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The Exploded View And Other Stories

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The Exploded View

I will explain later to you, my friend (I assume you are an anthropologist) why you must read this history on boards and floors and walls and tables. I am sure you have noticed that I have dug in my pen as far as possible, to preserve these marks, and that I numbered the passages so that you might easily compile them into a running account. I begin with the day when things so rapidly deteriorated, a sunny, watery memory which leaks even as I write these words.

First the pineapple trees began to disintegrate. Then, and absolutely without warrant, they threatened to attack me, though not verbally of course. All of this I witnessed with my wife Virginia while sitting on our porch, assuring her it was no hallucination. Upon her lap sat a white fluffball she had named "Mitchell." Her fine white fingers (through which I could see the bones and nerves) kneaded the cat's fur, while the bastard stared at me, winking and grinning. It made no difference to her at all. She looked at the same trees, smiling benevolently at those seashell-colored pineapples, feeling saintly or motherly or both, since she was -- I must make clear -- delusional.

"Well," I finally said, "how are you then?"

"Hmm," she said, and she thought about the question for a moment, as if she didn't realize that was not exactly what I wanted to know. Examine, I thought, each and every dull moment, and give a brief summation of exactly the way you feel, when all about us the island is collapsing, as if it were a prized landscape portrait de-painting itself. Finally, the answer emerged, what we'd all been waiting to hear: "I suppose I'm all right."

With all of that, you can only offer a guess? Well, I kept my mouth shut. Neither she nor the others would acknowledge the situation. What "government" this island once had -- oh, why bother.

"The ocean looks --" she said.

"What, blue? Yes, it does. It looks large, too, very large, and it would probably be safe to say it is very deep as well."

She lifted the cat and set him on the floor, then rose with her awful stoic beauty and left me there to remember that now was not the time to discuss these matters. So for a few moments it was the cat and me, and we could ponder our shared fate in silence. I wondered if he felt more or less catlike with the loss of mental capacity. He might be recovering primal memories stirred by misfiring neurons, imagining how he would swallow me if the mood occurred.

I went into the house and found Virginia in the kitchen, stirring boiling water in a pot, which she stared at like a daydreaming witch.

"What are you making?" I asked, feeling apologetic for my latest outburst.

"What?"

"I wanted to know if you can remember the mood we were all in back when —"

"Back when we came here? No, I can't. It seems funny, though, I know that much." She giggled as she continued stirring the water.

"It's lost to me, too. I keep wondering why we built houses like these. They belong in Cape Cod. What were we thinking of?"

"Spoiled childhoods on a beach, I guess."

I left Virginia to her conjuring and walked through the undergrowth behind the house, to the path, where it seemed to me the branches were more subdued. A few seconds later and I could see Larry Summers behind his own house.

"Doctor?" I shouted.

He turned and started to wave, then saw it was me and dropped his hand. "Leave me alone," he yelled. "I told you I'm retired."

I watched him turn away and disappear into his house — the one person capable of grasping our condition had just a few days ago decided to join the others in their refusal to discuss it. Except for Virginia, I was alone, and it wasn't hard to imagine that she would move out soon.

Suddenly, standing amongst the branches, I caught an increasingly rare flash of lucidity, and I could remember Summers landing the plane, and I could see the clouds of smoke that had rolled toward the horizon after we detonated the airstrip and the plane.

Then the memory was gone, and I struggled to remember why we had chosen to come here and abandon the only possible escape. That I could not remember why we had done so made the current predicament seem even more unbelievable. Was that what the others wanted, to disbelieve not only their senses and thoughts, but their past and future?

Then I heard a voice, my own: "Why are you sure we can trust the Japanese?" I saw Summers' face, his expression not changing as he looked away and said, "We can trust them."

Again, the memory vanished. Irritated at my unpredictable recall, I decided to confront Summers, sensing that he knew more than the rest of us, both medically and otherwise. I followed the path, absorbing the bizarre scents of the fruits which had begun to ripen on the vines. Meanwhile, my muscles relaxed to such an extent that I found it difficult to continue walking. I wondered if the scents of those new species of fruit had been seducing me into a coma.

When I finally arrived at the door, I had to brace myself as I knocked. He arrived quickly, as if expecting someone.

"What did I just tell you," he said.

"Summers, I only need a few minutes."

"Well," he said, checking his watch, "I don't know what else I can tell you. I'm retired, plain and simple."

"I have a few questions, that's all. I know you can --"

Looking over his shoulder, I noticed that the hundreds of volumes from his bookshelves had been stacked neatly on the floor. He must have realized I was looking not at him, but at the books. He paused, and, without looking at me, told me to come back that night at exactly 7:00 p.m..

Still feeling drowsy, I went to the back porch of our house and laid down on a lawnchair, the sun enveloping me. Later, I heard the front door slam. I almost awakened, but I could not lift my head. Then I began to float, upwards and over the water.

I awoke at ten minutes to seven. I rushed into the house to wash the sweat from my face and noticed that Virginia had left. She might have gone to Carol and John's place, where they would sip gin and tonics, discussing only what immediately occurred, such as birds flying overhead.

When I reached Summers' house, he was awaiting me outside. He motioned me around to the front of the house, where he had set out two chairs and a table with a pitcher of tea.

"I know it's been difficult," he said. "We've been friends for a long time. But frankly you make the rest of us uncomfortable, especially me. I'm in an awkward position."

"True, but I'm not asking much. I only want to know if you've reached any conclusions, and then I'll leave you alone. You must have an idea, or a guess at least."

"Look at that," he said, pointing in the distance.

"I don't see anything."

"Look," Summers said, "I don't have a theory, and I'll tell you why: Whatever is happening to us affects the central nervous system. It disrupts the senses, alters our experience of time, creates odd hallucinations and diminishes memory -- though at times, you've probably noticed, it sometimes intensifies it. But I'm a doctor, a scientist. I can't make a correct diagnosis of a situation

in which my own perceptions are distorted. It would at best be misguided and at worse murderous. Besides that, I'm not a neurologist. My expertise is general medicine and if we were anywhere else I'd make a referral. Unfortunately ---"

"Then what are we going to do?"

"People with serious illnesses carry on as best they can. First there's the shock, and then people settle down and realizes its best not to dwell on their symptoms. That's exactly what we're doing. It's probably the only medicine available to us. But then you come along and refuse to do so. You're upsetting everyone with your questions. You may even, I'm beginning to think, believe the hallucinations, when the rest of us are growing accustomed to them, considering them nothing more than fireworks."

I studied my glass of tea, but didn't trust him enough to drink it. "There may be clues in our symptoms, even in the hallucinations, as you call them. Have you looked at the trees, smelled the fruit, watched the birds and other animals?"

"The entire island has the same condition? That's absurd."

"Maybe it is, but I can't ignore my symptoms, and I won't play bridge while my life dissolves."

"Well," he said, rising, looking again at whatever had caught his eye, or merely trying to distract me, "I think you're denying reality even more than the rest of us. The only thing you're going to do is burrow your way further into illusion."

"I won't bother you again," I replied. He tugged at my sleeve as I turned away, but I shook free.

Walking home, I saw between the scattered clouds a distinctly purplish hue, almost as though smoke trailed across the dusk sky, filtering the light of the sun. The wisps of color coiled in the breeze and, possibly through Summers' suggestion, I thought I caught a glimpse of fireworks. But then I smelled smoke, and I knew it was no hallucination.

When I arrived home Virginia, of course, was gone, having left only a short note which implied that she and the others would always welcome me back, if only...

But Virginia was not the only one missing from home --- as I walked through the house, I noticed that all of my books had vanished from the shelves along the hallway, and when I checked the drawers where I stored my papers, I found that they were gone, too. Then I thought of Summers' books, organized on the floor, ready to be taken away.

I went outside and looked at the sky, but the smoke had dissipated and night approached. Who knew where they had gone after gathering the papers and diaries and books and every other reminder of our history together, burning them on the other side of the island? I suppose somewhere in those records --- especially Summers' --- I might have found the key to our condition. After all, he had been the one to buy the island from the Japanese. We knew it had been used for military purposes in World War II, but only now did it seem suspicious how much help we had received from the Japanese government, and how eagerly they had guarded our secret

existence here.

Yet I felt that what the others had most wanted to hide from me was not so much who or what to blame for our fates, but the reason we had come in the first place. Now that period seemed like an early childhood to me, known to have occurred, but otherwise forgotten, and perhaps that forgetting was part of the scheme. The last I remembered was an exhilaration of anticipation and fear, underpinned by guilt, as I watched the plane explode on the airstrip.

Suddenly the moon winked at me through its jaundiced glow.

"Perhaps you can illuminate my situation," I said.

But only a sneaky grin crossed its face, a Mona Lisa smirk; perhaps it was being groped by satellites, or particles of dust. No matter. At the time, I felt sure it was communicating -- not in the benevolent manner one would expect, but with a guarded sarcasm.

"Well," I offered, "no moon is an island, my friend."

But then I heard a rustling in the leaves, and I saw a foot, including the bumps of its bones, the veins, and the moons of toenails. Then I felt a force exerted between it and my body -- I had the foot in my hand. By chance or not, a cloud passed between the moon, myself and the familiar foot, and it was dark.

I lost my grasp. She ran away, into the bush, rattling leaves. Her voice shook with the bounce of her feet upon the ground as she yelled, "You're a memory of the past, too."

I ran after Virginia, certain she meant to warn me, when I heard her fall, followed by a squelched scream, and just as quickly another body shaking trees as it darted the opposite direction.

When I finally found her, she was already unconscious, a deep wound across her neck, the blood stark against her pale skin. I felt for a pulse, but it died away with my touch. A drop of sweat from my forehead fell onto her lips. I put my hand to her cheek, and with my other closed her eyes forever to the delirious world we had come to inhabit.

"What is happening?" I said, my hands trembling. I moved back, gazing at her body, curved back, as though she were about to swim into the sky. For some time I knelt there, conscious neither of the passing time nor the threat still posed by her killer.

"Why did we come here?" I whispered.

Then, I saw that her hand clutched something. Moving apart her fingers, I saw a watch that looked familiar, probably a gift I no longer remembered having given her. I turned it over in my palm and read the inscription, signed with my initials: "V: To a new beginning?"

The next morning I buried Virginia. My own fear seemed to mask any sorrow; I still couldn't know whether they intended to abandon or ambush me. What worried me was not so much death as never having the chance to grasp what had happened here.

I threw the dirt on her even paler face. The trees seemed to droop. I imagined the sky propped up by two cracking sticks. At any second the sky would collapse, ribboning towards the ground in cascading clouds, suns, moons, and other illusions that had been painted upon it by a trickster god, a set designer of a creator who had masked everything.

I dropped the shovel. Finally there was a mound, a mud casket.

Returning to the house, I tore through the drawers and cabinets, but not even a blank piece of paper remained. History had been obliterated.

Outside again, I knelt beside the grave, happy that Virginia had at least tried to warn me before leaving. I supposed I would die here, and the rest there, and between us the sun could warm the trees, and life would, without our bending it like spoons under the magician's gaze, continue as generally considered natural.

Then, a rustling, and a figure who appeared in a red flash. I stood, shaded my eyes with my hand. Again, it streaked by, in the opposite direction. I moved forward, numb as a drunk in a fight. There was a whooping laugh, then he staggered through the brush, still laughing.

Summers' clothes were ripped and covered in blood. He walked toward me with his arms outstretched, as if surprised to meet an old friend, bearing nothing but nostalgic good will.

"I knew you were the son of a bitch who killed her," I said, pushing him.

He fell to the ground, undaunted. "Oh, come on. It wasn't me that killed her."

"Then who did?"

"Take a walk with me," he said.

He looked crazed, stumbling around like an idiot, the island's own Caliban. "I don't think so."

"I'll explain everything and then I'll leave you alone. Unless," he said, giggling, "you decide to join us. But I doubt it. You're so goddamned rational." He looked up, just as he had the day before. "Whoa, did you see that? Jesus, it's getting bigger. Goddamn it, a fucking flying whale. What the hell do you think of that?"

"All right," I said. "What is it you want me to see?"

"The other side of the island, of course. I know you're curious. You would have come anyway. I've been expecting you, but it got a little, I don't know, monotonous, waiting for you. But I suppose you had to think things over, mull, ruminant, consider and all the rest of it."

He began walking toward the trail that led to the group house. I noticed dry blood in the dirt.

"Not far now," he said, and it did seem closer than it had before, as though I had purposefully imagined them further from me than they were.

"Oh, listen," Summers said. "I have wonderful stories to tell. The history of the island, our biographies, have taken new turns. Why just this morning I remembered that World War II actually happened here, even as I assumed the role of Othello -- well, the doctor as king, no? Ah, yes. And

earlier today, there was quite a duel between --"

"What was it you said about World War II?"

"You backwards Iago, reversing my plots, conniving to prevent murders -- it was -- I think there was something about experimentation, nerve gas. Wasn't that what attracted us here? But why should you want to remember? The drama has surpassed the facts, and that's what matters to us dilettantes. What else is there, dismemberment? Don't you remember we tried that? Christ, there was nothing left. Abject boredom... too much money leads to that.

"Anyway, I love to give a speech. That is what you want, isn't it, a monologue center stage? Will you remember it for me? It does trouble me that my many fine quotes will simply vanish. Perhaps they can slip into your memory, though that, too, will falter. But it's what we wanted, after all. Ah, those young soldiers exposed to our lovely poison had the nerve -- forgive me -- to lament their fates -- the hallucinations, the memory loss, the distortion of the senses. But we knew -- I am a traitor for reminding you -- that it was the a surrealistic cure, to purposefully expose ourselves to the lingering fruit of nerve degeneration. And what happened to you, my positive, benevolent Iago? A Catholic relapse? Have you become Augustine? Well, why not, I say!"

We approached the last clearing.

"Steel yourself, saintly Iago!" he shouted.

He pushed aside the last of the trees. The bodies lay across the surroundings of the house.

"You killed everyone?" I asked.

"Me? No, not me, not even indirectly, did I kill any one or all of them. Indeed, I may be said to have killed your wife, when I was Othello, and she -- what was her name again, Desdemona? Yes, that was it. Look, look," he said. "Over here." He kicked Knapp's body. "Remember him? John Knapp, was his name, I think. But now, he dies in glory, Napoleon, flailing at coconuts with a broomstick except that, unfortunately, this woman here put an axe into his back, her name being --"

"You were playing a game? That's how Virginia died?"

"Who? Virginia? Oh, that's right. Well, I apologize about that. But it's what she wanted. It was her favorite play. Anyway, if you had intervened sooner, perhaps you could have played Othello. It would have made more sense."

I made a grab for him, but he backed away.

"I'll take of that for you," he said.

He picked up a knife from the ground. "This should do it."

Glaring at the knife, he seemed lost for a moment between his old self and his fictitious characters. I almost pitied him, but could not forget he had killed my wife, no matter how he obfuscated matters. He held the knife out, as if bearing a gift.

"Kill me, Iago," he said.

I took the knife, thinking how ridiculous it was that we stood like this, in the midst of a drama that never should have happened, that in some ways was not happening, and I held it to his neck, as he had to Virginia's.

"I'll kill you," I said, "but only as myself."

When I drew it across his neck, he screamed pathetically, then slumped.

Now I stood alone amongst the bodies. The wind seemed to carry our memories in a whirl, strewing our motives, as I even then began to forget what you are now reading.

Memories of Salvador

– Being the Early Account of the Struggles of Arturo Giuchici –

To the Director of Holidays:

I humbly offer my services as adjunct to the Director in the Mission of the Changing of Holidays, as set forth by the Island Republic, which embraces all time, and me at all times. Thus I submit to you, and the people, in whose name I hope to fulfill my duty, as before God.

Respectfully yours, Arturo Giuchici

The long table before the Director was littered with the pages of calendars. Every page included a different photo of the Republic; it looked as though someone had cut the island into flat squares and strewn the pieces across the table. The single window that faced the sea made one more living calendar page, while the other walls were cast in the island's pale blue shadows.

Suddenly the Director noticed Arturo, who must have been standing in the hallway for the past fifteen minutes. "I forgot you were coming," the Director said. "Excuses -- I'm always making them."

"That's all right, sir."

"Arturo, you throw words around so heavily. Your letter made me laugh. You take the government's business too seriously. Frankly, the only reason I hired you was to help you realize that life is not a sober affair. Certainly what we call the Changing of the Holidays is the least sober of government affairs."

Arturo's face turned red. He pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead, but it was not at all hot that day. "I --"

"Don't worry, we've all been virgins. People only suspect when you worry too much about concealing it. This must be your first employment?"

"Other than --"

"Sure, chores, that kind of thing. Why don't you have a seat? Do you know why they call the Republic an island? Do you know how big it is? What about the United States? After all, the earth itself is an island of sorts. And so we must believe in our own destiny."

"I am completely in support."

"I am certain you are, certain. You've heard some talk about it. Why not support it, eh? You are a true believer, no doubt?"

"True believer in?"

"Well, in what do you believe?"

"The Lord is my savior, of course, first of all."

"Of course! Yes, He is indeed. I knew you would feel that way. Now, speaking of Christ, that brings us to the first holiday. You know, of course, that no one can with certainty state when Christ was born?"

"I always assumed at Christmas."

"Of course he was born on Christmas. Perhaps I should have asked, 'When is Christmas?'"

"December 25th."

"Ah, actually, that is incorrect. Not that it matters too greatly. No, what is important is that we properly celebrate our symbols and rites, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm still not certain about the date, sir."

"Well, let me put it to you this way: Christmas will be the first holiday we change, as it has been decided that it will be celebrated on the Fourth of July, when normally the island celebrates the birth of America, which has long been our benefactor and, it can even be said, our second savior, until now, at least. Yes, until now, we have required a little help, like any newborn baby."

"I don't understand."

"We'll celebrate the births of our two saviors on the same day."

"But why?"

"Why? To magnify, I suppose, the potency of the symbols and to suggest that we do things our own way. We have grown. We are adolescents now."

"But the people may not understand. I'm not sure I do."

"We'll find out soon enough. Today is the 2nd of July, after all."

"Already we'll celebrate this way?"

"Oh, yes. It's a surprise, actually, sort of a special entertainment. You'll be there, of course, and..." the Director paused for a moment, "and your mother, Christina, and brother, Michael. They'll be there too?"

Arturo did not answer at first. Then he said, "Of course we'll be there. It seems strange, though."

"Right now on the other side of the island there are still people chasing each other around with sharp sticks. Surely that is stranger than altering the dates of holidays."

"And if Christmas is to be in July, then when will Easter be?"

"Easter... hmm. Well, no decision has been made. I hadn't thought about that. We might combine that day with Good Friday, to emphasize that things are speeding up, that it need not be a three day spread. I mean, we know what happened. We have faith. No use prolonging things."

His mother would be outraged at all of this, and possibly even his brother Michael, an atheist who, while he would not care about the religious aspect, was already embarrassed by his country (for instance, the President had recently ordered that the tricolor flag be changed to depict a giant cracked egg). Arturo, however, felt a responsibility to his country, imagining that his reasonableness -- the Director had been quite right to identify his sober nature -- might serve the tiny body politic well, calming its more antic elements. It was that or follow his Uncle Andrew in becoming a priest; there were few careers on the island for a thinking man.

"Arturo!" the Director snapped. "What in the hell are you thinking about now? You're too abstract, wandering around in your head all day. Now I want you --" he lifted a large cardboard box from the floor and dropped it on the table, "-- to take these pamphlets and distribute them in the streets. Just dump them along the sidewalks and throw them at people."

Arturo picked up the box. It was too heavy for him and he stumbled out to the street, the Director giggling behind him. Irritated, he immediately dumped out half the contents. The wind caught the pamphlets and strew them into the hands of passersby, who mumbled to each other as they read.

He continued through the streets, leaving pamphlets here and there. Gradually the crowd became more and more raucous, with laughter and shouting and arguing and cajoling. When Arturo had just two handfuls of the documents remaining he tossed them in the air and ran away, sneaking off to the trail that led away from town toward his home. There, outside the little white house, stood his mother, who was already pointing her finger into a thin man's face, shouting, "Don't tell me this is a good idea! Blasphemy is what this is. Our government has gone crazy. The President is a nut job. Were you the one to pass these lies out, beanpole?"

The man shook his head and flailed his arms until finally he spun around and bolted into the underbrush. Now Arturo stood alone, waiting for his mother's rebuke, but she did not notice him. She went into the house and slammed the door and then Arturo heard dishes breaking, which dishes often did in his home.

Now what have I done? he wondered. He found a rock and sat on it. He could hear shouts coming from the center of town. It might be a riot, the first one since the new President had been elected.

Arturo knew the people needed a religion and a government they could believe in. He had tried to serve both. After all, he had prayed this morning, both for himself and for the people and their leaders. He had asked God to confirm in his mind that he had chosen the correct vocation. He had thought the Changing of the Holidays was meant to set signal that priorities would be set straight, not turned on their heads.

He needed to talk to someone, but certainly not his mother in her irrational state. He decided to find Michael, who liked to go to the other side of the island and laugh at the Stickmen. Arturo ran across the island to the hilltops that formed a rim around the territory of the native islanders.

"Why don't you try rocks," Michael screamed, throwing a handful of pebbles at the Stickmen.

"For God's sake," Arturo said, "what would mother think?"

"That I should confess, of course. But everybody knows, even the sun, that I like to torment these idiots. Look at them!" He bellowed with laughter, the Stickmen as funny to him now as the first time he'd seen them. "Well, maybe one day Uncle Andrew will finally convert them," he added sarcastically, "though the devil might have more fun with them."

"Okay, watch them, but listen to me: There might be a riot in town and mother is home breaking dishes."

"Not again."

"It's my fault."

"You always think things are your fault when they never have the slightest thing to do with you. That's a sin of pride if you ask me."

"I passed out pamphlets announcing the holiday changes."

"They've made the changes? What are they?"

"Christmas on the Fourth of July, starting this year."

"Ha!"

"Not everyone is so happy about it."

"They'll get over it."

"I started this mess."

"Did you write the pamphlet?"

"No."

"The Changing of the Holidays has been coming for a while. It's just another distraction."

Arturo watched a man below tackle another, then pretend to stab him with the stick. The second man made a great show of screaming, grabbing his sides, thrashing and rolling, but there was nothing wrong with him (island historians had recorded that the game was played with stabbing until the mid-1920's, when the violence mysteriously ceased).

Suddenly Michael was staring not at the Stickmen, but to the east, at the sea

"I'll be goddamned," Michael said.

Arturo turned to see. "Oh —"

A gray monster of metal was gliding by the island as if it had emerged from a slit in the horizon, its

huge gun barrels as conspicuous as the American flags. A battleship, but why here and now? It moved silently, which seemed impossible given its size; Arturo always imagined that such an object, which appeared all the more unnatural in its dwarfing of the island, would move with the sound of a collapsing factory, creaking and scraping and shrieking, but there was nothing, not even the lapping of the waves.

"You don't still have your radio?" Arturo asked.

"Of course not."

It was the first time in many months that Arturo had missed having access to the news. All of the island's radios (with the exception of the President's, people assumed) had been turned in at the request of the President and then presumably destroyed. At first, this had depressed Arturo, but soon he came to feel lighter, almost airy, like the island itself. It was as if thousands of people had occupied his mind like invited but eventually unwanted guests, and then one day without a word packed their bags and left.

"You don't think it's coming here?" Michael asked.

"It would have turned towards us long ago. It's going somewhere else. We're not very important to America."

"I wonder where it's going?"

Arturo turned to look at the Stickmen, who had dropped their sticks and stood gaping at the battleship.

"Come to town with me," Arturo said. "Maybe things have quieted down. We have shopping to do. It's almost Christmas."

"What should we get for mother?"

"I think she could use a new set of dishes."

But later that night, Arturo and Michael walked home emptyhanded, the shops having closed early as a precaution, though things apparently had not erupted into a fullblown riot. Still, they took their time getting home; neither wanted to face Christina and both hoped she would be asleep when they arrived. For now, things were quiet, the horizon bereft of battleships, the moon full and round and yellow as a lemon.

"Strange to have two Christmases in a year," Arturo said. "I wish I were a child. But it's all crazy. I should quit now."

"That wouldn't look good, lasting only a day on your first job."

Finally they reached home. When Michael opened the door, Christina was snoring. The two brothers tiptoed through the shards of china into the bedroom they shared. They laid on their beds and stopped talking. Unable to sleep, Arturo thought of the battleship, knowing it would never engage in war over such a place as this. It had simply passed back through the slit in the sky.

The next day, Christina made the usual breakfast, setting down the dishes with force insufficient to break them but enough to signal that she remained outraged. At the same time, the room was too bright with the sun. Arturo felt as if he had someone else's hangover (he had not drunk since he was 15, when at a family party he consumed -- at his brother's insistence -- so much gin that he jokingly lifted his mother's skirt).

"It's a lie," she said, refilling his glass of orange juice. "The President is a jackass."

Michael suppressed a laugh.

"And you," she said, "are a jackass to work for this so-called government. Do you guys ride around in clown cars, honking horns and spraying seltzer water in each others' faces? Because that's what I imagine when I think of your new job. At first I was proud of you, but I didn't know this is what they meant by changing the holidays. I thought they meant making new holidays. We can always use those. But not this."

"Mother --"

She began collecting the plates and setting them in the sink. She turned the water on and the pipes whistled and now she was yelling. Michael stood and left without a word. Arturo was stranded beneath his mother's arms; with plates in both hands she gesticulated wildly. "You're quitting, right? Tell me you're going to quit now that you know their insane plan."

"How would it look if I quit? The whole island would think I can't stick to anything. I'll never work again."

"That's stupid. What if the army ordered you to charge a kindergarten? Do you think people would blame you for leaving the army? No."

"Just listen --"

"I won't listen. I won't celebrate Christmas in July. You tell your boss I won't be coming."

"You have to."

"No, I don't. I'll celebrate Christmas in December and in July I'll stay home and pray that God comes down and cuts that bastard's head off."

When Arturo arrived at work, he did not even have to go into the building to find the Director, for there was his superior, sitting outside on the ground, several empty bottles of wine at his feet. His mouth was stained with the wine. His eyes looked as though he had just been either laughing or crying but then, as he saw Arturo, he wiped his mouth clean and stood quite easily and steadily. "Would you dispense of those bottles?" he asked Arturo, who at once tossed them in the garbage bin at the side of the building and then followed the Director inside.

"Arturo, preparations have begun for the Christmas feast at the center of town. How does this make you feel?"

"Well, I ---"

"And your family will be there?"

"That's one thing I wanted to ---"

"It is commanded that everyone attend, so I'll save you the trouble of explaining what I already know: Of course your family will attend. After all, how would it look if the President were to strut onto his balcony and give his usual magnificent speech to a few stragglers? We might just as well invite the Stickmen. Anyway, we've already sent couriers with invitations. They will wait until the invitations are open and read by the homeowner and then immediately collect the R.S.V.P.'s. It shouldn't take people long to decide between one choice, should it? No. And then tomorrow, tomorrow -- why, tomorrow will be Christmas, and I believe that the President has a special gift for everyone, every single one of us. That is the kind of man the President is, kind and gentle and above all generous. Yes. I would only warn you ---"

At that moment three guards rushed into the room, their bloodred uniforms in startling contrast to the white walls. Two of the men gathered and bound the wrists of the Director, who did not resist, but only slumped in their arms. Meanwhile, a third guard unravelled a shoddy looking document with numerous crossed out passages. "The President proclaims Arturo Giggli --- Giuchici --- the Acting Director in the -- in the Mission of the -- in the Mission of the Charging -- in the Mission of the Changing of Holidays." With that, they departed.

Arturo, standing beside a shadow of himself, looked into that shadow and decided it must contain more substance than his own body. He sat in the chair the Director had occupied the day before. He felt utterly weightless.

Papers, he now noticed, lay about the room like crashlanded birds, crumpled and stranded. The word he wanted to speak had not and could not be been invented; it would consist of all the names for God and all the curses from every language and culture combined into one guttural expression. The lack of that word could not at this moment be made up for by a simple "goddamn", and so he said nothing.

Just then his uncle, Father Andrew Giuchici, walked into the room and slapped a pamphlet on the table. "Your mother is very disappointed in you, and so am I," he said, clearly more Father than Uncle Andrew.

"You don't understand. It's all been dropped in my lap. I don't even know what's happened and now I'm the Director."

"That's outrageous. You're just a boy. You must abdicate your position immediately."

"There's no one to abdicate it to."

"Then you must contact the President and resign."

Arturo rubbed his eyes with his palms. "I don't have the means to contact the President."

"Arturo, Arturo! Ach. What is the word I want?"

Arturo leaned over and grabbed a handful of the balled up papers, then began unfolding them. "Maybe one of these has the number. My office has a telephone, though I've noticed it never rings; they simply barge in and arrest. I'm probably next."

"Well, Arturo, it would be best if you telephoned and offered to see an adjunct of the President in person, but otherwise you could send a note to the palace. That's exactly what I have done."

"Exactly what you've done?"

"Yes," Father Andrew said, "a note explaining that the church cannot participate in this so-called Christmas. Of course not. Of course it can't. I would be defrocked." He picked up the pamphlet once again, then tossed it amongst the papers on the floor. "Now I must disappear. The doors of the church are locked. Don't worry -- I have friends in the army and they will protect me. I'll send word to your brother and, if you like, you may join me. We'll be safe, at least as safe as possible under the circumstances."

As his uncle walked out the door, Arturo wished more than ever that he had a father, especially a powerful father who could do something such as step in and have a word with a few important people, a quiet, discreet word that would correct everything without the slightest conflict or trouble to anyone at all. At least that is how Arturo imagined it might have occurred. Unfortunately, his father had died during the 1925 revolution. Apparently he had gotten drunk the morning of an important battle and tripped and fell on his own bayonet.

Thus, it was necessary for Arturo to pretend he knew the sound of his father's voice and improvise a few words of advice from the grave. The voice he imagined was sometimes gruff and sometimes smooth, depending on the occasion. It's tone could be patient, demanding, cajoling or bossy. In a way, all fathers were Arturo's father, and then again none were. And so he conjured this voice and it said to him, or he made it say, "Arturo, do what you think is best."

"Do what I think is best?" Arturo said. "Jesus Christ, what good is that?"

But his father did not reply. He was in a bad mood today. Perhaps some ghost had poked the scar on his belly or possibly he was still hungover from the night before he died; time might stretch and bend in new ways up there. It might even be a kind of purgatory, a decades long hangover in which to atone for wasting his life in a drunken accident on the battlefield.

Well, what could he expect? His father's advice usually came in the form of wellworn phrases like, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." His father was no poet; nor was his son.

After rifling through waste paper for another half hour, Arturo decided the only thing to do was send a note to the palace.

To the President:

Though I of course humbly appreciate my appointment as Director in the Mission of the Changing of Holidays, I cannot in honesty accept that appointment. My sheer inexperience, matched with a natural timidity, cannot allow me to properly execute my tasks. I respectfully ask that you assign a replacement as soon as possible, for my good, your good and the good of the Island Republic.

Arturo Giuchici

Since the couriers were already busy delivering the invitations to Christmas, Arturo hand delivered the note. It was, he realized, quite possibly more a suicide note than letter of resignation. He wondered if his uncle had unintentionally delivered his nephew into the commission of a mortal sin.

Arturo left the door to the offices unlocked; what was there to steal? After dropping the note into a guard's hand, he walked through town. Upon seeing his face, people shook their heads in disgust, crossed themselves, or snickered. The groups of couriers passing by were, curiously, empty-handed, and paid him no attention. Certainly no one saluted Arturo or offered the slightest sign of respect -- he would not have expected them to do so, and would have been embarrassed if they had, yet he could not tolerate the mocking sneers he inspired. It was as if they knew he was going to hell and felt not pity or disgust but a vicious pleasure in his fate.

Finally, like the day before, he escaped into the trees, where it was cooler, and the birds and the monkeys and the snakes gave him only cursory glances, filled not with contempt but that peculiar animal humor.

He continued along the trail that led deeper and deeper into the jungle. It was the long route to the area of the Stickmen, but he wasn't planning on going there. Actually, he had nowhere to go at the moment; certainly not home. He was stuck in the clock, feet dangling, with nothing to do but spin around the dial.

Then he saw another group of couriers coming towards him. They were talking quite loudly, almost chanting, but their voices echoed and he could not understand a word until they approached and nearly bowled him over, singing what sounded like a nursery rhyme: "We're done with this job, this job... We're done with this job, this bullshit job!"

He turned around to face their backs; they hadn't even noticed him. "Hey!" he shouted.

They stopped and looked back. "What do you want?" one of them asked.

"I'm the Director of the --"

"We know who you are. You're the Director of blasphemy and we're your drunken couriers. We don't celebrate your holidays, we invent our own. And this is Drunken Courier Day, so fuck you!"

They danced off towards town, where they would probably be arrested.

Finally, he decided to go home; he was too tired to continue walking and would simply have to bear his mother's yelling. When he arrived, however, a pair of soldiers awaited him, the first resting against the door, blocking Christina, who was banging on the other side of the door. "You let me see my son! You're not arresting him."

"I told you," the man blocking the door said, "we're not here to arrest him."

"What's going on?" Arturo asked. "Are you taking me to prison?"

"Don't be absurd," the other guard said. "The President wants to see you. We're here to escort you."

"I'll wait here," the guard at the door said. "I'll keep your mother company."

Arturo walked off with the guard, confident the tradition of respecting women would be honored — in most cases, a woman committing any first offense short of murder was merely fined. At any rate, Michael would soon return from berating the Stickmen.

The President's quarters were spectacular, the floors covered in priceless Persian rugs, the walls filled with murals by Salvador Dali, who, it had been reported, was a distant ancestor of the President. In the many aquariums, coral creatures floated in languor. Above each doorway hung the new flag with its cracked egg. Meanwhile, through the curtains in the study and past the balcony stretched a vista of the entire town. It was on that balcony that the President had given his three previous speeches with their poetic, stirring and, as far as Arturo had been able to tell, utterly meaningless rhetoric; however, it could not be denied that stability had returned to the island, even if, in the past few days, it seemed to be dissipating.

Arturo, again impaled on the clock, had been left alone. Guards stood on the opposite side of the doors. It was another half hour before the doors swung open and the President entered the room.

He was an awkwardly poised man, but moved with such an obvious self-consciousness that there was nothing whatsoever natural about him. Undoubtedly, this explained why he appeared publicly only on the balcony, which concealed much of his body.

He wore a handlebar mustache in the manner of his relative Dali; however, the ends pointed downward. It surprised Arturo that the man was so tall, at least six feet and several inches. All of these features lent the President a cinematic quality, larger than life, as if on a screen. He wore a heavy amount of cologne, perfumed as a garden of overripe fruit. He walked past Arturo, sat in the chair behind his desk, and folded his white-gloved hands.

"Arturo... Giuchici," he said, "of the same lineage as the priest." He looked downward at his hands, wishing, Arturo guessed, to appear as if he were thinking of the most difficult things. "The priest," he repeated. "The President is a friend of the Church." He twirled the end of his mustache. "Even the great Salvador was a friend of the Church. Yet the Father makes things impossible for me at an already impossible time." He removed his gloves and dropped them on the desk. "These are impossible times and they can only be met with impossible reactions. Impossible holidays, for one, such as Christmas and the Fourth of July on the same day. These are the types of things the times require. Are they necessarily logical? No, they are not. Still, they may be more logical than logic."

The President is giving a practice speech, Arturo thought.

"The Director with whom you so briefly worked was inadequate to the task. His pamphlet was meant to delight the people, to present them with a holiday abundant as a pregnant woman. Instead, he merely riled them up, the last thing we needed. No, what we need our people to be awash in grand schemes, fireworks and erotic interludes. The birds should sing the opera as they fly overhead. Petals should drip hallucinogens and opiates. We should bathe in the light of Christmas bulbs, a blurry, nocturnal dream. But no, the Director insisted on speaking to them realistically, the way a typewriter would talk."

"Can I be honest, sir?"

"Honest?"

"I believe the people, if my mother is any indication, found the moving of Christmas Day to be a -- well, a blasphemy."

The President stood and walked to the window. Arturo saw him now from the exact opposite perspective as the one he had on the three prior occasions. The President then turned back towards the desk and lifted a heavy chalice, turning it in his hands, studying the minute design.

"I know, Arturo, I know. It has not been explained properly. In fact, it should not have been explained at all. If the people guessed that the celebration was a joining of Christmas and the Fourth of July -- which they never would have, of course, since who would have believed we would attempt such a thing -- then so be it. However, it need never have been made manifest. Anyway, my first point was a bit more subtle than the Director was capable of understanding, for I wished to mock the United States, even if it was a secret insult. That first and foremost. Secondly, I intended to imply that we, the Island Republic, could determine when and how to celebrate the birth of our Lord. That was the second point. And the third point was the most important of all."

The President uncorked a bottle of wine, filled the chalice and drank from it, probably, Arturo surmised, toasting himself. He then offered the cup to Arturo, who shook his head.

"You see, my compatriot, the island is evolving. Hence," he motioned to the flag that hung from the balcony, "our moniker, the egg. We are in the process of being reborn, or perhaps we are reaching the adult stage in which we will no longer be led by the hand by our mother, America. We are cutting our purse strings. But doing so is dangerous. My position, though popular, is weaker than it appears."

"And so, like a magician, I must for the moment rely on sleight of hand. I am forced into trickery, to deceive the eye of the public, lest my foes oust me. Later, I will be able to reveal a true miracle, one that has nothing to do with illusion. Until then, I cannot be honest."

"The Changing of the Holidays was only a ruse?"

"Not entirely; as I said, it was meant to symbolize something mysterious, to play upon the symbols that lie at the source of our island's existence. But I admit that's secondary. At any rate, the problem now is that the plan has backfired. My couriers have quit; the church refuses to cooperate. Most troubling of all is the army, which remains more loyal to the Church, I'm afraid, than the government."

"Is this the beginning of a revolution?"

"It is even more serious, I'm afraid. Just the other day, we cut diplomatic ties with the United States. It was a purely symbolic gesture. We mean nothing to them besides a few dollars in trade. Yet they send that battleship by as a prank, a needle in my ribs. Jesus Christ that irks me!"

"And that's why radio was banned?"

"Not exactly. It was banned because when the food prices rise sharply, which will happen any day now, the radio might tell the people why. And then we're back to where we started."

"They have a right to know. This is a democracy. "

"Not any more it isn't!" the President shouted. "Now enough with explanations. What I want you do is find that goddamned uncle of yours and tell him that if he does not publicly endorse the new holiday, I will be forced to order the slaughter of the Stickmen, whose souls he's been trying to recruit for so many years. If there's anything that will keep the army on my side, it's glory easily won on the battlefield."

That night as Arturo half-slept, hoping his dreamy mind might conjure a solution, he indeed had a long and not altogether disturbing dream in which Uncle Andrew delivered a letter from God (this time the message was written on an illuminated page that sparkled like the night sky):

To the Director of Holidays:

I have received word of your struggles and thought that a few words might benefit you. First of all, I understand your reluctance to act; you are surrounded by men of very different mindsets who all believe that they, unlike you, are of clear and definite minds, capable of acting, while you remain mired in doubts and cannot decide upon a course of action.

But how to decide on what the people need? For example, capitalists tend to believe I hid stock tips in the Bible. Old ladies believe I am like that nice young man in the grocery store checkout line. Old men think I am bitter but in certain shades of sunlight I will smile and remember, remember. This is the God people wish me to be; in a way, I am all of these Fathers, and then again none.

I also understand your current predicament and, while I have nothing specific to offer, will tell you this: I am often asked why I cannot stop the world's suffering. Well, actually, I can stop the world's suffering; the problem is that for me to do so, I would first have to cause more suffering than the world has endured in all time. So you see my predicament.

When Arturo awoke from this dream, he was laughing so loud that Michael was already awake and staring at him.

"Do you know where Uncle is?" Arturo asked, still chortling.

"As a matter of fact, I do. He is down in the valley not far from the Stickmen; he felt they might be in some kind of danger."

"He must have known," Arturo said. "Come on, let's go."

"But it's not even light yet."

"All the better."

They both threw on the same clothes they had worn the night before. Michael kept asking what had been so funny, but Arturo only answered, "You wouldn't think it's funny."

When they ran out the door, Arturo noticed there were no gifts in the kitchen, as there would be if it

were Christmas. Thought not surprised, he was relieved his mother had not succumbed to any pressure to celebrate. She would do exactly as she had promised, praying for the President's decapitation.

Now they ran through the jungle, which as always began to awake before most people. In the human silence one could hear so much life that it was as if all the other possible sounds of creation were playing in God's ear, and yet here were these animals and insects, opening their eyes to the faint slivers of light that appeared above through the umbrella of trees. The millions of invisible, microscopic lives too, knew nothing of the island's unnatural human drama. They had no President. They did not vote.

By the time Arturo and Michael approached the land of the Stickmen, fog was rolling from the mouth of the valley. They followed the trail to the ridge and now, for the first time, continued down the hillside, past where the trail ended. They darted between trees and the slope increased to such an incline that Arturo almost lost his balance. Gravity pulled them both towards the bottom until they stumbled onto the flat land. The fog had thinned and they could see further, all the way to the circle of Stickmen, who were surrounded by several hundred soldiers.

Arturo walked ahead of Michael and approached the backs of the soldiers, who slowly turned to look at him with expressions of disregard. He weaved between the men. Though some muttered mild protests, they seemed aware of his status as a government official and let him pass towards the center.

Suddenly, some of the soldiers in front began shouting, "Don't do it!" Arturo could hear the pained grunts of someone ahead. As he pushed aside the last few rows, weaving between the ribbons of soldiers, he found himself amongst the band of Stickmen, who parted not out of fear but the inability to see above the taller Arturo.

Now he saw what the others were watching: A lone Stickman held the blade of a stick against his uncle's neck, a trace of blood visible just above the Adam's apple. Arturo could not believe this Stickman was so close to violence after all these years, especially against the priest, who had learned their language and was the only outsider ever to offer assistance.

"Stay back," his uncle whispered as Arturo approached. "He thinks he's the devil. He said -- he says what an interesting character I've been telling him about, this devil. Now he wants to play act the part."

The Stickman's hand was steady with the knife, but his eyes were fearful. He looked back and forth across the lines of soldiers. The other Stickmen stood with their backs to the army; they knew they could not possibly win. Still, there were more shouts and the soldiers were beginning to jostle about, as if ready to charge. Then, one of the men in the very first row lowered the rifle from his shoulder and in one quick thrust shoved his bayonet into the back of a Stickman, who instantly fell.

There was an awful silence then; it was as quiet as the moon. The Stickmen looked at each other; Some of the soldiers motioned not to move, while others brought their rifles down, ready to plunge into the group of Stickmen. For several seconds no one had looked at the priest, but then in a raspy voice he said, "He's letting me go," and when Arturo looked over, his uncle had already been released by his captor.

"When that soldier stabbed the Stickman, this one said --" Father Andrew cleared his throat. "-- this one said that they always do the opposite of us." He tried to laugh, but could not. He spit some

blood out and then reached for Arturo's hand. "If we threaten violence, they turn to peace, and vice versa."

All of the soldiers kneeled.

Father Andrew whispered to Arturo, "Tell them I said there must be no bloodshed amongst the people, that they should remain here, and trust in the Director."

When Arturo entered the palace, there were of course no guards or couriers; all posts were empty. Winding his way through the corridors, he heard only his own footsteps. Then he entered the President's quarters.

"Where have you been?" the President asked flatly, as if his wife had just come home after an unexplained absence.

"I've been --"

The President held up his hand. "Never mind. I have prepared my words carefully this morning. While I have no army or church or people -- everyone has boycotted me -- will you at least sit amongst the invisible stars and planets and with them pretend to listen to me?"

Arturo nodded. The President stood and walked to the balcony, while Arturo followed a few feet behind.

"My friends, my people, we have finally been reborn. Fragments of eggshell lay all about us. We have emerged under our own God, in independence from the United States of America."

The words echoed through the streets. In the distance, laughter could be heard. Over the shoulder of the President, Arturo saw a few people wander into the streets. One of them was Father Andrew, who walked straight towards the balcony and stopped beneath the President, staring up at him.

"Father --"

Arturo's hand was on the chalice. He did not know for what he hoped; he was certain the priest could not prevent the growing mob, nor the army, which could not be far behind, from attacking the President.

"You've confused our faith in something more than you for disloyalty," Father Andrew said.

"I only meant to --"

"Your sleight of hand has fooled only you. Still," the father said, looking up at the President, "your dreams must have been quite beautiful to you."

"They were," he replied. "They certainly were the most beautiful dreams."

It seemed time, and Arturo did what he had to do with a compassionate precision. When the

chalice fell out of his hand and the President tumbled backwards, Arturo could only stand in the morning light, silent. He thought for some time and said, "Yes, I see the predicament now."

Then he walked to balcony, as the people were calling the new President's name.

Ukrainamerica

All the while I was growing up, Alex (my father is dead and I will call him what I want; I control things here) liked to roll the names of midwestern United States on his tongue: "Ohio," he would say, or, "Nebraska, Kansas," his ridiculous pronunciation making them sound like exotic planets. He told me when he said their names he imagined souls blowing across the plains. Then he would show me these states on a map. Then he would sit back in his chair and drink the coffee and smoke the cigarette. Then he would fall asleep in the chair, mumbling the names of obscure saints, snoring, dreams blowing out his nose. Then while he slept I would whisper to him, "Instead of me I could be an American girl, you know, dreaming of what it's like to be a Ukrainian girl." It happened exactly this way every night, until everything changed and the fable of the Kazlouskas took its mysterious turn.

It started with rumor, followed by intrigue and backdoor dealings, until finally of course communist theory and then communist practice fell apart. Even though I followed things on television and in the papers, the events leaked out of my mind. The past and present became interchangeable. Just as Alex's days at the factory had once stumbled one day into the next, so the factories began to close, ten folding into nine, nine into eight and so on until the husks of factories hung in the blue sky like broken-necked criminals.

One day I found a job at the brand new McDonalds. Alex stayed home or wandered the streets, smoking incessantly, trying to set himself on fire. He would visit me at the restaurant. "What is this goddamn music?" he'd ask, and I tried to explain the American love songs. "It's soothing," I said, because someone had told me the music was supposed to be soothing. "It doesn't soothe me," he said. "It makes me want to carve my fucking ear canals out of my skull."

"Daddy, it's a restaurant and they play music. It's an American restaurant so they play American music. If you buy enough hamburgers they give you a free cassette of the music and then the people who make the music get money from McDonald's, or something like that."

"This is not the Ohio I dreamed of. This is a nightmare."

"I have to make the french fries. The manager is coming."

He left and I stood there a moment wondering if this was how an American girl standing behind the counter at McDonalds in Ohio would feel -- were we interchangeable? I wanted to find a penpal in Ohio and ask her questions about fathers; were they all so ridiculous? I caught my breath; it was trying to run away from me again. After I caught it, I thought some more about this American girl.

When I got home he was on his knees in the living room. I had never seen him pray. He said, "What the hell should I pray for? I've got every goddamn thing I asked for." He was silent for a minute and then he turned around and looked at me. He stood and dusted off his pants.

"What should we do tonight?" he asked.

"I'm going out with a few friends from work."

"Going out where?"

"To a club?"

"What kind of club?"

"A club."

"To hear that music?"

"Not that music, but still American music."

I wrote my name, "Ann Carol", at the top of the page. Then I took the assignment sheet and where it said, "I am _____", I wrote, "Anna Kazlouska, daughter of Alexander Kazlouska", and where it said, "I live in _____", I wrote "Ukraine". I put down that I was 20 years old and that I worked in McDonalds (just like me in real life). I didn't even know if they had McDonalds in the Ukraine. To tell the truth, I found the name Kazlouska in a telephone book. I didn't even know if it was a Russian name, much less a Ukranian name. In fact, I found the Ukraine by closing my eyes and sticking my finger on the map.

I had to research the place I was supposed to be from, so I looked up newspaper stories. I didn't understand much except the economy was changing and a lot of Americans were investing. Anyway, when I thought of the Ukraine, I saw one of those decorations you pick up and shake and then it snows.

After filling in all the details, I began to see this Anna. Sometimes I could even think like her. I would lean across the counter at McDonalds, pretending I was her, thinking of people working in America, wondering if they liked it better or worse. Her breath would try to run away with starfish and boys spilling out its pockets and she would have to take a deep breath to keep everything that belonged to her inside.

I knew I'd outgrow all of this sooner or later but I had fun imagining. I controlled everything.

I named my imaginary American friend "Ann Carol" -- it sounded American. I was thinking more and more about her lately. My father was driving me crazy and it helped to think in different voices when I found him sitting with his head against the window saying, "Well if you're not going to give me something to pray about then I don't know what the fuck you want." While I had to comfort him, Ann would say, "This is bullshit. He's praying like a lunatic. God will kill him for that."

What is it that makes fathers get this way? He was acting more and more desperate and saying awkward things wherever he went. Neighbors were stopping by and asking me, "Why does Alex say our souls are flying away?"

Then he went around to all the stores and restaurants, harassing the managers. "Why do you play this shit? Can't you play our music or even Russian music? This music makes me want to die." I had only heard about this, but I didn't have to see it happen to know the looks he must have gotten, nor that people were saying, "No son of mine is going to be seen with Anna, daughter of the lunatic Alex Kazlouska." I could imagine the stories they were inventing about me.

Soon, he came to believe the American music was a sign, and his religious visions began. He never spoke of them, but I found his diaries one day when I was cleaning his room. He must have kept his diaries hidden all these years. This one was titled "Volume 24". I only dared read a few passages before replacing it beneath the fold of the blankets (he would bark at me later for not making his bed, but if I had made the bed, how then would I have hidden the diary without him knowing that I had found and probably read it?).

"June 1. This morning, as I lay almost awake but not yet thinking, I dreamed my wife was on her knees, kissing, suckling even, the toes of one of those managers, while tiny, nearly invisible angels buzzed in and out of her ears. She swatted them away like flies. Meanwhile, I was conducting the music that played behind them -- that is always playing everywhere -- puppet strings attached to my limbs being snapped and tugged by the President of the United States, who wore a Christlike robe and glowed like an apparition."

"June 5. Wearing a costume fashioned of black, oiled feathers and helmet shaped like a bird's head, the beak a spindle, I climb to the roof of the apartment and shout in an unintelligible language full of holy meaning. Then I swoop down over the crowds in the street, slashing the fleeing shoppers with my beak, the flapping of my wings creating hurricane winds, buildings collapsing everywhere."

I summoned Ann, who traipsed through the door with a kind of glide, as if on roller skates, mocking the solemnity of the moment. How much easier it must be for Americans, I thought, turning towards her. She merely held her finger to my mouth, shushing me, and then giggled, as though this were the most common, the most everyday occurrence imaginable, not to be worried about any more than a ruined basket of fries.

"Oh Anna," she said, "just a single n's difference between our names and yet here you are, a crazy little school girl running away from kooties. A school cat, scratching at everything with your paws, just about to jump straight out of your fur..." She talked as though narrating a film made for children. She was starting to get on my nerves.

After our projects were graded (mine received a "B+"), we were given the option to become penpals with someone from the country we had chosen. At first, I thought I would try to find a girl named Anna. However, I felt I already knew my Anna and, to be honest, we were growing a little tired of each other; we didn't have much to talk about and we began to argue -- if you can argue with an imaginary friend. After a while I simply forgot about her. I had real friends right here in America and I don't know why I got so mixed up thinking about another girl in another place all the

time. I suppose I thought someone from somewhere else might understand things better, like a psychologist or something.

Anyway, if you're wondering, I stayed in Ohio right on through college and though I'm not married yet, I expect to marry one day, and when I do, you can be sure that we will live our lives in Ohio, as I am quite sure that anything you might find anywhere else in the world you can find right here in Ohio.

After my father went completely mad, he had to spend many months in the hospital before he finally died. Fortunately, there was no music in the hospital and he passed his last days quite peacefully, though most of that peace was the result of heavy sedation.

At any rate, he arranged to complete his will before he went certifiably insane, even managing to have it witnessed by not one but two distant relatives (that is, they lived far enough outside of town not to have heard the rumors). I do believe that Ann was looking over my shoulder when I read the words: "For Anna, I have arranged to have all of my savings and my few assets liquidated and converted into an airline ticket to America. You might as well go there, as it is already here. Signed with love, Papa Alex Kazlouska."

Fizz

I'm sitting in Ray's Bar at 12:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve. In the mirror behind the liquor bottles I see my bushy hair, a pair of teardrop wire rims and a Raiders jersey -- not a pretty picture. That's when I decide to change my style. I tell myself, that's what it's about now: style. I even thought about changing my name to Ray Style. It sounded good to me. Hip.

I'm in this new place 'cause it's called Ray's -- same as my first name, Ray. Figure it'd make a good pickup line. Like some hot girl asks, "What's your name honey?" and I say, "It's Ray, just like the bar we're in." Then she slaps her hand on the bar, cracking up.

Now I start drinking faster. Pretty soon the bar's glowing orange and red and pink and everything's blinking, bottles fizzing. My mind's going super fast and I feel like I'm gonna spin out and I sit there grinning, looking around at people, grinning, maybe talking to myself a little and then laughing, grinning. It was a funny time. I had a good time.

After a while, the bartender grabs my arm and says, "Hey you, let's go, white boy. Come on, get out of here." I say, "Okay, okay," thinking, "Hey pops, I should dot your eye."

I take off out the door and then I'm pimp walking down the street like I got billiard balls up my ass, the whole town looking like a cartoon. The cars whiz by and the air goes through my skin. I'm still wearing Hush Puppies but sweet Jesus I feel cool. My name should be Ice Ray.

When I get home I crawl into bed and I already feel like I got three, four women in bed with me. I can smell their perfume and they're saying, "Ray, oh Ray," and I fall asleep with a big smile, the stars winking at me singing, "Oh Ray, oh Ray, oh Ray."

Next day I'm strutting by the shops, my reflection popping and bending in the store windows. I go in a few places -- bam -- see the prices and I'm already thinking no way is this gonna happen, no way. The sun struck a damn match on my dream and now it's burning up.

I got rent \$600 a month to live in my neighborhood, which isn't a great neighborhood but you could do worse. You go with the cockroaches and maybe you get down to \$250 a month. That's when I figure it out: The only house that matters is the clothes on my back. That's gonna be my roof now. And if I cut the rent to buy some threads and some hot girl says, "Let's go back to your place," all I got to say is, "Let's go to yours."

Later that day I take the bus to the east side. It's mostly black over there. Well, with my personality some people believe I think I'm better than everybody else but Ray Style don't think he's better than nobody else. But then I step off the bus and the first thing that happens is some black kid points at me and says to his friend, "Check out that monkey head lookin' motherfucker," and they both start laughing. I turn around and flash them the peace sign and they start rolling on the sidewalk, laughing even harder. I don't get the joke so I just move on.

I knew I'd find places to rent so I didn't bother checking out the want ads. After about an hour and a half I find a little building, square and orange with green eavestroughs. Funny thing is it's only a half-mile from Ray's Bar, so I guess I belong here. And to prove it, here's a guy locking the front door with a loop full of keys in his hand.

"Hey, you the landlord?"

He turns around, takes a cigar out of his mouth and says, "Huh?"

"You the landlord?"

"Yeah why?"

"Your sign says room for rent."

He looks at the sign. "I don't know, man. You got a job?"

"Sure I got a job. Plus my dad left me a bunch of money. I got it in the bank."

"What job you got, then? I need to know the rent's on time every month."

"Well I guess I don't got one right now but like I said --"

"I don't know," he says, shaking his head. "You got proof of that money in the bank?"

"Sure I do." I take my bank book out of my back pocket and hand it to him. "It's a little torn up, see, because I --"

He flips through it, looks up at me, flips through it. "Your daddy rich or what?"

"Not rich. He took a ton of insurance out, I mean like a ton, when I was a baby and what's he do but

die three weeks after I'm born."

"Jesus Christ. Well, I don't know man. I mean, you talk kind of funny. You all right?"

"I talk funny?"

"Like some kind of cartoon or something."

"That's just my style."

He puts his hands on his hips, sighs. "All right, I'll show you the place. It's not in too good of shape, though."

He opens the door and we go up a long flight of lime green stairs. "Can't you afford a better neighborhood than this?" he asks.

"I only get so much money a month and I'm doing me a new budget."

He opens the door and he's right -- it isn't much. There's some holes in the walls about fist size and some of the wallpaper's peeling. I'm looking around for bugs mostly. I don't like bugs.

"What about bugs?" I ask.

"No bugs. Nobody ever complained about 'em anyway. I get the place sprayed twice a year. If that's what you're worried about you won't have any problems."

I know I'm supposed to think, act smart, hem haw around about it, but instead I say, "All right."

He pauses, like he's supposed to think about it, except he wants to think about it and he does, I can see him doing it. "All right," he finally says. "Come back tomorrow at ten in the morning. You sign the lease, give me \$200 for the first month, another \$200 for the deposit. Then I'll give you the keys."

It's dusk the next day. Everything worked out fine and I'm moved in. I couldn't figure a way to get the furniture over from the old place so I just left it. It wasn't much anyway. I didn't have good taste when I bought it.

Now I'm looking out the window, waiting for night, trying to get a feel for the place. I brought a few crates I found on the street and I'm sitting on one. It's pretty comfortable. On the way over I stopped and bought one of those air mattresses. It crossed my mind that maybe you could fill it up with water and have a waterbed but then I suppose air works as good as water.

Figuring in the money I'd save on next month's rent, I had enough for some new clothes. They're laid out on the mattress: a pair of pants that look like the colors on a traffic light all mixed together, a green shirt slippery like a fish and a belt that wraps around just right and hangs down my leg. When you put them together it looks like I belong on one of those dance shows. I see myself kicking in the air, waving my hands, that kind of thing. Wave my hands in the air like I just don't

care.

Soon I'd change into the new clothes and kickstart the routine. I figured I'd hit the streets to old Ray's. Then I'd play it cool, just wait for the girls to come over and pick up my vibe. I already hear people in the corners, the ones shooting pool, and they all keep looking at each other saying, "Goddamn!"

Now I watch the second hand on the clock, and the space between its pointer and each little line marking the seconds gets wider and wider, like the day's gonna have to grab the night by its arm and yank it's hand, saying, "Get your ass in here." And then I look out the window and the sun's winning, inch by inch, 'cause the sun's sleepy, saying, "I'm tired of lighting up you sorry sons of bitches. Turn a goddamn light on."

Then, then, finally, it's dark and I put on those clothes. I kind of slip in not letting the edges of the folds touch me too much yet. I walk out the door and start down the street and then this next thing that happens, I tell you, and when it happened, and it's true, and when I began to see what I saw, and it's true, it's the genuine thing, like me, Ray, and I saw it...

See, all of a sudden the street turns supercolors. The buildings, they look like they're drawn on TV. And everything's lost a side of itself -- I mean it's all flat, but I'm still walking through it. And coming towards me is a group of black guys, and I'm not scared 'cause they look friendly enough. I even recognize some of them or at least they look exactly like people I've seen before on TV. There was Rudy and Mush Mouth and Weird Harold, that's their nicknames, plus some happy fat son of a bitch, but I can't remember the show they're from. And they're coming right at me. They sort of let me weave between them and then just for a second, right before they pass by me, I look down at myself, and I'm still me, Ray, but the rest is spinning around me, a zillion crazy colors. Then I look around and everything's back to normal, just like that. And those guys turn around, and they don't look nothing like they did before, they're completely different people, and the middle one says, "You want somethin'?" but I don't say a damn thing. I keep walking. I'm thinking, Ray, Ray, what the fuck was that?

I don't know, I'll tell you that. I don't know what it was. I should have asked those guys about it, said, "Hey, did you see that shit?" Asked them. I guess maybe some lunatic put some dope in his car's gas tank and drove around, trying to make everybody crazy with exhaust fumes.

So I stand there a while, looking around, I don't know, waiting for the goddamn Partridge Family bus to give me a ride. No dice.

I start off again to the bar only I ain't feeling so bright about the clothes anymore. The glow's off. I notice people looking at me and for now I don't like it too much. I know they're smiling not laughing at me but still.

Pretty soon though I start feeling a little better. I decide I might as well forget what happened. I gotta get a little whistle going inside. I'm real close to the bar and I can't go in there with a bad attitude. Not after all my hard work.

When I get there, I notice there's Christmas lights around the sign that sticks out from the roof, which don't make no sense. I look at them a minute. It's like they're reflecting my shirt, maybe talking to it. It's just that kind of night. Maybe it's National Bright Color Day or something.

I swing the door open and then all a sudden I'm looking at everybody, I mean everybody who's ever

been in the place 'cause it's packed up tight, and over the bar there's a banner that says, "Lordy, Lordy, Look Who's 40!" with a big picture of the other Ray taped to it.

Well I'm a little pissed at this point. I mean it's like everybody's trying to rip off my day. I don't ask for much but when a man changes his style it's customary for that man to receive some notice, something like, "You're a brand new man, Ray, a brand new man!" or words to that effect. Besides, these are my closest friends and everybody gets a birthday every year but this is a once, maybe twice in a lifetime event -- I mean maybe you could change your style every year but after while changing your style would become your style and there's no getting out of that rut.

I have to split hairs to get through the crowd and order my Long Island Iced Tea. When I get to the bar Ray's not making the drinks tonight -- he's got some skank taking care of that -- but he's standing back there, soaking it up, and he says to me, "Oh boy, oh boy, you again." So I get four Long Islands, just so he knows Ray Style's in town to stay.

When the drinks come, I decide to stay right where I'm at. I don't care if I'm in the way and how am I supposed to carry four drinks anyway? I take a good long drink of the first drink and feel it go down and it doesn't take long to start working on me. I drink the second one and now I'm in a whole new mood, feeling better than anybody in this place. And maybe nobody's noticed yet, seen my changes and where I'm going. But that's all right. I know it and they'll know it soon as they stop paying attention to Ray's stupid goddamn birthday. I'm just sitting looking at the skank, thinking how she doesn't even know how to make a drink, always flipping through a book for the recipes. What an idiot. Couldn't he hire somebody else who knows how to --

"What'd you just say, you monkey headed son of a bitch?" Ray says, cutting in on my thinking, which I'm not too happy about.

"I didn't say anything. I'm sitting here drinking, that's all."

"That skank is my wife," he said, pointing his thumb back at her.

"That's your opinion. I didn't say it."

"You're lucky this place is packed. Next time I'm throwing you out and this time is the last time. Keep your stupid thoughts to yourself, monkey head."

See what I mean? I'm thinking maybe he's psychic. How else could he know what the hell I'm thinking? And how am I supposed to keep all this shit straight? My whole plan is going wrong. Nobody can even see me in here. I should go home and try again tomorrow.

But I got drinks to drink and I might as well drink them. It takes a while longer to swallow these last two. I have to choke them back. I take a drink and look up at the ceiling and let the liquid roll down, then I shake my head a little, and I get a feeling like I'm on stage, everybody else below me, my head up in those lights, brain filling up with the light. Maybe my skin is gold now. Maybe if you cut me open diamonds would spill out and you could take one home as a souvenir, maybe swallow it so you could have just a little bit of me in you, sparkling.

Then I'm finishing off the last drink when this tall guy the size of two of me stacked bumps into my arm. I look up. I ain't stupid. I try to say I'm sorry but the guy starts laughing. "What have we got here?" he asks.

"Jimmy," Ray says from behind the bar, "this guy here's a little screwy. You do what you want with him."

"What are you, a soul brother?" Jimmy asks me.

"My name's Ray."

"You a rock star?"

"Ray, that's my name."

"You're standing in my way, Ray."

"Well I could --"

"Listen, Ray," he says, and then he grips my shoulders and he bends down until his teeth are even with my eyes and he says, "What kind of style you call this?"

"Ray Style."

"Well," he says, and he picks me up under the armpits, lifts me straight into the air and sits me on top of the bar. Now the place is quiet and he's standing in front of me, the back of his legs against my shoe tips. I hear the other Ray laughing, but his skank wife is going, "Shh, shh," like she's embarrassed for me.

Jimmy is shouting now. "Hey, everybody, this is what you call Ray style," and they all start applauding. "Look at the fine tailorship, the way the colors go together like a car slamming into the back of a bus. Pretty, ain't it?"

People start edging closer, trying to get a look.

"This guy's name is Ray. Ain't that funny? Just like the bar. Take a bow, Ray."

What am I gonna do? I have to stand up on the bar and I hear the other Ray say something, then Jimmy mutter, "It's all right. Watch."

Then I'm taking a bow. It's just like it's supposed to be.

"He should be a rock star, shouldn't he?" Jimmy asks, and the crowd starts whooping and people are yelling, "Rock star, rock star!" And now the whole place is in front of the bar ribboning out from me and I'm looking at them, taking it all in, when somebody pushes me from behind. "Get off my fucking counter."

I reel. I fall like a shot bird. I stretch my hands out and fall into a thousand hands that add up to one big hand cupping me there, holding me above, and then that hand unfolds and I fall out of its palm and the next thing I know they're tearing at my sleeves, my pants.

The liquor's killing me. I'm sliding in a blur through all these people and I try to catch their faces. It's beautiful the way everybody is smiling and I'm making their night, their whole year. And I know everybody's there, other rock stars and rap stars and blonde scarlet black girls and world famous comedians and sheiks, all of them circling around me, everybody with their tickets, tearing and

ripping, taking a piece of Ray. Go ahead, I say, take a little Ray, you deserve it.

I'm sinking to the floor, almost naked now when they back away, trying to give me a little space. In a second I'm flat on the floor and this movie star girl lifts her dress up and she sits right on top of me and yells out, "I never done a rock star before," and I lay there, not believing, it's too good to be true. And somebody yanks her off me and then I hear the champagne corks popping and everybody's laughing and I'm laughing, my head rolling. I'm hearing glasses clinking and I'm still laughing and people are stepping over me and I'm thinking what a day. I mean that was just the best day a guy could have and I'm just laying there saying thank you, thank you everybody. Thank you and good night.

The Kite Letters

The sun was in full view again, a burning lemon sour with heat, bubbling, fermenting. It is ugly to me. Unlike most people I cannot and will not sing odes to the sun or lie cancerous under it. I'm the sun's ex-lover, but it is not as bad as it sounds.

There was a time, many, many years ago, when the sun made me as happy as the moon now does. On morning walks I would sing its praises to every passerby: "Beautiful outside, isn't it?" If asked the same question, I would reply, "It certainly is! Good day to you, sir," or, if answering a lady, "It is almost as beautiful as you, my dear--almost!"

You cannot imagine the way I was back then. In fact, I admit it: I exaggerate. My memories are painted in the style of the 19th century; I always picture myself wearing a peculiar hat, while the women's skirts are so layered and ornate they cannot possibly have been worn by a member of my generation.

Perhaps such exaggeration reflects my thinking in those days, for I was a romantic. When young, I would fly kites, attaching to the strings the kind of love letters any girl would cherish. Yet I never addressed those letters. I simply let loose the string at the proper arc and they landed anonymously in the playground of St. Francis Junior Girls' School. Soon, I began flying the kites near St. Mary's Girls' High School, filling my letters with sensuous, erotic detail, ensuring those cherubs received a sexual education.

I had quite an imagination for a boy so inexperienced. Luckily my father, a divorcee with the harshest opinion of women, never found those letters. If he had, he would have immediately given me a thorough accounting of love and all its terror, complete with diagrams, equations, chalk, blackboard, a slideshow, educational newsreels. He would have stopped at nothing to prevent his son wandering the fields with kites and a lovesick heart--if he had known.

But those fields, speckled with wildflowers that rose and fell with the hills, irresistibly called me. Butterflies chased my kite, believing it the great mother of flight. Even the smell of the air intoxicated, as though soaked in alcohol; sometimes I imagined that if I reached out and pretended to squeeze the sky, red wine would gush between my fingers. It was a delirious place, the sun lighting the panorama as if it were the set of a Broadway musical.

When I wasn't escaping into reveries, I did attend school. To me, the only thing to recommend it was the presence of all those un-Catholic girls, so close to me I could almost smell their biological changes occurring. That was the benefit of public school, which I was only allowed to attend

because my father, once a devout Catholic, hated the church even more than women. "That priest should have warned me what kind of woman I was marrying," he once told me.

Nevertheless, my level of experience would have pleased him; I was a type young girls universally find unattractive. A boy like me, given to staring into blank spaces, especially clocks, only amused them. Often the teacher would call upon me and I would not even know it until he jabbed my arm. Then all the other students would laugh as I rubbed my arm and muttered, "Huh?"

If only my desire had not so thoroughly particularized, I might have been saved, but particularize it did. I can name the month, the day, the hour it happened: June 6 at 3:50 p.m.. It was cloudy, high temperature of 78 degrees, low of 69, humidity 88 percent. That's when the 17-year-old Polish-Mexican transfer from St. Mary's High entered the classroom.

The moment the door opened, every student broke into laughter at the sight of Marina Del Skubick still wearing her Catholic school uniform. Gossipers began devising outrageous tales of poverty. Hardly an hour passed before the rumors started circulating: the Skubick household slaughtered crows and robins for dinner; the father was a cocaine addict; for five dollars both parents let neighborhood boys watch them have sex; and so on. But that wasn't all. Marina was also burdened with an enormous nose and a pair of glasses that rode its tip as conspicuously as a whooping cowboy. She quickly became known as "Noseina Del Pubic."

The hatred she garnered only encouraged me. To parade through the halls with her would equal an insult to the public, an affront to social judgement. I hoped to buy her boxes of chocolates so she would balloon up like a dirigible. With her dark hair she might just grow a mustache, too. Yet I was so valiant, so full of chivalry, that I considered those "defects" lucky charms.

I began formulating my plan. Our classmates would run us out of school, and, being young castaways in love, we would reproduce profusely, overrunning the local population, filling the schools, naming the streets, creating cities, devouring the government. One day our land would split off from the country at large and, forged between Canada and the United States, draw its borders in the shape of a pregnant woman's belly. Then we would raise our flag. That is how I pictured things in those first Napoleonic hours of my love.

My luck continued: The only empty seat in the room was in front of mine. Now I could finally train myself not to stare at clocks. As Marina marched, head bowed, toward me, I looked away, hoping she noticed that unlike the others I regretted her humiliation. However, she sat down and sighed, long and windy. I imagined sailboats drifting in her exhalation as her black hair spread across the edge of my desk like feathers.

Mr. Hepburn tapped his map pointer on the blackboard, bringing the class to order. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "welcome our new friend, Marina Del Skubick," which brought another round of giggles and then a sharper rap of the pointer. "That's enough. Now, Miss Skubick, tell us your favorite subject?"

"I," she began in a high-pitched voice, "like astronomy."

"That's because she spends so much time on her back," the girl behind me whispered to another. "She's probably counted every star. Catholic girls are like that."

"You little bitches," I said to myself.

"What was that?" Mr. Hepburn said.

"The bitches behind me," I answered, unable to stop myself, "are insulting the new student."

The girl behind me slapped my neck as I was ordered to the principal's office. Then, with swift injustice, I was sent home for the day—after the episode was explained by telephone to my father. Then, when I arrived home, I received the following lecture:

"Defending the honor of a girl you don't even know? What have I taught you? For all you know, whatever those girls said was true. You might have been slandering them. I'm disappointed in you. All my efforts to make you into the kind of man who is not ridiculed by women. I bet she looks like your mother. Is she Catholic? You hate me, don't you? You probably imagine I'm the one in the wrong. I can picture the stories you've made up. Well, get them out of your head. I was not the adulterer. Is that what you think? What about you, huh? What do you want to be, an airplane pilot, movie star? Because I know. I can picture what you picture. I see it. It is an illness, a disease. Flowers do not love. That's what makes them lovely. But even now your mind is wandering. You're with her right now, in your mind, aren't you? Well, what's her name? You refuse to tell me? Maybe she thinks she is too good for you; that's why she won't tell you her name. Ha! See! Now you know what I mean. Hormones, that's probably what they blame it on in your school. Don't believe it. It's more than that. Horses have hormones. Do you see horses writing love letters? Because it is worse than biology. It involves psychology. I know you're laughing at me. A diabolic psychology. I wish I were an animal. An animal!"

That was all he could say. He broke into a cold stare, and I was dismissed. He was thinking of somewhere far away, or about death, or my mother, or both, or who could even guess, but it was something that left him unable to communicate. It was state he often talked himself into, but never out of.

I left the room and wound my way around the stairs to the second floor. I sat on the bench, facing the window, and gazed across our yard to the fields beyond. At 4:00 p.m. I saw in the distance my fellow students streaming out of school, a river of handholders, kissers, fondlers, grabbers, gigglers. It seemed every third body was somehow connected to another.

I wondered if my father was right. Maybe all of these couples who fell so madly in love and then back out and then back in again with someone else were nothing more than pathological gamblers, sick in the head. So what was worse, to pursue that sickly sweet delusion or live in that gray world my father inhabited? I decided I had to know.

When I approached the doorway, he was still staring across the street, watching the husband and wife gardening across the street. "Are you happy?" I asked. "I mean, the way you are."

He did not look at me. "Hmm: 'Are'. What kind of question is that?"

"Most people believe in love and romance."

"I do believe in most forms of love—parental, platonic, et cetera."

"But you once believed in the other kind of love, too?"

"I was an idiot."

"But I thought that's what people want out of life. How can you expect me to be any different?"

"You can do it," he said. "I believe in you."

That was that. Like children whose parents not only expect but demand they become doctors or attorneys, I had a mission. It was not my decision, or so he thought.

I decided to go for a walk. The sky was filled with huge, puffy clouds, as if mountains had been freed from the dirt and floated upward, hovering, dragging the sky down, stretching it, creating fissures. I felt just as heavy. I had been poisoned by my own father. I was sure his attitudes had infected me. That's why the girls didn't like me. That's why the others laughed at me when I drifted off into that same atmosphere where he sometimes floated, aloof, silent.

Everything in my mind slurred and dripped as I realized I would never touch Marina, nor any other woman. I had been trained in the art of coldness. I was a social experiment.

So I ran back home and dedicated myself to writing one last letter. This one would prove once and for all whether I could break my father's spell. In that letter I borrowed and stole poetry from the books my father had forgotten to burn, adding my own phrases. I cannot remember now very much of it, but I assured Marina I was her aficionado, her gourmet. My brain raced with words—invented words, jumbled together words, backwards words, magic words. I was sure I was composing a real spell that would seduce like witch's dust. Then I sealed the envelope, writing her name in black ink.

I hurried out the back door and ran through the fields to the usual hill. I sent my last kite into the wind, manipulating it with the string until I knew it would land on the path that led to school. Later, someone would find the note. It would become the source of a near riot as its contents were read, passed hand to hand into rumor and then myth. Finally I would appear at school and announce myself the author.

Needless to say I could not sleep that night. When I went to the mirror the next morning I looked like a madman, my eyelids as black as if someone had punched me. There were lines on my face from the pillow I had held over my head. I would be remembered as the lunatic lover, sleep deprived, heavy with dreams.

I dressed and ran out the door, bounding towards that point in the trail where the letter might still lie, or had already been found. When I arrived, I was ecstatic to see it had been located. I continued along the trail, toward the school. Already I could hear yelling and clapping and laughing.

But when I stopped running and waited in the school hallway for the first rumors, I heard only the usual commotion. Then the first bell rang, signifying the start of a day like any other, with no news overwhelming the routine gossip. The letter must have blown away or been found by an adult and discarded.

I had reached such an anticlimax that I slipped into my old ways, staring at the clock, wishing to snap the arms that measured time. I was not even stirred when Marina ran to her chair and sat in front of me, panting and smiling a little. Class began but I was fading and luckily never called upon that day.

When that schoolday finally ended, I was so disheartened I let the others pass ahead of me on that trail, not wanting to listen to the noise they made. Their racket trailed over the hills like junk in the wind and only when it was recycled into silent air did I begin the trip home.

As I wandered, tripping over rocks and holes, I remembered the words of my letter. They came to me as clearly as if I had memorized them, though I had not. It really had been a beautiful letter. I felt a little better knowing that I had expressed myself in ways my father never could have, even if I would end up the way he had.

Then, just as my spirits began to lift a little, I heard the strangest thing. For a moment, I thought something really magical had happened, for I heard the words from the letter, my letter, and then I heard the voice of Marina: "Ohhh, did you really write that?" I almost said yes, but as I followed the voices, I came to a patch of trees and saw the shape of a body lying on the ground. I stopped, pushing aside some leaves.

"You did? You really wrote that for me?"

I carefully leaned forward. Now I could see them. I did not know who he was, but Marina had her skirt around her hips and I saw his hand between her thighs. They were in a clearing, and the sun had lit them up, and I could see that hand, white with the sick light that wanted me to see. I looked away only to see my letter in his other hand.

"I am your aficionado, your gourmet," he read.

"I love that word, 'aficianado', she said, her face luminous, streaked with the sweat the sun had made.

"Things will be better. Getting thrown out of that goddamned school was the best thing that ever happened," he said.

"I love it that you can say goddamn and do the things you do to me and still write those words."

He pushed harder with his hand and then he rolled onto her and I watched, feeling the humid air grow heavier with their bodies, but refusing to rain. The sun held steady, imprisoning the air, unwilling to let it squeeze them out of my skies. Everything was poisoned, me internally, and now outside too, externally, everything on earth swallowing up the venom. I watched her shoulders roll back and listened to her stifled cry, her teeth in his arm, their skin souring the earth, heating the dirt, turning it to mud.

Finally I ran away, not toward home but a road I knew where there was little traffic and no houses. I continued running until I had to walk. I kept going and could not think. I walked towards the house where my mother lived; it was 500 miles away. People gave me rides, a mile here, five miles there, one time 50 miles in a stretch. I slept an hour under a tree and awoke and looked at the moon. I began to talk to the moon and it responded, transmitting the voice of God, who assured me that if I stared at the moon on nights like these, I could make out my lunar girls, who would appear only for me, that they are pure and full of cold air and that the light that formed their bodies came from cold pure stars many millions of miles away. Nothing could touch my girls for they had been created especially for me. Even God had not touched them. Now these many years later I sleep all day long, or try to sleep, while every night you will find me in my mother's garden, holding a flashlight toward the moon, sending my love letters in flickers of morse code, waiting for the promised day.

Marty's Crime Prevention Tips

"What's that noise?" Lori asked.

I folded the paper over and looked into those inky eyes. I'd been humming the song so softly she might have sensed only subaudible vibrations, the way the deaf feel music. Still, ever so slightly she was beginning to understand that I knew her little secret.

I shrugged. "Well?"

"Well" nothing," she said. "I hear a noise, Marty."

Lori went to the stereo and I'll be goddamned if she didn't turn that song on again. It sounded like a dog moaning. "You're cheatin' heart." It made me think of animals. She hummed along— how she hummed and hummed and swooned, sliding across a field of wet roses, sluicing through the thorns and petals into the arms of her lover. Then they giggled and laughed and frolicked and she whispered to him, "You don't think we're bad people do you?" It was all so vivid to her and she thought so loudly that I could smell those wet roses.

When Lori had first played the song I thought, "She thinks I'm cheating." Two years married and I finally buy a stereo and that's the thanks I get. But after a few weeks, the way she played that song over and over again, I knew it was her doing the cheating and this was her way of admitting it. After all, I was too old for her. It was probably a fling with some old high school boyfriend. I could do the math.

Now she was dancing in the living room, twisting, moving her arms in circles. "Do you want to dance?" Lori asked when I came into the room and stared at her.

"Darling, it's that—well—" but then I realized she hadn't asked what was bothering me.

"Suit yourself," she said.

I returned to the kitchen and hid in the newspaper, where events are simple and occur in a straight line from yesterday through tomorrow. In newspapers, even when spies are discovered with government secrets, that's the end of it. If I could only pull the four corners of the paper around me until they formed a box. If only my life came with a daily newspaper that told me, "This is what's happening. The rest is your imagination."

But that's not the way it works with me. With me you got stuff happening over, under, every damn side of events. Everything's leaking. I could cover up two holes at a time with my hands but still everything would pour down on me from all the other holes.

The thing was, the thing that got me was that she never left the house. She was always cleaning for this guy, and they must have waited around until I went to work at the butchershop. Imagine that: I had to cut up all that meat thinking about my wife cheating on me. They don't write songs about that.

But later that day, when I was cutting up the meat, I did remember a song. It was perfect and I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before. So after I got out of work I stopped by the CD store next to Shear Madness Hair Salon. When I got home, there she was asleep on the couch, the red light still on the stereo. I took my CD out, unwrapped it and replaced her damn CD with mine.

"What the—" she said, jumping up like a scared cat when I turned the volume up.

"I always wanted this record," I said. I half-sang along, "'..where you goin' with that gun in your hand?'"

"Oh, yeah, Hendrix," she said. "I didn't know you liked Hendrix."

"It ain't Hendrix, it's the song," I said. "'Gonna shoot my old ---'"

"He's got other good ones. Which album did you get?"

"It's the song, the song," I said. "I can't get it out of my head. I could listen to this song all day."

"I know how that is. Everybody does that. Then you get sick of it, but you keep hearing it."

"It's not even the music, it's the lyrics."

"I like 'Wind Cries Mary.' That's a beautiful lyric."

"It's really ugly, the way this guy feels. I mean he's thinking about ---"

"If you like Hendrix, what about Clapton? I don't really like Clapton. He's overrated, in my opinion."

"I'm not talking about any of that."

When the song was over I hit replay. The things I was thinking... I hoped she could pick up on the smells of the gunmetal, the click of the trigger, that violent river that went through my brain, the goats collapsing in the muddy riverbank, the black stars above.

But when the song stopped, I turned off the stereo. I was thinking... I was thinking right about then about the things that happen in such situations. And I began to realize that there existed several possibilities, several common resolutions. For example:

1. Lori hadn't been cheating; she just liked the song and I ended up killed her for nothing.
2. It's me who wanted to cheat only I didn't realize it until Lori was already dead.
3. Lori's boyfriend comes over and kills me just as I lift the barrel of the gun; they make love while I bleed to death on the shag carpet.
4. Lori kills me, having thought all along I was the one cheating; it's my song that put the murderous thought into her head.

These ideas might have come to me from reading the newspaper, but only rarely do those stories have surprise endings; more likely I had learned from television the parable that those who seek revenge never have the last laugh (even if the person who gets the last laugh is dead at the hands of the person being laughed at). I certainly did not want to be the kind of guy who tries to get even only to make a damned fool of himself. I had to learn from history, the history of television and newspapers.

I remembered then having seen a long, long time ago (probably before the first time I'd ever heard a Hendrix song) seeing some commercial about handling anger. It said to always count to 10—1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10—before acting on anger. And so I did that, even as Lori took out my CD

and replaced it with you know who.

When I got to 10, I felt, to be honest, not exactly better, but just a little cooler, like I could still pick up a gun and point it at her but would stop short of pulling the trigger. I decided what I needed was a new beginning. What appealed to me to do was to go get a new haircut, real short, so that my head was smooth and I could feel air—cold, calming air—across my scalp. This, I was quite certain, would put a good spell on everything. It might even spark a new feeling in Lori, put us on track to the kinds of good things you don't read about in newspapers.

So I went back to the mini-mall and, seeing there were hardly any cars, walked straight into Shear Madness. A young guy was sitting in one of the chairs under a hair dryer, reading Mademoiselle. He looked over and then at his watch and then back over. He said, "Can I help you?"

"I just want a haircut, short. Shouldn't take too long. Short and straight all the way around."

"Shampoo, rinse?"

"Rinse it afterwards, if that's all right. Other than that, I don't need any extras."

He motioned to another chair, then he got up and draped a sheet over me. It'd been some time since I had a regular haircut. Nowadays Lori cut my hair; I didn't like the small talk at Shear Madness. Back when I could go to a barbershop, I didn't mind. The talk there was much smaller than here.

"What's your name?"

"Marty Cattrell."

"Oh -- Cattrell -- Cattrell... Did you go to high school here?"

"Moved here when I was 25."

"Why the hell you'd move to a slow ass place like this?"

"Where I'm from makes this place look like Indianapolis."

"I take it from the ring you're married?"

He snipped, tight little snips, cut, cut, wish, when I wanted him to take the electric and cut wide swaths.

"What's her name?"

"Lori."

"What's her maiden name?"

Snips, cut, cut, wish.

"Lori Cummings."

"Oh my God, Lori Cummings?"

"Yeah."

"I knew Lori."

He wiped some hair from my neck.

"You did?"

"Sure, we go all the way back. Now I know where I saw the name Cattrell, in you guys' wedding announcement. Sure, that's when she disappeared from sight. So what'd you do with her, bury her in the backyard? I haven't seen her in years. Where's she get her hair cut because I know it isn't here? She go to the mall? She probably doesn't even know I became a hair stylist. Well, you've got to tell her to come see me. I'll give her a discount. I'll give you one, too."

"So you two hung out together?"

"God, yes we did. You ever been to Ray's Bar?"

"No," I said, but I had seen her look at Ray's with a sideways, faded Polaroid kind of glance whenever we drove by, the way you might look at the first house you lived in as a kid. And now, with this guy cutting my bangs, I could see the blurry closeup contours of the scissors and was staring to think again, just a little, about that river, even if—even if this was all innocent and none of my concern. Still, clues are everywhere, even in a hair salon.

"Lori was popular," he said. "You want these bangs all the way off?"

"Yeah." Popular? Like how popular? Keep talking. Stop talking. No, keep talking.

"Well, she was likeable and everybody knew her. Great smile. What a smile. She'd make a Sunday hangover fun. But everybody settles down sooner or later, I guess, even Lori Cummings. Well, everybody but me, that is. I never settle down. But that's me."

After all this talk he had worked only about halfway up my bangs. It was obvious he was cutting slow on purpose now, just to save time for his comments.

"So what about Ray's?" I asked. "I've never been there."

"No? Well, don't bother. It's a shithole now. Nobody goes there but teenagers. But when we went, it was different. Everybody you knew was there. And so was Lori, always at the center of it. I'll never forget those nights."

A straight razor lay on the counter.

"If what you're —"

"We—we all used to, you know, drink a lot back then. And Lori would love to do it. That's what we did, but not just me and Lori. We were all doing it. I mean, we all did it together. I couldn't even sing at all. They had one of those karaoke things there. She was always singing that one song about your cheatin' heart. You never heard a girl sing that song right until her. But she could sing it. We all

thought she might get famous one day if some agent came in and spotted her. But I guess you came along instead. You spotted her first. And lucky for her, right?"

I thought about this as he shaved the back of my neck with the straight razor. When he finished with that he spun me around, then eased me back and dunked my head under the water that spurting from the faucet. Finally he towelled me off and set me upright, facing the mirror.

I expected my face to look older, but instead I looked 17. I was going to start getting i.d.'d again; I already did whenever I had a clean shave.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"What'd you mean when you said --"

"I mean, is your hair okay?"

It was a struggle to understand these moments, for I'm the type of person who sees constellations where there are stars, though the Big Dipper looks like a boiling pot to me. Nevertheless, I thanked and paid him, assuring him that I would insist Lori start having her hair done by him from now on. In fact, I let him know that she would be needing a change of style. I didn't have time to explain; I had to get to the mall before it closed. For I was to purchase and present to my wife: White cowgirl boots; spangled jacket; the entire catalogue of Patsy Cline (she's good, isn't she?); ribbons for her hair; a microphone; and, of course, "The Wind Cried Mary"; as well as a guitar for myself and How to Play Country Guitar Volumes 1, 2 and 3, for I intended to accompany my wife on guitar. Like the man said, I spotted her first. She was staying in my constellation.

Some Observations Regarding Indoor Human Flight
and An Illustrative Anecdote of a Sexual Nature

Certain natural laws form the bulk of what is known about indoor human flight. These environmental conditions (atmospheric anomalies, color and light saturation, etc.) seem to enable the relaxation of the general laws of gravity. However, other unknown factors may be at work, and caution is strongly encouraged even under the best of circumstances.

1. A golden light, nearly copper, such as that found in buildings of an art deco design, and certain hotel lounges, and some nightclubs.

2. A temperature soothingly warm yet humid enough to improve the voice, and always an improvement upon outside conditions. Springlike, seemingly soaked with possibility, filled with all kinds of biologic fuel; that is, erotically supercharged.

3. A slight vibration in the molecules of air, usually caused by music which animates the atmosphere while simultaneously soothing it.

4. A perfection of occupation, in which the room is neither lonely nor crowded; one is neither ignored nor unduly noticed.

5. A smoothness of line, objects neither blurred nor sharp, but integrated betwixt foreground and background and each other, as if each thing were part of

6. A sympathetic host: the effect of morale is essential. Generally the host takes the form of a bartender. He or she will neither encourage nor discourage conversation with and between customers. Drinks are brought in a timely manner and money changes hands lightly and almost invisibly. In fact, one has the feeling that the drinks are delivered without charge, and that the establishment is an oasis never to be found again.

7. The presence of red lipstick seems to seduce the other conditions into harmony.

8. Proper tone: Humility is essential, as is effortless confidence. Self-consciousness will not do.

Eight rules suggestive of a nice evening out, if nothing else, and so my research has never been a chore. Be certain that if actual flight fails to occur, a certain inward flight remains in the offing. Actually, I have some doubt as to the semantic line between "indoor" and "inward", and cannot with certainty state the difference. Yet I emphatically maintain that when I use the word "flight", I mean flight. My ass leaves the chair. Or yours. No touching of wood and ass, do you understand?

Some quibble about these matters as if I am trying to be duplicitous, when nothing could be further from the truth. There is no trickery of word at work here. I'll leave that for my friends in the -- English Department. They make up stories; I report the facts. And so here is one set of facts, which I hope will be as convincing for you as it was for me -- the intriguing story of a young man who had never heard of me, or my work, or even the idea of indoor human flight. In short, proof, my friend, proof.

On a wintry day in 1999 (it was especially bright out, yet morbidly cold), a student came into my office exhibiting all of the symptoms of acute mania. However, his flights of word and thought indicated to me something quite different from a disturbed mental state -- his mood was rather that which I knew often follows a "virginal" flight, the breaking of one's atmospheric hymen. I had experienced the very same state myself, a giddy, exhilarated, almost electrified feeling of omnipotence. He had, I was already sure, taken flight. He was a twittering bird. Chairs and furniture were not the everyday objects they had once seemed. Now they were alien, nerve-wracking. And so, of course, he was frightened.

Let me allow "Q" to speak for himself a moment:

"I went to my favorite bar. I was agitated. I've been drinking a lot lately, sometimes all day, and by now I knew I wasn't going to feel normal until I got certain amount in me. So I went where I always go, a bar up the street from here, that only seems to attract heavy drinkers -- it's never embarrassing showing up with your hands shaking, the rest. There are even a few other students there, ones like me, who aren't going to be students much longer. I sat down. Just being there calmed me, strengthened my nerves. The light was familiar. I began to forget about myself before finishing a single drink."

May I point out: agitation, followed by an easing of the spirit, in the midst of a familiar and pleasing light, producing an upswell of confidence and strength, though stopping short of an involved and annoying egotism.

"The bartender wore a well-starched shirt and black pants. You didn't feel you had to pay attention to him, make small talk, but if you wanted to, he always knew what to say. Tonight, I was quiet. Each swallow seemed to restore eyesight, hearing, smell to their normal sensitivity. I enjoyed this.

"After about a half hour, I felt a kind of surge in my belly, a warmth that must be something like a

pregnant woman feels. It was an almost frighteningly pleasant sensation. I had never experienced anything close to it.

"And then, suddenly, God's honest truth, I began to lift off of my barstool. It happened very slowly, imperceptibly, in fact, for some time. I moved upward a sliver at a time. No one noticed, or they pretended not to. After a while, I was a good six inches off of my chair, hovering like a hummingbird. I thought I'd better go to the hospital; I knew it was a sign of hallucination --"

"No! It wasn't that!"

"-- or delirium tremors. Still, I understood that those conditions were usually accompanied by panic, and I felt absolutely stilled, like a baby at the breast. I couldn't have moved if I tried."

He explained with a sweetness of tone that made me wish he was my son. How proud I was, and how gratified to hear my very experience duplicated, and explained, nearly word for word.

"As if -- as if that weren't enough, doctor. As if that weren't enough of a story to sustain a man the rest of his life, through eight thousand drunken bragging sessions. But there was more. That wasn't the half of it.

"Because as I rested in the air, a woman came in -- I have a thing for redheads -- she entered, I would say, like an actress, but perfectly natural. I tell you, the air rippled. I bobbed and swayed in her wake. And as I watched her walk toward the bar, I noticed a hair's width of air beneath her feet.

"She sat directly beside me, and quickly rose to meet my gaze. She said, 'This goddamned wind -- this goddamned wind always makes me feel -- feel like something is going to happen -- happen. That a crime is going to happen, that I -- I -- that I might do something terrible, something inhuman --'

"Doctor, she was speaking for me. It was half the reason I drank, to escape that feeling. I felt that I had bumped into a lost sister who was in danger. I had the unusual desire to assist her.

"'I can't believe this isn't frightening you,' she said.

"'Actually, it's reassuring, as I came here feeling the same way, certain I'd better not tell a soul any of these thoughts.'

"'That seems impossible.'

"'And still, we're floating mid-air.'

"'Is that unusual?'

"'I'm not sure now. I could ask.'

"'Don't ask. I'd rather not know.'

"'That's all right with me.'

"Doctor, do I need to add that the night quickly progressed and --"

"Of course, you made love to her that same evening?"

"Yes!"

I grabbed his elbow. "Tell me, what was it like? Did you maintain ---"

"Altitude? During, you mean?"

"Of course. It's always been a question of mine."

"Yes."

"And was the --- did you feel differently ---"

"We were, for a moment, translucent, like those fish you can see right through."

"You bobbed, like fish, too?"

"Oh, like the ocean spilled upward into the sky and there were starfish and octopus floating through the air."

"And this one moment, or these series of moments, you feel they have transformed you?"

"I feel like an entirely new creature, doctor."

"And what if --- just what if you impregnated her?"

"That would be something. But you don't think ---"

"Why not? This is physical. I am sure of it. Perhaps only a few people are capable of it, but happenstances such as this could increase our numbers."

"A new being?"

"Yes, a being filled with magic, seeking nothing more than a purity of line and movement."

"Like musical notes?"

"One step short of bodiless, yes!"

"That's how it felt, exactly how it felt."

We parted exhilarated, and I have remained exhilarated for a month now. I allowed my colleagues, the psychiatrists and psychologists, to test, test, test him to their hearts' content; not a damned thing did they find. Of course, he couldn't duplicate the experience for them -- as I said, unselfconsciousness is essential, so the very act of being studied deems flight impossible. But that was of surprisingly little importance to me. I know that you, my good readers, will suspend judgement long enough to understand the joyous nature of my discovery, and if that is not enough for the scientists, then they will have to live without flight, though I will keep trying.

"Q" (you will know his real name soon enough) continues to see his lady friend. We are not yet sure

if she is indeed pregnant, or not, though I have an inkling that if she is pregnant, that status might evade our tests, as what would be growing inside of her surely would display startlingly new characteristics, perhaps different enough from what we call "human" to alter her own physiology. Time will tell.

"Q" though, might as well be a father already, so content is he, and I might as well be a father, too, to "Q," this strange young man who entered my laboratory and convinced me so thoroughly of what I already knew.

Astral Projection

In Paradisum deducant te angeli...

I once shared your life. Your suffering was mine. Can I tell you about it? For months I studied your day while you held on for dusk. You sat laid down rose showered dressed. Waited mostly. Then between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m. every day you finally left your apartment a skeleton wrapped in pale tissue walking as though your bones would crack in a breeze with only me to keep you company.

You hurried under the sun and perhaps you could smell me or hear me. I had a sweaty smell, a hum, my outline the dull blue of the sky translucent seen out of the corner of your eye.

"Just nerves" you told yourself. "Keep your head down. People are watching you. They know you've been in that room all day. They know what you do to love: You squash it like a spider. You're going to hell."

Time slowed during this walk. You imagined a second hand and tried to push it along with your mind. This was the worst part of the day, all your impatience squeezed into a few moments. But minutes later you were returning home, a bag crackling in your hand. If it was cool you carried the bag inside your jacket, as shamed as a child with muddy new pants.

"I was framed. It was a trick. I'm not a criminal."

That's what you told yourself, though not out loud. No, my sweet baby it wasn't a trick. But I had to keep our secret a while longer.

One night you finally allowed me to come a little closer. You weren't paying attention, fixed on the transition between just a moment ago and oh yes that's better, better. Funny, that's when we were closest, when we almost merged. Your fingers fluttered on the bottlecap like wings. Soon the bottle was open and you drank. Any minute objects would obey you again. Everything would soften, quiet, darken. The second hand would glide. You drank more, hurrying because you couldn't be sure the moment would really come.

Then the building began to hum and shiver. The stucco walls swirled like cake mix. The breeze came in from the west and moved through the canyons over the passes to the streets avenues and alleys. Finally the breeze found you and you could almost feel it lift you, not your spirit but your 95 pound body.

You looked at yourself in the large mirror. I should have known it was time for me to go. You'd been avoiding your reflection for months, ducking under it or closing one eye. You feared you had very

nearly become disembodied, but you finally stopped and looked. To your relief, it wasn't the symptoms of a disease that stared back at you or some other harbinger, but a smaller version of you, compacted by the past few months. You had thinned, withered even, but you were still breathing and renewable.

I felt myself stir then, too. Someday I knew you'd forget how it really was. But I'm not supposed to -- worry about that kind of thing. And why worry? Because I was the disembodied one -- again?

You forgot so quickly. What once had the intensity of a murder you now barely recall. You've forgotten what it was like when a tree branch became alien, threatening, and your thoughts ran out your ears like captions. Remember? But now that all seems like a teenager's heartbreak laughable.

So you finally saw what everyone else saw: Rusty gold hair, a body as light as straw. Your frailty, homeliness even, could be something else -- life on Mars. New. Not here Not us. It was this that brought him in -- what you didn't like about yourself. You knew it too. That was your secret weapon. Who could blame you?

Now you've recovered your beauty, your words, your appetite, your self-preservation. That's what I brought you and I shouldn't ask for thanks. It was a gift, for Christ's sake, not to mention my job. However, you could remember me.

Jennifer. Jennifer? Listen! Damn it!

You exhaled me next. Not purposefully, I know. I left the zone of your body like a photograph double exposed, one image separating from the other, first a slim edge of the moon and soon independent objects. Others would envy me.

But you reentered the world unencumbered by me. You turned away from the mirror. I slipped away from your body, the sun shining through, a thunderstorm, the rain refracting light, the weather God's dream.

That's how it happened, though you've probably reduced it to barometric pressure, humidity a cold front, whatever. I came to you with the forgiveness that you did not have and let you feel it without knowing what it was until it became as familiar as a winter coat by February a swimsuit by August.

Don't you understand? You came here in terror and you'll leave in terror. But for just a moment you had what I have but here on earth. I never had that. I get to fly sometimes. But things are only new until they happen twice.

-- To hell with it. It's stupid of me. I'm waiting for work. It gets me down. It's like you and your first drink used to be; I don't think it will happen again and then it does and every time the same sadness afterwards. That's my hangover. But you don't have hangovers anymore. I'm sure you've forgotten them too.

-- Who am I kidding? I know what I do to love: I squash it like a spider. I'm going to hell. There's no one taking care of me. It was nice while it lasted but now I can think again. Fuck my mind. Fuck thinking at all.

-- No my sweet baby --

-- Oh shut up. I'm sick of myself. I want to vomit myself.

The Exploded View And Other Stories

-- This is the secret.

-- What secret? It's no good. I'm talking to myself that's all. That's the secret.

-- Now's the moment. You're slipping. Good

I missed you. I like your needing me.

-- Why can't I just shut up?

-- You think this is you? I've got my fingers on your lips so easy to --

-- So easy to what? Look at clouds and make up pictures? That's nice for a while but it's too airy, too sunny. Not as real as someone you can still remember hurting on purpose for no reason at all except that you could and it was done to you.

-- I know you want to drink.

-- You want me to because it will make me weak and humble.

-- We're both angry lovers.

-- Not both. One we're one. Me. That's all folks.

-- We were almost one. Now we're definitely two. But I suppose you should be proud.

-- Why not? I am. I'm proud. You're right to hell with humility.

-- It's so damned dry in here.

-- Yes it is.

-- I'm getting sleepy. I can feel my fingertips. There's just a little bit of electricity humming around them.

-- Yes I'm here.

-- What story shall I tell myself tonight? The one about the --

-- Yes that's a good one. And since you're not paying attention if you don't mind I'll come a little closer.

-- I feel so... stilled.

-- You can feel my breath such as it is?

-- Yes. What?

-- You're already half-asleep.

-- If that's you --

- Yes?
- Will you come back just for tonight?
- Oh yes.
- Any time?
- I'm yours only yours.
- It's not wrong is it?
- I don't know.
- I'll put a word in for you.
- That would help.
- Come here lie beside me. Do you forgive me?
- For what? You forgive me. I just hope --
- Shhh! We're both forgiven now. Let's not be angry anymore. Come to sleep. I'm so tired.
-

Best Actor in a Tragicomedy

"Dear Tom:

"People often ask how it happened, how it came to pass, what possessed me, and so forth. It's not as though I made a decision. A certain pattern emerged, but like a page from a coloring book it required intervention to become this colorful 'lively' thing. The pattern needed the human hand, offered unknowingly (I still take the blame, okay?), to give an unseen push, resulting in action, fruition. Yet there remains guilt (I already said so) easily enough unfathomed from hidden motives, when this mechanism of self-delusion desires to be exposed and brought to justice. And so I offer my confession and impose the just sentence."

I found the note beside the body. My brother had obviously typed it to me in the midst of death, the intoxicated ramble familiar.

Scotch blemished the surface of the card table, the empty bottle on its side. From the puddle on the carpet I ascertained he had consumed about half the fifth. From the recent prescription of phenobarbital I estimated five to 10 capsules had gone down his throat. John's face lay on the keyboard. The keys were smudged with ink and scotch. John's last words were "h y 7 u b 6 j."

The note must have almost written itself, some outside force pushing him through the stupor to make sense of the past two years.

"What force drives our plotted lives, transforming chance and mystery so that they foreshadow the stories we live? Is it rooted in genetics so that sons follow fathers, reliving lives like restaged

plays?"

A chain of rosary beads wrapped around his fist, John made an unlikely religious man, a half-redeemed Prodigal Son. After my father committed suicide, he went into an angry silence, enraged his return had been celebrated not with a fatted calf but a hole through the back of dad's head. He felt responsible for the suicide, and correctly so.

I felt no remorse.

A sheet had been draped across the window, the sun backlighting it, and huge shadows of leaves flapped against the walls and ceiling. Everything about the room, the candles and books and endless stacks of papers and diaries, reminded me of a monk's cell. I picked up a red book marked "Loss Angeles" and flipped through the pages. Odd diagrams seemed to trace one day's thoughts to the next, as if he were laying out the schemata of his mind. He'd gone too far inside himself. A swimmer has to know his limits.

I remembered when he came home from Loss Angeles with a sickly-looking tan (it made him look older and more ragged, like a debauched actor who'd spent too many days drinking martinis poolside). He had a curiously shamed expression; I sometimes wondered if he'd committed several petty crimes -- I couldn't imagine him having the guts to commit anything more serious.

My father interpreted this behavior as his own failure. After his wife left, he would only refer to her as a bitch or a whore, slandering her to snuff out his love, but I knew better. He was a good man and whatever may have happened between them, she was the cause of it. But I knew damn well where my brother stood, and so did dad. John thought he had every excuse in the world to drive my father even further into remorse and alcoholism.

First, he mimicked my dad's drinking. It started soon after she left. Later, you could see it in his trembling fingers when he first walked through the door after two years in Loss Angeles. He might as well have said, "You did this to me."

"Perhaps studies will show that parents and their children even share dreams, and within those dreams lie the signals of fate. One day, we will know the outcomes of our lives decades in advance, and will have some small hope of changing them, however minutely."

He believed he had been cursed by his father. This near schizophrenic reasoning was that of a man who had killed my father and would have seduced his own mother if given the chance, climbing back into the womb from where he first emerged, retreating into precognition, vanishing into the cells of her body.

A coward by any other name, my brother, who had stopped talking for the past six months, marking his first step toward extinguishing his own guilty conscience. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn his mother's affairs had begun decades before they were discovered, and thus John, her illegitimate offspring, hated his unnatural father and conspired with her to bring about his destruction.

(My hostility, which many experience after a relative's suicide, was a form of mourning.)

My father was right: John's mother was a whore.

Gigantic eggs bounding across the surface of the ocean, her poisoned breasts to his mouth,

shotgun shells in the palm of his hand . . . I knew full well the content of my brother's dreams. And this apartment, with its soiled sheets for curtains, its rank air hovering like a cloud of poison, was the container of his dreams and should have been burned to prevent contamination.

Now the question remained: When to call the police (or hospital)? Well, they could wait. I already had the answers to their questions. No need for swinging lightbulbs or square-jawed detectives snapping monosyllabic jibes.

No, I was quite content right where I was. I went to the easy chair and stretched out. It'd been a long day. Maybe my brother was at peace; after all, Jesus was on his side, but I was stuck with myself.

I looked at him, his eyes closed, that snakelike mind finally done coiling.

"I never drank until I was 20 years old. Was it a decision to start? I'd like to say no, but when I examine my thoughts, the ones that circle me like airplanes waiting to land, then I know that I chose to drink for one reason: because I knew you would blame yourself. How little I considered the cost to myself, like any murderer who temporarily loses all perspective, not even caring about the punishment that awaits him, knowing how inevitable his capture and sentence; somehow, though, the act is designed and carried out. Even worse, my plan was crueller than any murder, a protracted series of events which require that the victim himself pull the trigger!"

What had he expected when he returned from California? The crown? My father gave him enough money to rent this apartment. It wasn't that bad; actually perfect for someone of his disposition, with plenty of darkness and solitude in which to corkscrew inward. He accused me of being hostile toward him, but I was merely protective of dad.

And so he withdrew. He needed medical attention, but refused, accusing us of plotting against him, but he himself had now "admitted" to being the one overly interested in plots, in three acts with a cathartic resolution. He brought it upon himself.

The night John came home from Loss Angeles, I immediately knew he now had something in common with dad, who with a drunken smirk stared at his son like a mirror.

"Well, well, well," dad muttered.

John dropped his bags in the hallways, went over to give the old man a handshake -- the closest anyone got to him.

My father couldn't help but add, "At least somebody comes back."

"Christ, don't start in on that bitch," I said. I didn't want to hear about her." I knew the spiel. It always came out after the drink stopped deadening his memory, then intensified it.

"I told you before, it's 'whore', not 'bitch'."

"Very funny."

"So you didn't become a goddamned movie star?"

John sat next to dad, at the other end of the couch. "I wanted to live where it's sunny and warm."

"I heard they have a different sun there," I said. "Brighter and bigger. What'd you find? Same sun. It's all bullshit."

"Yeah," dad said, "what'd you go there for anyway? I figured you were gonna become a priest."

"Looks like he's got the drinking end down."

"That's half the battle."

John ignored us. He was merely sitting in our vicinity.

"So why you back?"

"You know what they say."

"All that way and there you were?"

"Something like that."

"Now what?"

"No idea."

"Need a drink?"

"Yeah, I'll take one."

"Tom, get asshole a drink."

He mistook this gentle ribbing as a vicious assault, making a point of swallowing his drink and going off to mix a few more which he drank by himself in the back room. Then he went to bed and dreamed.

Yet my father had been every bit as much a dreamer as John. I knew the mental construct of a shrine to his wife (by chance named Mary) he carried. His drinking loosened her hold, then loosed it upon him — of course he was unpredictable. No one could predict just when the shift would occur. On a good night it never did, at least not until he fell asleep, when she returned skyward to remind him that not only had she abandoned him, but would do so again and again.

How she wore her blackness in those eyes and the hair that framed her pale mask. Her lovers were to be pitied. They fell on jeweled swords. I relished the pain my birth had caused her. Retributory justice — before her crimes, true, but the seeds of betrayal must already have been planted.

Even John's reverence for the Virgin Mary, apparent in the statues and prayer cards scattered throughout the apartment, was a mask upon the mask of his very mother. How he must have prayed to the very cause of his suffering. Hail, hail at the hour of your death! It was a ghostly masquerade.

I studied his own death face, those eyes open, finally, staring at the truth that confronted him in the final moments.

"Yes I killed him. I may have put the blame on my brother, for encouraging our father's hatred of our mother, when he should have forgiven her. But that was my weakness. I chose not to see the spirit of our mother, still poisoning us, our ruin never complete, a tragedy without catharsis."

I had been vindicated.

After the police fingerprinted me and conducted blood and urine tests, they took me to a small room. But there was no swinging lightbulb. I had not predicted this moment accurately. Reality shifted out of my control. The detective paced. His shoes needed shining. The room itself was flat. I felt wrapped in a box. In the corner a uniformed cop chewed gum. I had been answering convoluted questions for an hour. Finally, the detective said it plainly:

"Did you or did not you not put those pills in your brother's mouth?"

"I don't understand the question."

"Get him the fuck out of here."

Soon, I was released on my own recognizance. I walked out of the police building. The clouds sagged.

I went into a bar. There was no one there but a man smoking a cigar. He snubbed the cigar out when I sat at the counter.

"What can I get you?"

"I killed my brother. Scotch."

"Yeah? How'd you kill him then? Did you stab him, throw him down a flight of chairs, choke him, crown him, shoot him?"

"Poisoned him."

"Oh, I forgot that one," he said, setting the glass by my hand. "Why'd you poison him?"

"That's a good question. To be honest, I'm not sure I poisoned him. He might have done it himself."

"Well, then, I wouldn't worry about it."

"I think what happened was, he had taken some pills before I arrived at his place and then he almost nodded out and I slipped a few more into his hand, lifted his hand to his mouth, and then he did the swallowing himself."

"That's a tricky call."

"I'm very serious. You seem to think I'm joking."

"Listen, a lot of people come in here trying to pull my leg. I don't believe anything."

"The police let me go. But they'll be coming around."

"Did anybody love him?"

"My brother?"

"Sure."

"I don't think so."

"Then don't worry about it."

My leg twitched.

"What I'm trying to tell you is I'm very upset."

"I understand."

"Can I have another drink?"

"You can have a hundred drinks."

"You see," I said, finishing the first drink, "I feel very lifeless. Very hollow."

"That would be normal, if what you say is true. Would you like me to call the police?"

"No, not right now. I told you, I just came from the police station."

"Well, I thought you might feel better if you talked to them. But I'll talk to you, if that's what you want. I'm not doing anything. I was going to close early."

I looked around. There was an odd glow -- the jukebox and the neon beer signs. I felt like I was in a cartoon bar.

"You don't look good at all," he continued. "There's something, I don't know, faded about you. Positive you were at the police station and not some kind of a --"

"I was at the police station. Look:" I held my wrists out so he could see the handcuff marks.

"They don't normally handcuff a man in your situation. They'd know they could be wrong. They might not even suspect you of anything. They wouldn't rough you up."

"They know me. I've been in jail a few times. Fist fights, drunk driving."

"A troublemaker."

"No, sir."

"My customers like a peaceful atmosphere."

"I'm not planning anything."

He leaned closer. "Look at those pupils -- I think you took a few pills yourself. I didn't notice before, but now with the drinks you're getting a cockeyed grin."

"Let me ask one question."

"Go ahead, then I'm closing." He began switching the lights off.

"Is this how it looks if say -- say I'm guilty of something. Not that I am, but if I was. Would everything glow? Would people act a certain way, the way they think they're supposed to act -- like those cops, and you, too? Am I imagining it?"

"Look kid, I don't know what to make of it. Maybe it's a confession or a lie you've got on your mind. Maybe it's all pill talk. Tell the truth, I lost interest in people's stories a long time ago. I listen and nod and stir drinks. I made an exception with you and now I regret it. Now it's time for me to go to bed. If you need a cab, I'll call one -- that's as far as I get involved in people's troubles."

Outside, it was cold. I heard horns blaring but saw no cars. The bartender was right -- I must have taken a few barbiturates myself. My legs were numb. The glare of the streetlights became a shroud. I stood abandoned within my own distorted perceptions. There was one place to go.

I began walking down the street, my shoes clapping arrhythmically on the pavement. Did she still live in the same apartment? She might have moved to avoid me, though I'd stopped searching for her a year before. Until now, it made no sense to see her even if I could have done so. I had realized the purpose she served. But now things were different. She might help me. Even arrest and execution would be better than this disorientation -- if it really was a confession I harbored.

The path to her house, once so memorized, confused me now. I knew the names of the streets, but east was west in my state of mind. I walked against my instincts until I began to recognize the restaurants where I had so often humiliated myself in our public arguments. A glass of water in the face -- monsieur!

I lost control of my bladder and kept walking. There was something crucial about my disgraced condition. I not only knew it would get worse but that it might never improve. Still, a purpose had finally invaded my will.

And there it was, the second floor, the lights on, and the curtains, sky-blue -- the same curtains I once gazed at while lying in her bed.

I walked up the circling staircase. It was made of steel and rang with my weight.

Standing in the doorway, I looked at the orange door, which now seemed a malfunctioning traffic light, signaling something between stop and slow down. Now that people ask how it happened, how this all came to pass, what could possibly have possessed me, and so forth, I refer them to this moment, when I made the first decision I remember having made in two days.

She answered the knock quickly. She probably remembered just what sound the staircase made when I used to visit.

Now she looked at me and, not quite laughing but smirking and trembling, putting her hand on my shoulder, as if I were some old friend standing in her doorway about to hopelessly admit I loved her.

"I knew you'd come around, sooner or later -- I knew you'd look like this."

"Let me in for Christ's sake."

"Technically, I still have a restraining order against you."

She found that funny, too. I could have pulled a knife and stabbed her right there; she would have giggled to death.

"Then?"

She let me in. The apartment looked the same, except there were no photographs of me.

"Your clothes are wet. Do you want some pants? I think I have a pair of your old ones somewhere."

After changing, I felt better, not as disoriented but still thick.

I sat beside the electric fireplace; she had a real talent for making the tasteless charming. I told her how I wasn't sure what happened. I told her everything, as best I could.

"I can't believe he's dead."

"I know. But that's part's over. Now what?"

"I talked to the police. They let me go for now, but I think they suspect something."

"You honestly don't know whether you might have --"

"I don't know. I must have taken more pills than I thought."

"But the letter -- you said there was a letter."

"It could have been written by either one of us."

I laid my head on her shoulder. While she didn't comfort me, she didn't pull away either.

"This is a stupid question, but can you both type?"

"Our high school required it."

"The keys -- they could take fingerprints off them."

"No way. The keys were too smudged."

I felt her head against mine. "Did you want to --"

"I don't know. Probably."

"Because he took her side?"

"Mostly."

I studied her pale hand.

"You never once told me how much I looked like your mother. I wasn't about to ask why."

"Lately everybody wears a hundred faces."

"I wonder why we can talk calmly now, of all times."

Her voice fell distant. I saw myself glide into the red mouth of a mask.

"Go to sleep, John. Pretend you're at peace."

The next morning I awoke at noon and felt clear as the blue sky, recognizing that the police would make their determination based upon the same confused facts as myself. At that very moment, they were probably shifting through John's diaries and papers. Yet it wasn't criminal guilt that concerned me.

What lingered, though only half-remembered, were the words of the letter. One of the things I shared with John was grandiosity. We both found our way into a myth and played our roles like Oliviers. The intent of the letter, equal parts blame, confession, justification and denial, could have been written by either of us. I began to wonder if what really happened mattered. A psychological game had solved itself by using the players. But while that satisfied my abstract sense of the situation, I remembered my loss of control the night before, and how resolved I felt as I staggered toward this apartment, stained by my own piss.

Michelle slept as I dialed the police. I spoke to the detective who had allowed me to leave.

"I have an idea why you called," he said.

"That doesn't surprise me, though maybe I'm not going to say what you think I am."

"Oh, no, I'm quite sure of it."

Looking out the window at the sun, I wondered if I knew myself what I wanted to say -- how could he know?

"Before you tell me what I already know, I want to say something to you: We've found ample evidence that your brother planned to kill himself that evening, not the least of which was a suicide note."

"Yes, I've read it."

"You not only read a suicide note, you wrote it, all two pages of it. The ink on your fingers left only one clear print, on the second page."

"Then I guess I have nothing to say. I should wait here for you. I'll give you my address --"

"One second. I said you wrote 'a' suicide note. Unfortunately for you, there was a second suicide note inside his desk calendar, placed between the pages for yesterday's date."

"'Unfortunately'?"

"It's obvious you called me to confess. Or were you planning to contribute to the policeman's fund?"

"Well I --"

"It's a very interesting case. However, we could never prosecute you based on the evidence."

"But I'm offering you a confession."

"Yes, and I believe you. It's a difficult situation. He probably would have died anyway. I wouldn't even have suspected your involvement except for that first phone call from you. You had the sound of a man who'd grown used to his brother's death. Who might have seen the whole thing and waited quite a while before letting us know about it. Who had the very substances found in his brother's bloodstream, in his own. But there's something else I believe: This was a failed murder/suicide. You're going to have to live with that. And you'll have to find your own sentence to serve."

I looked around the bend at Michelle, whose mask seemed to have fallen away, and I saw her lying there, face as luminous as the moon.

"What do you suggest, detective?"

"Call your mother."

King's Gambit

Who wanted to kill me? Ah, there were many candidates.

That gray morning, as I walked to the bus station for a ride to Boulder, I saw a man in a flaptop hat loitering under a tree, the smoke from his Lucky Strike ribboning -- it could be him, since an assassin would, it seems to me, smoke Lucky's, or, conversely, maintain a staunch purity of habit. (The latter would pose a steely exterior, perhaps emulating an aluminum-skinned superhero. The former, however, favors squalor -- pornographic magazines, whiskey and prostitutes, and is altogether obsessed with illness and bodily functions (see footnote 655 to dream 206A-301-09891).)

Such was this character, who singled me out with a coded stare -- if I should pick up the signal,

interpret it correctly, my panicked expression would lead to a poison dart in my spleen.

I owed a scofflaw money, you see, for a gambling debt.

He remained behind me as I sat on the bench, and when I stepped onto the bus, sure enough I heard the sordid mud plopping from his boots. The filthy bastard coughed and hacked. (The phlegmatic, choking on their own bodies, take as many as they can into their spiralling deterioration.)

I sat in the back, squeezing myself between several people, but the shameless pig tailed me and forced himself between a pole and a fat Romanian woman, further gaining an edge by remaining on his feet. He attempted to engage the woman in conversation. I noted that she did not reply and instead checked her fingernails. The nails were jagged.

Now he looked my way. I wanted to stuff that hat in his ass. He looked foolish; it would be embarrassing to be killed by him. He appeared drunk as well. Possibly, I could turn the tables, but they would catch up with me and it would be worse for me in the end. (My theory: the assassins possessed degrees of sadism rising with each rebuff to their employers; thus, I had a merciful end in store, my tab, I think, totalling \$2,219.59 for a bet placed six months before. It would be self-flagellating to crank the wheel another revolution (see my pamphlet entitled "Circles of Torture") (published by Kinko's, 1994).)

Goddamn it, how had I involved myself in such an absurd and illogical chase? Had I not calculated, with imbecilic precision, that numbers simply did not align themselves in a manner favorable to me? Yes, yes, but still I insisted, each time owing more and more, until it came to this, a showdown between me, an unarmed debtor, and this puerile fantasist who would never make it in the CIA or any other legitimate but shadowy organization? Stalking me with crumbs in his beard, a debauched leopard prowling and farting, weakened from inactivity, capable only of a slow and clumsy kill, his rotten teeth falling out with each bite, a clown's murder complete with honking horns and red noses, goddamn it!

I looked over and muttered, "Double or nothing, what do you say?"

He grinned no.

Perhaps his answer was ill-considered, or merely un-considered. I tugged at his spotted coat. "What gives?" I asked. "Honor amongst thieves, right?"

"I'm no thief," he said, his voice grainy from lard.

"No... assassin," I said, though I whispered it, being, yes, essentially a coward.

Now, another 20 minutes of silence. The impossibility of patience.

Not so long ago the identity of my murderer had been as yet unsolvable -- nature, another man, or my own hands -- now, that mystery neared the end of its pages and I, being particularly un-entertained by the story, began to resent the plot, the characters (victim and perpetrator alike), and retained only the most biologically ingrained mood of suspense -- what did I care who killed me? I had long ago lost sympathy with myself. Fear, yes, I still had that, in spades, but by Christ, author of my mystery, I needed a rewrite.

Had I learned anything? Once my gambling had a purpose. Odds on most everything are 50/50, the going rate, they say, but what does that prove? That this can happen, and that can happen, and without shove or lift we careen like pinballs? I couldn't believe it. And so, I went on a quest, by gambling to prove, without a doubt, once and for all, whether God existed. I was a dice rolling philosopher.

It became my fixation, each bet tallying up one way or the other, every win a proof of God's existence, every loss a doubt. A string of bad luck long enough would demonstrate my utter unsalvageability — given I would thus not only be broke but more verifiably out of luck on the savior front too. If I were to grow rich, on luck alone, well, then, the crown was mine, I a noble prince under the rule of the King, hello.

But not every calculation is rooted in a viable mathematical equation, and after many months of escalating doubts (aka debt), crownless, hunted by the likes of this leprous beast, I began to rethink that equation. Surely, I soon realized, I must admit that the will, the morale and temperament of every player and every horse skewed the odds, that those defeated before a match began, by despondency or a poor breakfast, or even faulty genetics — and, vice versa, those prodigiously gifted, too — painted illusions poorer and richer than a worldwide accounting would prove the balance of the scales to truly be. It remained a matter unsolvable by the performance of man or animal, plastic or metal, and remained stubbornly incalculable, secret.

I went back to my usual way, placing that last bet for the hell of it.

Now my stop approached. The gray had spread its curtains and the sun shone — surely he wouldn't brutalize me now. He might only be summing me up, devising the proper method for my height and weight.

He indeed followed me as I made my way past the various shops. The son of a bitch didn't even bother muffling his footsteps, the click-click picking my brain, Morse code for kill. I walked and walked, suddenly remembering why I had come to Boulder — to lose myself in the crowd, to forget the entire business. I looked for the clowns and the pantomimes and the bongo players, who usually just annoyed me, but they had revengefully stayed home for the day due to the cold. The light tunnelled around me then whistled straight through my ears. For a moment, I felt purged, baptized.

But then, yes, he was upon me, and I fell again as everyone must. It was language that did it, that and my own goddamned thoughts that the language gave voice to and then unleashed upon my nervous system, my organs, my fucking soul, signalling this and that, without traffic lights or any other restraint of civilization, manic and animalistic.

I could see it everywhere, but especially, now, in him. I turned as he pretended to slide past me. I grabbed his arm and squeezed, crumbs and cockroaches spilling out of his mouth.

"Listen to me, you mangy fucking bastard," I muttered. "I know what you're up to. I know your secret. I know the secret of everything."

"Ah, leave me alone," he said, shaking his arm free.

"But don't you want the money?" I asked.

"What money? I don't want your goddamned money."

"That's right, you don't want it, but somebody does, isn't that it?"

"Somebody always does. Now leave me alone -- I'm late for an appointment."

"I am your appointment, if memory serves. Have you forgotten? Or am I second on the list today?"

Finally, he grabbed my arm. I had to remember: patience, patience... I was second on the list. Assassins have schedules, with appointments and meetings, lunchbreaks, coffee. Besides, now I knew; I'd seen the first physical hints of the ugliness inside, the way he grabbed my arm.

"All right, all right," I said. "Don't strike me here. Go on your merry way. I'll be waiting."

"Stay out of my way," he said and pushed off, moving like a bearded ship toward his destiny.

I had unmasked him, yes, and better yet could now prepare. Had I brought -- ah, yes, there it was.

Who could say now what was self-defense, or if any were ever justifiable in their violence, or stranger still, if all were, from the most calculated to the most random to the most patriotic to the most idiotic -- YET! -- everyone abandoned by You to their thoughts and their words, which could convince them of anything at all, even something so, in retrospect, asinine as believing the existence of God could be proven or disproved by untoward good or bad luck. Laugh, now, go ahead, but it made a lot of sense, as much as this moment or any other interpreted by a half-assed reason or, worse still, romantic notions. I could look up at the moon and see an eyeball on Tuesday and a testicle on Thursday. So fucking what? Could I measure the distance, count the rocks, name the craters and still see a giant gallstone? Or the glowing face of a princess?

To shut off my running mind I fixed it on habits. To lull the ceaseless ideation I unearthed methods and patterns where sometimes none existed, yet many had proven true or, at least, beautiful.

But now, back to my body:

My toes were numb, my nose itched, I had a cramp in my calve. Still managed to stay in sight of the executioner. I walked in time to the words, probably appearing to dance or stagger.

Where was he going? Where would the first one die? In an elevator shaft? Pushed face first into an escalator? A shoe store? Sea shell emporium?

Everything glittered, silver, reflecting. My "friend" sailed along as the yellow pages unfolded across the sidewalks and alleys. I hurried behind, convinced I was invisible, though doubtless he would have ignored me had I walked stepping on his heels -- for some reason the sequence of the murders was inordinately important to him. So, we had something in common. Perhaps we could have a little chat as my blood oozed out -- "Oh, you, too?"

It was then, as he went inside a "324 Parker Building," that I thought of the other possibility. But would good would it do? It didn't get at the source of the problem. Not a deep enough root, that. And where would I throw it? And would I be able to eat? Could I even cut through it, all the way, or would it require a sawing motion, which no coward like myself could sustain? And how humiliating it would be to go to the hospital and say, "Hi hink hi hut hi hounge hoff"?

There was nothing to do but wait here until he was finished, then quietly walk together to the place where the scuffle would ensue. Curious, I peeked inside the door and saw a small entry area where

usually a security guard or desk clerk would be found, and a winding staircase. I saw no plaque either inside or outside. It was the kind of place a well-to-do prostitute might live and it was more than possible it might actually be one he planned to kill.

I tested the door, which was unlocked. When I stepped inside, a sterile, nose-tickling odor greeted me. I left the door ajar and moved as silently as possible toward the staircase, which I climbed halfway before seeing a sign on a door that said:

MOKBEL HASSAN, M.D. Urology

I crept out, again leaving the door open, and wondered if my fortunes have changed, for surely a urologist wouldn't be mixed up in anything like the kind of business my sort enjoys. To be sure, though, I located the nearest convenience store, asked the clerk for a telephone book, found the "U" section, ran my finger down the page and read:

MOKBEL HASSAN, M.D. Urology

But then, below that, in finer print:

Specializing in the Discreet Treatment of Impotence

Another mystery solved, and yet a new one began, for if not this man, then who was it looking for me? Whose presence did I sense shadowing me, and why did I always mistake the source of the foreboding?

As I continued walking back to the bus station, I noticed the temperature was warming, and the clowns and the pantomimes and the bongo players were taking their places, lining the street, and the tourists and shoppers were crowding the sidewalks. I began to find myself lost in their midst and wondered how much of what I felt to be true had any relevance to my survival, and suddenly realized I would never, ever know.

King Seuss

It was Beth's birthday and I had bought candles for her, the ones she liked from Mexico with the oddly specific blessings ("Have Mercy on This One Bedroom Apartment") and the tortured face of Jesus. I put the candles in a bag. This would be her last gift from me. She knew it; I knew it. Somebody had to name the event, that's all, to make it happen, to get it over with.

Afterwards, I was leaving for a river I alone knew. It's a secret river in California, not far from Los Angeles, in the deep smog between two mountains. The smog acts as some kind of catalyst and affects the color of the foliage. You don't notice the smog once you're there. But that's all I'm telling you. Don't bother looking for it because you won't find it.

I took the bag of candles with me to the car and drove to her house in the Valley. The air was smoky with the smell of drying leaves. I was drunk and hungover, but my mind was fairly still with the moment. What had to happen was going to happen. No need to be edgy, depressed or nervous because only one thing could happen, and it was happening.

I would be all right once I climbed into my boat. I wouldn't let my passions carry me away. The

birds, fish, trees, etc. would watch over me, keeping me in line so that only inevitable, natural events could occur. This wasn't going to be like the last four drunken years.

-- Don't be edgy, there's no reason to be edgy, you are not edgy. Look at the sun. No? Then look at the sky.

Friend, I am the barbarian captain, the devil's mind embodied. I've seen it all, cannibalism, pedophilia, you name it. I understand rapists, murderers, extortionists. I know what they're running from. I am aloof, but friendly. I carry a pocketful of cigars. I could shoot the shit with Hitler, drink rednecks under tables. Nothing fazes me. If the sun rises, so what? It's nothing new. I don't give a damn. I can imagine brighter stars. I can push my thumbs into my eyes and see the birth of a universe. Who needs a god, or science? I'm not the kind of guy a woman should stick around for long.

To take a step backward, into the dark, that's what I was after. I'd seen enough. So my girlfriend or I would name this one last thing and then I was done with it. To hell with words. These disputes could not be settled in court. I hate Latin.

You see, I'm the last of the kings. I won't see the castle divided up into equally sized rooms. It wouldn't make me happy to see the peasants fed as well as me. I'll either lean out of balconies overlooking adoring crowds like the pope, or be hung like Mussolini. I don't need the sun of love. I have my armies. I am going to war at night. In the blackness we will clash and fall. There won't be love there. We'll beat each other in the head with rocks.

Don't get the idea that I'm evil. Not at all. I'm filled with light. My cells are chunks of stained glass. My blood glows in the dark. My mind is a star. If anything, I am pre-evil, and I was dragged to these realizations. I did not ask for them. Pride is not one of my weaknesses. It's just that I'm not made for love.

It's true I treated her well in my sleep. I produced starry gifts like a magician. I could dazzle the richest child with a million wonders. The rest bored me. I was powerless. I couldn't afford a wristwatch, much less bend and twist its arms until time sparkled like a grail.

Astern, the sun. Below, the pavement. Overhead billboards. I sailed through ideas.

Not far away, Beth waited. I thought, let's be aware of what's actually happening here: I'm no good.

To hell with that. I have medals. My troops respect me.

I exited onto Sherman Oaks and passed the overlit shops, moving through the network of gas stations and electric wires. Telephone lines hummed around me. Radio waves circled my antennae like fireflies. Searchlights lit up sections of the sky, obstructing the constellations. A pink haze hovered over the mountains. In the center of it, a fine layer of dust. The earth rose out of itself, evaporating upwards.

I had no opinions or friends. I was going with the animals. My feelings before had nothing to do with hunger, or fatigue, or thirst, and that's why they couldn't be trusted. I had been a monkey ahead of itself. I should have stayed in the trees, illiterate. But monkeys do learn, eventually.

Through the neighborhood. To the driveway. Up towards the house. Past the mailbox. Step over the pots. Repeated, memorized, emptied. Could be any house, just happened to be this house.

Listen to a string of words repeatedly and it becomes a new string of words. Without our help.

Helicopters overhead. Searchlights tracking. Letting somebody know, "You're visible, all right. No use pretending. Come out of there. Hands up. You're coming with us."

Knock. One last time being let in, essentially, by a stranger. "This house is your house, too." She had told somebody that once, and somebody before him. Now I was that person. After me, somebody else would be that person. That person would be jealous of me. He would think of me and ask her, "How? How could you even like him?" And he would be right. The world won't let us forget, not for a second, these failures.

But, sooner or later, if I have my way, each of us will be uncomfortable in every home, everywhere. We will meet all parents everywhere. Every love affair will be the real thing, and each one after that realer and realer, until we are subsumed into a single, earthwide love affair with everyone. We'll be comfortable everywhere because discomfort will be universal, and we'll escape our jealousy, because we will all have equal reason to be jealous. Get it? The only escape is to dive right in.

"Can I get you something to eat? You don't look well. Come in. Sit down. Awwwww. What's wrong, baby? What's wrong? Come over here, let me look at your face. You're pale. You're sweating. Your heartbeat is too fast. Take your jacket off. You don't need a jacket in this weather. There. Over here. Let me -- okay. I've got it. Now lie down. Put your feet up. Let me get your shoes. What took you so long? I should have come to your house. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made you drive all the way out here. You look tired. Do you want to take a nap? It's okay if you do. I don't mind. I have things to do anyway. You don't mind do you?"

-- I am going down to where the animals are, are. There's no talking there. My head hurts.

"You're feverish. Your hands are shaking. Can't you talk? Won't you talk to me? Okay. That's all right. I have things to do anyway."

-- You're leaving me. Let's get that straight.

"Is something wrong? Why aren't you saying anything?"

-- I just told you. I can't talk now. Here's a signal. No, that was stupid. I can't communicate. I thought they could teach monkeys to --

"Did you see the new billboard, honey? What do you think it means? What's it for? They reveal another panel every week."

"I don't know what it means."

"Oh, but thank God, thank God. You're talking again. You'll be yourself again soon. But you can't keep expecting this. Yes -- yes, of course you can. Who am I kidding? I'm there for you. I'll always be there for you. You can talk to me. We speak the same language. Tell me everything."

I could hear the grinding of the gears. I could smell her neck. The nerves in my fingertips trembled. Though tempted to tell her everything, I didn't say a word; she already knew I wasn't going anywhere.
