaltine mixed with Amarula. But he had misread the fair schedule and discovered not the exuberant performer as anticipated, but a mimic blowing and puling into a mike to imitate: a soaring jet engine, water gorging down a drain, and other confluences, while a small youth orchestra sat idle behind him. Suddenly feeling rooked and grotesquely hungry, he left the theatre and walked in a broad arc that placed him back on the main concourse in the opposite direction. He continued until he spotted a bright airy pizzarama where he ordered a latte and small Margherita pizza, coming to sit across from a happy duo, the girl hosting a mouth full of braces and a half-smile that intimated a younger Maureen Rutquist. He found himself trying to match her companion's face to that of the lithoid pug etched in his memory. Another chicken hawk he decided. Was it not amazing how many

people now resembled the effortless masher? But he rallied when his order arrived.

He finished his drink on the concourse, bypassing the Russian pavilion — once again. It took guts being a daring prankster, especially when rallying a hardliner. His swank alter ego continued to calm him as he headed toward the West Gate and home. Yet, when he hesitated, half the fair appeared to be following him.

ELEVEN

“The wrong scow?...” A quaintly incredulous Vijay had trouble assimilating the late revelation from one Cadmus Cruise, a tall well-dressed Persian-featured man, the Canadian member in an Iranian spy cell. They sat then on a park bench just off Stanley Park’s verdant Cathedral Trail. It was just past midnight. A minute before, each had turned off his flashlight after the exchanged on-off signals. The tall man’s voice continued in an unfamiliar deadpan.

“I repeat: the coordinates for locating the designated scow were dead accurate, but the forward team confused Point Robert’s Shady Island with the North Arm Jetty. The areas are, remotely similar, despite the distance apart. We are cursed with minimalists these days.” It was a mouthful, the need for such a disclosure now a necessity. Vijay remained drolly incredulous. Stoically Cadmus kept on. “The buggerish thing is a scow so like the one we drafted would be stationed in that area. It just would be!” he added, touting his rage. “And that bastard scow, with our jewel secreted below deck, lies near a log boom on the North Arm Jetty.”

It had been a jaw-breaking admission, ruefully sanctioned by Cadmus’s cell, yet one he hoped would salvage some time if not trust.

“So where is that?” said Vijay, once more apathetic.

“Off Burrard Inlet near the university endowment land.”

“Facing the offshore islands.”

“Yes. Not too far from Wreck Beach. No pun intended.”

Vijay grunted. He had availed himself of that beach’s nude vistas a couple of times. The brief solemn quiet that followed was broken only by a renewed breeze and the rustle of fallen leaves scurrying between their legs. Cadmus seemed momentarily speechless, word bound.

“The thing can be removed, taken away?” Vijay dryly asked.”

“Of course. Naturally our timing allows some flexibility. A mixup in registration is being ‘sorted’. A tug will be in the vicinity late afternoon day after tomorrow, just east of the descending trail to Wreck Beach. Be there at four PM. Wear the thermal patch.”

“Won’t there be boats headed for the fair? A lot of onlookers?”

“Not many this far west. Maybe a few. They’ll be keen to register with the harbour master.”

“You think so.”

The sarcastic comment angered the tall man. “It’ll work. Just try to cut the monkey business. You’ve no longer got a mint passport. We’ll have another soon, but for the time being — keep off the stage. No more ‘pissed off groundlings’ — so *He* said, for you direct. A phrase from the local rag I think.”

“Bully for him.”

Again the pause soured. The tall man wasn't sure what the phrase meant and was piqued by the possibility the hulk beside him might — a further goad — which prompted him to derisively say, just before leaving, “Hang in there sweetheart. Mazeltov.”

As the dark form disappeared Vijay felt the rage seep into his bone. Once again he was reduced to the status of a roller bearing, expected to perform as a fleet automaton — and silent captive if that were needed. Vancouver was a torment. Flush with the pretty cushy tranquility (Fortune's Favour) he coveted, and now removed as a canal on Mars. His anger was dispersed among all bunglers and precious derisive actresses. One of each one day, soon, without any preamble. He stood and wrenched one end of the bench from its mooring, then headed back to his seamy hotel, admonishing some tree trunks with his boots as he went.

The tall man, now free of Vijay's onerous presence, kept to an easterly trail that took him finally to Beaver Lake and a second rendezvous just off the overflow stream that meandered into Burrard Inlet. His Russian contact, a GRU captain, emerged from the shadows and together they walked in a counter-clockwise direction about the lake, bathed that hour in a moon-mauve sheen. The air was moist and full of autumn decay. The Russian got straight to the point.

“The pavilion spook — who got away before pavilion host could summon tracker — is young artist who drew pictures of Kurtz. An RCMP contact took kid's submission and recognized him as recent Surrey high school student — in same class as his brother's daughter. One yearbook face looks right, according to pavilion host. Kid drew remarkable portraits of graduates. Styles match.”

“But there surely is no connection?”

“He mentioned mobile phone. Late model. ‘A plant,’ he said. Now it's gone. Yes, gone. Gone!”

“Was it used?”

“Very big mouth our host.”

“It was taken from the pavilion?”

The Russian was slow in answering. “The pavilion residence.”

“Any reports of other thefts?”

“None.”

The tall man shrugged, mugged a smile. “A simple theft, no?”

“I assure you — nothing. A complete nothing. Worse than nothing. Radar ignition codes shipped over month now. New theft points to special snoop. Some operational prompts were lately assigned this phone's memory. That much I tell you. Any late signal could have been read, even redirected.”

The imputation of a ‘shared’ information cache in circulation drew a second moue from the thin tall man. “Pretty farfetched.”

“Something fishy. I think you promptly find this ‘artiste’ and see what he knows.”

“That may take longer than we have.”

“Too bad.”

“They may just be coincidences — one more smart ass acting out, and the other — some busy thief. Vancouver is full of gamers and needy dopeniks. ‘A bad apple orchard’ some wag recently called the place.”

“You argue like diplomat.”

The tall man was aptly upset by the expert’s news but did not break stride. The Russians were still ignorant of the misbegotten, misplaced scow, an incommensurable fact he would conceal as long as possible; their irreplaceable expert could vanish without trace if that fact got out now. The tall man suspected he could end up as fish treat.

“Admit it, you’re a worry wart,” he said suavely.

The Russian remained grossly silent.

“Of course I’ll get at it — right away. Just reassure everyone that everything is on target. The pertinent Anacortes lieutenant has contacted his Bangor commander as planned — in a very sober tone of voice I daresay.”

“You will make tape of interrogation of artist. Tomorrow night on mountain. Else we pull quick sorters. You get those last minute.”

The tall man grimaced, “Fine. Tomorrow. On the mountain. In the meantime, eat some zakuski, enjoy the exhibits. Supposed to be unique this year.”

“Just get buttinsky. He is ‘exhibit’ enough.”

For a moment the tall man thought of drowning himself in the ebony pond as the Russian left. He’d never been in such a mess before. As dire was his cell’s recent discovery that the ‘stray’ scow had been requisitioned by the fair’s directors for the final week’s fireworks’ platform — a late hectic advisement — something he prayed he would never have to reveal to the Russian.

Nor the glaring fact the scow’s registry had yet to be — ‘sorted’!

TWELVE

Buff Rutquist and his wife Naomi sat in the hallway just off the emergency entrance to St. Paul’s Hospital. They’d come for an update on Maureen. An early late-fall sun, streaming through a mezzanine window, gilded the entrance’s brass door frames. The leaves on the walkway shrubs beyond the entrance were yellowing, falling. Several times Buff rose and watched the traffic outside gradually thicken and slow. A full busload of commuters disembarked in the still frosted street. He was about to sit down again when, from a door near the admitting kiosk, a young smiling doctor emerged, a surgical mask fretting his neck.

“Maureen’s just fine, Reverend Rutquist, Mrs. Rutquist.”

Naomi quickly put down her magazine, sight-unseen, and stood by her husband. One tired eye of the doctor might have been winking.

“As we discovered last night, the one central is lost, I’m afraid, and one lateral, and she’ll have a sore gum and chin for a while. But the jaw is intact, the nose untouched and the

concussion mild — no evidence of confusion or memory loss — about a two or three out of a fifteen severity ranking. An orthodontist will take a look later this morning. I've left a message for your family physician. Should be around this afternoon I believe."

"You don't think then the concussion serious?" Naomi was far from assured by the doctor's marked amiability.

"There's no symptom to support such a worry — no affect or imaging evidence. We made sure of that. She seems a hardy young lady."

"We're grateful for everything you've done, Doctor — ."

" — Philips. Forgot my badge. All in a night's work; wish they were all as copacetic. Her original headache is gone, but I think it best she stay here another day."

"Copacetic my foot," said Naomi in the car. "He'd talk like that if she'd lost an eye."

"Nam, I really think we got off lightly."

"Lightly! I don't see that. Going around the rest of your life with a hole in your mouth."

Buff was tired, and impatient with gestures. "They make excellent implants these days. You've got some yourself."

But his heedful wife did not seem to hear. " — That one poor actor. He was still dazed when they brought him in. And that awful dance, on top of that lewd porno skit. I was actually rooting for the gorilla at first."

Buff drove the remaining blocks to their home in silence. He knew something about the theatre of the absurd. But about the participatory theatre of aggravation, or whatever it was, he imagined himself a falling buffalo, blunder bussed into obscurity. He was vaguely aware his wife's championing of such preciousness had waned: she too had one-too-many anecdotes to contend with. That night he dreamt about Mrs. Simpson giving confrontational theatre her blessing: "Furious, fired-up protestors have as much right as anyone to say their peace."

The following afternoon, Maureen was barely in the car when the apprehension loomed anew. The dedicated daughter insisted on visiting the theatre first, despite her mother's ready disappointment.

"They are that important, are they?"

Maureen simply directed her father to park the car near a colourful produce market across from the theatre.

"Won't be long."

Naomi soberly glanced at the colourful vegetable stalls as her only child crossed to the converted foundry. A large white banner cut across the theatre marquee, 'Temporarily Closed' scrawled upon it in scarlet strokes.

"She's as pigheaded as you were, once."

"I promise to have it out with her later. Right now I want to get the revisionist home." He had fancied saying *sans-culotte*.

But that conversation too was rigged from the start.

“Daddy love,” she said, plying his adopted primness, as her tongue flicked the gap in her front teeth, “we reopen next week, with a couple of extras backstage. There’s no problem. I should have a temporary partial by then.”

She sat on the veranda chaise barely interrupting her reading of late articles from Amnesty International — her ongoing reading these days — while her father paced back and forth crackling his knuckles. “We simply do not build pyramids any more,” she added. “Even your own church admits it’s screwed up a whole lot of lives. For the very last time: negotiation works only when we actually know, not imagine, what confronts us. Everything else is relative.”

He had been round the old negotiation bush so many times he felt physically bent. Who was left to abide a truce if all standards were ‘perceived’? As for the reality thistle, the last time they ended arguing over ‘assumed’ human aggressiveness. “Humans are not by nature aggressive!” shouted an unusually inflamed daughter, just before whomping the swing door to the pantry in a decisive exit. “Except when jawboning with you!” she called back from afar. Glancing at her now, clad in the unassuming grey sweatsuit she seemed then to live in, seated in a yoga squat invigilating the world’s atrocities indexed in organs like Amnesty International — to glean dramatic copy! — he suspected he was but a putative parent and lame belated apologist. The once fluent vitality, the early fond desire for his svelte nimble daughter, had set as a vice, a leg-hold trap. He could barely find the resource to attempt a prayer. Talking to God had become an adjourned meeting of the parole board. Later, in his study, he could hear the rhythmic clank of her weight station and imagined a large carillon metronome marking out the final ominous countdown.

THIRTEEN

Randy was readily entertained by the portrait before him on his easel. He imagined in the still unaltered image of the young executive a happy face that might have, at one time, graced a Huggies’ diaper package: the elemental corporate visage — benign, fit, content, smooth, monolithic. One of the few times he felt obliged to do nothing.

“I think this one should proceed on its own. The one tiny mole may in fact be an heirloom. What do you think? The complexion is practically an Ivory soap commercial.”

Herb stood to the rear of Randy setting out film and equipment for the two weddings that night — one of which Randy had been impressed into doing. “I feel you can handle it,” Herb had said, keeping his expression cement hard. “A wedding a month will help with your credit card debt (Herb was then paying Randy a small monthly wage), the rise in cable-vision, and your membership in the ‘Y.’” Herb often seemed deaf to his ace retoucher’s fanciful comments, yet occasionally joined in, as he did now, in response to Randy’s remark about the young executive. “Think,” Herb said newly assertive. “What are you working on there?” He sniffled less when giving curt commands.

“The portrait of a cherubic mining vice-president — along with some other unsuspecting board members.” Herb remained silent. “For inclusion in a showoff annual report. Total dedication.”

“They all go on the same page, yes?”

“Well, facing pages.”

“Same thing,” said Herb, still diffidently inspecting an older strobe battery. “That art director, don’t forget, likes a nice buttoned-down group,” he added, reiterating an earlier remark. Randy said again he was exempting an original. Herb faintly nodded, still bothered by the unresponsive battery gauge. “Done,” said Randy, easily shifting to another portrait. Herb then suddenly recalled something, a crucial detail. Quickly he stepped over to Randy’s easel and fetched the first portrait. “ — Yes that one. I think we better put in a few creases. As a precaution.”

“Put in...?”

“Um. When I first photographed him the art director suggested adding a few lines here and there; didn’t want a smooth youngster sticking out on the executive page. It’s the way executives are.” Randy quickly added, “Like to look cool, in there like flint; no crybabies or dilettantes.” Resigned, Herb continued, “Just add a few lines maybe about the eye corners and lips. Like a good chap.”

“Ah.”

“That should suffice.”

“Child’s play.”

Herb grunted and returned to sorting the wedding paraphernalia for the weddings that day: four Nikon bodies each with a multi-focal-length lens, four high definition memory chips, two 600 watt-second strobes, two Linhof tripods, and unobtrusively, for himself, a compact flask of vodka and extra nasal spray. Herb was a belt and brace man. He resumed speaking like a pressed embalmer, making sure Randy was listening,

“You’re to be at the bride’s house at 2:00. At 3:00 you go to Our Lady of Sorrows on Slocan, then to the Bloedel Conservatory. Try to be there first. Remember to keep the receipt. Then straight to Masaccio’s on Commercial, where you’ll be till the end. Try to steer clear of the near relations and friends of friends.”

Remarked a distant Randy, “You said before: they never order.”

“Use your discretion. The house wine at Masaccio’s wasn’t half bad the last time I was there — the homemade stuff varies. If it tastes homemade I usually drink a little, wait a little. There used to be a couple of handy fern boxes. Try to look interested. I’m telling you this as a reliable taxpayer.”

But by then Randy was silently, forlornly at work on one of the senior vice-presidents, a chap with lumps under his eyes the size of crash bags.

“When you finish with the bigwigs, you better do this — I promised Masaccio — he’ll be looking for them when you come.”

Randy was handed a set of small prints which Herb fetched from an overhead shelf, three in all, featuring a man relaxing on a sandy beach, tall palms lining the background. Randy looked up, perplexed, annoyed.

“What do I do here?”

“Remove the neat pile of clothes at the bottom.”

Randy again surveyed the photos. On one corner of the man’s blanket lay a pair of sandals, and a discarded bikini.

Herb continued in his once-removed manner. “Masaccio doesn’t want his family to see the swim stuff. His wife has a short fuse and owns the business.” With a snuffle he added, “Think of yourself as a kind of bomb remover. What do they say — disposal expert.”

“But they’re all glossy surface prints!”

“You might have to spray them with a clear lacquer after.”

“And chamois between coats? In this weather? It’s not tempting spontaneous combustion?”

Herb sneezed, then told Randy it was not a boom year.

FOURTEEN

For a long time the heavy restive venous man stood near the entrance to the motley neighbourhood confectionary. Too long, thought his grimacing partner seated in the full-size Ford sedan in the street outside. The man by the entrance scowled and waited: he’d had a hard time finding an open line to his elusive boss and awaited a reply on his cell phone. His partner continued to staccato tap the edges of the steering wheel. When the cell phone finally buzzed the conversation was decidedly short. A block away, an old but stately parish church drew many smartly dressed celebrants to its heavy doors.

The venous man returned flush-faced to the car and sat in silence for several seconds before speaking. “The kid must be questioned tonight. On the mountain. The one who was traced to the Spooner home and photography studio.”

“The kid who just entered that church with some camera stuff?”

“The man says we do it now. Too messy later.”

“Holy smoke there’s maybe two hundred people inside. And still comin’.”

“You think he’ll leave the same way?”

The second man shrugged. “Who knows?”

After another pause the first man said, “We go in, apologize, flash a badge. He’s immediately wanted for questioning. Brutally molesting a kid...who’s been hospitalized...”

Both men sat in silence pondering this scenario.

“Before or after the service?”

“Before.”

“Sounds like a real fireass, this boss of yours.”

On entering the church the two men discovered no one, at least in the vestibule, who spoke transparent English. Simple genial nods from two older couples met their initial queries.

Without further ado they marched into the church proper and down the aisle where the ceremony was about to begin, many curious faces following, including that of two ushers who were obviously not expecting two meatballs thumbing respect. A mellow Italian tenor began

serenading from the choir loft at the back of the church.

“Where’s the camera guy?” the first man demanded of the priest who, with the groom, best man and groomsmen, had just congregated at the front to await the bride.

“Please, can you not quietly wait at the back?” said Father Rosario, a Mary Immaculate Oblate, who had a full rostrum of ceremonies to get through that day.

“Police. Urgent.” The first speaker flashed a fold-out badge which he hastily returned to his hip pocket.

Father Rosario wanly pointed to the rear loft then closed his eyes, leaving the groom and groomsmen newly perplexed. The two intruders looked back and up to see a skinny lad fiddling with a tripod. Presently a camera pointed down at them. They glanced at one another then rushed to the back of the church, past many rows of watchful guests. Belatedly finding a rear staircase, they pounded up the narrow steps followed by two complaining ushers, the sounds thunderous in the old vaulted church.

Then the sudden descant swearing of the photographer, well above the sound of the tenor and the growing rumble of voices, widened even the good father’s ancient eyes. The shrill cursing began when the first of the intruders attempted to curtly pass himself off as a police officer, prompting an usher to dismiss the proffered badge as nothing more than an elaborate chauffeur’s decal! Ever alert, vigilant Randy, his phone prank newly daunting, claimed the two were more likely goddam collectors there to seize some of his equipment — a comment that swiftly earned him a corp of sympathizers, for by then the loft was jammed with robust Latin witnesses. The subsequent urging to ‘lay off’ that day, prompting ready accusations, insults, pushing and shoving, soon led to a wholesale fracas that echoed throughout the old building like the shunting of boxcars. The organist and tenor then huddled behind the organ. A camera suddenly lurched free of the tripod and fell from the balcony nearly striking a young mother and babe, a chance miss that riled individual members of the audience. By then many young bloods had bounded up the staircase, including the groom who, unknown to Randy and his would-be abductors, was a stellar communicant in the martial arts. Indeed, a few guests in the congregation were sufficiently peeved to tolerate a fight. “Well, what wedding is complete without it?” the indomitable mother of one bridesmaid would later remark. All the while Father Rosario, known as one of the last of the holy fathers (not yet ruefully questioning or debating) lidded his eyes and barely moved his lips.

The net result — at least until a general quiet resumed — was that the two goons, though no slouches themselves, were finally shoved and pummelled back down the stairs and delivered to the entrance of the church in a greatly disappointed state, just as the bride arrived. The buzzing groomsmen, backed by a legion of auxiliaries, followed the two aliens as they fled to their car and, after gunning the motor, sped away as angry fists thumped the windows and trunk, shrill insults sounding like sirens.

“Hey Randy, you got some good shots, eh?”

It would be his investiture to ward status.

“Not very. The corn holes,” he added, looking after the car and trying to sound disgusted, while a sense of impending doom upstaged his precious sense of the absurd.

Thereafter it was as if Hannibal himself were sent packing: the ritual of commitment in Our Lady of Sorrows Parish Church was that afternoon historic. Each phrase in the exchange of vows seemed original lyric refrains. Only Father Rosario heard the dulcet phrases with unbroken solemnity. One small bruise on the groom’s forehead the lovely bride kissed with touching solicitude as the ceremony closed. Nor was there a bridal entourage attended by a more conscientious photographer, even if his first camera was likely trashed in its fall from the heavens. Of course, the photographer’s poise and earnestness was not entirely whole. He suspected, feared he was in big trouble, his prank catching up to him, that the night’s festivities must come to an end. But he had never been a ‘blood member’ before and tried very hard to imagine the staying power it might confer. Several times he resisted contacting the police — doing so seemed insulting before such willing, stalwart companions. Moreover, the police had recently let him down. Resolving poignant quandaries, entreated, demanded a proud resourceful consortium, not unlike the sodality here — so he wryly mused. As a favoured survivor of highly inconsiderate WASP confiscators, he was not about to complain. At least not just then, his indecision on hold. He had a job to do. Moreover, the formal ordeal in the Bloedel Conservatory awaited.

“Holy jees,” said the breathless driver in a peevish voice when the two were safely out of harm’s way. “I’ve busted a finger — look at the sucker. Like a fishhook!” But when he looked over at his companion he suddenly felt much worse. “You’re gonna pass out? Man you can’t do that!”

FIFTEEN

The summoned man on the cell phone was, for a time, gruesomely quiet.

“I told you never to call me here again.”

“So? We got clobbered. Al is barfing, spitting blood, what can I say? He ought to be in Emergency. You said it was straight up. A simple snatch.”

In a grave voice the summoned man asked, “Where is the photographer now?”

“A place called Masaccio’s. On Commercial. Yeah.”

A further pause vexed the caller. “ — You want a stiff on your hands?”

The glacial voice at the other end of the line, which belonged to the tall gent that Vijay and the Russian met the evening before, demanded an immediate rendezvous at the North end of Burnaby Lake and urged the caller to be there in less than ten minutes, signing off with the clipped injunction, “No hospital. Repeat: *no* hospital.”

“Okay, okay.”

It was a half-acre of scrub abutting the water, hosting mainly dense thorny bushes and a few scraggly elm trees etching the amber twilight. The Ford pulled up beside the BMW. The doors opened simultaneously.

“He’s, I dunno,” the driver of the Ford stated.

The tall man, his eyes alert to the surroundings, barely noted the slumped form in the front

seat.

“Get him out. Leave him clean.”

The driver readily obeyed. The flaccid then unconscious body was brusquely removed, flopped onto the ground, the pockets quickly emptied of all ID, after which the driver gruffly mused, “So I just go ahead and zip the glowworm.”

“No, I want him. Tonight.”

“How do I do that for fucksake? Look at my hand.”

“2:00 A.M. On the mountain.” The voice was emphatic and barely audible. Then two strangers, one wearing a kind of skull cap and fingering his cheek, emerged from the back of the BMW. Barely noting the prone body, both men climbed into the Ford.

“Why not,” said the driver, his grimace somewhat relaxed.

The tall man watched the Ford pull away, fetched a revolver from an inside coat pocket, fixed a silencer, and shot the unconscious man in the temple twice. He then rolled the heavy body into the water, returned to his BMW and drove to an address on south Fraser Street, its boulevard of horse-chestnuts newly bereft of leaves. As he drove he drolly whistled snatches of Hava Nagela.

After passing the brightly lit entrance twice, he turned into the alley and parked at the back. First he checked the mortise lock on the sturdy rear storage bay where some tools for his undercover operations were carefully secreted, then ascended an exterior staircase to the second floor where his plush modern gym was stationed. A few devotees were finishing up in the ballroom-sized chamber which was chock full of faintly sinister contraptions fashioned from chromium and grey vinyl. Full-length wall mirrors alternated with glossy murals of glistening torsos, both Herculean and Amazonian, some caught in panned motion. Treadmills, stationary bikes, stair climbers, and wall tension weights lined the perimeter. Lift and flex stations projected as surfacing kraken from the vermilion broadloom.

“Oh Mr. Kruse, good evening. Just going. I’ve put the new mailers in your office and turned off the outside marquee. Just the two clients left.”

Cadmus Kruse nodded to his secretary as she collected her coat. Her boyfriend smiled weakly from a wall couch. Waving back with a show of camaraderie, Cadmus headed toward a rear workout area where he recognized a bulky lineman from the B.C. Lions standing by a dewy hale youngster who lay on her front on a foot-anchored bench, flexing in an upward back swing hands locked behind her head. Cadmus was amused by the girl’s cutoff and sweat pants. But not, as he approached, a recently bruised jaw, which he initially suspected may have come from an accident in his gym! But the conviviality of the conversation between the two allayed his sudden pique.

While turning off the floor’s unneeded lights he overheard the nymph complain of a periodic stitch which the lineman suggested might come from cramping in some back muscles. Two resonance sensors adhered to her mid back just below the cutoff. The head-up, back flexing maneuvers had, it seemed, barely imprinted the digital readout on a nearby monitor. The lineman resumed speaking as he rearranged one of the sensors. “Serratus, dorsi and obliques

are hard things to isolate but real highs when peaking. You're getting a few read outs now."

The girl was soon groaning and saying she could feel eons of neglect. "Hard to imagine being so unfit."

"Feels okay then?" cautioned the mentor.

"Feels great — really. Thanks."

"I'd stay within a lower arc for a week maybe." He pointed to a small readout on a monitor near the bench — again to profuse thanks. He stiffly smiled, packed a towel into a carryall, then sauntered toward the men's locker room, bulky arms spread like outriggers.

Face down, the girl continued to flex head-up in an upward back swing. Approaching from the side Cadmus took note of the kneaded tummy and pointed nipples in the cutoff. He recalled a picture showing a woman leaning over an ultrasound scanning pool, a pale breast suspended downward. He moved in front and smiled as he looked at the readout. The girl grimly smiled back.

"You're new, I think," Cadmus ventured.

After an intake of air she concurred. "As of this week, yes."

He elected to introduce himself. "Cadmus Kruse, owner-manager and general dog's body."

After another intake of air the girl affably nodded, adding, "Hi, Maureen Rutquist."

"Don't overdo it now."

"God no way," she said, as she continued to flex.

Sensing a slight self-consciousness in the girl, Cadmus turned away, and had wandered part way back to his office when she briskly called after him. "Hell sorry, I've got my heel caught in one foot brace. I think it slipped a bit."

Cadmus loped over and deftly released the brace's truss. "It may need some adjusting," he conceded, eyeing the girl. "I'll get it looked at tomorrow."

"Thanks. Couldn't even get my shoe off."

"You might want to consider the transfer workouts on our new CST. 20 intense maneuvers, the resistance silent and seamless, the draw pressure from a heavy fly wheel. No cuffed restraints, only hand and leg armatures."

"I'm used to more basic stuff — push ups, pull ups and the like. I have watched people working out on it. Worth a try I guess." A lame smile ensued.

"It's becoming the most popular workout frame in the gym. We're thinking of buying two more." Then, watching the young girl massage her foot, Cadmus took note again of the girl's chin bruise, and a portion of shapely breast through an armhole. About as sexy as they come he decided. He then made the connection.

" — You're that actress — at the new theatre."

Maureen flashed a professional grin.

Cadmus easily converted his show of recognition into concern. "I thought so. The pics in the papers...sounded a bit risky. Experimental or something isn't it?"

"Not really. Some jerko got carried away, decided to trash the show," she said, applying a

towel to moist cheeks while taking note of her inquisitor's digressive eyes. "We reopen early next week."

"Did they ever find the guy do you know?"

"I don't think so. They have a good sketch but so far no arrests. Actually, I think it would be a shame if he were."

Cadmus did not have to pretend surprise. "You would?"

"Sure. You can't have a gutsy theatre without risks. It's what people want. The freer the better." Sensing diffidence Maureen continued: "The theatre's got to make some sense of the behavioural bust we're in. Today's problems have outstripped our parameters of experience. We need new models, whole new constructs." The soft towel formed then a cowl about her face.

Her words, it seemed, did little to mollify the man's antic smile — which Cadmus imagined a thoughtful expression.

"It's pretty confusing for a 'dumb-bell' like me," he suavely said.

She offered a wan pout as she daubed hanging ringlets, keeping up the promotion. "We're going to do other older stuff as well. Shaw, maybe, next spring. This season we're trying to hit a few nerves — get people thinking beyond habit and staid convention." She began wiping her strong shapely arms. "People easily get complacent. At our theatre everybody 'works out'."

"Sounds like a hell of a show."

"It is — you should come. The theatre's one of the best total conditioning cultures there is. Can even make you sweat a bit. She whiffed an armpit and managed a coy disgust before the watchful eyes."

Cadmus nodded, indicating a probability. She, in turn, nodded agreeably at the new machine, then promptly departed for the change rooms. Watching her leave he continued to doubt the likelihood of briefs beneath the sweat pants while approving, below the cutoff, a waist marginally narrower than the hips — not just another unfinished boy then.

When she disappeared he switched off the remaining studio lights and headed toward his office where, just beyond in the foyer, a stately man in a dark suit and clerical collar rocked back and forth on his oxfords.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, hello. Waiting for my daughter Maureen."

"No problem. Have a seat. She shouldn't be long. There's some hot water and herbal tea bags behind you."

"I see that. Thank you."

As it appeared the father was about to patronize the surroundings, Cadmus promptly excused himself. "I'm late with a couple of calls — back in a jiff."

Decisively he crossed into his office, quietly locked the door and froze as if expecting a further interruption. Then in a fluent motion he swung into his sculpted office chair and summoned to his Mac book the coded access program that cued the building's many robot monitors, normally activated from a station in the secretarial office. But his computer exclusively

sourced one tiny lens secreted behind the door vent of a locked locker that focused on the women's tiled shower stalls. He was annoyed to hear some brisk swearing in a part of the room he could not see. He did pick up sounds of a nearby locker door opening and closing. Then the hair at the back of his neck began to tingle. He could have sworn he heard two voices, when he was certain Maureen Rutquist was the last and only one left in the women's locker room. But the voices seemed distinct and surprisingly sonorous.

We declare thee by this act set free from the danger of excommunication in which thou stoodest.

The lower voice then gave way to one of higher register — a voice Cadmus recognized as Maureen's.

I thank you — shit — I thank you. I thank you.

The deeper voice returned.

But because thou has sinned most presumptuously against God and the Holy Church, and that thou mayest repent thy errors in solitary contemplation...dum de dum...do condemn thee to eat the bread of sorrow and drink the water of affliction to the end of thy earthly days in perpetual imprisonment.

Perpetual imprisonment! Am I not then to be set free?

Set free, child, after such wickedness as yours! What are you dreaming of?

By then Cadmus realized that both voices were the creation of the young intense actress, whose natural voice resumed:

Give me that writing. Give me that writing. Light your fire: do you think I dread it as much as the life of a rat in a hole? My voices are right.

Cadmus soon got bored. Though a few lines toward the end of the recitation reclaimed his attention — particularly one about securely chained feet.

...You will not shut me from the light of the sky...and chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills.

By then the thespian ardor was flagging.

“Christ, what a drooler!”

The words faded just before the hydraulic door to the chamber closed. Cadmus swiftly moved from his office onto the salon floor just in time to bid the stately father and his expressive daughter good night. As they descended the staircase to the ground floor the daughter complained of her father's presence. “I told you not to bother.” The mother, the good pastor replied, had insisted. The girl was as imperviously assertive as they come, Cadmus decided, thinking of the bruised chin and gamey cutoff.

He returned to his office and watched through a front window as the father stood in the newly lit street before a compact sedan, while the daughter crossed to a small sports car and chucked her carryall behind the passenger seat before ducking inside. A young man rose from the driver's side and sauntered across to the father. After a few words and sudden handshake he returned. Seconds later the sports car smoothly pulled away. The father briefly waved, yet remained standing several seconds before opening his own sedan door.

“Take that, dadeo,” said a debonair Cadmus as he checked his watch, returned to his

custom office chair and, after retrieving the face mask and conduit, took several full draughts from the canister of pure oxygen housed beneath his desk.

SIXTEEN

By the time Randy finished photographing the bride and groom with their families, the palmy Bloedel Conservatory atop Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park, was an Italian Chamber of Deputies, each voice delivering itself of a unique aria-addenda that surely made the arboretum's exotic birds perk up and take notice. As it was, with Herb's finely fixed agenda of poses still to be completed, and the guests having an agenda of their own, he felt a full and presiding humility. Several of the bridesmaids, even the bride herself for a change, were pretty and voluptuous beyond decency. Yet he might have been a eunuch. His weariness from presuming to line ebullient people up like bowling pins, then frame them with the Herb Spooner smile, was acute, and yoked to the worry about what awaited him when the evening ended — the wrath of Aguirre perhaps, visited in a similar floral luxuriance. Among melodious Catholics like these the agnostic might complain.

As he took the requisite close-ups of the bride and maid of honour, identical twins and both youthful Sophias, he decided he'd better once more get down on his sore knee. Herb was particularly sensitive then about capturing too much cleavage. Bodies made for sin and sin alone he said to himself as he grimly exposed, soft-rendered this time, the standard litany of full length and three-quarter poses, royal and chummy, serenely looking at the camera and fondly themselves, the maid of honour keenly eyeing the bride's ring...the heartening part the discovery that the honourable maid was an inveterate flirt, despite a sullen boyfriend who seemed the one mismatch in the whole retinue. The least macho of the groomsmen, he was an overweight, narrow-eyed and apparently very wealthy scowler, who had not increased his popularity that afternoon by misplacing the pants to his tux and delaying the parish church ceremony — thus making the arrival of the two goons, when they did, a blessing for Randy. Suppose the two had come when the wedding party just left the church, minds set on the conservatory and reception?

Again Randy was distracted. Good lord, was such loveliness not a premier torment? Often, so it seemed, the more affluent the bride's parents, the plainer the bride. How many times Herb returned from West Vancouver or Shaughnessy with pictures taken in posh settings, the star attraction, tensely fussed over by cosmetician, hair-stylist and couturier, a homely soporific creature rehearsing a smile. If the present Sophias might yet convert their nervous eunuch photographer into a satyr, the brides of the Architectural Digest settings often invoked in him a settled charity. It seemed a life of rage, tears and exotic drugs was as certified as the gems in her tiara or the exquisite ice sculpture sweating out her reception.

Then, almost like a reefer break, it was over. The remaining grandparents and select relations were duly recorded and the celebrants returned to the Conservatory entrance, beyond which a stylish Chinese retinue waited quietly except for some playful children. As Randy struggled out with his two cases of equipment, perspiration then stinging his eyes, he was met by

one of Herb's competitors, a tall flamboyant Russian-Canadian who, unlike Randy, travelled light. Val, or Valerian Apollinarievich, conspicuously released a wide linen handkerchief from a breast pocket, offering it to Randy as if giving alms, kopeks, to the escaped laughter of several persons in the waiting party. Randy merely smiled as best he could and struggled out past the emphatic Henry Moore sculpture, 'The Knife Edge', onto the conservatory parking lot, the cement covering of a large reservoir, arriving at last before the studio's second car. He was pleased to see the wedding party dallying along the adjacent park's picturesque walkways and fountains — time enough to get to Masaccio's first and so abide Herb's admonition of always leading not following the bridal party. He carefully looked about the parking lot but could see no suspicious watchful person or persons.

Masaccio appeared disappointed to see Randy. He had apparently expected Herb and felt denied a professional presence (an 'award winning' photographer), also perhaps an old sparring partner. He accepted the three retouched prints, which had confiscated Randy's afternoon, with the casualness of one receiving an unsought business card, quickly stashing them in an inner coat pocket. He then handed Randy over to Ugo, the hall's floor manager who, happily for Randy, was a natural humanitarian. Quickly he took Randy in tow, pointing out where he might lodge some of his equipment in a small annex by the fragrant kitchen, where bushels of crabs and prawns in stacked mesh hampers sat before copper cauldrons, and ceiling-high hutches of lasagna faced large black oven doors. On side tables a company of plump girls were assembling antipasto dishes for the banquet tables arranged as fingers about a cake in the form of a parapeted palazzo.

"Over two-hundred guests," Ugo said proudly. "Very nice people. A cousin of the bride's mother is related to a Frescobaldi. Unfortunately he couldn't come."

A few minutes later Randy was summoned to the hall entrance by a tall bearded man wearing an embroidered skull cap. The man's wife and young son waited solemnly between a faded print of Vesuvius in Eruption and the portrait of a bridal couple set within a brandy snifter. The man wanted a picture of his family with Masaccio who, when fetched, smiled generously. "Not at all Mr. Al-Sadr," Masaccio exclaimed, apologetically departing after.

The reception was much as Randy anticipated, the fruity wine tolerable, his glass never more than half empty. He took many pictures, each set improving over the last, his anxiety occasionally eclipsed by the sanguine chatter. There was an after-dinner fight off a rear balcony that overlooked a park, but the combatants seemed reconciled to one another minutes later during the lively ballroom dance, which ended with the groomsmen hoisting the groom onto ample shoulders to regale their champion gladiator. When the bride returned in her traveling costume Randy could barely stand upright. During the removal of the garter he was on one knee, touted by those nearest an okay sweetheart. Just before the bouquet was thrown and the couple sought their messed-up getaway car through an arbor of arms and hands, Randy had given up his camera to one of the celebrants and slumped down on a wall couch, very mellow

and agreeably pie-eyed. Ugo looked on calmly and asked a guest he knew to drive the photographer home. It was a willing subordination for Randy. With luck he would be escorted into the burglar-proofed studio where he might seek a Land of Nod oblivion on the reception area's comfortable sofa. It was the maid of honour's boyfriend who in the end was charged with the good deed. Randy was supremely grateful and slumped in the passenger seat in a warm stupor.

The front door to the studio was no sooner keyed than the shadow came from somewhere to assist the driver with the equipment and drowsy photographer. Randy no sooner realized his peril — the driver being grateful for the assistance — when a sudden brief head punch snuffed out consciousness. The deft but inconspicuous blow was the work of an expert who easily gathered the newly limp form in his arms, assuring the escort he would look after the drunken bum. He deeply apologized on behalf of the studio, said he had just learned of the late dereliction, expressed his thanks, wished the escort a good night and safe drive home.

SEVENTEEN

Three cars were parked near an ocean lookout point off the South-West Marine Drive causeway next to the UBC endowment land. The night was cool, fresh and speckled with stars. The pale license plate on the car nearest the roadway, a large dark four-door, flashed against the oncoming headlights revealing a Washington registry. Another vehicle sat in darkness beside a small sports car which was more noticeable because it caught the fringe ray of a distant streetlight.

Maureen Rutquist and a boyfriend stood near the fence that marked the edge of the embankment that descended steeply to the water thirty meters below. The girl stood backed to the boy, the boy's arms locked about her, their focus of attention the scow whose dark presence lay near a log boom off the North Arm Jetty. The boy, a contender for the Canadian Olympic Team in the pole vault, was also a physicist, with an abiding interest in pyrotechnical detonations, who currently assisted the fair's renowned fireworks' contractor. He spoke quietly about the scow that would serve to stage the exceptional, much anticipated late fair fireworks.

“It's a reinforced-hull model with added ballast. About as stable as an island. We set out the new cylinders tomorrow.” He kissed her neck. “State-of-the-art.”

Maureen dourly smiled. “You ever think how many food hampers all the fair fireworks could have bought? Even just the final night's?” As she spoke she returned his venturesome hands to her laminar midriff, fingering them beneath her loose sweatshirt top.

“ — The ones the manufacturers, wholesalers and their employees would buy with their wages and profits?”

“No, the people who do without state-of-the-art fizgigs.”

The pole vaulter was getting a little impatient with the inquisition.

“No one will starve in this country because of the Cherry Bombs or Lady Fingers.”

“From the expert himself.”

“Why pick on the fireworks — and not the rides, the candy floss, the jugglers, the concourse streamers?”

She was silent then and resettled her head against his shoulder, her hands newly indifferent. His earlier caress of her young breasts had been hypnotic, the most exotic polymer crude by comparison. But her new insouciance flagged him now.

Pointedly she suddenly asked, again, “What about the pollution, all the smoke? You said yourself the chemical composition of some of the explosives was ‘military grade.’”

He imagined her smiling. Withdrawing his hands he hugged her with mock ferocity, a clinch that slowly turned mutually isometric as they swung slowly face to face from side to side. “My Green Peace scold.”

“Maybe I’m curious.” She pushed him away. They stood facing one another, their profiles framing the distant outline of the scow.

“The gases virtually all oxidize on explosion. A tiny bit of particulate dust gets into our pores and turns us into rabid anticommunists.”

Rather awkwardly she kept him at arm’s length. “Always a serious bastard.”

He seemed pleased with this assessment.

She looked at him carefully, detecting all sorts of latent sarcasms. He was at last resigned.

“Mamselle Armfeldt, I presume.” Earlier they’d watched *A Little Night Music* on a video disk.

“So, Frederick.”

“So, the acidic salts might, well, pickle a few molecules of plankton.”

“What about the freshwater reservoirs on the North Shore?”

“Catchments.”

“Yeah. And what about the nearby residents?”

“Or the fumes. Mingling with stray sewer gasses.”

“Yeah. That too.”

“So, what would you like to know?”

She turned away then, disengaging his arms. “I think I want to go for a swim.”

His mute attic stance suggested skepticism.

She shrugged. “I’m still a bit sweaty — not from you. I never like showering at that gym.”

An ambiguous nod.

“No reason, just don’t. Mainly it’s just so peaceful here. Sorry.”

“It must be all of what, fourteen degrees. Where?”

“A hundred metres or so, back.”

“It’s a bit dark.”

“Not that dark. House and street lighting come across the waters from Point Grey.”

She turned then and walked toward the car. He followed blowing noisily on his hands. She perched on the fender when he approached.

“You’re serious,” he said, digging for his keys.

“You can wait, maybe.”

When they climbed in he hesitated before starting up, then brightened, remarking, “The

Cove is maybe less Siberian.” Jerry’s Cove was a busy pub near the university gates they’d both patronized.

“So where’s that?...”

“Touché.”

Half-an-hour later they entered the water at the base of the embarkment that rose above Wreck Beach. They were soon surprisingly warm and energetic, he following like a muskrat, the lingering image of the pale nude form by the water’s edge luring him on. Both were good swimmers, he slightly less practiced, such that he felt pressed when she struck out toward the scow. He called after her but she continued on, arms stealing across the plum-dark water. At first he doubted her resolve, then swore softly and stoically as he followed, setting his pace and breathing for a longish haul.

He almost ran into her.

“I’ve a cramp in my toe,” she said, incredulously. They were treading water a meter apart.

“Best to rough it up a bit.”

Alternately they drubbed up the stiff ligaments, she once dropping beneath the surface to do so, returning undecided.

“It keeps coming back...I wanted to see the scow close up.”

“Sure.”

They looked at one another with new joint amusement. Then abruptly she turned and headed back toward the beach. Both concerned and relieved, he followed, his senses alert to splashing that signalled her position and speed. Vehicle headlights from the Marine Drive roadway occasionally skipped through the shoreline trees. An older quiet two-stroke motor launch with head lamp passed by them as they neared the beach.

“Everything okay?” someone yelled. “Heading in,” Maureen shouted back.

After reaching the shallows, they kept only their heads above the waist level water, a growing wind keening the air. They moved slowly, momentarily uncertain where they’d left their clothes.

“You didn’t say we’d have to get out,” he said, returning from a rise and accidentally bumping her shoulder. After another chance nudge she briefly brusquely caressed him.

“That help?”

They tumbled and separated into a deeper pool then again hit a sand bar that rose almost to the surface before slipping into a shallow, distinctly warmer pool. He recalled how some days trapped ponds of water left by the outgoing tide remained a few degrees above the mean, tepid bath water on warm bright days, like today. The pool was about a meter deep and they walked on their fingers, the sand beneath part of a fine sifting mixture, fully alive. At the opposite edge they paused and kissed. Only once before had he settled against the full nude length of her, and found the experience, in its unexpectedness, perhaps the highlight of his life. They floated on their sides, an arm cantilevered for anchor and support. At one point she drew back: he had forgotten the sore lip.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Briefly she lay unmoored above his lank denser form, floating about like a summer skiff, touching intermittently. “A variant of the uncertainty principal,” he dryly exclaimed, her fluid self never quite in place. She seemed for a time unsympathetic then broke into laughter, her stomach alive, undulant. “— Better than standing up in a kayak,” she managed to say between outbursts. He knew she’d been a ranking K1 racer in the province. The comment convulsed them both, turning the fumbling into surrender — into his anguished and her plaintive sighs as they pitched and yawed against the edge of the sandbar, she an elusive current, he a flailing salmon. They tarried at a no-return stage when the veteran two-stroke craft was heard once more near by. For a few seconds his thrusting motion, barely a caress in the buoyant water, and the steady putt-putt putt-putt of the old engine, actually synchronized, the craft sufficiently close to muffle their newly animated giggling, which became convulsive just before she pushed him away and scrambled the last few meters to shore.

It took half-a-minute to find their clothes and towels. By then he was notably shivering, she complaining anew of a seized toe. At one point she sat on a smooth shore log and groaned as he worked the phalanxes back and forth.

“God you are cold,” she said between sighs.

“Warm blooded,” he said, rubbing and wriggling the knotted toe, proffered and withheld according to the pain. At last she extended the foot, flexing her toes in a delicious agony free interval. “I think it’s one I wrecked on stage that night.” Gamely she fitted the sole of her foot to his chest. “Thermal induction,” he said tracing the warm alluvial thighs and nearby sex, even as a shiver swept over him. She pulled away when the caresses got inspired. “Too gravelly here,” she said, then swiftly assayed his hesitation. “Later, O Happy Dagger.”

Immediately she was up, swiftly towelling, retrieving clothes, white shorts rising with despatch. While pulling on her jersey, she headed up the steep path to the car, he several steps behind, hopping, chattering, one leg failing for a time to fit a trouser leg. In the parking lot they noted the addition of a third vehicle, an oversize van. “Another da,da, dumpster,” he said, in a convincing shiver.

Inside his chilly Kitsilano basement apartment the small camp heater was tempered and lit, clothes peeled, a condom furtively sought. Soon water surged behind a newly closed shower curtain. He would remember most distinctly the incisive female symmetry, water-pearled. “The missing *kore*, somebody once remarked,” she stated in response to his solicitous soaping of her shoulders and back, his hands less acquisitive than the older actress she remembered with some distaste. The flower pattern on his bath curtain had been reduced in the truck of time to grainy newsprint — paper that wrapped a fresh seasonal catch she approvingly thought as they embraced. An hour later she watched him as he lay still and silent as the North Arm Jetty’s scow — which would soon be towed to the fair waterfront for the unprecedented final week of fireworks. On the street outside some kids were noisily returning from a party. It was almost light. She thought of her parents who settled early in their respective twin beds. When did they last make

love she wondered? They likely tabled their anxieties at supper, and now might be silently awake wondering where their restless daughter was and when she might return.

Very quietly she entered her home in the early dawn to find the two parental magogs downstairs sharing a mug in their dressing gowns, her father craggy, pensive, her mother demure as ever. Maureen drew a tofu salmon cake from the refrigerator, a date bran muffin and carton of apple juice. “I spent the night experimenting — with the physicist!” she called out. The assertion came out wrong and was met with night-stalker silence. Briefly she looked in at them. “He’s likely an okay book. A little nutty about his fireworks that’s all. Which you’ll see in a couple of days.” Goaded by their stark quiet she added, “Please set the ‘alarum’ for about noon,” then, confection in hand, sauntered off to her room in a gyro-even gait, leaving the learned folk staring at their clammy feet, wondering if the experiment could ever be a success.

EIGHTEEN

As the car moved Randy imagined his head a large Halloween pumpkin, tongues of flame searing eyelets, nose and mouth, his body a bed of smouldering embers.

He had performed badly before the Inquisitors, the ‘critics’ who brutally interrogated him under the quonset dome on Burnaby Mountain. It seemed he might be a final casualty to end calamity. Somehow peace would prevail after.

Odd he should recognize the Dolphin Theatre on Hastings Street, tightly bundled as he was in the passenger seat of the grungy, swiftly moving car, the theatre a strange surreal vision, its marquee lights blinking like a heart machine. So perhaps he was alive after all. The curiosity baffled him, as had the cosmic quiet when they first arrived before the dark quonset hut, his senses alert to every creature out that night, every sound in the rank fall air, where echoes became fusion reactions...

And then to have nothing, absolutely nothing to say, nothing to add to his own lexicon of screeches and hoots and warbles...he had surely mimicked the spectrum of animal vocalization that night, from banshee to piercing piglet while mounted as a hectic spotlighted bat. His initial story of a prank they laughed at.

Then, in due course, with spittle oozing and mouth agape, a termination. The final blow truncated all pain below the neck, except perhaps for one gimpy arm, hand — enough to push a wheelchair perhaps, join the paras on their marathons of hope, one frail hand pressed to the rim. So he dumbly, freakishly imagined.

The final blow had been a blessing. Before: ringing pandemonium. After: simply a pumpkin head, burning eyes flashing and umbering. Now, he imagined himself a small fragment of magma flowing past the empty Dolphin Theatre, the smell of excrement lingering.

Then suddenly the transported pumpkin lurched to one side and fell, breaking into heavy sparks against the bosky surface of an old dory that floated on a dimpled sea, swelling, smelling of a deep. The man who hefted him into the boat the remembered ogre, now a carefree shipmate, pushing off.

So. The change was real. Headed out to sea. It would be his last night out.

“You’ve a lousy job,” he said at last to the dark form. The face he had drawn so carefully did not immediately answer, surprised perhaps the voice returned. When the form did respond, Randy sensed not a teething Grendel but an oversize earwig, a clerk, a *fonctionnaire*, a person he had often duelled with and won!

“It’s a job.”

So. Not even a last minute dialogue, as in some of the popular bloodcurdling tales. He was on his own. His last night out, an embered corpse guttering.

It was dark when the boat’s motor was idled. He felt the weight of something heavy being tied to his ankle, then an under arm lift and heave, a prompt splash, and salt water keening his burning eyes. The first time he’d completely submerged as a young swimmer was near a log raft in the quiet sun-flagged water of a prairie creek, cozy greens condoling partly submerged logs. Now a pervasive suffocating greyness, intimating his horror story was over. Without the slightest vicarious thrill.

NINETEEN

Vijay parked the car just off the winding roadway on the cliff above Wreck Beach. An hour of warming sunshine remained to the clear afternoon he estimated, a brief interval to himself before the belated evening scow retrieval undertaking — about the time the inaugural fair fireworks would sequin the night from the older smaller platform. As he checked the lock on the trunk he noted a remaining speck of blood on his forearm. A bit of saliva easily rubbed it off. Reflexively he checked both hands then, whistling lightly to himself, padded down the steep incline designated Trail Six that led to Wreck Beach.

When clear of the concealing foliage at the bottom, he was amused and cautioned to find the notorious site still harbouring a handful of bathers. Almost at once he found himself sufficiently an oddity to remove his trunks. As a light evening chill touched his back as the sun mulled his front, he mused how nudity tended to beguile facial identity and thus facilitate anonymity. As he walked to the water’s edge, he surveyed the beach’s mainly idling bods, alert to behaviour that might intimate tension, vigilance. Nearby a lean Adonis stood ankle deep in the lace-hemmed ocean. Hitherto the macho dude in that area, he seemed surprised to see Vijay. Behind him a uniformly dark-tanned, ashen-haired woman was seated on a quilted throw that backed a light grey driftwood log. On seeing Vijay she pulled out her earphone plugs. Vijay imagined in her barefaced regard a sly warning. Beside her sprawled a second, younger, more slender lad, his wide light eyes staring up into a deep indigo sky. He looked high, spaced out, his one knee bouncing rhythmically. Another serviceable head, Vijay thought. The woman had once been a storybook beauty he decided, only stretch marks on her abdomen and weighted chest compromised the overall splendour. The further Adonis appeared then rather languid, an outsider looking on.

Twenty meters out an old wooden sloop appeared to be stuck on a sandbar. An ageless gent, gaunt, skin a toast brown, stood neck deep in the ocean near the stern, all but invisible in

concentration. The incoming tide occasionally swayed the craft as a nearly settled toy top. Observant Vijay decided the sloop, once afloat, could offer a discreet look at the distant scow, allowing him, if need be, to cogently advise the retrieval team. Resolutely he waded out toward the abstracted gent.

“You think the incoming tide might dislodge it?” he asked as he drew abreast to the man, the afternoon sunlight newly divided by the sloop’s stern, the waters either side a salmon pink. The smell of brown algae was particularly heady, reminding Vijay of a stale prison cell. The old man continued to study the conjunction of incoming ocean and the sloop’s listing pitch; finally he shrugged and sloshed to the further side.

“Can I get some help?” Vijay called after him.

The gent rounded from the bow to stand opposite. “It was a Neap Tide when I got stuck; didn’t see the sandbar.” For the first time he looked directly and earnestly at the newcomer. “It’s only a foot or so in — the fin keel — and on the far side of the rise. A good strong push, with a new tide swell, might move it off. I’ve left the rope ladder over the side.”

“Well worth a try.”

Fingering his grey chin stubble the old man added, “Can you confirm my find — about the keel. I looked but can’t stay under very long. The water’s fairly clear around here.”

Vijay promptly submerged and found the keel embedded about a foot on the sloping side of the sandbar facing forward, as the man said. He also noted the acute direction the keel pointed, to directly clear the sandbar. He then surfaced, gave the old man a thumb’s up, and waded back to the Adonis and asked for a hand. The young man seemed relieved, and tentatively agreed as he cast back to his companions. The woman carefully watched as Vijay approached. Silently, mindfully, she listened to his plan to dislodge the keel. He would need help. Duly satisfied, she reached for a man’s large pale dress shirt, slipping it over her singularly factual, once splendid torso before rising. The young lad, though apparently willing, had trouble finding his balance and Vijay, assuming the candour of a compatriot, hauled him to his feet and into the water, the others following. The lad seemed amazed to be upright, and was fully as smooth and delicate as expected. Vijay guessed the woman a lay protectress, and not likely a spy. By then she was fully alert, heeding his palmy attentions.

He waded out to the rear of the sloop, the incoming ocean swell having marginally straightened it, and instructed the assembled group, including the old man, to push on the one side rear when he submerged to try to further elevate the hull. By then a few sightseers had converged and another two young men joined the team. Seeing everyone in place Vijay submerged again. Following several upward hefts and ample pushes, the ocean water was heard briefly sucking about the keel. Seconds later the sloop leaned slightly seaward then smoothly righted itself. After nudging it to a comfortable depth Vijay helped the spry old gent, then loud with good cheer, scramble up the rope ladder. The gent, seeing that Vijay also wanted to come aboard, readily helped him climb up. “Jolly decent, jolly decent!” he exclaimed, then called out to the others, “Come on board and have a cupper. All of you, please!”

The two supplementary helpers thanked the old man but signalled they were heading in. The other three were only momentarily undecided before swimming toward the craft, to Vijay's pique, the Adonis assisting the less agile lad, who struggled up first with the old man's ready assistance, followed by the woman plucking at her captive shirt, then the quiet Adonis.

The slicked group came to sit about the tiller looking not so much pleased with one another as curious about their host who promised a homemade wine and sweet meal biscuits, which he went to fetch from a bow container after conferring with Vijay on a suitable reef and carefree tack. Soon the forestay and main sail were catching faint intermittent breaths. The young druggie looked saucer-eyed, as one seeing a new vista a first time, his slender frame yielding to a light shiver. It was all Vijay could do to resist chucking all four overboard as he set a course for a slow, close pass of the jetty. The wind was light but growing. The woman asked what he did. A longshoreman, on holiday, he said. Her follow-up questions were assertively frank, yet with each answer she seemed reassured. Her language fitted the bias of a social worker Vijay thought. She turned out to be both chaps' landlady. The round eye called her a 'block mother', a characterization that prompted latent smiles. She sat then with legs entwined, arms folded in her lap, leaning against the nude god, the druggie a bum's width apart. When the boat headed west the sunlight bronze-blinded their faces. Vijay sought a more acute tack, to which the woman objected...then smiled, eyes closed, as the westerly warming rays slowly returned. A vigilant Vijay cast all three as wayfarers only.

The elderly gent returned with a picnic hamper, jug of wine and tin of homemade biscuits. A ruby liquid soon spilled into plastic cups and was drunk in a hesitant quiet — interrupted when the lad, apparently mesmerized by the setting sun, suddenly stood up. His ready elegaic words filled the clear afternoon quiet. After a time the woman tried to get him to turn away and scolded her friend for not assisting. "My god his cones'll be hamburger."

Finally they pulled the stargazer back to the cockpit cushions, into an awkward slouch, squibbed by a slight sinistral arousal. The woman dolefully looked at the Adonis who in response remarked, "The only part of him that never really crashes," then absolved the joke with a short laugh. Practiced moues ensued — an antic moment Vijay barely noticed however. Seconds before he had been startled, nay shocked by the discovery of a launch idling on the far side of the scow while two men went aboard, arms laden with sections of metal scaffolding and some canisters resembling the boles of a rail gun. Except that they weren't. Just what they were eluded ready recognition — nor had he seen either man before. Something was radically, direly wrong!

Summarily he turned the sloop about, causing the old man to spill his wine and the druggie lurch onto the woman's lap. The old man blurted his surprise. The other two exchanged puzzled looks as the woman rearranged her hands, wine and biscuit about the druggie's newly flagged head. Vijay said nothing as he tacked toward shore.

The brief interval it took to return to the waters off the beach was strained and mute. No one challenged the newly obdurate mood or decision of the large surrogate captain. Mainly they disapprovingly looked away, the woman quietly confirming a substitute evaluation, so obvious all

along. Vijay barely noted the foursome's bewilderment and was over the side after partly reversing the craft when their beach area reappeared. "Sure a damn funny turn around," said the skipper shaking his head. "A sudden sea change that," said the Adonis, unmoved. Yet in shared wonder they stared at the large muscular form as it plowed through the slate waters, its headway unusual to its wake, as it fairly pounced on the shoreline, lunged across the sand and disappeared into the thick mantle of bushes partway up the cliff.

"It's not so surprising; you never really feel settled around such a person," the woman summarized, recrossing her legs while cradling the youngster's limp head in her lap. "It's the sureness that clues you in. Little empathic function."

"I'm grateful he did what he did, mind you," said the skipper, still open to leniency.

"Oh yes, of course," said the woman. "But they often have a fixed agenda." She smiled. The sudden flight had proved a kind of verification for her. She eyed the Adonis with newfound esteem, his hand then negligently lost in her lacewing hair.

Minutes later they waved the old skipper goodbye from the shore waters, the young lad lazily idling in a leftover shoreline pool, the aging siren and her Jason shouldering one another's arms. Standing on the beach, the woman noted deep footprints left by the striding hulk.

Vijay, in turn, could hardly believe he'd not been privy to a change of plan. Cadmus Cruise was initially silent when contacted, his reply too slow in coming and too glib to appease wary Vijay. "We're just...well, tending to business...with an alternate strategy. Time's a ticking." Given Cadmus's feigned nonchalance, Vijay feared the worst. And when the smug agent referred to the strangers as, 'Just some...routine auxiliaries,' Vijay believed something was indeed 'ticking' — the undeclared irony being that Cadmus was then as confounded and flummoxed as Vijay! As was the team waiting to remove the scow, the late instruction from its minders 'to stand down' dismaying, demoralizing.

The Russians were then aware they'd been kept in the dark about the 'stray' scow *and* its specific purpose, when one of their own ocean monitors spied the two newcomers at work on the scow. Yet they shied away from a spetsnaz retrieval in a busy harbour, trusting that some adroit maneuvering was still possible — in spite of the egregious negligence of their Iranian flunkies.

TWENTY

Lithesome Maureen demurely sat on the edge of the scow beside her tawny lover, the alert pole-vaulter who, that past hour, had worked diligently with an engineer to measure and mark the positions of the launchers for the final weekend of fireworks at the fair, a spectacle touted unique to the West Coast. Amused and pleased was he to discover her paddling around the log boom in a beige racing kayak attempting to keep her smile inquisitive. Now they relaxed, feet dangling over the scow's edge, the sun just descended. The middle-aged engineer, an American film producer in his other career, studied a large design map in the motor launch. The scow was being slyly outfitted near the jetty to mislead competitors, one of whom was seen casing the main

False Creek station, and any environmentalist zealot, who might feel 'obliged' were he to spot the state-of-the-art apparatus soon to be in place. The Harbour Master was keeping mum about his sanction of the scows's location and use. He'd been well paid of course.

"What's the new oval patch at the end?"

Maureen's question broke the cordial silence.

Before answering her most recent question, the pole-vaulter studied her long lean legs, nearly as incisive as his own.

"Probably covers an old sump: the scow was used at one time to clean up oil slicks."

"You never did really explain the pots. Sorry, casings."

He looked away, from beauty so focal. "For the heavier launchers. The g-force they impact might faintly list the other platform, making some trajectories less precise. A remote possibility, yet one you control for, when you can. Tomorrow night's plumes need a fixed place in the grid. If any layers overlap some configurations could be screened."

"You still think it's safe hanging around?"

"I think so." Their musing eyes met, inches apart.

"An assertion to ponder," she said in a singsong delivery.

"You'll miss a pretty great show."

She wryly smiled. "I may miss most of it anyway. Final curtain's about eleven."

Momentarily they were distracted by the close passing of an older sloop and its aged skipper who waived complaisantly.

"Looks like they grew up together, the gent and his ship," the pole-vaulter remarked.

She pretended not to hear, observing her beau with new frankness.

"What big ears you have."

He squinted, looked away.

"Did you wash today?"

"Not in that ear, no."

"I do detect a sense of timing."

"Equipoise," he said after a bit, while stroking her outside thigh.

"Ho, ho, ho."

They regarded one another with amused candour.

"Will I see you later?"

"Maybe."

"How's St. Joan doing?"

"It's been postponed." The amiable spell briefly lapsed. "Father Dog still wants another week of bad ass skit parade. I *can* get away early tonight though. Save me a place in the Rose and Thorn."

"Sounds good. When?"

"Around nine."

He nodded with a muted thanksgiving she found newly seductive.

Minutes later he watched her fluently paddle back toward Point Grey. The swift sure speed she attained quickened the ongoing dilemma. Did she want a pal or combatant? Were they one and the same perhaps? He could never make up his mind. He had a mathematical sense of complementarity but with emotions it hardly signified, nor the notion of equivalence, if their intimacy was to have any staying power — he had little interest in a clone of himself. Was he then a borderline pessimist — newly aware that romance thrived mainly in yearning and uncertainty, that happiness itself could be a quicksilver commodity, recognized fleetingly, transiently? He felt like an explorer rationalizing a hazardous shortcut. Like exploding a firework. The fleeting brilliance was all there was — in the end. You planned for another or stayed planted in the dark!

A similar debate preoccupied his actor-lover as she prepared to leave for the theatre — the last of that week's skit parade. She had warned her parents she 'might be late' getting home — a pronouncement they accepted with some resignation. What galled her most was the incommensurateness of it. In the end, by giving, you simply got taken. So it seemed. The straightaway chap enjoyed himself regardless and she willed for herself that 'regardless'. Was she then a Principal Boy, a 'pissy queen', as the older gay actress asserted? And what for god-sake did that mean? Should they not speak of many sexes instead of two or four — boy boy (macho), girl girl (handmaid), boy girl, girl boy, boy-girl boy, girl-boy girl?... Weren't the variations a near jungle assortment, even without the example of transexuals and hermaphrodites? How could you settle, resolve anything with virtually everyone different? Yet did she not want to be 'wooded' — and by an able 'male' practitioner? Perhaps she simply wanted to make love to herself, as the disappointed veteran intimated. God knows she could do it as well — better — than the neophytes who had thus far tried. In time the pole-vaulter must improve, but what then? Having to confront the widening AIDS rut, which might leave one wary of an adventurous partner? So unlike say — acting. Surely that engagement was self-sustaining. The power of the good actor was mesmerizing, the sheerest manifestation of power, an entire imagination surrendered to your own. At least for a time. Was it not a handsome bonus to score as well with one's beauty and *esprit*, a kind of triumph over even your fellow performers — sometimes horny even? Why, you felt as though you could upstage any complacent alpha male and his assured outlook — an idea that prompted a new assessment of her pole-vaulter: He imagines he's a princely Romeo who, as such, gleans the harvest of a carnal eye. The 'mirror of patrimony' someone said. Hum. How 'freighted' could it get?...

The complex 'mating issue' then seemed debatable as ever. Though the nub was plain enough. To seize that randy impertinent stick and ignite its ancient roots, you hurled its pretty custodian into a pyrotechnic of ecstasy that obliterated self. You were left with a creature dependent on arousal, on further allurements for undistracted, unconditional affection. So it bloody well seemed. Most days.

This dour notion reached her when, slice of cornbread in hand, she skimmed the script of a

popular playlet *Dog the Father* had rewritten and restaged. One line in the original drolly amused her, its ambiguity apparently unnoticed by the author, though the line had gleaned some laughter. The original playlet featured a monologue delivered by a veteran burlesque queen who recalled several anecdotes that had ‘fleshed out’ a salty career. In the needy line the performer said to herself, ‘I’ve been dancing for stiffs for years, I might as well be embalming them.’

It was the unflattering ambiguity of ‘stiffs’ that wryly stood out. The average stripper’s audience was hardly comatose, for one. Why would they come? Surely no self-respecting performer would concede she readily put them to sleep. Conversely, why would one embalm a horny client — your pay check? The kind of stiff she transformed earlier that night into a satyr required no balm.

The stolid pun came from *A Particular Class of Women*, a rather earnest one-woman show conceived and performed by a Toronto actress which had earlier played to full audiences in Edmonton’s Fringe Theatre Festival. *Father Dog* mounted a takeoff of it — a *burlesque* of burlesque — and had asked Maureen to consider the part. The original was a solicitous, hammy role, sometimes unaware of itself, their parody of it slyly sophomoric. There were a couple of skin scenes Maureen played in a skin-tone zentai body suit that inflated to a humdinger shape and measurement. The main striptease was noisily letting the air out, to her ‘indifferent’ shrugs. One member of the cast was a designer for a soft plastics extrusion firm. 3-D glasses were offered for sale in the lobby (the proceeds to corneal research), and earphones. A few gents in the audience would don codpieces the size of carryalls. That sort of thing. The final scene served as an encore presentation if the concluding applause was prolonged.

She was not all satisfied satirist, mind you. A matched melodrama would be to turn the lordly goats into dumb porkers, showing them who in effect wears the pants, even if little more than a sliver of pizza. Yet overt nakedness could be a drawback for the pretty actress — a mindless, pandering ploy. Awkwardly, the line about stiffs was a defensive pun. All tit and no swish. Bawdiness was meretricious, extraneous to authentic narrative — or must become itself the swift, sudden double-whammy enthrallment! — to quote their agile director.

And with that complex notion in mind she rose and after a moment’s indecision retrieved the bustier she’d worn under her strapless graduation gown. It was perhaps the most risqué item in her largely functional wardrobe — bought especially for the occasion — a sheer stretch affair that fit beautifully, subtly enhancing contours. She was on her way to the shower when she passed her mirrored closet, stopped for a brief inspection, then sought the garment, which she held in front of her as a bullfighter might a small cape, performing a torero ‘shimmy’ of her own behind it. When she slipped it over her head and smoothed the rills, the contours still ‘commandeered’, leaving an observer more or less engrossed — not thinking, reflecting. Hah!

Finally she turned off the main floor lamp, leaving only the oblique light from the washroom and slowly removed the frock whistling a honky tonk ditty. Then she folded the two outer mirror panels to form a half hexagon and looked carefully at her lithe jaybird form, its full back, side and front, making a second global inspection with the weight on the other leg. She decided the

businessmen in Vancouver would be sweating more unctuously were she ever to perform as the original script intended — no body suit. For a delicious minute she imagined the general hush — whistlers were a rarity in the city's mainstay theatres. She then sought her makeup kit and touched up the discoloured lip and a small mole by the lower rib, reassuring herself both 'dissimulations' would not otherwise compromise her integrity; for the author-playwright honesty was grittily important. La deda! She decided she had some sympathy for the pole-vaulter. Until she tired of him he might break a leg.

Then she quickly showered, swiftly towelled, and sought the early evening power nap she willed before each performance, her very own Chakra renewal, expunged of all 'perchances' to dream.

TWENTY-ONE

Cadmus Kruse sat smoking silently and alone in his darkened office after being sorely rebuked by the Russian. It was almost a year since he gave up nicotine. Had his oxygen supply not inadvertently run out and he needed something to lull frayed nerves, keep him thinking alertly, pragmatically...finally at dusk he stole to the confectionary down the block and bought two packs, the same furry faces hovering nearby.

It had been a gamble keeping secret the misplaced scow. But on learning via an angry Vijay of two strangers boarding it with unknown equipment — and later, via the Russian, that the scow itself was to be towed to the fair waterfront to serve as a launch platform for the final days of fireworks — Cadmus gagged on his own tongue-tied astonishment, his singular ill-luck.

The Russian's words still chilled. "Imbeciles! All of you!" Now the matter was out of his, their hands. The anger was momentous, Allāh Himself speaking. Cadmus thought of the Sacred Baboon, of thick blood, or clots of blood. Nothing less than an élite spetsnaz team — The Night Comers — would take over and try to dispose of the device without so much as a murmur in official circles. Though how such a retrieval might be accomplished remained highly speculative, given the scow's minders and intended placement. Of course the one detail still pending was the slight possibility that the larger fireworks launchers just might trigger the shell's time-to-detonation transducers — which would make for a very deluxe fireworks display — the Russian basilisk, as Cadmus thought of him, was not amused when he broached the possibility. Could he have been simply mocking, infecting Cadmus's team with a toxic insinuation? Feeding the poison that disorients, paralyzes, impugns? Reveals the shills and quislings? Cadmus still half believed something like that at play here, though now, as a pariah, he was in effect Godforsaken history.

He'd spotted the car across the street at dusk — two part-time goons. The professionals would be nearby. To have goofed so thoroughly, so relentlessly, almost supernaturally — Super Natural British Columbia! Would the spetsnaz team even be in time if what was implied was in fact true? No, the Russians would indirectly seek diplomatic intervention in the face of such happenstance; while the humiliated Americans would be anxious as anyone that the news remained sub rosa. The Russians were after all not players, only backers, gamers. They plotted

ingeniously, remorselessly, yet disappeared like water in the desert when the caravan got lost. They were exceptional escape artists — and unwavering slave masters. To have worked so hard to build up his business, to find he could occasionally help an Iranian intelligence team...now another incidental death, beside a meddlesome artist. How wryly balanced it all seemed.

And the maniac, the chap they called the Juggler, was he not in their employ all along? His situs mastery legendary? Why else was the Russian so resolute, so knowledgeable about late events? Surely he had a much earlier warning — an angry covert ‘skill’ reporting the strangers boarding the scow with unknown paraphernalia. Was the Russian simply not too damn dramatic when he confronted Cadmus? What did it matter? They would be mopped up like so much spilt beer — a smell no one paid much attention to, believing it now common to the district. Had the wily insinuating Russian Bears planned it so all along...to follow the nerve pathway? As his inhalations became longer and his hands began to steady, he dumbly sought another option, even as he sensed being chained to his seat — the dial tone absent the moment he impulsively, witlessly fancied an ‘out’. He looked again through the curtains onto the street and wondered — for the umpteenth time — how far he would get. Another hit-and-run perhaps, or murderous break-in — or simply a disappearance. The pawns came with few moves...without the single constitutional phone call.

After seeing the alley clear of any stray visitors, Vijay signalled the driver across the street, then proceeded to attach a trip wire on the rear staircase. The ‘fugitive’ should fall about fifteen feet, ‘facilitating’ a broken neck; thereafter the office safe would be thoroughly rifled: Option One.

If Cadmus chose the front entrance, in effect sanctioning a full grilling — Option Two — he might even survive. The Cheka was not unduly harsh toward ample fugitives, if there was a further need. But Vijay doubted Kruse could endure the role of a snitch, of ready pander and informer. The man was a two-bit sultan, a suave expedient racketeer. You need guts to face a Cheka grilling, let alone the retribution that may follow from your own cadres. A suicide was the easier, sanctioned option. Now his clique, nay the whole faction, would itself be suspect, hidebound. Muscle-bound! Showy muscles often compromised overall performance. Vijay would enjoy beating the vain sot into oblivion. An option not approved. Yet.

However, Vijay’s own plan — the unofficial Option Three — was the most aesthetically arresting. His one care being that Fate would permit only the destruction of the numbskull. The young actress, the other human who had marked, scored his life, who indulged in her theatre a burlesque of force, of imperative might, he may not have time for. The deft facial slash, now inflamed, required adept clinical intervention, proscribed for the time being, because it disclosed an identikit, a ‘smell’. Option Three was thus in jeopardy. Yet, if he pulled it off, the death he’d planned for Cadmus the Clown would be an apt prologue to a reckoning with the brazen actress, so deserving an existential encore, which he would stage at her own gym, were his Kismet not so skint. Time had always worked against him, the ever caustic reality, as defined by his desultory

paymasters. Was the older nuclear shell itself even real? XM 785 — but a clerk's number. He could readily imagine the well-screened Russian 'headhunters' using such bait to bag the more wildcat networks — trace the latest maundering of the Defenders of Allāh.

PART TWO : LIMBO

TWENTY-TWO

Randolph Glasser was newly aware of himself in a strange limpid shroud or mist, unseen by passersby apparently, a nimbus that lingered, loitered about environs he was familiar with. He could see, acutely it seemed, yet appeared invisible and inaudible to an outside world. He was definitely not among the living: no one scowled his way and he was not hungry. Yet the scenes, the people who passed before him were realistic as remembered, whereas his own anomalous 'actuality' finely dismayed, roiled even. He imagined himself a bit of organic waste that defied disposal. Bound to ooze and reek a bit over time. Pollute a few 'droplets' of time.

The curiosity now was that he should find himself 'occupying' an empty back row seat in a familiar theatre at curtain time, awaiting a performance of *Dog the Father Et Cetera* on Granville Island just under the main downtown bridge network. From past experience he knew the patrons had come anticipating a roisterous good time. Angels and savants could stand in line — spooks included he guessed. The provocative company's last round of dramatic fixes, he recalled, had dealt with social acrimony, ethnic elitism, and a vulgate sense of fascism. Tonight's offerings, would disclose brutality and masculinity as old locker buddies, kibitzers in bullying and assault — the standard jockstrap stench. The theatre marquee read, in part, 'Guaranteed to Save the World from Chauvinist Pandemonium'. Despite his bizarre surreal presence, the scene before him was acutely real. His wonder only vivified the scene before him — and the fact he was invisible, imperceptible to all but himself!

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride was the first civic staple to be discovered sprayed with preservative. Horses came out riding constables — the comedic dummy inversion. After the ride, the horses and riders appeared as separate actors. The horsey riders, played by female actors with attached noses, pointy ears, and thick long eyelashes, removed and polished up bridles and saddles, and pacified with words and pats nervous males who clutched about them the standard blue and gold RCMP horse blankets. The poise of the riders was notable when shoeing a becalmed male, i.e. fitting him with new stylish espadrilles.

The with-it audience seemed to agree that men reduced to nervous mares, executing stilted maneuvers, was an overdue 'reckoning'. Only Randy Glasser, now dead, or badly preserved, sat in an unheeded haze dourly looking on. Though not for long. A female classmate who had died before him in an auto crash suddenly 'materialized' at his side. His hair was surely alive and tingling. The girl, whom he liked yet ever antagonized, now appeared as a kindred misty shelf-mate — while enjoying every minute of this footling pantomime.

A short essay of his — then laying in a drawer of his lowboy, one of several destined to be pitched unread into a Glad trash bag — was he felt topical. He had illustrated it by drawing an elegant lady rider lovingly carrying a complaisant horse on her shoulders through a venturous forest — invoking the belief that women were smitten with horses sufficient to mother them, an idea he hoped to fox-trot with now. But the reaction he got from his classmate when he ‘flashed’ this cartoon was that men were every bit as freaked out on horses. “You ever hear of a male jockey?” Randy was only momentarily inhibited. Jockeys, horse lovers? Whipping the daylights out of some filly toward the finish, running the guts out of drugged stallions — horse lovers? It was a disagreeable use of ‘love’, but one he realized he’d have to bear, if he was to become more than a louche observer — in this disconcerting limbo.

“Why is it you mainly see young girls in riding academies?” he answered back. His classmate took this in with a twitch to her mouth. “It’s simply a dumb conventional habit.” “No ecstasy involved at all?” he urged. The girl twitched again. “You’ve confused the issue. No one carries a horse for gawdsake. It’s riding that counts. Watch the show.”

Randy decided his fond idea might be disagreeable as his presence here. He stood accused of horsing around. Feminists, generally, weren’t jokers and knew the ropes. As Freud said, there are no jokes and passed a life more or less proving it. And with no jokes there was little satisfactory sex, simply more method assault on earth and great silences beyond. It was all coming true it seemed. The rash insomnia of witness. His dour bailiwick.

Like an acute case of shingles or sweating before the atomic core of Vijay Kurtz, or a crackling tinder-dry Middle East, particularly in the Jihad swelter. There you dealt with some very high horses.

“So how in hell does a gal ‘carrying’ a horse relate to the uptight Musical Ride?” his companion asked, further amazing Randy that his caricature had not been junked.

“Great cultural resolve, I think. Holding one’s own, regardless. A Feminist precept. No perks. Boils down to mainstay stature, durability.”

“That’s a big help.”

“I’m afraid so. The modern lady’s *raison d’etre, n’est-ce pas?*”

The pause darkened.

“Only a crackpot would draw a girl carrying a horse.”

“I think the animal lover can do naught else.”

“Naught?...”

Thereafter, she returned to the show before them. Yet he continued mindful as ever. He suggested that only daydreamers and auteurs felt fine *in* the saddle. The one honourable job left was mopping up. He could cite Mother Theresa on that. Then there were those who wanted the beast to look good, content, well-cared-for at least — a decidedly modern female empathy, he felt. The clues were systemic he believed.

For instance, just before he ended in his watery grave in Howe Sound, he had strolled through the RCMP stables at the fair. Both mounties and horses made a good-looking team —

elegant structure, fluent co-ordination in both camps. Only the horse maybe had a better behind. Mountie breeks denied the wearer a distinctive bum — intimating the needed serge slackness for long rides, perhaps. Anyway, the mountie bum could be more or less inconspicuous, while his knobby calves, sculpted in lustrous chestnut leather, were surely the tease of any broom tail. So: even odds thus far, more or less. But the natty T-shirt, which the swanks wore when grooming their horses, polishing bridles and such, presented a dilemma for the female mountie: a bra resembles a harness itself under such flimsy attire. Another beastly humiliation, no? And without a bra you can easily miss a beat, fall prey to inane distractions.

“Only an uptight nerd would notice,” his classmate interjected with some venom.

To which he replied, as amply as he dare, “Him especially. The perpetrators of modern fashion have spent decades rapturously studying and monitoring what makes for arresting flesh — free of dicey gravity. Designers lose their jobs — the shirts off their backs! — for failing to have a sufficient number of people take note. Resentment and disappointment sell many fanciful halters — which tends to explain why quantum dynamics, with its many tiny swells and shells is a ticklish investigation. No ‘specific’ gravity as yet, so to speak.”

His companion was again absorbed by the live performers. Calmly Randy continued, sensing a rare freedom from interruption.

“To ‘Maintain the Right’ — in politically correct parlance — is to fondly tend the beast. The Musical Ride has the beast strutting to a regular beat, the occasional twitch of a filly’s nervous flesh chiding the male for daydreaming of a connoisseur’s leg up or titular reward.” His companion faintly smiled; one of the horses had briefly veered out of alignment in the formation.

“You don’t say, Polonius. Don’t understand a fucking word.”

The next offering of Father Dog, however, proved less deductible. Religion was a sorry bean. You even had progressive Christian clerics themselves patronizing some parodists, those who would turn God into a chauvinist boor unable even to make up His mind. Whereas a female Deity might have decided long ago that she really wasn’t that interested in humans generally, and returned to things like her pulsars and photons (accrued interest and travel). Man’s a beast so put him away. But in a kindly way. Randy was by then thinking of the Berlioz Requiem to get through the night — for what followed left him a sullen malingerer.

The issue at hand was a papier-mâché crucifix of an obese woman that disappointed a few critics in the front row. A crucified anorexic was found to be elitist, little better. The company then swiftly retried name-tagged persons, beginning with Judas, acquitted on grounds he was slandered from the start. Pontius Pilate and Saint Paul were sent down as a shirker and agitator, respectively. The two lacked ‘empathy’. Jesus got off with a warning not to patronize his mother or indulge his precious conceit, nor condescend to the woman by the well. And stick to his carpentry.

Randy was a little let down when the skit ended without God being exemplified as a Gibbon or Killer Whale, or some further addendum to the Mystical Body. But when a comely

lass began reading lines of Andrea Dorkin's, including 'Women are the only group that shares a bed with their oppressor', he listened in silence, wryly recalling the sensuous verses of Alexander Pope, especially the 1st Canto to *The Rape of the Lock* — now a background shroud, the merest cosmic noise.

What dire offence from wayward causes springs; What mighty contests rise from trivial things...

But he was really a bit of a dolt: the phallus being more or less problematic all along, today more intrusive than ever it seemed. A hefty macho Messiah was never really proprietary, given how many early church fathers commissioned, had they not, a lissom lean-limbed being on the cross. The form's skimpy waist cloth varying in degree of indelicate exposure, some authorities sanctioning unadorned 'misties' — all, in the end, serving the ancillary purpose of softening up the skeptical lady, making her into a willing consort? The poser of the ungainly question — How else might it have been accomplished? — faced a growing barrage of ridicule in that day and age, heterosexual passion then considered prosaic, unimaginative, even to some, innately despotic. So: one might worship the modern woman, paint, sculpt, film her in every more stoic determination, but could possibly engage her interest only if he was — citing Randy's short list — a PC philanthropist with oodles of ready cash, a film or video producer dandling a coveted role, a cute guilt-racked Herculean, or an enlistee of the new enlightened protocol which tended to prize boundless variation. Oddly, inimically, 'unmitigated variation' was really little 'variation' at all, one of the overlooked truisms. Miscellaneity, wide-ranging plurality, approximated *anomie* — normlessness — which facilitated disorder, confusion, bewilderment. *Who am I?...* As the alert Oscar Wilde had one of his disillusioned fops postulate: 'A passionate celibacy is about all we can look forward to'.

By then Randy's doughty classmate was applauding a female St. Sebastian, played by the lovely student he remembered with such fondness, who appeared in an ivory, arrow-pierced body stocking while pacing up and down as on a fashion runway, before adopting a Sandro Botticelli pose, which drew a coterie of several contrite kneeling lad actors, one of whom delivered a solemn monologue about 'angry thrusting penile arrows' — presumed tools of the chauvinist mind and its obsession with obedience and punishment, leaving Randy quelling a stubborn snigger, as the audience keenly applauded the 'woke' squib.

Then a team of vigilante revolutionaries came on stage, automatic weapons belligerently seeking complacency. A perky dead-silent pantomime went on for a minute or two, the cadres stalking the aisles, looking for a pernicious someone, becoming not quite comic and thus further skewering the ominous quiet. While the search went on a separate actor recited examples of Alt Right memes. One offering about masculinity becoming anachronistic the cadres suddenly dramatically approved of, nodded enthusiastically, and swiftly carried the reader offstage on their shoulders, singing Arina Grande's 'God is a Woman'.

His airy companion then decided to offer some timely advice.

"It's a clever overdue roast, Polonius — hitting bull's eyes every time. Lookit, you've got to learn that musty convention and complacency stink. You've had a ball, now it's over. Think

unisex. It's a workable synthesis."

"Caesar as potentially every man's wife?..."

After a brief appraisal she briskly said, "One possibility. Why not?"

"Some think that's why Rome overlooked the barbarians."

"Well, if that's so, Caesar was simply way ahead of his time."

The logic seemed immutable.

"The basic thing," she continued, "is that the masculine hangup with ascendance is fear of failure, defeat. Women endure attrition, exhaustion, disappointment. They can outlast any fucker. That's why they get stuck with tedious unpaid housework and men get to goof off. The masculine ego is always taking off, a real treky enterprise trip. Silly mothers stacked to paradise, vying with cement mixers and closet queens. Anyway, the flight of the patriarchal soul. The never ending proverbial gospel trip."

Every gesture Randy could make seemed inappropriate.

"Lookit, if you're being nice out of habit just remember that Judaeo-Christian convention offends women as much as Mein Kampf offends Jews.

"No, I won't forget that."

"I mean, my gawd you hear of American football coaches drawing cunts on their tackle dummies!"

Randy badly smiled. Poor eager sots, he wanted to say.

"Gawd."

"The times."

"A bunch of alternating bullies and crybabies."

"What do do?"

"Christ, do something. Go tar a Proud Boy. Recycle a woman-hating Hemingway novel. Rape a pro-lifer if you're really stuck. You're got a damn Y-chromosome, use it!" It seemed both proper and disastrous to take her at her word. One time being naught served.

The standing applause in the theatre was affectionate and prolonged.

TWENTY-THREE

Maureen peeked through a narrow separation in the curtain. Each night since the attack, she and her fellow players who had confronted the maniac, carefully surveyed the theatre audience. Most believed they would recognize the saboteur were he to reappear.

It was the last week of the fair and Maureen planned to leave early, her Saint Sebastian act just ended, and join the pole-vaulter on the fairgrounds at ten to watch the laser show and fireworks. They agreed to meet by the IBM information kiosk near the B.C. Pavilion. It would be her one opportunity to see the firework display staged the final week of the fair. The unprecedented finale on the weekend coincided with late programme performances. She had begged off this night's Act Two fatigue duty, the revolutionary-style scrutiny of the audience for die-hard bigots, xenophobes and such — while the audience invariably followed the stalking with

quiet attentive amusement. Her replacement, a mother who came late to acting, seemed eager to abet the search by wielding a submachine gun.

“You’ll be late,” the woman said, smiling.

“Just my luck to miss the bastard,” said Maureen, still dressed in the prickly pear suit of St. Sebastian.

“I think you scared him off,” said one of the regulars.

Maureen closed the curtain gap. To her stand-in she said, “He hooks to the right, remember.” Easily they hugged.

The loft space she shared with the female cast had been breached that night by a couple of boyfriends. “No fornication in the dressing rooms, please,” someone called out to a couple kissing in a corner behind the horse-mountie costumes. “Two minutes,” the manager called from outside. Maureen stood to one side carefully removing her prickly St. Sebastian body suit, while the fatigue-dressed partisans smudged their faces with theatre lamp black, and a dynamo worked the loading chamber of an automatic like a mastered Rubik cube. The one veteran actress, a budding dipsomaniac Maureen thought, gazed at her reflection in the room’s wide free standing mirror and purred. Another performer scrutinized her completed ensemble. “Why should just the cute boys go to war!” More suavely the veteran commented, “The best there are, gramps.” In response, one of the suspect boyfriends said in a nasal voice, “How can we prove ourselves in combat if they won’t protect us from the women.” The hisses were shrill and prolonged.

It was a sight that soon entertained — Maureen, newly seated before the expansive mirror reassessing her discoloured jaw, nude then but for a towel and shorts, her facial makeup almost removed, the St. Sebastian body suit limply hanging nearby, the company of slangy, mock-menacing, green-khaki guerrillas approving one another’s menacing appearance while stealing glances at lithesome Maureen. “Eyes right,” someone said prompting an instant of open amusement. Maureen too smiled while fingering the towel about her neck, pretending to wipe away a remaining swatch of releasing agent, an antic the older actress noted and Maureen sought to disown. Thereafter she ignored the reproachful eyes and salved her lip and jaw, remaining seated until the eager partisans were called to their battle stations. But as she quickly slipped into jeans and cotton pullover, she realized she was not unmoved by the older actress’s attention. “It’s something everyone should seek out at least once — a matched pair,” the daunting woman had said, fastening to the dare the perdurable Sapphic lure. That inveiglement Maureen avoided because the woman was too much her very own watchful, care-laden mother. A realization that dealt its own fine insinuation, she thought.

But the notion lost its edge when she emerged from the theatre and saw the familiar lights of the fair aurora. That wide vivid scene proclaimed a durable mix of girls and boys, of people generally, having fun. Gaiety, vivacity was the exception among in-turned relations. To have a rollicking good time you needed a certain underlying innocence — ‘possible among genial nit wits,’ she handily said to herself as she headed for the boardwalk that passed Mulvaney’s Tiffany-shaded restaurant, just beyond which lay the pier where she’d earlier berthed her kayak.

She could feel the conventional reclaimable fondness well up within her as she paddled across the stolidly named False Creek, a narrow, dredged waterway off Burrard Inlet, to the elegant hull of the Pacific Swift, a replica of a vintage sailing ship being assembled in the Old S.A.L.T.S. shipyard dry dock near the fair's False Creek marina. Six years ago she had sailed about B.C.'s coastal waters on a masted frigate sponsored by the interdenominational Sail and Life Training Society — one of the highlights of her young life — the essential enjoyment of enchanted willing children, still removed from the strains of late adolescence. The Pacific Swift, modelled after a late 18th-century brigantine, would shortly be towed to Victoria for the outfitting of tackle and sails. Thence it too would carry more young people through the showcase waters off the rugged B.C. coast, teaching them the technical and cooperative skills of seamanship. Now, in her kayak, she paddled by the immense scaffolded hull, once stopping to feel the cool smooth timber, before entering the marina and securing her light craft to a wharf near a squat older sloop. She was cautioned to discover a police launch moored nearby, yet could see no office onboard or about.

After a careful scrutiny of the immediate environs, she skipped onto the embankment and over the chain-link fence that extended down from an administrative office to a repair yard adjacent the Old S.A.L.T.S. dry dock. The fence afforded an agile person a free entry to the site. A few people strolled beside the quay, enjoying an open area where you could move freely. A stone's throw beyond you reached the entrance to the Egyptian Ramesses II Pavilion, where a talkative crowd snaked back and forth. She had met her friend several times on site, allowing herself to be propelled by his quiet enthusiasm to many of the rides and most of the pubs. Their impromptu introduction took place near the Ramesses colonnade itself. He had been preparing to take a picture of the pavilion. She strode by with a few members of the cast. A sleeve button on her loose jacket caught in a shoulder strap of his back pack. They were both caught off balance. After a brisk joint apology they parted only to be smartly pulled back toward one another. The ensuing disengagement of the button allowed him to take her in and ask many leading questions, some in the form of chary invitations. "You've never heard Lúnasa?..."

They ended that first night not in the noisy overcrowded Unicorn tavern Lúnasa performed in, but the Rose and Thorn, the Edwardian lounge in the British Pavilion, where he voiced a fancier's knowledge of the single malt scotches they sampled — talk that nicely parodied the waiter's scrutiny of Maureen's young face. Teens were admitted with an answerable adult. Maureen's ready sampling of the scotch would be masked by the coke she ordered.

From the beginning he served as a baffle to the overwrought attentions of the veteran actress whose social vision divined ornate neuroses, particularly in conventional pairing. The disappointment in her lean austere face when she learned who Maureen was seeing, was unsparingly pathetic. To allow oneself to be publicly fawned over by an impetuous homegrown stud was, as the Nemesis-eyed woman said, akin to suckling another priapus, a haughty bigot. His words were affable and thoughtful though, not those of a natural talker; he was in fact putting forth a considerable and unexpected effort on her behalf.

Almost everything about him heartened or paced, including a graduate degree in engineering physics, which she learned of incidentally that evening when he expanded on his love of fireworks. Had the lineup that first night at the Unicorn not been interminable they might never have met again. Her noisy distracting crowd were there to hear Lúnasa, yet sullenly waited an inside table. A few in the group were willing to try the less crowded Rose and Thorn. There he relaxed and eventually described in near poetic language the most transient of nature's flowers — fleeting wide-plumed fireworks. Their chemistry was simply speeded up he said. Now, as she passed the Ramesses columns once more, she recalled him fancifully wondering if such pillars rose up or hung down in Egyptian lore. They are simply in between, Melchior, she had quipped. A few seconds later he asked who Melchior was. When she evasively referred to “just another smarty” he said a Melchior was a pole-vaulter he knew. That was when she learned he was something of a firework himself, soaring near the Canadian record — an unaffected remark that now seemed minutes old as she noted, again, the small models of satellite vehicles suspended in the space above the bevy of spotlit marquees that lined the main esplanade. The noisy crowd itself moved as a dense fluid atmosphere. The leaves on the Linden trees by the Korean fretwork Pavilion had just begun to turn and drop, the timely end of a pleasant generous season. She wanted someone to be close to that night and was conjuring up a felicitous moment when the heavy man, the theatre ogre, hove into sight, walking on her right, converging from a small waterfront plaza. He came within twenty feet, forcing her almost to a halt, in effect jamming her further into the throng while he seemed to move unimpeded. In the same measured walk he crossed to the overhang entrance of the Telecom Theatre where he turned to stare after her. Her reaction was initially one of lagging stage fright. She continued to move forward, even as she looked back with wavering and annoying trepidation, his sudden menacing presence acutely dismaying. Yet what he would want with her here eluded her. Though his cold stare and stealthy movement portended harm, injury. But as suddenly he vanished. She cursed her sudden disorientation and puckish looks, the young impious face that seemed fated to be lectured. With senses so scrambled, the least initiative became precarious. Reserves were drained just assaying her specific whereabouts. Twice she passed the West Gate attendant — a folly that defied explanation. If a part of her strove to seek out a fair official, something else kept straining forward, some catty animus that willed to demonstrate its independence; she had briefly stymied the bugger once, she might do so again — and remain upright this time! Her strong elegant legs seemed to move independently of a mind advising caution, holding out, voting against catching up with the ogre and drawing him into a fray, screaming as only a determined young actress might! Surely that would ticket the bastard, give him a notoriety he couldn't slough off. Numerous happy fair celebrants must defuse, arrest an open assault if that was intended. So she thought. Almost debating the matter aloud she spotted him following perhaps the distance of a softball pitch. Suddenly she bolted after passing the Roundhouse with its stately black steam-shrouded engines.

At last she worked as one, her destination the lively crowd and sensual music at Zorba's

Greek restaurant, with its renderings of benevolent Vancouver celebrities smiling down from the upper outside marquee. No sooner was she inside, however, amidst the happy clientele, than progress was stayed by a belly dancer who lingered next to a keen patron holding aloft a large bill. Someone demanded she sit down. She squeezed by the sensual lady and accosted a busboy on his way to the kitchen. He in turn frowned and pointed to a formal chap standing by an outside table. When she struck out in his direction, the heavy man blocked the pathway, a bandage scoring his cheek, a slash of taupe war paint on his swarthy mug. For a brief minute she played a kind of dodge ball game with him, moving from one table to the next, striving to gain access to the natty host who also moved with great zest from patron to patron — while the large dark form, an apparitional troll, ghosted the intervening space. She kept saying to herself how silly it was. Just tell the first sober face what's going on. You've got a voice for petesake. If that person proves too timid or aloof tell another.

She had almost made a complete tour of the restaurant when the belly dancer moved once more toward her truncating a sought-out route to the host, the dun face following in her wake. The two seemed to bait her together, the dancer's eyes especially alert to the newcomer's edgy movements. Not again, dear, she seemed to say. Not here. Here, above all, rudeness is forbidden.

Mincing, prinking bitch thought Maureen. She let the dancer pass then spoke complainingly to an attractive couple who seemed alerted until the heavy man also approached the table and said in an astonishingly deferential voice, "Maureen, Mrs. R's been waiting some time now." He smiled leniently at the young distracted couple with a stoicism that careerist Maureen read as a masterclass coup. The couple seemed concerned, yet cognizant of a youngster who might well be a brat. She was astonished, fully aware how her young immature face must deceive. Quietly he added, "We'll miss our bus." Her extravagant reaction, instantaneous and full of needy oaths, rendered her simply petulant, even hysterical. "This isn't happening...that's the most stupid, crappy, served-up...!" The trim tuxedo-suited host she originally sought approached and, taking her by the arm, led her to a concourse exit. There he asked her to calm down, while the heavy man existed as a model of propriety and stoic devotion, his gestures those of a long-beleaguered parent or guardian prepared to go home alone. "Mam'selle," the wary host said at last, "please go to the West Gate. The closest, easiest, best person to see. Please. Thank you."

This said he displayed in an engaging smile an obliged trust of them both, then left her on the concourse and returned to his genial celebrants. Calling him a hopeless jerk, and her 'guardian' rather worse, did not abet her cause. Turning dumbly to her stalker, still subtly exhibiting the lenient gestures of a quaker, she suddenly, yet almost lackadaisically stepped forward and struck him, twice, once hitting his sandbag neck. Allusively he put up a lagging arm in a show of defence. She could hear ambiguous murmurs from some people at tables just off the concourse, and among a tarrying audience of passers by. "Just piss off will you!" she yelled at last. Lucidly he told her to stop behaving like a child. She turned and stomped off toward the West Gate. An older lady asked if everything was all right. Maureen hesitated, long enough to hear his reply — "She's determined to stay, I guess; she and her mother had a tiff." Briefly he

stoically spread his hands, palms up. She could not believe her senses. The sucky wormy performance had bagged an audience!

To gain access to the West Gate Maureen had to wade again through the crush of bodies filling the central concourse. Within this amorphous cell, ever changing its constituent shape, free movement required unflinching will. Once she found him directly behind her, his deep voice acutely intimidating. “I had expected more from an actress.” She jostled some folk next to her and found herself jostled back. A young girl called her a bitch. He was momentarily gone, then, when she wasn’t looking, his low voice scored her attention anew. “I could have put a ribbon on you, many times.” Again her anger swept away restraint. She stopped, turned and called him a string of choice names concluding with, most adamantly, ape-shit psycho! As a noisy harridan she at least got attention. Stonily, apathetically he concluded he was leaving with or without her, then bled into the throng. People looked quizzically at her. A heavily made-up girl said looking after him, “Don’t go away mad now,” to further marginal laughter. Again the jocular response was so hopelessly inapt that Maureen all but searched out the director. Instead she turned and strode back toward the West Gate, more irascible than ever, cursing not putting on more makeup. She could imagine the brute somewhere eyeing her with a speculative smile, her quiet but impulsive swearing offering little respite.

Twice she passed the tall official near the West Gate re-entry turnstile, her mind still recouping. So she made a statement, got escorted home. What then? The bastard would still be at large and she have accomplished nothing. Think girl, think! Did he not risk a great deal by stalking her here? Wasn’t his openness not a pushy arrant gamble in itself? Could he be absolutely certain she hadn’t alerted someone — set out to do some fast tracking of her own? She believed he was somewhere watching her, carefully judging her performance...the swine seemed to know that side of her well. She realized a conference with a grounds’ official might be inconclusive; her predicament was not something communicated quickly or plausibly — given the maniac’s astute acting. She moved then into the West Gate’s restroom station where, certain he was still about, she might think without a ready audience. She considered sitting in one of the toilet stalls for a while but suspected he’d wait her out.

She had of course told the pole-vaulter the pertinent details of the assault on the company and knew he would be readily, unsparingly supportive. Might the two of them not do some baiting of their own when they finally met that night, while one slipped out for sturdier backup? Was there not at least a possibility of cornering the bastard? Whereas, if she simply bowed out now, the scene would remain every bit as skewed and threatening. Soberly, she realized her friend would not arrive at their appointed rendezvous for almost another fifteen minutes. She’d come early to take in the fair on her own for a time. She’d seen so little of it.

In the end it was as much the dare that thrust her back to centre stage as her disgust with taking what she imagined a wimp’s exit. She also decided the growing crowd along the waterfront, the early birds hanging about for a good fireworks vista, could be a useful thicket for a nimble rabbit — particularly if sometimes on all fours! It was this growing dense mass that

finally impressed her — made an assault inherently difficult. Certainly conspicuous, discernible. Not something he'd want. So she imagined. Though what he did want eluded her — likely more than belting her again. Dog the Father had obviously spooked the bastard. Good. In due course she would meet her able friend, swiftly explain, and regroup. So she chose to believe.

Her decision made, she decisively struck out for the waterfront promenade where she could reach the fireworks crowd quickly as possible. Why hadn't she seen it before? Her two current options seemed then obvious: the relatively open space of the promenade, where an assault might be nimbly drawn out and thus conspicuously viewed, or the growing crowd about the elevated ground very near the distant firework's platform, where you moved as a mole or not at all.

TWENTY-FOUR

From his muzzy bootless bower restive sightseer Randy was astonished by the thug's gruesome murderous intent — and the young actress's plucky if naive resolve. He would have elected the wimp's way out, given how crowds could in fact mask a sly assault. With stintless foresight and princely luck he just might stave off a few hazards: he had been startled, nay awestruck, to learn how relatively easy it was to faintly, marginally influence some events on earth — where he was himself so relentlessly stalked, abducted and slain! In his new hazy condition he couldn't dramatically alter immediate, set circumstances — send in a SWAT team, that sort of thing. He could, however, give a few things a gentle nudge now and then, and those nudges often amazed in their net result: akin to altering a person's breathing pattern by dispersing a certain pollen! The sneeze factor he thought of it. The clever part was predicting the irreducible result — of some allergens in a slightly altered gust of wind say or, more manually, an innocent bystander's incidental move, twitch or gesture that could 'accidentally' modify some subsequent act. Such 'nudges' were finely exacting, of course, as well as hazardous. But — they 'obtained'!

Now it was simply a matter of squeezing out an extra few minutes, somehow. He suspected Maureen hadn't anticipated the lengthy distance separating her from the rendezvous with her friend at the B.C. Discovery Pavilion. Moreover, the crowds along the waterfront, her chosen route to meet her friend, varied in both density and movement. It would be a tricky calculation. The terrible part was he could just as easily make things worse. That too was gratuitously attainable. The paralyzing possibility. Time and Life, he no longer doubted, played on nobody's side. Even his abrasive partner seemed more or less reconciled. The Eminent Unobservable Zookeeper had, apparently, decided determinism was a vapid sinecure and presto — chance, fright and danger, and occasional excitement when one eluded robust menace or found a timely interest or haven. Randy's effort now might well be as ineffective as it often was in the past; you don't assign complex maneuvers to nitwits, and what he hoped for here could well explode in his face. His old classmate briefly looked in and re-registered her disgust. With the U.N. facing more budget cuts, the world's needy piteously multiplying, the world's weapons and nuclear arsenal going to seed, racial and ethnic hothouses full of poisonous blooms, et cetera, what in

God's name was he doing fussing with a spoiled bitch actress? "She almost deserves a shake-down. And you sit there in your usual idiot funk. Do tell me I shouldn't be surprised."

"Please carry on," said he, freely waving her by. "You save the world. I'm trying to get from the fair's Pink Zone to the Blue."

"You're bananas," she said before moving off.

That distant remark coincided with Randy realizing his pretty charge still hadn't traversed the Pink, a fact that now compromised his plans for the Blue. He swore vengeance against himself and, as the saying persists, dug in his heels, an expression he sensed considerable nostalgia for. An excruciating two minutes later he feared his meddling had stupefied the girl. Inadvertently she glimpsed the ogre's knife and momentarily panicked. If he hadn't nudged one fair patron to more readily step out of a strong shaft of sunlight, believing the act might hinder the ogre's sight line, she never would have glimpsed the blade. Such common minutiae were readily consignable. The timing was off and the weapon discerned in a loose sleeve. At times he felt like an air traffic controller attempting to redraw a downed radar screen. The intent might be estimable, the attempt ever dicy if not forlorn. Yet he seemed to improve as he played, making allowances for wishful thinking. Mustn't give up now, old sock.

Then he wondered if he shouldn't simply let the clever young actor handle more of it herself. She had quite miraculously recovered her presence of mind and was again avoiding her attacker with considerable aplomb. Down the line of course lay a medley of dangers, any one of which...though the hazards themselves arose in clumps. From there to there, yes, likely hunky dory. But there, by or beyond the expansive Russian pavilion and things could get tricky; a nearby monorail station both partly hid and divided the crowd. Astonished, he watched her heading toward it away from the waterfront. She perhaps misjudged the congestion about the busy playground area designated Child's Play, a family draw, or been possessed by some maternal instinct — didn't want to involve children. The psychological moxie needed to answer such a question was well beyond his ken. Impulsively he elected to try to nudge, egg on the movements of the two into a measured distance apart — the movement of the one factoring the other. He found himself flagrantly determined.

As she neared the entrance to the Russian Pavilion, the first moment had come. And he could do nothing. The variables swarmed as the crowd thickened. The chain of incidents he might trigger by redirecting any single discrete movement could be tragic. He put his hand to his mouth and held his nonexistent breath. The ghoul was practically on top of her, the crowd about noisy, sluggish, apish. Fitfully he viewed the entry wound euphoric Vijay Kurtz had planted in his acutely graphic mind. The lung would be collapsed, the windpipe and vocal cords in primary shock. She would fall quite undramatically, help arrive much too late.

Then, horrifically, she disappeared from view. Frantically Randy raced through a series of visual planes to find her crawling on hands and knees through a gaggle of legs, her stalker looking about rather peeved. For an instant Vijay had neglected the exclamations in the crush of bodies ahead of him. When he did comprehend, his anger flared as his prey re-emerged,

heading back to the dense central concourse. Then a sudden opening in that press of bodies allowed him access before Maureen could disappear into that crowd, a gap Randy belatedly realized he might have closed: responding to a slight nudge, a young boy could have dropped his ice cream cone a little further on, thus *delaying* the gap created by side-stepping folk. One of the precepts up here — collateral mishap ever lay in wait. Again Maureen all but disappeared, this time resorting to a half crouch, moving diagonally off the main concourse to emerge on the Air Plaza amidst the panoply of exceptional airships and balloons. She paused briefly by the early tri-engined plane with an attentive white plaster mechanic standing by it, her mind again susceptible to haste, reconsidering the sharp scream that would at least place her in a defensible cocoon — just as Randy concluded he needed but a parallel energy capacitor, a human whose nerve and ferment might serve to augment his own ‘nudge’ — add a possible impetus to his own ‘touch’, a prospect he was slowly apprehending, energy being an ambient commodity, anger often its prompt. He was disappointed to find no one in the vicinity who might serve his coalescing plan though. Everyone was either content or exhausted: exploitable urgency or acrimony were scarce dispositions at the fair. Any serviceable nudge seemed contingent on his own sole marshalling — though a nearby scene slowly adventitiously gleaned his attention. Yes, something emphatic *was* happening on the terrace beneath the clear plastic rain-cover of the Praha Restaurant in the Czech Pavilion, in which direction Maureen was headed. Had she seen the refuge it might offer — decent lighting and no belly dancer? With a few nudges could he not get her inside — where the expedient energy packet he sought was slowly intensifying? The necessary buildup was already underway in the animosity of two agitated restaurant patrons! The barest increase, a slight additional crescendo and voilà — the entire scene might be transposed! The kinetic force he sought to augment one excursive ‘nudge’ was coalescing with, he believed, enough surplus angry ‘oomph’ to derail an assailant if the staging was right. Just don’t lose it old darling. He had rarely performed ad lib before, and this ‘doing’ demanded great finesse. He rubbed his outwardly invisible hands and urged a slight increment of exhaustion on the girl that would keep her resting in and about the wonderful air machines a few seconds longer. The trick was to align the keen dislike burgeoning between two long standing, antagonistic restaurant patrons — to his own timely nudge. Hatred can spawn explosive energy ‘packets’. Acts that can disable. One seemed immanent here. A long shot but worth a try, at least.

Yes, go for broke ‘Einstein’.

The scene that unfolded in the restaurant — which promised to deliver a pertinent, ‘sympathetic’ nudge, sufficient to alter events — was being emotionally charged by two of Randy’s favourite antagonistic humans: mayoralty candidate Harry Janos, lawyer, lover and leftist leveller, and columnist Doug Till, patriot, faithful husband, decorated Gulf War veteran, and perhaps Canada’s lone vintage conservative. Just moments before, Till and his wife were seated on the covered terrace next to guess who — none other than an unusually debonair Janos and a stylish woman who were just finishing their entrées of the roast duck with its special blend of caraway and *fleur de sel* rubbed into the skin. Both men curtly smiled. To imagine on a coinci-

dental night out that Fate would place them cheek by jowl in the same restaurant was lumpy oatmeal indeed. If Till felt constrained to request a different table he quickly changed his mind. Besides, the restaurant was full and he and his wife had waited some time for a table. Grin and bear it he said to himself, and pray the gamy prophet kept his mouth full of food.

Conversely, Janos was at least grateful his entrée was finished. Till had always given him indigestion. Perhaps he might return the favour. “The duck is excellent,” he said, hoping Till would cravenly order something like the filet. And he was dead on target. The avidly lauded duck was the offering the Tills had come for especially. Very quickly Randy decided he had two things working for him: Till’s annoyance at concurring with Janos on anything, and Janos’ determination to upstage Till in conversation before his younger attractive companion. By keeping the adrenalin plentiful Randy hoped to bring the animosity to a head, the energy packet by way of a poised fist he might co-opt to affirmatively nudge events. Firsts and anger got on. Neither man would suffer unduly and Vijay would be indisposed long enough for Maureen to both contact an authority and her boyfriend. If he could pull it off he would find his stay *Here* less...off-putting. This promise he offered up to any stray invigilator who might be watching.

As if on cue, Janos got the fray off to a promising start by audibly telling his pretty observant friend that Till could afford such a night out because he, Uncle Janos, had recently granted struggling columnist Till an interview. Till threw his head back but said nothing. At first. His wife smiled. Randy kept at his peripheral nudging and the forthwith Janos asked Till if he had enough for the duck. “I always pay my way, comrade,” said Till. Said Janos with a cartoon smirk, “Pretty nice place don’t you think, Till? Hardly expected a good ol’ boy showing up in a commie palace like this.” To his attractive friend he added, “Till is a feisty red-baiter. A bit mental on the subject, otherwise not a bad egg.” Said Till with a durable smile, “Well, I always like to see what a country’s ‘aristocracy’ is eating.”

“See what I mean,” snapped Janos, “a mental case: he can’t order a goddam meal without yakking off like a fuddy-dud.” To Till he sneered, “So sorry, ‘Archie B.’ — no Chicken Kiev.”

Till smiled, then audibly remarked to his wife, “I seem to recall the Kremlin dining on Chicken Kiev during the Ukrainian famine.”

Thereafter the words became glazed with select poisons. If Randy was incidentally sympathetic to the veteran, this night he wanted Janos’s rhetoric to be persuasive and galvanizing as ever. Nothing propels a leveller better than the strychnine pinch of his own resolve. Putting a fussy stickler in his place in a keen and adroit manner is the headiest of elixirs, and Randy needed all the righteous indignation he could summon, his protégé, as he now thought of Maureen without apology, a stone’s throw away from the restaurant and closing, her assailant in sly diligent pursuit. The timing had to be perfect. He scrounged about for every additional energy packet he might summon. Janos was soon redolent with indignation. His young friend flushed but impressed. Even the waiters were seen occasionally nodding. Janos’ critique of Western narcissism and materialism attained fusion potency with the arrival of the Armenian brandy.

“ — And the bloody fireworks! Those new, expensive, silly, pointless, dumbass fireworks — while there are unemployed forestry workers who don't have a pot to piss in!”

Till of course matched taunt with taunt, lashing with lashing, the rising harangue drawing the manager and scolds from nearby patrons. Yet Randy kept all available energy packets linked together despite the many shocks he received when one slipped back and he sought to return it. Eventually he could see a kind of aura about himself, a form faintly astrally present, though he soon realized he was the only one taking note. Still, he likely represented more than a litter of uncharmed quarks after all.

It was then Till abruptly tuned out and shut up, leaving Janos half sitting, half-crouching, still more Marx and Engels asperity puckering his tongue, the manager patiently trying to intervene. Just as the manager imagined a hiatus, Janos started in again and Till, after a further token effort at disengagement, rose to the occasion by snatching the bill from Janos' table saying he could afford both, something few 'privileged' Russian, Cuban or Nicaraguan citizens could do! As encore he called Janos a crappy old babushka, in response to which the fist that Randy conjured earlier rose in the air, intending nothing more than to swipe the bill back from Till or simply emphatically knock it out of reach. As the fist rose Maureen swept by, followed by an artfully nonchalant Kurtz, passing Janos' table just as the fist, poised as a low fearsome upper cut — now propelled by the exceptional force of the purple band — swung up to seize or scatter the bill. Instead the mighty swing, nearly sufficient to stun a pig, caught a rushing Kurtz with a bull's eye to the groin as he sidled past. Randy had intended a glancing blow to the chin but the timing of the joint nudge was marginally off. A Hollywood sound-effect's man could not have produced a more sinister sounding thud as Kurtz hit the floor like a turd from a tall horse, while Janos shrieked in pain, holding his hand before him as if thrust into a meat grinder — or Sacred bond fire. Till, no longer combative, helped Janos back to his chair and urged the manager summon emergency help. Janos looked as though he might faint, the man on the floor like a beaked worm. The alarmed guests looked on as so many witnesses to a café bombing, which Randy decided it nearly was as he surveyed Janos' trauma. A macerated carpal bone and compound fracture to the forearm. Randy'd been so caught up in the 'nudge' necessary for an amply stunning swing that he'd overlooked the excess of the mighty purple band to do it; too late he realized the lesser energy packet in the red would have sufficed — though the kinetic study to confirm it was well beyond him. The man on the floor began retching convulsively. Randy decided the sorely injured Kurtz was but collateral damage. Thus, with a waggish amusement, he watched Janos painfully raise his arm after onerously taking in the man he'd just zapped, and litigiously excuse himself before an imaginary judge: 'Well, Your Honour, I just don't like being pushed around, I really don't. And this bloody eager chap just happened to get in the way.'

It was a qualified success Randy presumed. Kurtz's injuries would keep him in limbo for sometime — keep him 'off stage' for the duration of the season, so to speak. Initially the mighty blow had badly bruised Kurtz's acetabulum, sacroiliac bone joint as well as his testicles, one left bleeding. To stay any self-recrimination, Randy watched in full-spectrum display the meeting of

the two lovers. A memorable moment, full of authentic alarm in the pole-vaulter as Maureen told her story. A group of fair officials and city police stood about the restaurant entrance when the two returned to assess the scene. Maureen gave a full statement, including the attack on the theatre, to an empathic female constable just as the fair's brilliant sky laser show began, the fireworks to follow. The relief Maureen felt on seeing the prone bent body taken out on a stretcher was as great as mortal woman might manufacture without preternatural help, which Randy decided would be impertinent to augment. The girl, he reminded himself, was just the tiniest bit disappointed. The accident deprived her of the finale to a febrile baiting exercise, though any latent grudge she felt was countered by her essential relief.

Later, after the fireworks, on their way to the pole-vaulter's car, a short block from the fair grounds (Maureen had decided to retrieve her kayak the following morning) the newly ardent lovers dallied in lickerish clinches in doorways, lanes, the hidden receiving bay of a pub. Doing so Maureen roused the poor lad to a joyous level that made the drive to his flat adventuresome, ending in a near mutual mauling just inside his front door, a kind of duel to the first dying, which led to an unprecedented and magnanimous (almost self-consciously hilarious) mutual exhaustion, which a mesmerized Randy watched till they both slept. It was perhaps the first time doubter Maureen felt the dichotomy of the sexes worth excusing. The pole-vaulter had rarely been as high in his life. But Randy's delectation of Maureen's naked form as she slept, turning occasionally with the fluid grace of a jaguar, was cut short when Randy's torqued cellmate stormed in wanting to know what the hell was going on.

"Well, as you can see," Randy responded reverentially, "all heavenly bodies are majestic, even at rest."

"Jeez I'm not talking about that you airhead. I'm talking about that animal terrorist you so easily neglected — and let escape from the hospital!"

"Moi?"

"Yes, you pillock!"

"Oh come on."

"You screwball!" The girl's feral fury was itself enough to cause mental if not bodily injury.

"My sweet bee eater, the police were there, the..."

He was abruptly cut short.

"You think that *nervo* was going to be confined by a rookie constable or two? How stupid of me to think you were on his case! Jeesh! And if that wasn't bad enough, you've overlooked that fucking lethal scow out there!"

"What scow, where? Oh that one."

"Holy Geronimo!..."

The girl *was* upset, an alien vexation distorting her usually resolute look. Randy felt distinctly uncomfortable yet could see nothing unusual about the aforementioned scow — from the outside. Given how diagnostic perceiving was more or less axiomatic — down *Here* — he now looked below the upper platform. Seeking a lay explanation of the complex apparatus within

took a moment to comprehend and left him aghast.

“That’s awful,” he said at last.

His companion looked away, over an ocean of contempt. “And you sit here covertly watching a porno flic.”

It’s how you can amicably watch a porno flic, he wanted to reply, but didn’t have the nerve.

“Christ. The lectern in the Simon Fraser University quadrangle will be — fricasseed.”

“Well, they say it’s an ill wind...well surely there’s something we can do?”

“Yeah sure. You might want to have a listen to the current conversation between the happy Ruski bomb removers, one of whom whimsically jokes about a *historic* fireworks display.”

As Randy raced through the pertinent exchanges, some by phone, two in Stanley Park, one in an engineering office in Port Coquitlam, the prevailing presumption was that the shell shouldn’t explode, the complex timers would not be affected by the fireworks launchers and the scow’s jewel could be disposed of later, without incident. Whereas an open declaration to one or more Consulate would badly perturb the fragile status quo, and media awareness cause its own half-life storm. The sense of extraneous intervening complexity hadn’t wained though. Something unanticipated could transpire, making removal from such a conspicuous space problematic. The bomb removers would await a decision from their Consular head.

“So it’s being sorted...*c’est la vie*,” said a resigned Randy sitting back.

His classmate once more looked away, her incredulity bordering on the bathetic. Wryly, sluggishly he decided he’d better check out the mental states of the decision makers, and soon stared long and hard at the chief removal expert’s disposition profile. The man was a career cynic, one who would not, if circumstance allowed, balk at exploding a nuclear shell on a Western civilian population. He actually fancied such destruction, believing the West entering an imbecilic DIE (Diversity-Inclusion-Equity) binge and the prophetic Armageddon, less its religious guise, one conclusive means to start anew! Randy was speechless.

“ — A nice kick in the head, no?” his companion said at last.

It was also too obvious, from the detailed summary he just fixed in his memory, that no conjunction of energies existed to alter the grim, exceedingly complex, status quo, at least none that might respond to spare ‘nudges’, leaving the only recourse to an emergency response team, an option no one in this afterlife might appropriate. He and his companion could nudge and faintly rescind but not temper a will already ingrained, embedded, human fanaticism being largely immune to *contrary* nudges, and, in the current mundane player — a resolved vengeful Russian chiliast or millenarian drove the narrative — who could well devise to act vengefully, maliciously! Marshalling *his* regnant energies into any nulling unity would be a fiendishly intricate balancing act. Indeed, the suspicion lingered that the *Hereafter* visionaries — the insect/virus champions, say — abetted turbulent fireworks as much as anyone.

“So, does that mean we might as well turn back to the happy gropers?”

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than they tasted of soap. Spoil-sporting was out of season. But what could he do — have done. His philosophy of attending to the individual,

however inept, was the extent of his resolve. The welfare of the many-too-many was ineffable, infinite, cosmogonic. Take it or leave it.

The girl was obviously leaving it. She walked out of his space with the finality of a teacher who had just flunked an entire class. The possibility of a solitary millennium or eternity loomed before him, the ruin of possible nuclear warfare a fine trope — the feasible devastation of humankind. Oh well, some microbes, clever insects and viruses would likely survive. And weren't these capable of extraordinary evolution and, for the connoisseur, inestimable beauty? Unthinkable as the prospect was of no longer hearing Rossini or Mendelssohn, or watching sexy Maureen beguile a shower, he would just have to look and listen more carefully when the crickets took up their hind-leg bows, or a virus wondrously mutated. All to be done — depending on the length of his stay *Here*, of course. As a kind of insipid chaser he noted the efficient device was in fact a radiation enhancement bomb not an explosive type, and recalled his smart antagonist saying the Simon Fraser lectern would likely be 'fried'.

However, when sleek Maureen woke a second time the following morning, and seemed less certain about the esteemed rapture of the night before, Randy was moved, nay besieged, to find her looking to the stars for council, as if a boundless capacity for both open curiosity, protean desire and willingness, were in danger of terminal collapse, or toxic half-life cynicism. He reminded himself that tending to such a singular beauty and her unrest could be a first step, given his infatuation and ineptness, to misfortune if not folly. Yet he decided he'd better have another go at the available celestial machinery, however spurious that might be. His isolation would be far worse if he left off now. Only on storybook earth were his treasured optimistic dreams ultimately realizable after all.

Again he was oddly, imperturbably determined. He would keep his nudges going till the designer of the Jollyball Machine in the Swiss Pavilion ran out of inspiration, about the most any mortal might expect of a plodder. For those who inadvertently missed that paragon exhibit, the Jollyball Machine was a pinball circuit that a shiny steel ball, with a determined grin, traversed on its eager way to find succour at a Swiss chalet! It coursed everywhere at first, from an uncooperative turnstile to a cavalier gondola lift, from a misaligned funicular to a nearly disastrous pit and pendulum; from a speed boat on a spooked lake to a fangled tilt-a-whirl going nowhere at the speed of light. So it seemed. Yet back and back the stubborn ball went on that roller coaster ride, it's determined momentum invincible. Was it not a comfort when a machine throve as a machine, the peri-apt of its maker — here the timeless resolve to seek a refuge, a haven, a sanctuary that might absolve choice time outs — like revelling in brilliant grandiloquent fireworks. At such times, Randy's own soulful melancholy took a hike!

TWENTY-FIVE

Everyone in the lower mainland was getting up that final Sunday morning to go to the fair. For Western Canadians and not a few Americans the spectacle was astonishing, like seeing your navel after a long winter or discovering a neglected but lovingly assembled tuck box. Parents

seemed less putative, children less petulant Randy thought. Old and young shared smiles. Hairless faces with bearded, painted ladies with unkempt drifters, squirts with mossbacks, putterers with go-getters, some shapely stretch-knit buttocks enhancing the mix! The ones who stayed away were likely climbing sheer rock faces, undergoing emergency surgery, killing slugs, or heading for Wreck Beach, the lower mainland's human zoo. The crisp clear morning dazed below a spectral sun and flash-blue sky. Those who had used up their fair passes, who waited in front of hotels for buses or airport transport to take them back home, were resigned to missing one day of carnival. Whereas, those aware that the concluding fireworks, scheduled that final week, were touted a historic epic event on the Pacific West Coast, likely regretted being tied to a schedule that shirked that phenomenon.

Inimically, Buff and Naomi Rutquist lay awake before the alarm, both wondering about this unusual morning. They had tried to be understanding when Maureen begged off the remainder of that frightening messy and officious evening last, giving them as quid pro quo the pole-vaulter's cellphone number. "It was not inevitable," Naomi said when they first climbed into their twin beds. "You always flattered, encouraged that impetuous side of her and naturally she took her cue." Said he, "I know I know — my daughter is a robust Sibyl. More or less." Said she, unamused, "You would say that." Said he limply as plea-bargainer, "Well I'm hardly a minder any more. She's home free." Yet they both willed one final visit to the all-denominational Pavilion of Promise that day, to pledge their troth, and enjoy the last performance of the RCMP Musical Ride in the Rogers Arena. They still did not know of Vijay's frantic escape via a washing chute in the Centennial wing of the Vancouver General, nor that for the terrorist that escape was the most exigent and excruciating exploit in his turmoiled life!

Concomitantly, Herb and Babs Spooner planned to attend only the stellar evening fireworks, to arrive at the False Creek site aboard a friend's yacht about eight for a box supper opposite the Plaza of Nations. Now they remained beset in their separate beds, mainly because of a shared annoyance with what they imagined to be Randy's impulsive goofing off, and baffling disappearance. The bride's father had phoned to complain that Mr. Glasser incited a commotion at the church, got drunk, did not finish the reception, and had to be driven home — well, to the studio — a further puzzle for Herb given the lad's disappearance. Moreover, Herb had some demanding retouching awaiting Tuesday morning, following this Thanksgiving Monday, the final day of the fair. A further concern to add to his pensive state. Earlier Babs had too, out of habit, padded off to the bathroom to rebrush her partial — just in case. But the memory of caddish catfish Randolph, and his inauspicious disappearance, stranded intimacy.

Returning to the primordial world, in the native bachelor flat, the self-sufficient Maureen lay on her side assaying his intimate kisses, wondering to what extent a babe would feel different. The early pale light of another impending day rendered it all rather pedestrian. She recalled the indelicate sight of a sow suckling a farrow of rambunctious piglets for whom the flesh-pink teats served as a kind of fistular air bag they kept lambasting. She was then twelve and visiting the

barns at an early agricultural fair. A sardonic shudder passed over her now, which he seemed oblivious of. Her maternal instincts were not then perhaps exemplary. Even as he framed her chin with a soothing hand and fondly invoked her name she doubted the spell of the night last could be recaptured. So fleeting, so ethereal, its memory all but dissolved, the dreamy Aeolian harp baffled by a growing street din, his earnest voice now a mere footnote. It seemed only a hushed numinous audience might reach and relieve her silent whirling scream. Her beauty beggared the functional individual, turned him into a dedicated porker — initially a swank nosy father she loved and loathed and willed to taunt forever.

In a similar restive mood had Vijay Kurtz — two days before — on his way to the fair and an overdue reckoning, planted the near-naked body of the old vagrant in the garbage bin. One deft blow and the man's squalid vigil was over. The neck broke like an old arid branch.

Now, wearing an unvarnished grimace and enduring searing pains he'd never experienced, he thumbed his way along Vancouver's Grandview Highway, a crude homemade sign reading Injured Logger hung about his slightly bent neck. He strove to be over the Rockies if and when the blast went off. His debilitating injury had prevented him seeking out and hot-wiring a car. He should have left, as expected, the night before last by boat. But he had behaved as a hot dog nemesis, and thus forfeited the scheduled exfiltration. And now, as a media pariah, he was untouchable; indeed, someone may now be trying to nullify him. Thus would he head West then South and resurface in California. The oncoming delivery van looked most promising. As the van pulled to a stop he smiled painfully, said he needed a ride to Hope to see a sister.

"Climb in," the bearded and rye-whisky-smelling driver said. "Just picked up this lousy one-way this morning. Know how it feels."

But neither absorbed Randy nor his strenuous classmate saw the 'logger' climb into the van. Randy was newly aware he knew nothing about nuclear fission, whereas his classmate, heeding the maniacal perversity of the one bomb 'remover', and the possibility that the shell might still be inadvertently or purposely triggered, worked to keep as many medical personnel away from an estimated deadly perimeter. She also managed to augment the numerical digits written in hospital requisitions, and facilitate the standby servicing of some extra beds in the Langley Memorial Hospital — believing it the nearest major hospital that might survive any deadly radiation. At times she paused, like the fabled animal reconciled to an inevitable end. The logistics seemed to pale before the political fallout, which she would have to leave 'till later. And to think she had nearly gone off to watch a supernova shrug off its smouldering nursery and ignite several hundred if not a thousand new stars!

By noon Babs was doing the ironing and looking more bemused than usual. Facing his wife's hung-jury manner, Herb, nasal spray in hand, found himself thoroughly peeved with Randy's insouciant disappearance. "It does seem darned peculiar. Not that one should be surprised. He did pickup and leave before like a gypsy."

Babs sighed. "He did leave a letter of resignation, though."

It was the one point Herb could not disown. To simply have left, gone. Leaving no advisement whatsoever. Abandoning even his note pad and Stim-U-Dents. It wasn't really like their fastidious Randolph.

"Think I should maybe call the police," he said at last. It was neither question nor statement. It was Bab's ready nod that converted it to a resolution. As vexing as the complaint about Randy being disorderly and not finishing the wedding, was the discovery of the ruined camera. He must have really tied one on, the shyster. Moreover, wouldn't he, Herbert Spooner, be in a further bind if his deft retoucher was not working early the coming week? Yes, he'd better call the Surrey RCMP. Wouldn't really do any harm.

The inspector who came was already planning to pay the Spooners a call and surprised them both with his incisive questions and comments. Just that morning he'd begun subsuming the disparate facts: the singular sketches of the theatre attacker by the artist whose domicile was the same as the Spooners; the rude incursion into Our Lady of Sorrows Parish Church by two goons seeking that very same artist, reported by a church elder; the chap who assaulted the theatre players and stalked Maureen at the fair, and was injured there, being the same thug who recently escaped from emergency — reaffirmed by the emergency hospital staff on viewing Randy's realistic sketches. The thug's driver's licence, care and debit cards, which he'd not retrieved, were discovered to be bogus. By the time Babs brought in some coffee both the inspector and Herb were unusually quiet. Wary Randy had never disclosed his making of the sketches, and neither Herb nor Babs regularly read the Vancouver papers. Each missed the Sun issue where the sketches by a 'Heedful Young Artist' appeared. The television account simply sited a 'Theatre Witness'. The bride's father had given Herb only a curt account of the 'hooliganism' in the church and Randy's inebriation at the reception. His lawyer would call in due course. The incident at the Praha Restaurant, though incidental, had allowed for the apprehension of the suspect, while his subsequent escape from the hospital curtailed any formal interrogation. Moreover, Herb had noted nothing unusual at work; certainly no sign of a break in or maniac stalking the studio.

"The facts are highly suggestive but we have no serviceable joins," the inspector said at last. "Mr. Glasser was not likely an extortionist; the pictures of the theatre attacker were promptly openly published. We might consider a lone, random, vengeful assailant but for the apparent planned assault by the two heavies in the church, which suggests a wider operational net. We have yet to hear from all our inquiries but thus far the theatre assailant and the two attackers or abductors remain unknowns."

Herb was trying hard to think of something intelligent to say. The inspector beat him to it.

"I'd like to see Mr. Glasser's room now."

Herb had anticipated yet momentarily forgotten that likelihood and gingerly smiled. He was about to explain when he decided the inspector should not be delayed and forthrightly led him through the kitchen onto the back porch, the lawn, and finally to the tree house's ascending step ladder then in the 'up' position, which Herb pulled down then pointed up the steps.

The investigator was intrigued. “Not what I expected.”

Herb smiled. “He wanted a cheap place to stay.”

“I take it you built it for other reasons.”

“Oh yes.” Herb could feel a sneeze coming on. “We did more or less agree it would be temporary. For the summer mainly.”

The inspector remained reflectively silent, glanced about the yard before cautiously ascending the narrow ladder.

At that time Buff Rutquist was adding a few topical touches to an old standby sermon — his consideration of Michelangelo’s unfinished sculptures, those figures never made whole, given a specific human identity, and thus a manumission and eventual expiation as he thought of it. He was reflecting on that lack about the time Vijay Kurtz drove the van near Princeton swearing at his mushrooming balls, the pain acute. The sallow tattooed man in the back appeared asleep. When it was dark Vijay planned to dump the corpse and drive through the night. Strangely, his failure to deal with the girl added to his acute discomfort now. His whole body throbbed, including the cut. He would need more antibiotics, even a robust pain killer. His rage was poisoning his life. Someone soon would pay to right these supernumerary aggravations.

By sunset the crowd at the fair waterfront had swelled to over 300,000 steadfast celebrants, and long lineups congested all four entrance gates. Concourse foot-traffic monitors stood prominently atop elevated stands, megaphones in hand, urging the wall-to-wall bodies to go and come on respective sides of the the elevated monorail stanchions. When the Strathcona Chinese Dancers began a traditional Fan Dance on the Plaza of Nations stage, accompanied by a recorded orchestra reminiscent of a thousand Viennese fiddles, an indigent looking Vijay was leaving the office of an elderly Penticton physician who gave him a sample bottle of Tylenol III and a prescription for a broad-spectrum antibiotic. Vijay explained the facial wounding and hernia as the result of a chance encounter with some violent muggers. He used the van driver’s B.C. Medical Care Card, whose lined face bore a slight resemblance to his own, to register with the office medical staff, who accepted his explanation that he’d looked far better when the picture was originally taken. (He’d not risked retrieving his own identity cards from the hospital; he’d not had time in any case.) The doctor mentioned how he was looking forward to the closing ceremonies, at the fair, especially the fire works. “They’re advertised as ‘unprecedented,’” he said. Vijay agreed.

When it was dusk Vijay drove to the Penticton Game Farm near Lake Okanagan where he once awaited a dispatch. He broke the lock to the entrance gate with a tire iron, then drove to the interior pens where, following another vigilant reconnoitre, he painfully hefted the body of the driver, bearing a few ambiguous head bruises, over the fence surrounding the Musk-ox. The evening cloud cover parted briefly to allow a glimmer of sunlight as one of the hairy brutes charged and slammed into the form, twice before backing off. Vijay had considered using the Leopard pen, adding first a few deft slashes of his own, but the area assigned the Musk-ox was

better concealed within the park. The driver had nursed a litre of rye when he picked Vijay up, enough to cue a coroner to an inebriated state. Vijay, after a brief debate, left the cleanly wiped van by the pen and hobbled to a still-open roadside fruit stand where he hitched a ride back to Penticton. By 10:00 P.M. the Tylenol had rallied his hot-wiring resolve, and he headed south in a stolen car to Osoyoos. That car he'd leave near the Oroville border crossing, and nick a new one when across. He told the border officer he awaited a pickup on the American side.

About that time, the Cambie Bridge which traversed False Creek and outlooked the distant fireworks' stage, was closed to vehicular traffic. Photographers, banked two and three deep near the bridge railing, avidly discussed ways to best capture the fireworks. Only a few folk noted the heavier fireworks' platform. Children scurried between adults and tripod legs, parents not quite keeping track as they pocketed stiff fingers. The evening cool belied the earlier Indian-summer sun. Inquisitive chatter was brisk and blithely self-effacing. Young hawkers offering tea, chocolate-and-oatmeal cookies, quickly sold out and left to get more. The mood of the celebrants was vivified by the lights from the fair waterfront that reflected in primary brilliance across lazy rilled waters, the conversation in part animated by the sight of the many boats and crafts on these same waters, their umbered dimensions sometimes fringed with seasonal festive lights. Even the South side of False Creek, an industrial storage site and railcar siding, teemed with people. A bullhorn on the site warned people to stay away: several chemical tankers sat on a nearby siding. The crowd thought the injunction suitably inflammatory and chuckled. Then a spotlight mounted on one of the industrial sheds began to pick out groups of the visitors nearest the tankers, all of whom nonchalantly left, quickening their pace when the spotlight followed them.

Two harbour craft kept all boats back of the laser beam athwart the waterway that marked a boundary line forty meters from the fireworks scow. The expansive waterfront itself was packed scores deep. The fair's president's select company of notables sat patiently in the few comfortable seats in the Ontario amphitheater, which outlooked the steel-gray scow where the attentive pole-vaulter was making last-minute checks. The imminent display would be unprecedented for him and the West Coast. He set off the preliminary test, an icy rosette that exploded about fifty meters up, yielding a wind reading and diffusion measure. The crowd sighed and whistled its approval. No surprises. All systems go.

The Spooners sat in thick sweaters sipping Spanish coffees on the aft deck of an old converted seiner. Their hosts, a retired photo-supply wholesaler and his wife, owned two photofinishing labs, one of which Herb patronized. The host was explaining, again, that his automated system and general laissez-faire policy precluded the monitoring of most proofs. Only images of cruelty and sadism might be questioned. Herb had just returned from mounting a camcorder on the bridge and warmed his hands about a coffee glass. Babs wondered aloud how they would ever get out of the crush of boats. "With great patience," the hostess said stifling a yawn.

That comment Randy picked up when at last he focused on the 'wrong' scow's interior-secreted nuclear shell. His classmate had long since given up trying to intervene. She was

somewhere nearby trying to get a score of lower mainland physicians summoned to house calls beyond the fatal radiation zone. Though doctors rarely made house calls any more. Her taciturn father sat with some old school mates in a restaurant atop Queen Elizabeth Park. Her mother visited a sick sister in Calgary, while her younger sister stood with a boyfriend near the small outdoor theatre by the B.C. Discovery Pavilion. She had decided, given the marginal nature of her options, that her relations would suffer least where they were. She nearly got her sister's boyfriend working late at his trainman's job, an option that would have delayed their arrival at the fair site. Though by then, if the detonation took place, the radiation emanations would be lethal for two or more square kilometers. Not the slightest probability arose of steering the two into the interior, to Harrison Lake, for instance. Nothing so distant could be invoked to upstage the fireworks. When she bombarded her sister with thoughts of the excursion, the sister laughed. She and the boyfriend had been lallygagging over the phone, deciding when he would pick her up. The sister impulsively asked if he'd not prefer Harrison that evening, then burst into giggles, both at the inimical idea and her boyfriend's bewilderment. "Harrison Hot Springs?..." he said, almost as an expletive. "Just a joke," the sister added, wondering the while where in hell the odd idea came from. She had been doing a lot of strange things that day — like absently filling a washtub full of water.

But as she stood in the fair's crowd softly humming a pop tune, her acorn curls fetchingly laid back against her boyfriend's shoulder, Randy began to show signs of renewed life. Quite suddenly a simple artful idea hit him. Had his love of music been less keen he might never have imagined, rather heard, apropos the girl, a possible remedy. He was far from certain the idea had any real relevance — he'd always been a physics dumbbell — yet it seemed at least feasible if sound waves were significant *here* — which he imagined they just might be. Better doing something than nothing at all, yes? Even if it proved to be inane, the hand wringing might be less excruciating would it not? So. Making an honest decently intended effort was at least excusable. You didn't usually diss a chap for trying. His afterlife companion took note of his intent and dourly smiled. Such a precious fulsome idiot. Again she curtly left his environs.

He, however, was resolved. Earlier, off the North Arm Jetty, he'd heard a test of the launch sounds made by the fire-works being readied for the fair. What had stuck him was the tonal resonance of the heavier launchers. He had a vague idea of what a transducer was, and imagined something like that crucial here. The loudest accented launch thumps actually matched the tonal A thrice below middle C, establishing a wave front that could, could it not, set off liable electronic circuitry — allied to crucial pre-explosion timers, say? That's what some transducers did, transfer *specific* sound into electric signals, did they not? So, if he was right — a highly speculative presumption to be sure — would it not be better if such a wave front didn't crest, but was instead put 'out of phase', denied the crest needed to possibly activate any transducer? But how to convert a maximum wave front to a minimum eluded him. Formula with a $F_n =$ always perplexed. But he knew from his own limited piano experience that an A flat simultaneously sounded with a fundamental A would scramble the vibrations of the funda-

mental. Possible? Maybe. What was there to lose? Nothing. He would at least be making an effort, however inapt or silly for some smart techies. Immediately he began to canvass the sound ‘noise’ in the area, believing he might nudge, amplify, some vibrations that matched a lucid A flat — even a few decibels might make a difference. But the ‘noise’ in the area proved to be highly erratic, few distinct tones stood out, and none reliably or consistently matching a ‘pure’ A flat. So his fanciful notion of speaking as an upstart Jehovah was simply more hooey, lamely whistling in the wind. Luckily, his avid rebuker was still a way off, not taking note of his latest ‘buffoonery’, as she might have put it.

Then a truly awesome sound tweaked his ears: the sound of someone on earth, very close to the fireworks, was making audible sighs five octaves higher than that lethal tonic A — but in an intermittent sonorous A flat! The rapt sighing came in fact from his schoolmate’s sister — a delirious sing song intonation near by and sufficiently loud, frequently recurrent and fortuitously pitched, to tip any devilishly delicate balance! So he believed. He was suddenly flabbergasted. What in god’s name was the nugatory bird up to? Her ‘sighing’ seemed providential if not heaven sent. Someone on earth was about to intermittently utter the purest note he’d ever sought! Let alone try to amplify. He soon realized, with some astonishment, that a chap much like himself — the girl’s very brazen boyfriend — served as the instigator. The sustained vocal sighs of the young lass, many reinforcing that A flat, were in response to the lad’s attentions — nibbling ear lobes while tracing arms and shoulders — all of which summoned the frequent A flat sighs. If Randy’s imagination was working overtime, again, it at least distracted him from seeing his new life full of lurid waste and putrid essences. But how typical — of his own footling activity when on earth! Talk about fantastical, fortuitous coincidence. He imagined a Judith not a Jehovah tipping the balance! Indeed, women’s voices were often shrill, even explosive, in that day and age. A strident A flat not exceptional, surely.

The fated business began when a wire barrier about the easterly side of the B.C. Discovery Pavilion collapsed from the pressure of the crowd. The rush to a small knoll very near the fireworks platform was on. Among the folk taking up a spot near a lone lodgepole pine were the sister, wearing a loose poncho, and her boyfriend. Given their position, somewhat removed from the rest of the knoll’s new denizens, they began smooching. If the girl’s older sister, Randy’s former classmate, had been a rather austere type with wide set eyes and long straight hair, destined to teach Special Ed classes to handicapped children before her untimely death, her sister was fairer, plumper, a sturdy hedonist and tireless flirt for whom the ballads of Justin Bieber formed her essential curriculum vitae and spiritual transport. If she was still a virgin, it was due more to the intimidation of the boys she necked with than happenstance or caution. Her present friend was only slightly more experienced, though not for lack of trying. As they kissed, the young lad’s thumbs soon began to drop inside her jeans, then covered by the poncho. Because the girl felt somewhat more custodial toward her mature bosom, the tentative thumbs, still hinged to fingers outside, continued uncensored. When the boy, a couple of years her senior and, as we’ve noted, an intact rake, calmly suggested she have an orgasm during the fireworks,

she gasped, displaying a practiced incredulity. When the import was matched by a further descent the girl began giggling, offering some resistance. Unresolved seconds later, the young Pan whispered how fantastic it would be, with a little prompting, to marry her peak to the final outburst. Fireworks like that were a singular rarity he added sedulously. It seemed mercurial appetite would be a fine co-star in Randy's 'act'. Indeed, the girl's open decision to give it a try, and possibly give the fireworks something akin to a PG rating, seemed almost anti-climactic. Only coyly did she make the heated lad promise to attempt no more than a caress as she backed herself to him, her curly head nestled against his shoulder, her poncho masking her front and the boy's hands.

And so the momentous countdown began. The girl, Randy learned, was one of the world's easily orgasmic women — a subject upon which he had been enlightened very early on by no less than Sue Johanson — given to frequent protracted keen sighs that often reinforced that needed A flat — which he prayed would be loud enough, with a slight amplification, to intervene. The surrounding affable folk took the exclamations to be an infatuation with fireworks and not a reprieve for an entire city population. As the slick voice of the fair announcer began proclaiming the unprecedented last round of the International Nights of Fire, the lad's fated right hand reached the satin nave, idling ever more insistently before what purpling Randy now imagined as the original critical mass. A small 'nudge' of his own sustained the lad's timely caress. When the preliminary fireworks' Chrysanthemums blossomed into the sky, the fluent launching of the nearby lass was sex-manual perfect. As the heady spiral began, Randy sombrely counted off the minutes remaining to the final climactic shower burst — the critical period when the resonances of the heavier multiple-launched fireworks would peak or crest — and decided his optimism was premature. Just as more of the initial fireworks, mainly lacy golden Willows, stretched into the sky, the girl's chin rose, listing in a luxurious feint before the sovereign lust, her voice possessed of a new and erratic vibrato. Randy was momentarily horrified until the girl whispered, "Don't stop, the first one is always the littlest." The lustful boy was raptly attentive and not a little grateful she'd worn her wide poncho that night, his one spare vocal caution being, "Not so loud," to little avail. Though the crowd was then nearly wall to wall, the tonal sighs, even with Randy's 'amperage', were still stolidly interpreted by those nearest as an unabashed delight in fireworks. Randy was again optimistic — then once again scowled when the second periodic set of A flat sighs were briefly stifled by the boy's avid kisses — an approximate half-minute before the finale, and the sustained instatement of the full-bore combined launchers. The initial rapt sighs had cued Randy's classmate, then in a despairing mute state, to glance in the direction of his oddly noisome bubble. Sufficiently alerted she came closer, peripheral to his line of vision.

When the nympho's sighs by the lodgepole pine began a second time, the precocious lad, fearing his girlfriend's sighs might be recognized for what they were, welcomed some incidental noisy Cherry Bombs exploding across the waters. Still, the A flat remained frequent and amply audible, given Randy's 'assist', when the last of the Cherry Bombs left off. His classmate, lingering behind, registered first stupefaction, then outrage, then chagrin, and finally, without the

slightest self-dramatic moue, resignation. Many seconds before the climax of the International Nights of Fire she realized what her waggish companion was up to and remained drolly observant and gruesomely quiet. Conversely, Randy luminously smiled as the joyful girl began again experiencing, with his help, the kind of high Dr. Johanson esteemed and Carl Sagan once approximated in a popular tape, when postulating life in the Cosmos.

Then another ominous muffling of the sighs. The lad had got embarrassed and began whistling at the fireworks in hopes of screening the tuneful sighs which, as the moment took hold, actually went swiftly deliriously louder and resonant — many reoccurring flat As twice above middle C worthy of any fervent minaret crier recalling the world to a limpid peace. As the firework's heavy launchers began their fully resonant tonal thumps, they were sufficiently fortuitously aligned to the girl's sighs, to create an amply timed dissonance! Fractional second delays did not allow a reinstatement of a sustained pristine tonal A. So hopeful Randy believed. His watchful companion assessed the desperate gambol with dour amusement. The timing of the sexual nudges themselves seemed totally fortuitous — what you might expect of a consummate programmer. Indeed, Randy's effort in intensifying the girl's apt rapt sighs looked positively prodigious; even his classmate seemed ready to mollify her disgust.

With each increasingly regnant thump the girl's clamant sighing continued to addle any deadly layering of that lethal tonic A. So Randy believed. For the very first time in his sorry existence he imagined himself a consequential player. His ethereal yoke-mate stood behind watching the cyclorama of vividly blossoming fireworks as he self-conducted, matching his tonal 'nudge' or boost with each resonant thump — an astonishing, almost numinous revelation, like seeing a mythical beast materialize in a great tapestry (not rather some telltale leachate on a warehouse shelf). Randy did his best to make the late discovery of his classmate behind him an utter, even embarrassed surprise, after which he collapsed back to the median plane of his wave function, his bright glow fading, though not without a few sparks peeling off into space. He even managed a self-effacing smile, to comport himself as a gracious concert virtuosi. He half expected a flinty rebuke but even that didn't materialize. His former classmate was then mutely apathetic, for she knew the grand 'aria' to be totally pointless! Nothing to do with transducers. Or lascivious sighs. He'd obviously not boned up on the actual fuse mechanism, as she had, the shell being governed by a radar proximity fuse, which would withstand an explosive force of up to 17,000 g. The shell would require special prompting to explode — which might well happen given the field operatives in play! Yet she knew her fellow sojourner had tried in his inane way to minimize the shell's hazard, and she was getting tired of admonishing a lout whose education and imagination seemed irreparable. She was also aware that he might be the only boyo in that particular corner of the cosmos, at least for now. She lamely smiled. Sometimes you have to make do with the sluggards.

Conversely, the more Randy looked at her, the more his confusion grew: she was actually unerringly pretty, a Pleiad he'd not noticed before, possessed of a lambent sylphlike nebulae. It must have taken him a second or two (a 'relatively' long time in the interminable wait) to realize

that far from believing his exploit a silly endeavour, she may be inclined to acquit, accept as a given the likelihood he hadn't been vicariously, pruriently savouring another pretty babe. He couldn't believe his eyes. She was even loitering about his cosmic shell, looking at the few mementos he'd picked up in his afterlife trolling. She stopped before a shiny vinyl lens cover left on one of the Apollo landings which a solar storm had eventually charged and pushed off into space. He still anticipated a sandpapery lecture. But she merely replaced the cover and turned to look candidly upon him. There was no mistaking that wide Cassiopeia gaze, so lucid, empyreal. He doubted such a felicitous conjunction of the spheres would occur for several more eons and fled into her arms, grateful celestial wraps were so ethereal.

As for the couple in the B.C. Discovery Pavilion's rain forest, they remained locked together long after the ground about them returned. It had been Randy's last 'nudge' to release the lad from his own rancid furor, whereas the lass had experienced a high she would not forget, and avidly recall when later trysts disillusioned. Seconds later the two were enmeshed in the outgoing crowd, abandoned entirely to their very own insular, desperate longing.

TWENTY-SIX

The Reverend Buff Rutquist was writing in his diary. He had decided to give the fair a favourable rating despite the wood sculpture outside the interdenominational Pavilion of Promise. The carving symbolized the dilemma of commitment in the face of bad luck — an impoverished mother balancing a jug of precious water on her head while her babe slipped from her arms and headed for a fall. An estimable theme, except that he found the work crudely stylized, a caricature of the mother, whose woody clodknocker look rendered her thick as a plank. Must modern art be so insular, so often inapposite? The times were hard on traditionalists. More than once Maureen had called his sense of beauty fascist, in other words, according to his lexicon — pagan! Yet the pavilion was a manifest success, the ministry nondenominational. The building's stylish roof evoked inspirational comment from a lotus blossom to a Carmelite's flowery hat — surely happily ecumenical given the intended artistic motif of a dove. His next sermon would deal with sharing and cooperation, themes he had neglected. The spirit of the fair gave him renewed hope he might line up behind his elders less plaintively, believing the Eucharist must triumph in the end, whatever the current digression. The makers of the Spirit Lodge, for instance, the magic tableau vivant in the GM Pavilion, had charmed many thousands of visitors with their integral dancing spirits. Buff made a work note to comment upon blithe spirits. That struck him as a suitable epitaph for the fair, despite the later frozen lineups. Wasn't the lively anticipation the measure of success? Yes, he must get in the habit of expecting a knockout credo from his modish church. But these genial thoughts were invoked before the rock beat began issuing from Maureen's room. The uncommon success of Dog the Father *et al* permitted her to buy two new speakers. With alarm Buff noted the fresh flowers Naomi brought to his desk that morning quivering in the lovely Imari vase she picked up at a bazaar. At first he imagined a mild earthquake. But with each of the accented thumps,

which the wall and corridor seemed to amplify, the flowers vibrated in near-synchronous accompaniment. Suddenly his dancing spirits were less nimble. That flagrant rock beat was the pulse of the Apollyon, and if there were no Apollyon, then that beat surely must invoke It. Buff was nearly prepared to reconsider H. Reinhold Niebuhr's thesis of man being moral, society the corrupter, an idea that accommodated shared sinning — catalyzed by the plangent hypnotic universal beat. But that excuse no longer worked for him. Augustine's and more recently Solzhenitsyn's discovery that the beast lay within each person had resurrected his own quaint, ridiculed belief in a hierarchy of souls, which the Bible but not his church expounded. His initial witness of cherished young Maureen boogieing to an orgiastic band had been merciless, perhaps the first intimation that his celebration of her nubile form was more on the order of an entrapment. But now the beat, which stirred even the late hardy buds in his wife's Imari vase, seemed capable of obliterating two millennia of struggling civilization. Surely if chutzpah, trance states, even golem antics were fashionable panegyrics for a rock band, as celebrated in a review of a rock film by Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker* (one of his initial, early, earthly teases), then what chance humility, compassion, sacrifice, stoicism? Surely Ms. Kael's enthusiasm was a harbinger of the chic super ego that might flinch at nothing. Dear Lord, even confessional and message songs came now scored with a fun beat. If missals might be fun, then catharsis was an obscenity. What was the spirit of Mary Magdalene, the sorrow of Job, when backed by conga drums? Would the promised new Christ go to a revived Golgotha doing the latest beguine, bolero, boogaloo, belly bod, hip hop, rap measure, even as the lash leapt to the beat — as it did in parts of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, that bewildering terrifying part when the guitars and drums reached orgy pitch — when the Saviour was scourged and Buff's daughter moved more seductively than ever. So it seemed. Wasn't the marriage of furor with gratification a likely outcome? And wasn't that what his church seemed to downplay, given Mrs. Simpson's keen dissing of traditional staid belief — savouring instead the vehement ardent 'rumble'. So it seemed. Homologous now to Maureen's lordly tune-spare thump thump thump. The drummer in a delirium even flowers must pay attention to. Thump thump thump. Given life's pervasive disappointments, how peeved, incensed one might become when the narcotic pulse ceased or was interrupted? Thump thump thump. There was little flirtation here: the beat had to be indubitable, the only time he might use such a word: supreme, sure, emphatically anticipatory. The galvanizing omnipotent beat — sovereign, eclipsing, extirpating. It could bowl you over, trample doubt, ambiguity. Moderation, melodiousness quaked before the beat. Then Buff could hear the clank of Maureen's exercise machine. Clank thump thump. One could hardly get more regressive than that. Clank thump thump, clank thump thump. Push and shove in concert. At last he had had enough and stormed out of his study, strode to her door and without thinking angrily opened it — something he had not done for years. Starkly before him, clad only in a pair of worn briefs marked by a tiny maroon stain on the gusset, she lay on her back, legs upright swinging apart in ankle harnesses attached to sliding side weights: an oversize slingshot taking aim. He quickly closed the door though not before the clanking stopped. He muttered something

about the sound being hopelessly distracting. Seconds later he heard firm foot steps followed by the implacable thrust of a door lock. Throughout it all she said nothing, or nothing he could make out. He turned and went back to his study. The sculpted form, suddenly overtly stilled, had emphatically scolded him, defaced his otherwise reasonable pique. The clanging resumed moments later, more assertive than ever, followed as editorial comment by a new record with razor-edged guitar scoring an endlessly stopped beat. Then the searing rock music and reverberant thumps ceased: he was, he might assume, still more than a lodger, a last-minute reprieve noted just as he left for the garden and the old summerhouse to sit among his wife's prize begonias, where he attempted to dismiss the incident and carry on with a sermon, as best he could. Yet that aspect of his daughter's commitment also distracted him. She seemed to be working on a form that would parody his very notion of femininity, especially her shoulders and arms, surely of late the envy of any young stripling. What uneasily returned to his memory was the scene that greeted him the day before when he fetched her from the gym. Since the theatre attack, the understanding was that either he or Naomi would see that the impetuous daughter got a lift; neither wanted her using the car on her own. The daughter complained of having to wait on them when she had so much to do. At the time Naomi herself became unusually resolute. Languidly Maureen acceded.

On arriving at the gym, Buff politely inquired after Mr. Kruse, learning from the receptionist, a talkative woman, that the owner-manager had been oddly absent, couldn't be reached, and hadn't called to cancel appointments. A special confusion arose over a video camera left standing by one of the latest versatile exercise units, an apparatus that digitally monitored many maneuvers. By then Buff and the receptionist overlooked the expansive gym, the exceptional apparatus midway across. "It can be especially good for the dyspnea prone, as inactive, too leisurely people sometimes are, as well as lumbar and sacroiliac neglects," the woman explained. By then Buff had noted, with some sobriety, soaked Maureen towelling her arms by the new exercise unit. The receptionist resumed with, "The funny thing, no one seems to know much about it — the camera — obviously an ad or something — you know a detailed promo — yet there's nothing doing in the daybook. Even the ring light on the camera is rare in that it converts to infrared illumination. Mind you, Mr. Kruse always was a locked-in techie."

"How long did you say Mr. Kruse has been absent?" Buff entreated, to keep the singular information flowing as Maureen headed for the woman's change room after pausing to eye the camera.

"Two nights — and just with a new season underway and an upswing in bookings."

In the car Buff's sometimes captious daughter remained aloof, her newfound wariness still in play, due, he believed, to his blunder the other afternoon. He noted that the outfit she wore in the gym was cleverly casual — 'louche' came to mind as he mused how decorum, as he understood it, was more or less superannuated. "Have a good workout?" he said at last, trying to sound unassuming.

"It'll do," she answered staring out the window.

“I was very annoyed the other day, and acted rashly.”

“Forget it,” she said interrupting him. Barely stifling a smile she added, “You may see the unedited package on stage around Christmas.” It was a simple goad; she had all but decided to play the new part, that of a stripper, in the clever inflatable body suit.

They said no more the remainder of that strained drive home. Just the day before, Buff was informed by his tense wife of the most recent thespian exploit — ‘the charismatic renewal of burlesque’ — indirectly quoting the whimsical director. They had sat in silence, the precious comment sapping sufferance. In the summerhouse these scenes flashed before him as treacherous as a debate on liberation theology. Stupid as doves; clever as serpents.

Early the following morning the RCMP detective who presided over the recent puzzling events suddenly arrived to interview Maureen. The man’s expressionless cornstarch face seemed out of place against the close-kinky hair and natty blue suit. He offered no apology for the early visit, seemed himself unrested, and waited blankly in the living room while Naomi went outside to fetch her daughter who played with a neighbour’s roisterous mutt. The two women emerged together from the kitchen, Maureen in a slack sweat suit, Naomi a flowered morning wrap with light pyjamas floating beneath it. On entering, Maureen discarded a smile, nonchalantly approached and sat on the sofa, one leg tucked under. From an armchair Naomi soberly took in the impassive inspector and her insular daughter.

Again the inspector went over events leading up to the encounter at the fair, then asked a new question. Did Maureen know any of the concourse performers, particularly the jugglers? Buff glanced at his wife who in turn faintly shrugged. Maureen answered with a businesslike “No.” The inspector then drew from his briefcase a couple of juggler’s knives, narrow chromium blades ending in rawhide handles and placed them on the coffee table. “Have you seen these before?” he asked. Maureen curtly mutely shook her head. “They were apparently stolen from a fair performer and found, along with some books and gauze bandages, in a carryall in a locker at the gym you patronize. A gym employee, who reserved the locker for the new patron, read about the disturbance at the fair. On seeing the sketch of the attacker in the paper, a man who resembled her new patron, she called us — hence our look into the gentleman’s locker.” (Under a department advisement, the inspector did not mention that Mr. Kruse, the gym owner, had been found dead on Burnaby Mountain; the public would learn of the man’s death the following week.) The inspector resumed by noting that, “The carryall in the locker also contained a book of dramatic readings entitled, *The Queen of the Dark Chamber*,” which he now drew from his briefcase. After flicking through a clutch of pages he paused, saying, “One part’s been underlined. ‘Thy mouth...is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory.’” He then placed the book on the coffee table by the knives but nearer Maureen.

Maureen belatedly, nonchalantly took up the stiff paperback, then smiled. What was funny the inspector wanted to know.

“It’s obviously not been read, at least by an actor,” she answered. “Too pristine.”

The inspector seemed satisfied with this then asked if the copy was hers. The question startled Buff while Maureen remained suavely disengaged. “Hardly,” she said, replacing the book, then stretching her arms and looking at the inspector with an intimidating mixture of boredom and drollery, suggesting to Buff she might be bluffing.

The detective then drew from his briefcase a second book, saying, “We also found, in the carryall, this well worn copy of a play called, *St. Joan*, with your name on it.” This second book he directly passed to Maureen. To Buff’s amazement his daughter seemed to absorb this too without heed. After a cursory perusal of the book, she placed it on the table, saying it was an old copy she often carried with her but had lost, quite possibly in the gym. If she appeared then disengaged, she did suddenly, almost impulsively, pick up one of the lustrous knives and cursorily examine it before returning it to the table. These movements the inspector carefully took in. He then glanced briefly at Buff before returning to his frank regard of Maureen.

“And you never saw this man, likely your attacker, in the gym?”

Again a businesslike ‘No’.

“And you don’t recall Mr. Kruse saying anything that might relate to an upcoming videotaping, perhaps for promotional purposes, apropos the unusual camera in the gym?” The ‘perhaps’ alerted them all.

“Again — no. I rarely saw Mr. Kruse.”

If Maureen had intended to say more, the impulse was promptly dismissed Buff thought.

After another untuned pause the inspector rose followed by Buff and Naomi, and latterly Maureen. He suddenly thanked them all for their trouble. He put in mind a subsurface being Buff thought, one rarely seeing the light of day. He then startled them by recommending a specially assigned surveillance team for a month or so. For Buff and Naomi the suggestion was topical; several times they had discussed the wisdom of such a shadow. “I have no objection,” Buff said after a moment’s politic reflection. “Do you, dear? Maureen?” In that portentous atmosphere his query seemed coy, ingratiating. Already they had asked Maureen to suspend her jogging for a time, relegate her exercise regimen solely to the gym.

“Why not,” Maureen languidly responded, though she was then silently brooding over the fact that the monster had a locker in the gym she patronized, and possessed a copy of a play she was rehearsing! The inferences rushing through her head then were dramatic indeed!

“Have you no more leads on the strange man?” Naomi finally asked askant, as if the question were being deliberately neglected.

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Rutquist.” For the first time the inspector formulated a show of concern. “His driver’s license, care and debit cards — part of the hospital record — are all fabrications. In short his identity and purpose here remain unknown. I’m convinced only that he is clever and dangerous. We must not forget Maureen believed she saw a knife, and he did viciously attack the theatre players and stalk Maureen on the fair grounds.” The actual tone of the remark startled Buff. How swiftly he might imagine, suspect, misinterpret. “As for Mr. Glasser’s disappearance, or now Mr. Kruse’s for that matter, we can only guess. For a time we

best keep a discreet eye on all of you. A minimal precaution.”

“You did say team,” Naomi interjected, her committee voice assigning details.

“Yes. But you likely won’t know they’re around. Please act as naturally as you can. For a few weeks at least. It’s one option we can exercise.”

The inspector then turned, approached and opened the front door with a deliberation that suggested he was ever appraising the house’s security potential. Naomi continued with patient compunction, asking, “And when did you decide on the plainclothesmen?”

“Actually they’ve been in place since shortly after the man’s escape.” The inspector then stepped outside and glanced about the entrance. “I wanted a careful discreet look first. I hope you can understand. It was not a light decision.” They could all see Maureen censoriously turn back into the room.

A guarded Naomi glanced at her daughter. “It is disturbing. And altogether puzzling.”

After another lax pause the inspector frowned, faintly nodded once, then headed out to his car. Buff was a little disappointed he could see no one in the street, even as he wondered about the detective’s notion of ‘discreet’, a mental query he kept from his wife.

“He could be an alien,” Naomi said as they watched the unmarked car drive off, her eyes also tuned to the neighbourhood. “We have so little say in the matter.” Her staidness of voice had resumed.

When they returned to the comfortable living room, Maureen sat in an unusual quiet on the veranda. Buff had never seen her more distant. He doubted it would be possible to get her to suspend her jogging for long. They had thrashed the question out a couple of times since the attack. She was adamant. She couldn’t live her life in Coventry, she said. When he deigned to describe the pertinent historic demesne, she had simply left, as she did now, loping off to the back fence to engage the mutt, leaving her parents staring after her like a couple of abandoned spirit gates. Buff’s subversive thoughts were then as limpid as new toadstools in the lawn. He sensed a whole legend missing, his grownup child a pirated artifact. Despair I can handle, he said to himself, recalling a lexical sermon; it’s waylaid trust that can maul.

Disillusionment was also on Vijay’s mind, though in less debilitating form to be sure, as he crossed into California from Oregon, after assuring the border official he harboured no citrus fruit in the car he’d nicked the day before, his own new identification papers, including a fabricated car registry, the diligent work of a cell forger. Had he not gone to the trouble of arranging a gym adventure for his athletic actress-provocateur, he might have departed equanimously — and on time. As it was he felt robbed of a fine dual vengeance, his camera a guest star to a dramatic act...the fettered girl would not have been harmed, nary a scratch, simply, perhaps, perturbed...how he liked skirting the edges of meaning, to keep the guessing game alive, the inquisitors head up.

In his mind, meaning was ‘framed’ by outlook. His actress-provocateur sought, he believed, a world free of dogma, diktat, a world of limited disparity. Meaning a world of moral-cultural

relativity in his purview. For a flinty pragmatist like Vijay Kurtz the actual theory of relativity was simply the wise man's infatuation with chaos. Those seeking order, clarity, were not always keen on their discovery. One delighted in connections as exceptions. The dramatic ploy! Happily he believed that his own self-sufficiency that afternoon on a roll.

For instance, the media's captivation with terrorism was surely one of the keys. What would the terrorists — ethnic, racial, sexual, economic — do, if tomorrow, no acknowledgement of their deeds was made but for a numerical index beside the stock market figures, the higher figure the more incriminating? American racial turmoil 850, ethnic 450, sexual 700, economic 300. News without lucid tumult was a ratings' anachronism. Vijay would remember best one late-night telecast on CBC-TV. In wanting to hear about the picketing of a visiting American warship, he had randomly dialled into a CBC program called the Journal, hosted by a very pretty and engaging commentator. It was the question she placed in an earlier part of the program before an authoritative guest that tellingly entertained — a sement devoted to the killing of many airline passengers by nervous hijackers on a grounded jet after the jet's interior lights went out. The host and guest were tallying the moral balance sheet. That such a ledger might exist at all was the salient point. By giving the extremist a say, you immediately distorted the bottom line. "Did the terrorists demean their cause?" — the final question from the attentive woman. It was the presumption that the terrorists might have had a sufferable excuse that instructed. The woman was in earnest. Indeed, if Vijay saw a more touchingly decent and empathic face in Canada — in North America! (Europeans being rather more blasé) — he could not remember it. That lovely forbearing face stood out. What could charm or win over such a heedful beauty but grace, decency, sincerity and selfless strength — all defined by their lack. It was her solicitude that made his day. He was surely as essential to that scheme of things as intelligence, resilience even art itself. What, after all, did compromise achieve finally but the slighting of truth (inequity being infinite)! And what was sane hopeful man without his truth!

He, Vijay Kurtz, helped keep humanity precious — so he resolutely believed as he turned into a campsite for the night, casting about for a lonely pilgrim to share a recumbent idyll. He would be a model of patience and consideration — and leave at least one human that day reviving optimism. He could even innocently lie beside the creature listening like a quiet knowing stoic...it was the crudity of violence that gave force and potency sorry names, reducing any fated reckoning to a lurid peep show. Pulling under an overhang of lofty birch, he felt his craving, his thirst for apt incisive redress, could swallow the world.

And the world seemed to be tarting itself up for such a meal.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Who was it who said it was better to know a morning after than never experience a night before? It then dawned on Randy — reluctant to let the bromide pass — that the idea was at least problematical. Indeed, such expressive authorities on the 'night before' as Richard Wagner, say, would find the matter a pale conundrum. Wagner was much on Randy's mind of late.

Oblivion, Wagner hinted (for some critics solemnly averred), was the only legitimate after glow. The uncertainty of surviving to another mundane morning seemed directly proportionate to the exquisiteness of the night before. You want splendour, ecstasy, you tended to slight the urgency for rent control. By all reasonable measure, Randy mused, after his singular encounter the past night, one should be nescient after. The dawns in a ghoulish limbo or dismal netherworld were now less tolerable than they once were. He was also paralyzed by the suspicion that delight, *Here*, was anomalous, preternatural, certainly illusive — that he could wait a millennium to engage in such an affair again, if such coupling was in the works, one fortuitous wedding night being but an incidental tease. At that unenviable moment, he considered Wagner's music to Tristan und Isolde suitable only to learn differential calculus by. Or German grammar if one was really strung out. Letting it direct anything else was to court disaster. To leave one's quarks in an idled state — the union itself spawned a small nursery cluster of White Dwarfs — was to risk the inevitable comedown, the waning of hope, anticipation, even refuge — all that. Watching his 'cell mate' vigilantly stomp off once again to attend to neglected services, unfortunate beings generally, left him feeling guilty, culpable even given his fiddly preciousness. He recalled her many reproofs of his snug self-esteem — and was shocked then to hear a proximate *reprise*, in a voice nearby, a male voice he'd not heard before! The presence of a *third* human spook actually being *Here, now*, dumfounded, for that human also proceeded to reprove and disorient a precious Randy, though in words far more insidious. Randy wondered if his cellmate had informed the newcomer that dumbbell Randy needed an upgrade on some presumptions — down *Here!* Thus, after a brusque introduction, the man continued with his daunting lecture, the subject of which Randy's earlier companion hadn't broached. Indeed, it took Randy a while to comprehend what the man was actually saying, his initial words singularly bewildering, if not belying comprehension itself.

“Due note sir, one redemptive truism *Here is* that *only* when all of us have suffered *everyman's* pain will the *truly unfortunate* be appeased — given that the salvational reprieve of late confession, to invalidate chastisement, remains an anathema for many humans. It's one of the presumptions *Here* — the wholesale sharing of pain. A subject your companion has, in her favoured demure, somewhat neglected I believe.”

Randy recognized in the man the voice of a once famous British theater actor who's appearance here and sudden confounding lamentation prompted a vexed query.

“What in the world are you on about?”

“That when each individual soul suffers what every particular earthly soul has endured, only then will we be free, expiable. It takes a while. I know.”

“Not a Comedy of Errors then,” Randy glibly said, still awed by the man's sudden unforeseen emergence and ominous bewildering exegesis.

“Here there are no jokes,” the newcomer solemnly stated.

“Well, I've already endured a pitiable life and painful death,” Randy replied, accordingly.

“One.”

“One was enough.”

“There will be doubters. That it was the genuine *comparable* article — matching their own in torment.”

The supposition was appalling for Randy. Was he to be scourged now by two or more fanatics?

“You’re a real comedian, right?”

“The traditional offer of being ‘Forgiven, Excused for the Asking’ is now generally considered gauche. Many folk *Here* feel slighted, fobbed off, and are reassured only by *everyone who’s lived* suffering their particular pain, even those with no religious faith who simply imagined ‘passing on’. Indeed, your tenuous existence *Here* is but an interim sojourn.”

Randy was decidedly incredulous. “You’re surely not serious. So what do you mean by — ‘everyone’? Everyone who’s lived? That’s absurd. How could you possibly share everyman’s pain? You’re talking, what, trillions’s of lives — and god knows how many years. A bloody eternity that.”

The man barely smiled at Randy’s ready bemusement, saying, “Welcome to the *Hereafter*. Only when a plurality of embittered humans have been appeased will the keening stop. We’re still well shy that number.” Randy did note the chap’s quarks had a spin more tilted than his.

“What?...”

“How do you expect we shall ever implement a reconciliation to life’s cruel disparities? Sour apples spoil the turnover. We daren’t not remember, not know our neighbour’s suffering. It’s the current Nemesis-racked burden. The sharing of all Human distress; experiencing each and every torment for all time. The only durable reckoning that allows for a care free release — from all agonized guilt, antipathy and vituperation, past, present and future.”

“Memories to share, I presume — you’re bloody well bonkers!”

“Alas. The presumption has its own caveats. A topical one is that once you’ve been high burned at the stake a couple-of-dozen times you learn how to, well — ‘prepare’. After that the skin flaying, drawing and quartering, witch burning, disemboweling, acid baths, excrement dunking, rat gas, asphyxiation, dehydration, stoning, crushing, impaling, ravaging, body part hacking, fearsome accident, raging sickness — to list a few special downers — may come off with less excruciating pain! By the time you get to protozoal, parasitic, bacterial, viral and algal infections et cetera, it gets almost routine. You mayn’t even leave crude arabesques in the ‘change-back’ rooms. So you should be warned there are those who spy in this inurement and acclimatization of memory — learning how to ‘endure’ — a fraud, a malingering. Thus we may have to approach each impaling and mashing, each searing and sundering, each torment and mortification, with the discomfort of the original. The only *fair* way. Indeed, some of the impetuous ones may have to begin all over again — if the need, the requisite for a guilt-free soul, cannot be shunned. Best be prepared. Even Doctor Assisted Death is now also considered facile and thus reprehensible.”

A short snuffle ensued from the dumbfounding ‘historicist’.

Randy stifled a giggle. “My god, you outrank Rodney Dangerfield. So: any chance of rebuking the dumb swine who actually precipitated all this bloody ‘intimacy sharing’?”

“Oh the Big Cheese is on a gourmet guilt trip. We’ll go on forever ruminating if He stays on, wallowing in self-pity. Desperate or flummoxed I guess.” Randy’s expression seemed to please the sober speaker. “It’s hard at first, I know.”

“‘Wallowing’?...”

“It’s His belated recognition — lack of, well, foresight, clairvoyance. To have overlooked the indelible vastness of horror that He’s gratuitously visited on most humans — His final, so-called consummate creation. Makes for much anger, the density of spite some call it — murderous black holes peppering the whole. None of us yet know how it will end — even Cheesy it seems, who initially fancied the all-embracing pardon in confession and some kind of limbo for doubting Thomases. Especially vexed are those traditionalists still hoping to partake of the paradisaal afterglow, sanctioned by adventitious confession. But the resentful, the ones who feel they were bilked, arbitrarily singled out for particularly ghastly atrocity, on earth — the folks in the ‘pain panacea’ faction I’ve mentioned — feel doubly shafted by a facile confession that absolves, and expect a reckoning — a *total* Human reckoning, as I’ve said. ‘I suffered way more than you, why should you be granted immunity from knowing my pain by merely confessing your own erstwhile if not manifest knavery on earth — to enjoy some kind a wooly nirvana.’ Even oblivion’s not really an option any more. Thus, the balm of a restful Ever After remains — elusive. Takes a while, yes.”

And so a tartly baited Randy once more mutely assessed his sullen ‘cheesy’ existence, this time without his dedicated classmate, who he observed a little way off stubbornly attempting to make life somehow more tolerable for the remaining folks on earth, hoping perhaps to augment a consequential ‘plurality’ of reconciled, non-complaining humans. Her Higg’s bosons never looked more breathtaking. The rest of her sub-atomic particles were practically drooling it seemed. (The informed reader will recall that the Higg’s boson is the tiny delicacy other quarks and leptons hunger for to gain weight and stature!) Because her admonishments were far less onerous than those of the current crepehanger, he sorely missed her. All she ever said about their ‘future,’ beyond a sojourn *Here* was, “Keep an open mind”, suggesting some matters were still being ‘sorted’. In any case, the new arch prognosticator was a firebrand, his words a livid contumely. Whereas his classmate was a fine tease. Indeed, the chances of being lectured by her again left Randy upbeat; as a simple chauvinist pig he warranted possible remedial attention!

With some abiding relief he did watch the awesome fireworks scow being stealthily pulled out late the following night — the Harbour Master yielding to another ample bribe — the nuclear shell retrieved and dispatched to a phantom submarine, the unmoored scow itself left floating near the Surrey marshes. It turned out the Russians had given the terrorists misleading quick sorters; they never intended the shell should go off. They only wanted to embarrass the Americans. Get some wide ranging concessions — which they most likely got!

The firework’s expert was of course vexed to find his pet stage gone from its False Creek

vista. When informed of its whereabouts, he speedily went to retrieve it and was only marginally relieved to see that none of his special gear had been stolen. Someone likely had a good look though. And cleverly fiddled with the Harbour Master's log. He reproved the pole-vaulter for not hanging about for a time, as agreed. Instead, the ardent youngster, discovering his peerless inamorata no less willing, if not as ebullient after her dour fair adventure, had returned with her to his small studio apartment and sagging cot, the thin mattress of which they eventually moved to the floor where their love making became obstinate rather than irrepressible — a waning marathon — which merely added to Randy's celestial distemper, particularly the unforeseen finale.

An hour before dawn, when it seemed the lovers might finally unwind and get some shut eye, Maureen asked her lover to sodomize her. Both Randy and the pole-vaulter were shocked, though the pole-vaulter got over his dismay somewhat sooner. "I want to know what the fuss is about before you start making the rounds," said canny Maureen in the face of her lover's edgy surprise. "You said last night I was the first. So. *Tempus fugit.*"

But before the tryst in fact began, Maureen started giggling and packed her tacitly relieved lover off to the shower where she joined him in the tiny cell. Being partly relieved to begin with, he soon engaged her ready affection. Randy wryly imagined there was nearly enough randy determination in the lad to launch each of half-a-dozen Comets, Bombardos, Kamuro and Chrysanthemums. Whereas her own catalytic energies might have turned the gunpowder and titanium oxides in Lady Fingers and Cherry Bombs into grains of talc. Indeed, the satisfactions seemed nearly stainless until about noon when a corrosive argument surfaced. The harsh words were all voiced before Randy could devise a suitable intervention. It started over the simple matter of letting the sun in: she wanted it, he didn't, at least not until she was dressed. "The guy across from me is a high tech Tom."

"So," said she, pushing back the curtains, a piece of multi-grain toast clenched in her one hand, "he's maybe seen more than me then — you fucking bastard!"

His dazed silence was such that she speculated aloud how a 'willing sodomizer' must manage. He resented the imputation in a sullen quiet that vexed her more. "But it's so simple," she said, "you might have screwed me all morning like that. Shade boy!"

Seconds later they were not speaking to one another, prompting her to leave, saying she didn't want to see him again until he sorted himself out. To add to the pole-vaulter's embarrassment she left wearing a new T-shirt fetched from her tote sac with the following written large over small but incisive breasts: *When God Made Man She was Only Joking!* Too late Randy got him to think of asking if she was thus slumming the night before or simply clinically curious. She was long gone when the thought coalesced into a question, though he wouldn't have placed it anyway. He was beset remembering the merciless loveliness and past engaging repartee — in a companion he'd belatedly imagined a durable life partner! A high he was reluctant to eschew.

Thereafter, Randy could not recall being more plaintive or exasperated. Vexed enough to

reconsider the horrendous juggernaut the old actor divulged — intimating that one must scourge oneself of all belief in absolution, all belief in a genteel Land of Promise contingent on a mere plaintiff confession. He decided he might listen to something rather soupy and smarmy. Samuel Barber's tearful Adagio for Strings, say — with bongos or maracas maybe. He would surely become inflamed, splenetic, the precursor to becoming a devout radical, a fearless pain monger. A 'forgiveness' hater.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Picking a sensitive nose, Herb Spooner stood alone in the middle of Randy's one room hideaway trying to make sense of the broadcast clutter. He knew the laconic RCMP detective, who had returned the day before with a search warrant and two diligent assistants, was interested in the fact that Randy lived much as a hermit. The whereabouts of a stepsister, whom Randy had mentioned to Herb in passing, remained unknown, and no evidence of a correspondence survived. In due course the experts discovered in one drawer of Randy's small wobbly lowboy three overdue traffic tickets against the studio car, a well-made faux fair pass, also full-size colour separations of a twenty dollar bill which the detective later said were inexactly scaled, and likely never used. Herb was as baffled as the police. Moreover, he had no large-format camera, though renting one was easy enough. Randy's fake fair pass likely began as a large art rendering he copied then reduced — 'tightening' the look. So Herb guessed.

The detectives left with the fair pass and the twenty dollar bill separations.

Herb was amazed at the furnishings the talented idler had packed in during his short tenure: a small propane biffy, a camp heater that also ran off the propane, a water jug and wash basin, a clothes tree with a worn multicoloured coat, a narrow cot and desk, and a rickety lowboy that housed some tatty paperbacks, a tablet PC, a packet of granola bars, and a folder with letters to assorted editors, still to be mailed apparently; a small telly sat atop the lowboy, wired to the ceiling light, a modest printer lay underneath. That was their Randy, Herb decided, living as an insular recluse, but for his membership in the 'Y'. His disappearance now more ominous than ever. The abode's two bare windows were fixed in adjacent walls. One overlooked the alley, the other the kitchen windows. From the centre of the room Herb could see a neighbour across the lane raking leaves and Babs preparing applesauce on a counter by the sink, her head a geodesic dome of precise little curlers. My Omnimax Theatre he said to himself. Babs and a neighbour worked for a time at the same hair style salon, and did one another's hair on alternate Saturdays.

Randy had been an exemplary, perhaps peerless retoucher, indeed likely the best Herb would ever see, a fact that 'touched' him more deeply than he cared to admit. As well he could talk to Randy, even if they rarely agreed on anything beyond which blemishes and stray highlights ought to go. Talking was one thing he could do only sparingly with his wife. Around her he contended with sudden abstraction, piecemeal lust, nervous eyes, and a misleading tongue. She would understand, he was convinced, but the words often seemed miscast. "I don't know how you can gab with him," she often said of Randy when what she likely meant was "He's always assessing me, I know he is." Once Babs looked out to find him with a telephoto lens. When

Herb went out he discovered his retoucher with the studio's macro lens, which had a long helical mount, capturing a rare leaf caterpillar, one of several nature portraits he sent to a picture syndicate, all of which were rejected. Yet Babs was ever after distrustful. Never again in the morning did she roam about in her baby dolls; his favourite model had retired.

Herb now began to shuffle again through the remaining items in the wobbly lowboy Randy bought at a garage sale. Conspicuous among the first offerings in the top drawer was the picture of the gadfly standing by a large portrait photograph he'd diligently worked on — one of the few times the smart aleck was caught smiling. Two recent sales flyers lay beneath — a veteran bargain hunter, Randy. Several unused postcards lay below these, all of vivid Sri Lankan masks. Stubby pencils and cheap sharpeners lined one edge of the drawer. In the larger lower drawer Herb uncovered: a price schedule for computers and word processing programs, a handful of blank reserve cards from the Vancouver Public Library, a neatly blocked page of ecclesiastical type, advertised as an early product of the Wittemburg press in the German Pavilion, a receipt for some jeans, a late Times Literary Supplement, and a largely unreadable note pad — Randy's writing being largely indecipherable, deliberately so, Herb sometimes thought. But the discovery of the single photographic print neatly tucked inside the note pad stupefied. Herb wrinkled his nose at the notorious photo of the Winfield-Cranmer girl, the youngster who had cost the studio the contract to the Winfield-Cranmer School, one item the detectives missed or passed over. Randy must have printed a second copy on the sly, for Herb had eventually returned all film chips and proofs of the two sittings to the school. He moved into the brighter light by the front window while keeping out of Babs' sight. What struck him anew was the lithe symmetry of form and cue-ball roundness of the young breasts. A new age, he said to himself. Some words were scribbled on the bottom. He had to fetch his glasses from a shirt pocket to read them, which he did now aloud.

“How does one court a modern Aphrodite — with great impertinence.”

He smiled. Language like that he missed. Well, the day's young weren't lacking impertinence. Maybe it was a necessity. Meaning life was getting better but no one must dare admit it. He stuffed the picture in his pocket, believing posterity would not rebuke him for doing so. What was it Randy used to say, something about well-articulated bones being the clincher in the end, free of the lying fleshy mirage. Something like that. Like he once said of seamless transparent stretch knit pantyhose: legs left standing on their own. The world seemed less distinct without Randy about. As hectic, blame ridden perhaps, but somehow less in focus. He thought of the chubby youngster he originally built the snug treehouse for, who so suddenly and testily refused to play in it once finished. The boy's past was a caseworker's nightmare which Herb and his childless wife barely interrupted and only learned about months later. Recently the lad, now a physically mature teenager, had assaulted and maimed a pensioner and underwent yet another psychiatric assessment. In a way Herb hoped some kind of disorder would be found — a tumour, something. He winced when he recalled the child's many wanton acts, and his own bitter incomprehension and final exhaustion. He still occasionally found dried lumps of excrement in

the house. Perhaps he and his wife were just too hopeful. Babs simply ran out of tears, he of patience. One day he actually struck the lad; next, a case worker came to warn of child abuse. The seasoned ward knew his rights very well. Herb could have throttled both child and counsellor that day. His anger astonished even himself.

As he turned to leave the airy abode, he paused to look at Randy's old quilt coat. The coat of many colours he called it. It was perhaps functional enough yet remained sufficiently gaudy for Herb to insist Randy take an advance and buy a plain mackintosh. There seemed an age's dust on it now, particularly the shoulders. He searched the pockets: dried orange peel, a crumpled Hare Krishna tract, and a receipt for some Advil caplets. He kept the receipt. He feared something truly rank had happened. He could not imagine Randy *not* leaving a note, however minimal.

Then, standing by the door, he saw the ghost of a footprint on the ladder beside the grass-damp prints left by the detectives. The print framed an unusual tread. He'd not seen it before. Looking carefully at the entrance step ladder he discovered one more, less distinct but still traceable. The footprints were not his. He doubted they were the retoucher's gum boots and accepted them as worrisome evidence of someone else, of something not yet concluded, resolved. They alarmed — the footprints. Not likely those of a friend he thought with a twinge of anxiety as he returned to the kitchen to help Babs scald the canning jars. After a brief debate he decided his wife and the detective must be told about his discovery of the odd footprints — but not the provocative print of Maureen R. His reasoning here seemed no more dishonourable than wanting a secret or two of his own. Secrets otherwise came to his wife like drunks to detox centres.

But two nights later he was roused from sleep by a distraught, incredulous wife. He could feel the ribbed cuff of her new housecoat on his arm. Her hair still smelled of something like rhubarb. She was alarmed and whispered in a quiet voice he strained in vain to hear. It was as much her directions, her pointing, rather than her rushed soft words that led him to a corner of the kitchen and a cautious look at the tree house, the door of which was plainly ajar. A weak garage light across the lane occasionally picked out a lambent shadow of an upright human within the room itself.

“God if it's him I'll scream,” Babs said, to which Herb dourly answered, “Me too.”

“I'll get my coat,” he said finally. But when he returned and headed for the back door she held him back.

“It doesn't seem like Randolph.”

“What makes you say that?” he answered giving in.

“Randolph was a sitter.”

Herb pretended confusion. “So how could he see you all the time then?”

“He had a long neck — it's true.”

For a full half minute they mutely stared at the gazebo.

“I don't see much neck at all,” he said at last, unable to resist.

Babs jabbed him yet held on tighter than ever. A few tense seconds later she told him to call the police. “But in the bedroom.”

As he complied, his mind was alive with speculation. On returning to the kitchen he found Babs on her knees by the sink peeking about a bouquet of moonlit Marigolds on the window sill.

“Shhhh,” she said pulling him down. “He came halfway down the ladder then went back up. He’s wearing that old coloured coat.”

“Is it Randy?”

“I don’t think so. No.” Again she grasped his arm. “You’re not going out there until the police come.” Herb remained silent, alert. He was about to rise and shift the silvered bouquet a little to one side when the door to the tree house fully opened and a figure reminiscent of Randy slowly descended the step ladder as if undecided. The weak garage light issuing from the alley behind the backyard fence left the figure at ground level mainly in shadow. Babs instinctively pulled away to one side. “He’s heading for the rear gate. Jimminy, it could be him.”

“Randy never moved quite like that.”

“Even so — you stay right here.” Once again Herb was gruffly restrained from approaching the back door.

“I want to see who it is,” he said limply.

“That’s alright, he’ll be back.”

“Will not.”

“Will so,” said she, craning again about the Marigolds. It seemed a measure of their joint, custodial resignation with one another that they might talk as children when upset.

When the RCMP detective arrived with a constable, five minutes later, the stranger had vanished. The alley was scouted as well as the adjacent yards, powerful flashlights casting a small-scale aurora. When at last Herb and the detective entered the tree house and Herb turned on its lone ceiling light, the room lay forlorn as ever. Only the coat was gone. Herb could vouch for nothing else. The odd footprints he’d noted two days earlier were as confusing for the detectives. This night’s fresh tracks were routinely inspected and pronounced inconclusive because the shoes or boots had been gummed up with wet leaves and left no distinctive marks. So! A sudden insinuating frisson permeated the air. Maple leaves littered the floor inside the tree house. In one spot near the back gate the stranger had apparently slipped: a long smooth cowlick interrupted one settle of leaves. “I’ve been after Herb to get at the raking up,” Babs said casually from the back porch to the constable then examining the yard for further foot prints, a comment that left Herb more willing to share some niggling irritation at a future date. Marriage: the worn, trusted, dated thumb index.

When they returned to their bedroom the sky in the East was coming to life. He once witnessed a blue baby restored to pinkish health — not unlike a dawning. The incident happened during a visit with a friend to see a new daughter. The babe had choked as they looked through the nursery window. They spent a frantic half-minute summoning help. Two

nurses arrived and swiftly took the troubled mite away. A short time later it was returned to its sturdy crib suffused in a healthy pink and yawning prodigiously. That same year Herb and his wife were told they could have no children, a diagnosis eventually deemed premature, when it was exasperatingly late. Relegated a marginal couple for adoption — their ages were not in the competitive mean — they decided to undertake to be foster parents with an eye to possible adoption and took an immediate liking to the cute active child a caseworker brought to their sunny kitchen early one spring afternoon. Babs now sat on the bed looking at the faint fan of pink sunlight in the East. An early riser, she could be in bed by nine. He reached over and touched her hand. “Not a single cloud,” she placidly said. It was Herb’s act of hitting the child that held up any later adoption application. Out of sheer resentment he had finally called a halt to their candidacy. Then Babs came down with mononucleosis. A year later they were more or less resigned to their claustral fate. Now he felt her maternal lack had been newly wryly teased by the stranger, almost a kind of daring familiar who provoked as much care and annoyance as Randy had. He began rubbing her back. “It isn’t like him though,” she resumed, in that tone he could interpret either as lament or ridicule. Tentatively he put his arms about her and after a calculated gamble lifted her night shirt to caress her unbuttoned breasts. She simply smoothed the fabric and lazily reminded him of a driver’s license renewal that had come in that week’s mail, not entirely hiding the nimble smile he cherished. “You have to convert your weight to kilograms and your length to centimetres,” she said taking his hands in hers. Said he with some wistfulness, “I wonder if I should try for a soft or hard conversion.”

“That sounds a little like Randy, she said, keeping close to him. He took it as a compliment, his desire for her then inestimable.

Seconds later he was helping her tuck in the shower cap. Minutes later Randy too was apprized of the missionary couple, who looked and seemed surprisingly fresh and alive on their queen-size pallet.

TWENTY-NINE

The sight of his coat of many colours once more alive and moving along the streets of Surrey opened many old wounds for Randy. Events like that were not supposed to manifest themselves on earth! The confusing part was the wearer resembled himself in a dour and unseemly way. Some dark bruises about the face were a particularly sobering ‘re-introduction’, as well as a strand of seaweed about one ankle. The spectacle drew him away from watching Herb rediscover his demure but resilient wife and Babs recall the married name of Randy’s stepsister which she stated aloud just as Herb was thinking of his accounts, out of the sheerest bravura, in an attempt to keep the rondo alive. But the stray mention of the girl’s name quite flummoxed him. He could not compete with directories, recipes, discount lists, Universal Studios or Neapolitan ice cream, to name a few select rivals. Had they not come from the shower he might have suggested a hot toddy break, which sometimes kept her less ruminative. This day, however, he must settle for a brief postludium nap, as it were, and an early start at the studio. His new conditional assistant and retoucher, who would begin that day, belaboured trust.

But if Herb was moved by the reminder that his fey housebound wife still might captivate, Randy was chastened by the advent of a rogue clone, out of nowhere, so easily ‘perturbing’ his former bland life. Nearly a lampoon of the old horror story, he reminded himself — imagination yielding to monstrosity, a tale he had cravenly considered writing during his last few weeks on earth! Now the tale threatened to come true and he exercised little or no control over the script. The more he scouted the stranger’s psychology, physiology, particularly his endocrinology, the more he marvelled at the awesome portent. The man’s glands could manufacture at the merest visual clue a whole spectrum of catalytic substrates; could in fact shut down most of the cerebral cortex while the drugs coursed through his system. Emphatically and haplessly he, *It*, resembled a particular waggish, daring side of Randy, minus mainly the ornate romantic aestheticism and keen memory: this hulk would readily pass up Mendelssohn for some late reincarnation of Sid Vicious. Eminem perhaps. The ugly face bruises did revive the terror at the hands of the arch sadist interrogator, a memory the hulk seemed immune to or had forgotten. Randy was bereft of an explanation; the stray corpus had come from — nowhere! His classmate still being away, he stoically went to consult his ‘other’ sojourner, the former British actor and polemicist who staidly ventured as explanation: “I do say it sounds like you’ve been saddled with a revenant or dybbuk — a kind of zombie.” The actor’s expression was sufficiently apathetic to convince Randy he mayn’t be piling it on this time. Listlessly his interlocutor added, “Never did bone up on the matter; even less predisposed now.” Randy recalled that while on earth the man had captivated as a great character actor. Here, he moved about like a prison veteran — a Jean Valjean denied a *passeport jaune*.

“Well, if I have, the bloody thing didn’t ask my permission.”

“No he...It wouldn’t do that. I expect you’ve learned very little about the — the *Other Dilemma*, as we sometimes call it.”

“Not a lot, no.”

“Ahh, such a bother.”

“Do tell me.”

It was obvious the explanation was esoteric. One would have to pay attention — to another knotty complexity few viable horror writers would burden their readers with. “Let’s have it,” Randy urged. “Without the ‘trowel’, if possible.”

The actor stiffened. He had likely been gay Randy thought, and a canny bully. Now, on good days, he might pass as a grubby old Abelard, though as an on-call mentor his sullenness diminished somewhat.

“The principle is simple enough; it’s the application that still contorts, involutes.” Randy could see some wholesale fiasco swaying innocently as sea foam. “Let me first put it to you in the form of a question, in effect a philosophical proposition: If, due to human progress, you could live a very, very long and healthy life, more or less indefinitely, certainly far longer than the current life span, would you come to slight the conventional expectation of an inevitable demise?”

“You mean if I had the choice of living as an active, long-lasting man, would I waive the prospect of something worse? Like remote hapless earth watching. No contest.”

“You are so very sure?”

“As a dog outside a fish processing plant.”

“Yes, it is uniformly dismaying.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it seems all of us here felt the same way. At least at first.”

Randy’s quarks stood their ground, especially his few no-nonsense muons as the actor continued.

“The yearning for a man-made Elysium hasn’t really petered out, you see. One of the timeless, ineffable...pipe dreams. As we’ve noted.”

Randy found himself as impatient with the morbid fusspot as ever. “So what’s this got to do with being yoked with — a yo-yo zombie?”

“Yes, the piquant rub. You see, Cheesy’s critics-at-large, well some — the ones laughing off any belief in the redemption of nasty brutish humans — are bored and want a change of species! Invariably they are the insect, bacteria and virus mavens, who do harbour the most elaborate visions. For them, far fewer humans augur a greener more durable, adaptable planet. They come over to talk about it from time to time with some of us dated crackers. The lobby against them has managed to stall things but only just. Those souls whose life ended hideously and prematurely are particularly resentful, being denied any redress if their wish for full comprehensive reparation — most souls suffering as they did — is in fact to be scrubbed, aborted, upstaged by an assertive insect consortium. So, for the truly exasperated, a few of the ‘mavens’ have contrived to leave a few ‘partly-alive hulks for the nonce’, as one wag put it — identifiable bods, lingering on earth for some kind of possible future expiation. If the bellyaching is virtuosic, a token mind may be added. Though such complainers are more and more outflanked by the viral and insect mavens, who want to trash human bathos, all ‘lingering fancy’ as they put it, the obliteration of discontent as we know it.”

“But why him — that ‘him’?” It was as much complaint as question. Too many things were conspiring to add up, yet elude acceptance — in this ominous theorizing.

“Well, some mavens may have decided a more-or-less live body was called for here — given your sudden fearful early demise. Though it could be as much a late tease: they anticipate a select entertainment in watching an impaired ‘hulk’ blunder about, perhaps.”

A suddenly ungrateful Randy recalled how he could never abide adept teasers. A reminder he didn’t welcome, as his mentor staidly continued.

“So there you are, a leftover ‘coil’, your minimal self. They likely had to mend a few things and were not overly conscientious doing it. Anyway, it’s you, minus a few qualms, a few aphorisms, a sense of grace and such, less mainly an empathetic demeanour — the insect cards again. But goodness gracious — what glands and reflexes! Nearly prehensile it seems. Ostensibly, a Deer or Blackleg Tic — without a head, I dare say. One to ‘hitch a ride’ now and then.”

“Another token gratuity.”

“As you see.” The rare exhilaration was fleeting. The Brit’s old apathy reinstated itself as if his exertion yielded but another unwanted bingo number. “There’s a wager, I imagine, to see if you, the thoughtful you, choose to join your grimbo carcass, leave your filmy stay *Here*. A first step to engage the awesome juggernaut we talked about earlier. In some detail.”

Thus was a newly dour Randy introduced to that part of himself ‘left behind’, muddling about in a kind of Neolithic fog, minding instincts that led him back to the treehouse to stand in the small room seeing little of interest beyond the multicoloured coat, which he belatedly donned. How ironic to have the beast at last ‘without’, while being more anxious than ever about the beast’s feral agenda. And how ignoble to discover the beast’s instincts, movement and locution were well nigh impervious to the kinds of ‘nudges’ his vigilant mind might practice from *Here*: this body had dealt with that fusspot before! Randy seemed destined to see his own distinct monstrosity released from its choosy master...and if that were not enough, the old axiom about felicitous ideas being rare, gruesome ones commonplace, banal, placed him in a box he’d never been *stuck* in before. *In a nutshell: It seemed the antipathy and obduracy in the world could eclipse thought, impose a matchless reign of terror, and he must forfeit his very human reason to ‘abide’ that ruin!!* Oblivion had a new appeal and seemed too good to ever take place. His romantic instincts would be put to a bitter test, of this alone he felt abjectly certain. A sufferance, forbearance test without soulful symphonic accompaniment.

With analogous dismay did Herb Spooner spot the motley coat advancing across the Granville Bridge as he drove into downtown Vancouver the following day. A portrait sitting had been cancelled that morning and he elected to attend an auction of some fair artifacts at the B.C. Place Stadium. The sight of the coat was really more than he could stomach on such a carefree day. In the curb lane he might have slowed down. The traffic, however, was hectic and he drove on. Moreover, he didn’t want to actually confront — whoever it was. At least not yet.

Expediently he parked a block from the North end of the bridge and hurried back with his miniature camera ready to get a glimpse and possible shot of the chap coming off the bridge’s walkway. As he hurried across an empty side street he assigned a raw landscape mode to his lens. Intrepidly he approached the bridge only to find the multi-colored coat nowhere in sight. The wearer had either jumped or decidedly hastened his pace, though this latter option seemed hardly possible given the length of the bridge.

Quickly Herb traversed two more streets, sighting only routine attire, no strident primary pasteups. Briskly he entered and exited two of the area’s seedy taverns which were just opening their doors. The open squalor in that part of town stifled interest. Business without commerce. His exhaustion also begged a halt.

Woodenly, uncomfortably he returned to his car not having exerted himself like that for eons. In the passenger seat his heart thumped away like a berserk toy. He decided he’d better slowly walk about a bit rather than uncomfortably sit. As he locked the car for a second time, the

colourful patchwork coat almost brushed against him as it swept by, crossing the street following a diagonal that led to the alley at the rear of a frowzy hotel.

Herb turned in amazement.

“Randy?...”

“Leave it, pops,” a strange toneless voice mumbled. Not looking back, the colourful form sauntered onward toward the alley. Herb gingerly followed, struggling to recall, verify a scarcely recognizable face. But some ugly bruises, particularly about one partly closed eye, chastened doubt.

All the while a perplexed Randy racked his mind for thoughts that might alter the will of this extrinsic self, none of which made the slightest difference to the the chap’s momentum despite the telling limp, one result of the brutal interrogation. The injured leg had been perfunctorily attended to — another lax attention of the insect mavens. Yet with surprising despatch the hulk entered and exited several of the area rooming hotels, lifting from a lane packing crate a Granny Smith apple and, from a rear smelly kitchen, half a ham sandwich. Twice Herb lost him, only to see the coat re-emerge further down the block, crossing over to the noonday bustle of Hornby Street, moving with the quaint amble of a Llama traipsing a field.

Randy was aghast to behold the dauntless form executing the full range of feints and slight-of-hand he had struggled to perfect, including taking off and reversing the vivid multi-coloured coat as ‘he’ strode out of the lobby of the Hotel Georgia cinnamon bun in hand, an act Herb just caught in a final thrust of arm. Inside out the coat assumed a uniform skin of dull grey, giving the wearer a new anonymous identity. From there the automaton crossed to the Bay and hopped up an escalator to the crowded cafeteria atop the department store, entering through the frequently opened Exit doorway, Herb warily following. Smoothly lifting a cup from a vacated table the hulk approached the two cashiers and mumbled “hot water”, then, on a close turn of a nearby food bay, pinched a bran muffin before approaching the hot water fount where he also gleaned a teabag, a lemon wedge, some cheese snacks, and a palette of jams. From there he moved to a quiet corner, leisurely sat and, after an ample burp, produced with a magician’s flare the muffin, laden with jam, and a few cheese squares. Herb stood aghast with a single black coffee. No sooner had he reached a table than the hulk, two tables across, began squeezing a thick lemon wedge into his drink, a sudden squirt from which shot across and hit Herb in the cheek, causing him to spill some of his coffee. The oblique jet went apparently unnoticed by the nominal hulk as he sat back sampling and assessing his beverage before adding more sugar. Herb, when recovered, was dumbly fascinated. The fellow appeared impervious to his surroundings and sufficiently disheveled, and otherwise menacing to be entertaining when taking tea. Hadn’t Randy been particularly partial to the ritual? Was not his special strainer still hanging above the sink in the studio’s back utility room? While dipping his tea bag, this very peculiar Randy sometimes gazed up and about like a Meerkat.

Yet despite the needling similarities, Herb mistrusted the identity. Something to do with being cool, the form working as one, as an automaton, despite his injuries. Randy, except for his

artwork, contended with a fractious multitude. Occasionally his indecision could be nettling — he might be smartly supercilious or an oafish poltroon — whereas this carcass moved as a smoothly functional if limping android or golem, now savouring an after taste. A worthy method performance. A busgirl, glancing at the hulk, listened to a concerned supervisor who helped the busgirl clear away a used table. Gradually more and more people regarded the roughed-up character, some from roving curiosity, others taking their cues from the edgy staff. The mauled face betrayed no care or confusion though. He, It, simply continued eating, looking about, seemingly sightless, heedless. Then suddenly the form paused as if reminded, mumbling, “I’m a soup man,” a comment both Herb and Randy recognized as germane. A glossy matron seated nearby managed a wan smile.

Forthrightly the hulk rose and, taking his empty cup with him, moved up to the soup bay, the supervisor in close pursuit. When he lifted the lid to the chowder tureen the supervisor clamped it shut. The hulk paused as a robot in momentary suspension. The supervisor shook her head, said there would be no fuss if they left together, now. The hulk twitched. Desperate Randy put it down to his precious sense of propriety. A momentary default this day, however, Randy soon alarmingly realized.

Responding to the supervisor’s discord, the hulk nonchalantly tipped the tureen, dumping the contents on the floor holos bolos, the supervisor and cashier doing a nimble shuffle to get out of the way, unlike several astonished patrons, one of whom slipped bearing a full tray. Snatching a custard from the dessert bay, the hulk strode out of the cafeteria and into the Bay’s precious art-curio section, carelessly or nonchalantly demolishing a stand supporting some expensive Eskimo sculptures that precious Randy had always believed needlessly grotesque. Next, two displays, one of misbegotten terra-cotta birds, the other of equally idiotic brass nicknacks, came crashing down, followed by a vulgar chrome sculpture of a nude female diver splintering a gaudy gilt mirror at the edge of the swank furniture section. The *mêlée* was altogether satisfactory for Randy who never had the nerve nor insouciance. Nearby shoppers scurried behind heavy book-cases and panelled rosewood consoles. One keen onlooker hid behind some plump pillows on a settee. The elevator the hulk approached quickly vacated and he descended to street level by himself. Herb stood trembling and irresolute among the shocked and rawly entertained shoppers.

It was while the hulk stood alone in the elevator, in the sole quiet he would know, that Randy tallied all the lesions and realized his own fate was more or less sealed. He would not shirk his ‘leftover’ self. A reunion was in order it seemed. If the hulk’s autonomic nervous system was in tolerable shape despite the earlier beating, the musculature was not. Already one arm twitched with an electrolyte imbalance that Randy knew could become spastic. Also a hand, cut on one of the display cases, oozed blood. Some excellent platelets would stop the flow, while vigorous infections already at work in both an ear and eye, more serious legacies of the earlier beating, would continue to worsen. When the elevator opened the lone unsightly form parted several startled shoppers as he marched, unmindful of his new conspicuous limp, to the south Seymour

Street entrance where three Vancouver policemen had just congregated. Whether Randy managed to influence events he never learned. Fiercely he strove not to have the chap apprehended on a crowded street at high noon. Most likely the rage of some plucky, imperious ancestors, plus a slight celestial nudge or two, enabled the hulk to get away in the thick traffic, though now running on stiffening joints and a cardiovascular system partly leaking and fibrillating. In executing the sovereign desire for flight, bones and tissue would draw upon extraordinary reserves! The vague plan to head for one of Vancouver's raunchy strip pubs, roughly in place when the hulk sought his last cup of soup, was now superseded by a need or wish to escape the crush of downtown bodies, to find an acre free of noisome human activity. With the instinct of a pilgrim he headed for the vacated grounds of the fair, first going down a walkway harbouring a procession of souvenir shops, then onto a street that led to the fair's new demolition fencing, past a surprised security guard whose jumbled comments on his phone had to be repeated as he watched the fugitive scabble up the wire mesh and flop over the other side.

If a solemn Randy took store of the further injuries sustained in the breach of the fence, he noted too the sudden freakish deliverance and strange annealing quiet. A demobilization. The hulk had a vacated carnival to himself. No lineups, no schedule to miss, no wayward encounters, no comic seizing you by the scruff of the neck impressing you into his act. The tangential relief Randy felt was positively harrowing. The hulk too sensed a growing deflation — a strange perplexity as he passed odd residues on the grounds, piles of demolished building materiel, remains of once thrumming pavilions that engaged even snooty Randy. Already the landscape was in some respects foreign. Familiars that once had beckoned, alerted, were struck down. The carnival forest close cut.

The police car sirens the newly mindful hulk, now fraught with Randy's anxiety, barely heard, while sensing an alien discomfort — a novel sense of liveness, isolation — Randy's sorry world. One heard a strangled snort, a shrill whine, a voice lacking even a serviceable vocality. The limp was now a farcical dip, the one eye wide as saucer-eyed children in maudlin drawings. For the second time in his life Randy sensed what mortification was and wanted the experience over. In the end he would deal with the dire prospects, however insidious. If living, being sentient in the *Hereafter* couldn't approximate the irenic, serene, graceful, pastoral, lyrical, he must plead *nolo contendere*. All to be done. All to be done.

Then, thoughts of his pending excruciating *Hereafter* were 'upstaged' by a sudden happy recollection — his clear sighting of the grand tall spire, not yet demolished, that rose atop the once crowd-happy Sports Pavilion, the spire a near imitation of a bell tower on which several deft climbers had risen with enviable agility during the life of the fair! Inside, the pavilion patrons had been treated to a picturesque view of the busy metropolis and a film about roughnecks adapting to culture by dressing up in tutus and tights. The tower itself was a four-sided obelisk held together by a rigid steel frame. That day a demolition worker had loosened a central anchor plate that also secured one of the outside foot salients climbers used to rise to the tower's summit. That worker, now seated by a lunch pail, watched with growing consternation

as the leggy form climbed up, via a steep adjacent pile of building debris, onto the top of the pavilion's remaining door frame, leaving the peculiar being one a step away from the roof and its adjacent tower. By the time the figure had reached and climbed partway up the tower's vertical face, a small group of workers and guards had congregated below.

But the man heard nothing. Rather, Randy then heard nothing. He and the hulk existed at last as one, clinging with a terrible defiant optimism to the next chancy projection. Even one additional ascending step might lift one beyond the sporadic cloudy atmosphere where the sun shone unembarrassed. The credulity was beyond counsel or terror, despite the growing chorus of tiny inner voices crying out that the carcass would not hold. Once again Randy felt the wind upon his skin, in his hair, and the effect was cathartic! He had made a decision and sensed a keen nostalgic wonder at his surround that overwhelmed him now. However pathetic his soul, he was lost without a body. For a clear indelible moment he remembered the newly warming sunshine, then slipping, falling, bypassing a sea of faces, seemingly confused or aghast, tumbling into a soundless void, his last fleeting vision a flush eventide hosting an exquisite gliding bird.

As for hectic Herb, who had gained access to the scene by telling a newly arrived policeman that he believed he knew the daring trespasser, the sight of the body sliding, twisting off and away from the tower, seemed a reprise of oldfangled ciné drama, like watching the fall of a ribboned escutcheon from an ancient citadel, except that the twist to the banner was clearly unnatural to its large bare head, so oddly conjoined, the merest tenuous yoke — so Herb imagined askance before the first attendants got to the body.

Soon a beacons ambulance arrived. After an intensive inspection the lone stilled form was borne into the coach's vault, one white coated attendant faintly shaking his head.

By then the fair site was restored to its ghosts and a few methodical demolitionists. Herb gave a statement to a smartly dressed female officer and amazed himself with details he could summon about the hulk's recent movements in downtown Vancouver and the Bay. He had strained against positively identifying the person he saw in the ambulance until he spied the socks — an old pair of his which Babs had given Randy. A black-and-navy diamond pattern, now barely hiding one blue-blooded ankle. He feared then for the worst as the ambulance fled away, its siren a shrill death knell for him.

As he returned to his car the many fresh lesions of hand and face continued to contort his memory. It seemed a lifetime had passed since he last saw the long pointy fingers adding an extra lump of sugar to his tea on the studio's sturdy utility bench. A partial distraction loomed in the form of two ample men in construction coveralls and helmets who emerged suddenly from the same alley the coat of many colours had swept into but a short time before. The two passed close to Herb smelling of beer. Someone by the name of Conners, a clumsy non-present third party, was being preciously told off. "Conners, hell, he couldn't hit a bull's ass with a sack of peaches." As he drove off Herb decided Randy could be, should be, at that moment, doing something just like that. Despite his unease, the thought brought a latent smile to his face.

As anticipated, Randy was DOA at Vancouver General. In due course Herb would learn

from the detective that Randy had likely been tortured, a dumfounding imputation, acutely alien and ghastly. The detective further believed Randy's death ended the mazy drama they had all been immeshed in, though his final words to Herb offered little redress. "It seems Randy's drawing of the one perp most likely precipitated his ensuing jeopardy. The lad acted entirely on his own recognizance, as you now know. We have evidence the ogre crossed the border at Oroville. His real presence and purpose here is under investigation of course. If his assault on the players in the theatre seemed adventitious, Randy's drawing gave him an unwanted identity. Why Randy was sought out and suffered as he did suggests his drawing incited the interest of more than one player. His demise suggests a wider complex scenario — which we must take under advisement. When we have more information we may wish to interview you again. We'll continue to keep a careful eye on you all for a time, of course, but we believe you'll not be bothered again — with Randy's death. He seems to have been the sole catalyst here."

A week later, as a still wary Herb boarded up the tree house, to appease he and his wife's lingering apprehension, he realized he didn't have a photo of his late retoucher. The picture of Randy ostentatiously pointing to the prized portrait had vanished. An impatient Babs admitted doing some hasty housekeeping in the tree house the day before, when the municipal garbage was collected. He would look through his studio files, even Bab's albums, without luck — the smart aleck had been whisked into memory, his main legacy the many modish colour portraits gracing scores of albums, mantels and walls impervious to all but the sun, though most such portraits outlived their usefulness or want before fading. Occasionally Herb would confront an anemic image and disappointed client. A new print was usually readily attainable. Herb kept on file all his own film chips and proofs — except the late Winfield-Cranmer set. The retouching might never be as nuanced, of course. The one stray print from the informal Winfield-Cranmer class portrait 'featuring' Maureen Rutquist, Randy's copy, Herb would keep forever, one reminder of his restless retoucher.

He planned to dismantle the tree house in the spring, perhaps leave a sizeable bird house in its place, one akin to the commodious apartment models he's seen in the fair's garden centre. That should be sufficiently arresting and accommodating to attract the desirable birds. Though his optimism had taken a tumble that year.

Later that year Randy's teapot and strainer were sold at one of Herb's garage sales to a neighbour who wanted a gift for an aging aunt — who died a year later. A relative gave the items to a thrift store where someone dropped the pot and broke off the spout. The ornate strainer eventually sat alone and idle next to a clutter of rusting fishing tackle, a dusty set of Reader's Digest condensed books, and a bookcase full of old vinyl film cassettes. A young boy asked his father if the sizeable strainer could be a worm holder.

THIRTY

Buff Rutquist stood looking out from Maureen's empty bedroom into the bucolic backyard

of their home. Dourly he watched his wife rake up the many, many leaves from their three stately poplars. Each year the tall yellow-leaved spires suggested to him Towers of Babel, confounding language. This year he had not helped out, was behind with a sermon. Rather, he couldn't settle on a suitable subject. The excusable topics were dwindling, unless of course one 'opted' for the new worldly defaults of: corporate greed, bigotry and chauvinism, gross neglect of minority and indigenous rights and sluggish reparation action, racism as a Western crutch, the scarcity of asylum, the 'wronged' environment, and so on — subjects with their late revelatory dogma and redemptive promise. A new politic misandry saw man, particularly the white man, as the arch perpetrator of historic mayhem. Well, he was white and had lusted after his young gracile daughter. Being beguiled was no excuse. It was then he noted the grass required yet another cutting, and the moss was back in sovereign velvet abundance. The sudden clear good weather added a further rebuke. In the reflection of the room's window he could see the walls of his daughter's vacated bedroom behind, even the imprint on the carpet left by her exercise station. It was time she was on her own she said. The overdue leave taking.

He had been impressed by the outside appearance of the West End high rise she'd rented a studio apartment in, and wondered how her acting would pay the rent; she'd balked at an allowance. Inside it was a whole other world, as they say. In the foyer the carpet lay threadbare and often rilled. Reflections in once trendy wall mirrors revealed sections of 'hot' rot, the silver nitrate exposed. The interior hallways, airless, dimly lit, 'foisted' a garish wallpaper, scored, and peeling in parts. The studio flat itself was tiny, cold, musty and without curtains — promised but starkly absent. A ropy rug smelled of a caustic antiseptic and the former tenant left a small upright piano with cracked soundboard partly blocking the eating nook. Naomi was determined not to say a word and stuck to her guns. Maureen kept on the phone almost without interruption the day they brought her remaining boxes and cartons. How astonishing a youngster not long matriculated could have so much — a fact Buff now recalled as he turned to stare at the empty walls in her vacated bedroom, trying to remember the pictures that fronted the small hook holes in the plaster. A print of Michelangelo's God Creating Adam filled one space, a Ronald Serle cat and Rousseau's *Le Lion Affamé* two others and, most recently, a small copy of *Le Cyclope* by one Odilon Redon, an acquisition he never inquired into; Naomi may have had a hand. The room's wider wall flaunted modern posters: Dog the Father Etc. and The Vancouver Fringe, 'Bad' Rock (an affirmation), fossil fuel vilification, and a perfect postcard menage of a pristine unfouled America, the colours fulgently vivified and saturated, as they often were in that hypnotically visual age. Somewhere an early portrait of father entitled Doctor Cobbly hung, a wiry pastor standing in a leaning pulpit with showy teeth. A grade school drawing. A rather intimidating rendering he thought now.

With unsparing fondness he could see the misleading young face, the grass hockey player with one slack sock bunched about an ankle, the teeth braces, the *papier maché* puppets, the roundtable homework, the patch of lawn where she and her close friends would sometimes play badminton after school. He could hear the carols sung on street corners by the church's young

folk at Christmas, her animated phone conversation, and the wordy silences toward him when he sometimes scolded. Memory snippets chronicled the leggy athlete, gymnast, happy sailor, and late swift ‘water skater’, her kayak racing eponym, who withdrew from a national competition to become — the resolved thespian and sarcastic peri who disowned, disparaged, ‘burlesqued’, via her late theatrical performances, most conventional mores. He was late comprehending his daughter’s dismay, so taken had he been with her lissome athleticism, which Naomi had silently reproved and the vital daughter slowly, if less mutely, discovered ‘two-faced’. Could he ever reconcile, settle in full that sensual, carnal period...the roughhousing, the mock wrestling, the many calisthenics and early gymnastics which sanctioned the occasional ‘helpful’ hold or support ...was it all thus sordid, inimical? Yes, yes, he had occasionally been excited, occasionally caught and pressed very young thighs, pushed young nates on a gymnastic flip harness, held a balancing giggling young teen aloft, standing on his upturned hands, stealing glimpses of a lucid groin...as he derided sissy manners, prissy attire...such a stolid, footling list. The butch singlet Naomi retired after one niggling debate. Many times he had watched through a narrow window in their garden shed her return from school. From the shed he could see into her bedroom, across a small gap in their tree-thick back yard, where he *watched* as she discarded a uniform, tried on new clothes before a critical mirror, sometimes with her friends, experimented with makeup, a new dance. He would not soon forget the day Naomi saw him, or he saw her standing in their own bedroom looking calmly regally down at the shed. He was chagrined and appalled at the sudden and novel bitterness — betraying a liberated normality, so ‘healthy, natural, victimless, fun’. Some solecisms of improvement would turn him inside out. Once he imagined he knew how to sin; now he could barely find a sermon topic. How desultory, oafishly optimistic it all seemed now. A mere *homme moyen sensuel*. His wife had never reproved him directly though he often imagined her prayers thereafter more plaintive. His ‘sentence’ began the year she decided they paid too much to heat their home. Window casements were refurbished, custom Venetians added with full linen curtains to ‘compliment the sills, aesthetically and functionally,’ she said. His hideout in the garden soon faced an often curtained bedroom window and was abandoned. Six months later he conceded his wife had indeed saved them over eight percent on their steep oil bill.

A recent newspaper story quoted the brisk young daughter-actress as saying, “The freedom to lure, tease and molest has never been more abused.” The newspaper caption read, Bawdy Act Burlesques Itself. The text described how a lithe young Grace, a modern Astarte, portrayed a Canadian stripper in a one woman skit entitled *The Right Stuff*, one of several revised skits in a late *God the Father Et Cetera* revue. The paper’s account ended with the following:

“Throughout her performance, which included ‘flatulently’ letting the air out of a lasciviously inflated zentai body suit, the actress explains the appeal of the obscene, how it relieves one from having to think, cogitate, trouble one’s head about brutish, noisome, deprecatory reality. She chomps a carrot during her act, a carrot that talks, in her skilled mimicking like Bugs Bunny, often saying to the audience, ‘Carrots can really help you see and

ogle stuff, folks, get an eyeful!’ Spotlighted in a shrunken, normal fitting zentai suit at the end of her monologue, she sadly observes the carrot stalk — all that’s left — before saying, ‘Well, a new crop of leering veggies wasn’t in the script.’ So the Vancouver Sun story closed, leaving Buff duelling with the camp innuendo, and the sobering recognition that his church’s elders would find the skit pertinent, thoughtful, humane and relevant, only it’s ‘tone’ arguably excessive, the furtive voyeur given so many ‘raspberries’. Would he ever again look upon his daughter without dismay? It promised to be a long winter, his reinstatement of original sin making him the modern hovering gull — dreading too that his guilt might simply be, as some of the elders might say, a naughty means of reliving the adventure!

The same Bawdy Act blurb also caught Vijay Kurtz’s eye as he scanned a dated Vancouver Sun he’d arranged to have sent to his new California domicile, being keen to learn all he could about the end of the fair, particularly the last night’s fireworks. Most likely the Russians had spirited the device to an offshore freighter or submarine. Just how and when he knew not. His contact in Los Angeles said only that the original plan was ‘archived’ and to forget the entire affair. Hints abounded that some weighty concession to a designated proxy had been concluded. In any case, there were many more looming issues, the problems in the Middle East and elsewhere making ongoing international commitments more complex. Noxious ‘mosh pits’ he thought of the day’s cultural tumult. The inability to stay calm in a small space.

His stay in Vancouver, which he deemed *opera buffa*, he now revisited in The Vancouver Sun’s story of the young actress who’d once ‘marked’ him. Celebrity status meant staying in touch, though his wound had long since healed and been surgically minimized. The girl, he decided, was still on track with her own band of revisionists. An actress affianced to Dog the Father — vividly berating male self-esteem in white pride, hoary patriotism, paternalism, insular chauvinism, owning guns — leaving the newly designated ‘deplorables’ conspicuous, poignantly aware of themselves. The prettier the scourger the better.

He closed the paper, laughed and wished her well. Then he ordered another tequila. This time with a worm, he thought, reminding himself of the creatures she must avidly pinch. Later he would return to Disneyland to take up his erstwhile role as an astute carnival juggler with a rare virgin lad he picked up in San Francisco. It was his first talent. Over the years he had given much enjoyment to the many fun seekers in Southern California. He and his new partner set up their carnival act at rotating sites and drew large impromptu crowds. There was only one Vijay, whose tricks with dirks and torches second guessed reality. The awed sighs in his audience assured his confirmation. More and more it was becoming *de rigueur* to live on the edge — even a necessity, given that the good Samaritan was no longer flush. If blaming the lapses of priests and Levites had been a theatrical conceit, it was now a bulwark. And if all artists were career liberals, liberals more than ever resembled method actors, ‘players’ convulsed with passion, righteousness, brimming with disgust if not loathing for ‘unworthy others’ — a plurality of humans Vijay thought. Life then was very full for Vijay Kurtz in his disguise as the inimitable

Juggler.

As for the vital performer herself, she still felt peaky in her one room flat two floors above and near the din of Denman Street, just off English Bay. A recent cold had become worse and kept her coughing and awake in the still curtain-less, neon-seared night where the smell of the recently cleaned carpet remained pungent. The last tenant had been a messy sod. The apartment in a building across from her remained dimly lit, its curtains partly drawn, the soft glow from it outlining the frame of her weight station, augmented just before her move. The company's director, watching her one day finish a workout, suggested they consider a new abridged Hamlet rather than St. Joan — a 'Junoesque' Hamlet. They had both smiled, yet the idea intrigued from the start. "You have the turbo energy for the part," he had said. Two nights ago she stayed and read several scenes. Everyone present agreed she could be super. Amiably she concurred, discounting the recent cough.

She rose and took yet another prescription Tylenol left by the pill-loaded director. Looking again at the lower apartment opposite, brighter than before, she saw a handsome man talking with a second, slighter man and an older still handsome woman — a time travel siren or circe she mused. The good looking man appeared to be happily idling over a late night snack, so unlike the restive intensity of the maniac who had trashed their theatre and so nearly assaulted her on the fair site. The second man might be a younger brother. The woman, casually clad in a colourful kimono, appeared to be reminiscing, while enjoying an expert foot massage at the hands of the younger swain, a treatment Maureen frankly envied at that moment.

In the suite next door, its blinds framing a hallway, someone left with a lunch bucket. In the adjacent flat, its curtains also drawn, an elderly gent slept as the dead before a ghostly television.

All in all she believed the place tolerable, the lease good for a year. The former tenant who owned the piano had moved in with his girlfriend. Maureen agreed to keep the compact upright for a fortnight, the time the chap needed to accommodate it. She returned to the floor mattress sensing a queasiness from the codeine. Again she thanked her own mother for the wide down quilt as she snuggled under it for a further requisite forty winks.

When she awoke, the early morning skyline in the East registered as a stark cutout against a navy blue sky, the bay's dusky waters wrinkled with a keen easterly wind. She was slicked with perspiration, could not dislodge the aftertaste of a weird and rotten dream, and wondered if she was going to be sick after all. She had yet to awake feeling her old self in the new apartment.

She rarely dreamed, yet the setting that night was too vividly the Fraser Street gym whose manager had been discovered dead on Burnaby Mountain, his death attributed to carbon monoxide poisoning. She had not returned to the gym and missed the equipment that allowed her for the first time to feel competent as a body sculptor. In the dream, which seemed like a dream within a dream, someone juggled whirling knives near her as she worked out, spot lit, on the gym's newest tension apparatus, arms and legs fully alive. Soon her sweat-marked togs were being lightly nicked by the spinning knives, a kind of moving buzz saw, the juggler of which she

never distinctly saw beyond his thick, hairy hands — which she glimpsed in the margin of the bright spot light, set atop the video cam. When she tried to pull away she discovered her hands bound to the machine's armature braces.

It was perhaps the sheer banality of working out that left her so unobservant, at first. She found herself fiercely straining to release her hands. She must have gasped, shuddered at the first passes of the knives, been hysterical by the third or fourth.

At one point, while dodging the menacing blades as best she could, they suddenly left off, leaving her newly fixed to the machine, her face in the wall mirrors flush in an extraneous quandary, the harshly lit explicitness of her sweat-marked self decidedly clinical, un-theatrical. When the unwelcome limbo began to drag she could feel the insidious act start anew. Swearing vehemently, she set her peerless temper to duel with the wily provocation, elude the blades and disappoint such sots who might eventually witness the creepy performance — a gingery hip hop that could tempt laughter even, this duel that absorbed her so.

But then intermittent creases appeared on her seamless skin, some of the blades leaving narrow crimson lesions, a wounding that nearly stymied her. But again, when a fearsome climax seemed imminent, the operation stopped, the moment stayed, the stilled blades rising to hang above her like so many chimes or clappers — to be summoned yet once again, her anger more lurid with each renewed roundel — each scowl to the sniggering yo-yos who might watch the performance.

When at last fully awake and focusing on her spare surroundings, the dream lingered as a lurid hallucination. Her throat was raw, she was thirsty and nauseous, also clammy and her feet cold. She'd dislodged the quilt in her sleep. She found she was angry beyond debate, beyond even her supple imagination. It seemed the only possible out was an unmitigated triumph: either you wrestled the macho jerk to the floor or paraded your humble cowl before his rapacious eye — that seemed to her then the probable scenario. A more decisive act had you resorting to threats, even weapons, heralding a dramatic 'stramash' — a Gaelic word she liked.

But an hour later, after she had showered, eaten with a bowl of hot oatmeal half a Tofu bar, some unsalted deluxe nuts her parents had brought, and sloshed through a ripe honeydew half, she felt up to the wile or prattle of any vaunted juggler. *Acht goode, now we eat!* she said to herself, smiling as she sensed a recovery. Surely it was all just the adjustment to leaving the nursery. Didn't the pole-vaulter, the sometime student of quantum turbulence, say the birth of a star was a more-or-less measurable but wondrous dynamic? Not unlike a resplendent firework. Well, she would 'take care of business' without becoming anorexic or bulimic or drug 'stupent', or whatever else caused stars to collapse prematurely; she would be there, in the flesh, real, unambiguous, dynamic, lustily and vastly entertaining, a fixed point, emulating a quasar. She had listened one afternoon to a boring talk on Very Long Baseline Interferometry, where fixed quasars were used to infer the earth's wobble, odd bulge, and other fascinating things. So forget all the horrible bastards thinking their finite wobbly distorted thoughts. Her presence would set a new perturbation — refashion the hook of the great gravitational lens! *Oeuf!* The randy proles

must drool at their peril. It was about then she first missed her neck crucifix. The chain remained but not the body of Christ. Must have been the juggler's doing, she wryly thought, as she hunted about the quilt and mattress. The Father-Son had definitely vanished. Her chain an epigrammatic 'aide memoire' she mused.

When she was finally out of the apartment and jogging in an adjacent park she mellowed somewhat. She believed she just might have the patience to give the pole-vaulter another chance. It was, after all, likely what her naughty sad dad would have wished. Very Long Baseline Interferometry seemed a hopeful distraction. The eager chap was obviously interested in more than the vulgarization, the boob tubing of light waves. Maybe on that other frequency they might thrive — even as she knew she could hardly settle for being part of some invisible energies — for being merely sensed, not actually seen or heard.

With that dilemma momentarily shelved she felt her cold breaking and the rain that had been predicted likely miscast. There seemed little doubt she might pace the older bluer stars. A whistle that greeted her in a turn merely reinforced that prognosis. All prurient male 'cyclopes' must gaze in awe and dread!