

# TALES OF THE TINKERTOY

*a Novel*

JJ SEMPLE



Copyright © 2022 by JJ Semple and Life Force Books. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

It is natural to compare works of art—novels and films— situated in previous times with present day namesakes. Social norms, beliefs, and values evolve over time. Traditions, customs, even religions evolve. Attitudes towards sex as well as sexual practices act as a weathervane for what is accepted and what isn't. The 1960s acted as such as old ways and practices were questioned and replaced by what may appear to be similar to today's attitudes. That is not entirely accurate. The '60s were a time of rapid change, frontiers whose lines were not yet drawn. Today, with the Internet, there are hardly any no lines, certainly any new frontiers. Then is not now; now is not then.

As for the sex in this book, a book should only be considered pornographic when an open-minded reader finds that it serves no literary purpose. The author has made every effort to ensure this credo has been adhered to.

## EPIGRAPH

“Do you know what I did? I burnt every novel I possessed. Dickens. Cervantes. Flaubert. Dostoyevsky. All the great and all the small. I even burnt something I wrote myself when I was too young to know better.”

— *THE MAGUS* — JOHN FOWLES



# PART I: 1952-1967

“Nature does not loathe virtue: it is unaware of its existence.”

— FRANÇOISE MALLET-JORIS





## THE KNOWER

**I**t wasn't a real neighborhood; houses were far apart. Winter's and Stewart's were the closest families to ours. My father knew the latter from work. That's how I met Julissa, their daughter, at a barbecue we were invited to. Right off the bat, Julissa and I didn't get along, even though our ages matched. She was playing the little helper, passing around homemade pickles. I cracked an off-color joke about pickles and human anatomy to see if I could get a rise. She barely looked at me. Jokes, serious talk, nothing interested her.

The harder I tried, the more she looked around nervously like a person unfamiliar with cats freaks out when one jumps in their lap. I knew I'd get nowhere talking about baseball or mentioning Charlie Parker or Dave Brubeck. I told her we'd studied *Hamlet* in English class and the Korean War in history, adding my favorite subjects were reading and writing, trying not to sound pedantic.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I dunno. School."

"What about it?" she asked.

Julissa started petting their large Newfoundland. The dog walked over to me. I put out my hand. Julissa gave me a dirty look; I melted. The slightest put-down exposed my lack of confidence around girls. It never occurred to me it was part of a game she was playing, one she perfected.

It was obvious Julissa didn't give a hoot about school. If she cared about it at all, it had nothing to do with academics. When I told her there were no girls in my school, she acted surprised and a wee bit more interested.

"Oh my, what's that like?" she giggled modestly. There was nothing modest about Julissa. She was one of those teenagers whose hormones kick in before they're supposed to. She'd learned what she could get away with, how to arrange herself innocently while inwardly her intentions were anything but innocent.

In a fruitless attempt to make her daughter look ordinary, her mother styled her blond hair with a bowl and she didn't allow her to wear makeup. It only made Julissa more alluring. She might have worn a prison jumpsuit; it wouldn't have mattered; there was nothing ordinary about Julissa or her green and black 1940s-styled short-sleeved peasant dress. Hemmed at the knee—no pleats, no lace, no frills—it was the perfect counterpart to her dark red Keds® and bobby socks.

"That school of yours, nothing to do 'cept look out the window," she said.

"Thinking about what we're missing."

"I know what boys think about," she said. "Poor little things need cheerin' up."

"From now on, I'll stare out the window and think about you, maybe."

"The horses. They'll cheer you up."

"Sure will."

"Last one there is the devil's plaything."

She took off for the stable at a run. When I caught up to her, she was standing with her back against the stable wall. I leaned in, my arms forming a circle, enclosing her. She tried ducking under them, making a game of it, laughing. I was too quick for her. She smelled of cow's milk and clover.

NEXT THING I KNEW WE WERE IN THE HAYLOFT, AND SHE WAS showing me hers and I was showing her mine. No offense, but at our young age mine seemed to hold more interest than hers, that is until she



gently pried the two sides apart and it was like staring at me. She told me to make mine big, which indicated she'd done this before. How else would she know about boners? If she fondled it, it'd get bigger in a matter of seconds, I insisted, but she only poked at it once or twice like it was a dead mamba that still might bite her.

Every time one of the horses moved in their stalls, she cringed and the look of terror on her face frightened me so much I wilted.

Her parents, she explained, were very religious. They belonged to Lambs of the Lord, an obscure, but strict church. What we were doing was a mortal sin. If they caught us, it meant a whipping.

She pointed out a pink area at the top of her, her— *cunt* was the word I knew from school. The way older boys spoke it, with such repugnance, I hated it. Older girls at her school, said Julissa, referred to it as a *pussy*, a term I instantly related to.

“When I rub there softly.. It has to be just right, my whole body..” In the words of a fifteen-year-old, she described an orgasm so seductively it had me fully erect. Her face flushing, her titties tingling, molten liquid gushing from within, her body erupts like a volcano is the way she described it. Only lasts thirty seconds, she said, sometimes a whole minute.

“How could it be sinful?” she asked. “If it was a sin, God wouldn't have put it in our bodies.”

“That's the whole point of religion, overcoming temptation. Says so in the Bible, on page one. Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit.”

She wanted to see me do what she'd just described, the way boys do it, she said, watch me spurt. I proposed lying back while she used her hand. At first, she was unwilling. I asked her if she'd done it with other boys. She swore that she'd merely exchanged glimpses—a few boys had shown her theirs and she'd reciprocated. She hadn't had many opportunities; her parents didn't want boys hanging around. I was there with my family; that was different, she said. Besides, I was deemed trustworthy because, as my father described it, my prep school practiced the honor system like it was a religion.

Julissa pushed me back into the hay and started to explore me. I let her. She spat into her hand and applied it to my.. we didn't use the word *penis* in those days. *Cock* was customary, although I liked *Knob*, the

term Pop used, mainly because no one else used it. Anyway, she fondled it a while before wetting her hand again and finding a suitable motion.

She'd learned how from her older brother who was in Korea now, she said. He'd shared certain techniques, often describing the things men like.

"I did it for him once or twice, but that's all. I swear."

They'd been in clandestine revolt against their parents' fanatical fundamentalism, she said. We exchanged looks as she went at it, her mouth wide open, panting.

My breathing quickened. Soon, she had me on the verge. Using her index and middle fingers, she dipped into the flow when I came, slurping a gob or two off her fingertips while making a funny face and giggling. I was pretty sure she hadn't learned this from her brother.

Julissa was a much better kisser than I was. Her tongue was everywhere. After a while, I caught on. By that time, I was hard again and wanted to go all the way. Julissa was all for it. She rolled me over on my back. Gaspng, mouth open, as if inhaling a sigh, she lowered herself onto my knob, guiding it into her. Bracing herself with her arms, she leaned back and started to move up and down and around with abandon. It wasn't her first time; that much was obvious.

That thought cost me an instant, a fraction of a second, time to realize I might be in real trouble. More than once, my mother had explained how girls got pregnant. Still, I had no intention of stopping. She let out a cry before finding a rhythm she was comfortable with; she looked down at me and smiled.

I might have labeled it ecstasy, had my rational mind been functioning and I had something to compare it with. It was like we'd crossed into another world.

"Julissa..."

"Honey baby."

I couldn't believe it. After a miserable beginning, feeling I'd never get anywhere with a girl, I was doing it with one.

Well, almost...

Fifteen measly seconds into it, the shit hit the fan. The sound of someone, perhaps, two people approaching the stable, fussing and

making a racket. Heaven on Earth had evaporated just as we were beginning to savor its delights.

In the rush to disentangle herself, Julissa must have sprung halfway across the hayloft. She was fully dressed before I finished struggling with my pants. We were able to slip out the back way and pretend to be moseying in from the pasture where the cows were; it was her mother and grandmother.

“Where you been, girl?” snapped her mother.

“Nowhere,” said Julissa.

“What were you doing?”

“Nothing.” There was the slightest flicker of defiance in her voice. Her mother knew it was there, but it wasn’t overt enough to be called out on, even though the hay in Julissa’s hair was a dead giveaway.

I should have thanked those interlopers. Had I gotten Julissa pregnant, my life would have been over. I never would have left Oklahoma.

A few days later, Julissa’s father called Pop, ostensibly to ask if I’d be attending the local high school. He knew I played football. Pop realized that wasn’t the main reason for the call, so when her father got around to explaining Julissa was boy crazy, he knew it was about the two of us disappearing during the barbecue.

“Nothing personal, you understand. He’s a fine boy. It’s Julissa we worry about. If she should get in trouble...”

“Thanks, neighbor, it won’t be our boy. You can be sure of it.”

After dinner, while reading the latest *Submariner*, Pop came over to my chair. “You only live once, Monk,” he said putting his arm around me like I’d caught a touchdown pass. “Get as much as you can while you can.” Pop was full of aphorisms when it came to sex. Nevertheless, Julissa Stewart was off limits, he said. My only souvenir?— the scratch marks her fingernails had gouged on my back. No more swimming with the family this vacation.

When our paths did cross a few years later, she snubbed me. Rumors swirled around Julissa. If true, she ran around with certain townies, making up nasty things about me. Like hinting I was responsible for her abortion, the one her super-religious family had no trouble arranging when it concerned their daughter but, oh Lordy, how they condemned it when other young girls became pregnant.

I could tell Pop wanted to quiz me about Julissa, the horny bastard. My mother heard him and chased him away. These things were never discussed between generations. Later, it was alleged that Julissa's father had raped her repeatedly.



I'VE TRIED TO FORGET THE DAY POP TURNED UP AT WINTER'S, BUT IT keeps cropping up, a souvenir of my father's struggles with alcohol and the source of our estrangement. He'd fallen off the wagon again; my mother and I had stopped counting.

This on again, off again merry-go-round, said my mother, was like dealing with two different persons, neither of whom were conducive to a caring and giving family life. It wasn't always that way, she said. When they first got together, Pop was a social drinker, the most gracious, fun person she'd ever known. Unfortunately, that sobriquet was short-lived as tends to happen with so-called social drinkers.

According to her, in holding his Mr. Hyde persona in check by not drinking, his Dr. Jekyll side was devoid of empathy. When that happened, he couldn't stand himself, so he'd start drinking again. Drunk or sober, there wasn't much difference.

Drunk or sober, we lived in a house of gloom, waiting for a pin to drop, for his inevitable next outburst. My mother, cringing at the sound of his footsteps or a cough from the bedroom after his nap. Nap, my ass. The night before, he'd passed out at nine-thirty and was just now thinking about his first drink of the day. I felt like a coward, leaving my mother to deal with him, but I had to get away.

I wolfed down my Wheaties and hightailed it out of the house before Pop got going. Three or four times a week, all summer long, I'd trek down the hill from our house in Carmelita, Oklahoma, to fish, hunt, and play backyard baseball with the Winter boys.

Now that I'd finished my summer reading, my visits were even more frequent. The Winter kids weren't educated like I was. When I mentioned summer reading, citing titles: *The Price of Salt* by Patricia Highsmith, *King Lear*, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, they laughed and teased me. They might not have read *Beowulf* or studied solid geometry,

but they had the kind of cunning and determination that comes with working the land.

Perhaps, like me, you knew a family you wish could have been yours, a house you hung out at, hoping somehow they might adopt you. In my life, it was the Winter family.

Imagine my surprise when Pop materialized at Winter's that afternoon, his face distorted with rage. To the best of my knowledge, he didn't know the Winters, where their house was, or who they were, partly on account of their being shunned by the fundamentalist families because they were Catholics.

Outside of boxing lessons, an occasional movie, or one of his patented tirades, Pop never showed much interest in me during summer vacation, even when he was sober.

I realized he was not only drunk, but he was also making a beeline for me. I had no clue as to why. Something I'd forgotten to do? Firewood? Garbage? Some other chore? No, I was all caught up. I should have run, but I just stood there on the burlap bag we used for a base.

There we were, the four of us, the only time Paul, aged sixteen, the oldest of the Winter brothers, and I teamed up. We were batting against Randy and Willie, Paul's younger brothers. Sixteen and fifteen versus fourteen and twelve.

"Fifty-three to four," Paul shouted as he crossed home plate and I slid into third base behind him.

Abruptly, the sky turned molten chromium—a color so malevolent it made my teeth chatter. At first, I thought this change in the weather might have something to do with Pop's arrival. I froze. I wasn't alone: birds, animals, mankind, all moving creatures froze when he grabbed me, hauled me off the base, and started herding me up the road toward home. "Your aunt and uncle just arrived, in a taxi. You were supposed to go with me. Where were you? I looked all over." In my rush to escape from home before my father, I had forgotten their arrival.

Sensing something amiss, Eloise, the boys' fourteen-year-old sister, who usually ignored our antics, came through the screen door in time to witness my humiliation. Still within earshot of the stunned Winter family, he let loose, "Five minutes I been watching you pick on them young boys." (Pop adored bad grammar, using it to bolster his prize-

fighter credentials.) “Is that what they learn you in that fancy boarding school back East? Is that what we’re paying for, Monk?”

He punctuated each pronouncement with a whack to my tail with his walking stick. “How to bully little kids?” A string of curses. “We’ll see about that. You can damn well go to school right here in the real world, learn you some fair play, goddamn it—you little monkey.”

He was so angry he started hissing, as if someone had put his false teeth in a microwave while they were still in his mouth, causing him to emit a blend of high-frequency warbles and muffled phonemes.

This self-appointed amateur psychologist, my pop, was angrier about the baseball game than not being able to find me. In his mind, we had traumatized Willie and Randy for life, even though they had enjoyed the farce as much as we had—a kind of zany diversion when the usual order of things is reversed—the whole thing being Willie’s idea.

“So long, Gus, you little monkey.” I heard Paul shout, and I realized I couldn’t count on sympathy from the Winter boys. True to their cornpone sensibilities, they thought it all very funny, escorting me up the hill with taunts and catcalls that only made Pop angrier. I feared he might forbid me from ever visiting them again. “White trash,” he muttered.

“We’ll save you third base, Monk,” said Paul.

“So long, Gus,” came the refrain. “See you.”

All the while, balling my way up the hill, I told myself: *You aren’t paying for school. It’s not you; it’s Aunt Alice and Uncle Phil.*

PEOPLE WHO KNEW MY FATHER, RAYMOND “RAY-RAY” MAZUR, LIKED him. At gatherings, he told funny stories about his boxing exploits. People loved having a minor celebrity as a neighbor. I loved the stories of his heyday too, but not the moods that followed them. No one had the slightest clue about the real Ray-Ray Mazur. He fooled everyone but my mother and me.

I told her about the Winter family, and how nice it was to have someone to do things with. I might have mentioned them to my father once. If I did, he’d nodded and cleared his throat. His usual reaction to anything I said. I hated the nicknames he gave me; I hated the moods; I hated him.

The afternoon of his appearance was the only time Paul and I had teamed up against the younger boys, but Pop was in no mood for explanations, and I couldn't get the words out. Why try to justify myself when deep down he must have known he'd gotten riled up over something he couldn't walk back without appearing weak in front of us?

That his anger wasn't justified, that he knew only part of the story, that he had jumped to the wrong conclusion was as obvious as the monstrous unfairness in making me the instigator. But I'd been powerless to speak. His anger had morphed into a fiery animus. I knew I could outrun him (he was huffing and puffing), so I started sprinting up the hill. When I got to the house, I passed it by, disappearing into the woods to the stream where I kept the six-pack of beer Paul Winter had procured for me. I vowed to never again find myself at a loss for words. I would master words, their meanings, and their usage, and I'd have my revenge, which, when dealing with family members, I would discover, is never entirely satisfactory.

One Budweiser later, I headed home. Hearing loud voices through the screen door as I approached the house, I hung back, singling out to the most prominent voice—Pop's. It didn't take long to catch the gist. Pop was threatening to pull me out of boarding school on account of what he thought he'd witnessed at the Winters'. Furious at my father's misinterpretation of events, I felt a hot wave engulf me, soon realizing Aunt Alice was letting Ray-Ray sound off, all the time knowing that he'd capitulate without her ever having to remind him of her abundant financial support. The whole thing reminded me of the Kabuki theater my aunt had taken me to last Christmas vacation in New York: lots of bluster.

From the bushes, I heard Aunt Alice lead Ray-Ray to the bar and open a Coke, his favorite beverage. He polished off ten or more a day when he wasn't drinking. It turned out he'd also forgotten their arrival because he was drunk, using me as a scapegoat when they arrived in a taxi. He sobered up quickly. He didn't dare take a drink while Aunt Alice and Uncle Phil were visiting.

"This way," said Aunt Alice, after my brush with Julissa was explained to her, "he won't get a local girl in trouble and be obliged to spend the rest of his life in this backward—" She handed Ray-Ray his Coke over ice

and kissed his cheek. “So, it’s settled. He goes back East to us when summer vacation ends.”

A Coke served with soothing words; Ray-Ray was already feeling justified. My wild man of a father grumbling, attempting to save face, realizing the futility of it.

How could a brother and sister be so different in so many ways?

The screen door opened. My mother stepped outside, cooing to me, “Come inside, child. No need to fret. You’re going to stay with your aunt in New York—just like you want,” she said. “Wouldn’t be that way if you was white.”



IT WAS A LONG TIME BEFORE I RETURNED TO THE WINTER HOUSE. I made sure Pop was working when I finally did. Eloise, who rarely spoke, even to her brothers, sat on the side-door stoop watching Willie and me outscore Paul and Randy for the first time. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her watching us.

When we’d finished with baseball, Paul suggested hide-and-go-seek with me taking the first turn at being it. After I’d found all the brothers except Paul, Willie stood in front of the house as if to divert me from looking into the crawl space under it as the house was elevated on blocks a good two and a half feet off the ground. I peered into the darkness without seeing much, then I crouched down and started crawling. After I disappeared in the dark, Paul appeared from somewhere and the brothers began chanting, “Gus loves Eloise; Eloise loves Gus.” That’s when I discovered Eloise had made her way under the house, all shy and serious in her cotton-print farm-girl dress.

I liked that she wasn’t a giggler like Julissa. After I’d moved alongside her, after we’d stared at each other a while, she asked me about New York City and boarding school. We talked for ten minutes before she inquired, “Would you like to go together? Be my steady, Gus?”

“Sure,” I replied, not understanding what going steady entailed.

“Only..”

“Only what?”

“Nothin’.”



“C’mon, it must be something.”

“Is it true you’re some kind of Indian?”

“Part Cherokee on my mother’s side, I am. There are many of us in Oklahoma, didn’t you know?”

“Is that why you’re dark?”

“I guess.”

“I don’t mind... I think you’re swell,” she said. “I didn’t like what your dad done that last time.”

“Ain’t none of your business.”

“You did it with Julissa, didn’t you?”

“We didn’t do it,” I said. “I only saw her once. Why?”

“Only that she’s telling everyone.”

When the talk stopped, the brothers reckoned we were kissing, which we were. The harder I became, the more she pressed her crotch against mine, the more the boys teased until my breathing turned hyper—a signal inspiring her to cup my stiffness with her right hand as it started to throb. After, she whispered, “Gus. You do love me. I know it.”

“You know I do, love you, Eloise.”

“Cause I’d never go all the way before becoming fully acquainted, you know, engaged.”

I waited for an answer to materialize. Words failed me.

I’d dry-humped her, or wet-humped her. I didn’t know which. Only that it was the high point of my life up to the moment. She was so beautiful. She made me want to share my dreams, starting with my favorite books, *Antic Hay* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. How the authors, Aldous Huxley and James Joyce broke with conventional morality in a search for truth. Their hedonism and excesses, their revelries, their witty conversations, the failures that haunt aspiring writers and their persistence, Paris and London, their sexual freedom (although I didn’t use that term).

I got right to the edge of revealing my innermost thoughts and stopped. To continue or not to continue; that was the question. Although she wasn’t like her brothers, she’d probably start laughing when I described the struggles of would-be writers in a world that doesn’t appreciate writers. The more I spoke, the more I sensed her agitation. I was sure she’d find my ramblings wicked or whatever words her church

used to describe someone like me. How could she not, given the differences between my world and hers? London in the 1920s was about as far from Carmelita, Oklahoma as Oz is from Kansas. For all she knew, I could be talking about Sinbad the Sailor, not about two of the most influential writers of our century.

Nevertheless, I risked ridicule. I told her how Mr. Swartz, my English teacher, said I had talent and he'd given me those two books. Now, thanks to boarding school and the subversive elements within, outcasts like myself, I had a model for the life I was going to lead, starting ASAP.

"Gee," she said, snuggling up to me, "the way you talk, the things you know. I love to read. It's about all I do 'cept for washing my brothers' underpants." She paused to let me picture it, then added: "London, Paris. They seem so far away, although I did play Cecily Cardew in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, last year's school play." She hesitated a beat, before reciting a few lines from the play in perfect King's English. "'I wish Uncle Jack would allow that unfortunate young man, his brother, to come down here sometimes. We might have a good influence over him, Miss Prism.' I was the only actor to get the accent right, you know. We watched a movie of it before the first rehearsal."

Boy, was I wrong about Eloise. She went on to tell me about Carson McCullers and other writers she admired: Lillian Hellman, Stendhal, Joseph Conrad, and William Faulkner. *Babbitt*, *A Doll's House*, and, of course, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

"I can picture us five years from now, Eloise. Strutting down the Champs-Élysées, sipping Pernod on the Left Bank, waving to Scott Fitzgerald at the next table, if he was still alive, that is."

"Gee."

EVERY SO OFTEN WHEN I THINK OF HOW MY FATHER DRAGGED ME away from third base, I think about Eloise Winter and how, had I not gone away to boarding school, I would have married her, had a family, a farmhouse, and a job at a country newspaper. That's as far as that fantasy went. One week later, I was back at school in Connecticut and living permanently with my aunt and uncle in New York City. Each time I returned to Carmelita, Eloise was away, at parochial school or an

extracurricular activity, 4H, or some such thing. I never saw her again. But I counted on the memory of being dragged away to reincarnate her in my imagination. In my most recent visit home, the Winter family had moved. The farmhouse had been torn down and the land was being developed.

## ANTIC HAY

**B**uried away from the world during four years of monkish confinement in the halls, dormitories, and classrooms of the Woolley School, I was a month away from graduating. I'd climbed the ladder of academic and athletic achievement and now, whole new vistas awaited me.

Term papers had been handed in, final exams had been graded, the class valedictorian had been chosen, college acceptances were old hat, no longer being bragged about, and I had served the final ace of the tennis season against South Kent, Woolley's number one rival.

With no further challenges, academic or otherwise, to hold over our heads, the school had lost its leverage over the graduating seniors. By tacit agreement with faculty, rules were no longer enforced with the same severity. Several students began slipping into the woods to their concealed automobiles for clandestine visits to local dives. Not that this select group of WASP offspring planned to disrupt school activities. It was more a question of release. For me, it was a release from conventional pathways to success for the progeny of the ruling classes. I had no intention of following in anyone's footsteps. New beginnings were sure to reveal themselves if only I could take care of one remaining issue: I was the only senior without a date for the prom. I'd been so busy with tennis and my application to Yale that I'd neglected the prom.

According to my roommate, Mitch Warren, if I'd started earlier, girls were plentiful. At this late hour, the chances of landing an attractive date were slim to none. The "townies," the high school girls who'd previously boycotted Woolley functions, now rebelled against that shibboleth. The chance to marry into affluence—Woolley boys were considered scions of the rich—had seen to it.

The cutest "preppie" girls had their pick of New England's many boarding schools. Bigger names than Woolley, Mitch insisted. Deerfield, St. Paul's, Exeter.

The differences between the townies and the preppies, Mitch advised, were not ones of breeding, but of endowment—the girls from Metcalf High School were well endowed while the prep school girls were flat chested. A generalization I found rather fatuous.

I was surprised that Mitch was more upset about my situation than I was.

"The attractive townies are spoken for, my man," said Mitch. "So too the pick of the preppies. You couldn't get one now, even if you were that Elvis guy girls are crazy about, but— But... thankfully I have the solution to your problem."

I started to object.

"No, no. No need to thank me. I insist. There's still the risk of her refusing."

"Who the hell is it then?"

"Joanna Benson."

Spindly Joanna was the daughter of our football coach and math teacher, the assistant principal, and a revered figure on campus. Joanna was a cross between a townie and a boarder: she went to Metcalf High, but she lived and ate meals with her family on the stately grounds of the Woolley School. And like her townie classmates, she was well-endowed, which made her a desirable date, despite her status as the daughter of a faculty member, declared Mitch.

"Score one for Joanna," I said, still not convinced.

"I'm sure you'll discover other qualities; I never have," joked Mitch.

Since my acquaintance with Julissa Stewart, I developed an aversion to being "fixed up" by parents or adult friends of parents. At that moment, the fixers were narrowed down to one, Mitch Warren, a fixer if

there ever was one. I didn't need a go-between; I didn't mind missing the prom. *Sacrilege* said Mitch. *The co-captain of the football and tennis teams! Missing the prom? My roommate! Never!*

Nevertheless, because I resided among the anonymous hordes of New York City and was away at an all-boys boarding school most of the year, I didn't know many girls.

"Does it have to be Joanna?" I asked.

Mitch nodded.

COMPARED TO MY CLASSMATES WHO COMMUTED TO SCHOOL, I WAS A latecomer to sex. While they dated on weekends and evenings, as a boarder I was confined to campus. I passed the time longing for intimacy with a girl, fantasizing my fingers unhooking her bra, my nostrils smelling her fragrance as it rose from her fallen undergarments, my hands exploring her hidden recesses. The bits about boarding school, that sex is relegated to self-gratification with a contraband copy of *Playboy* magazine were true.

Attempts to put my affliction in perspective never materialized. I was resigned to an endless succession of fantasies.

These fantasies had become even more animated when, during my junior year at Woolley, my aunt took me to see *Tea and Sympathy* on Broadway. The play took place in a boarding school much like my own and dealt with the seduction of an artistically inclined loner boy by the housemaster's wife. Even at eighteen years old, I grasped the impossibility of anything like this happening at my school, but it fueled my frustrations. It was as if the playwright were thumbing his nose at me.

Yes, I was a latecomer who harbored the foolish notion that the universe owed me a chance to even the score with boys who had dated girls all through high school.

Eventually, I asked Joanna.

As newly minted, soon-to-be high-school graduates, both of us would be off to college the following year, where high school memories, good and bad, best be forgotten. In the meantime, I wondered about this person I'd soon be dancing with. Who was Joanna Benson?

To be sure, she had a special look, an almost caricature resemblance

to a gangly Little Orphan Annie with braces and thick round-rimmed glasses that lent her a quality of wide-eyed desperation. It was almost as if she'd created this persona with the express purpose of making herself unattractive.

She was also six feet tall. Not a problem for me at six feet three, but it had been the previous year when she was escorted to the junior prom by none other than co-captain and quarterback Mitch Warren, who was five nine at the time and not much taller since. Their terpsichorean efforts had elicited giggles from students and teachers alike.

"Her father being the assistant headmaster and all, she has a kind of protective cover," said Mitch. "Conventional wisdom dictates there's only so much you can do with her. Take my word."

"Meaning you struck out."

"We were a total mismatch. You're the sensitive type, both of you. You'll connect with her."

Mitch went on to reiterate that Joanna was very protective of her reputation, not wanting to involve herself in anything that might embarrass her parents, who had drilled into her the shame of becoming a boy's boarding school in-joke.

"The thing is... You can be the first to go all the way with her, man," said Mitch. "It's a cinch."

"Not possible."

"Possible. Here's how..."

IT SEEMS THAT MITCH HAD A SECRET AGENDA THAT I DIDN'T KNOW about. He was counting on me to nail her, his revenge for the previous year's humiliation.

As prom night approached, I began to imagine Joanna as a fellow outsider: she, because she'd lived through puberty and adolescence only yards away from a detachment of sex-starved boys; I, because my skin color had decreed it from the moment of my birth. Thinking about it this way eased my apprehension. I looked forward to the dance, although I didn't expect much in the way of affinity with Joanna.

What was I going to say to her? I'd been so isolated, so sheltered. The only women I knew, were my mother and my aunt. Okay, there was the

occasional miracle, a girl falling into my lap—Julissa and Eloise—two memories, no matter how aleatory, I treasured.

Success depended on my approach, my Fred Astaire dance teacher told me. I was no Fred Astaire, but I had taken lessons at one of his New York City studios my junior year. My aunt had insisted. The teacher told her I was a quick study—told me I had the steps down.

If I didn't know what to say, I had to assert myself on the dance floor which meant... She used the word: masculinity. Something I'd always assumed would be there when I needed it, but I wasn't sure how to exercise it while dancing. This wasn't football or basketball.

"Like this," she said, moving in close to me until there was hardly any separation between us. "Tighter," she insisted. I pulled her to me; the rest was effortless. Every move I made, no matter how slight, she followed, as if yielding her femininity to my newly assertive masculinity. When the music stopped, she smiled. I was sure what she'd just shown me was not in the Fred Astaire playbook. It was then she said I was ready for the tango and rumba.

"If you try to impress a girl with talk, there's only a twenty percent chance of success. That's the advantage of dance: she's already in your arms, waiting for you to show her you're not afraid to assert yourself."

The problem: my last lesson was over a year ago and I hadn't practiced since then.

Thinking about it had me tongue-tied. I supposed sensitive girls grasped the situation and came up with words to put a boy at ease. But what if we had nothing in common? Was Joanna one of the sensitive ones?

It being her graduation, her father persuaded the board to hire the socialite Lester Lanin orchestra, a fitting reward for her being ogled by the student body for as long as she could remember.

Our dates were waiting for us in the dim light of the dining room. Smiling, Joanna took my hand. Gone were the glasses and the braces—her features now arranged in algebraic perfection, like an equation her father once alluded to as an encapsulation of time and space. A buffet supper. We ate in silence. In the distance the incongruous sounds of musical instruments, tuning up, tinkering with the sound system.

Expectations were high as the band kicked off the evening with



Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek." Up to the moment I held Joanna in my arms, hardly a word had passed between us. She placed her arm around my neck and drew her body into mine, an embrace which, to my surprise, had me tingling all over. It was as if we'd jumped from a plane with one parachute and we were holding on to each other for dear life. An hour later, when the orchestra broke into the lush theme from *Picnic*, I seemed to be floating on a velvet cloud. As ridiculous as it might seem, suddenly I was William Holden dancing with Kim Novak. I closed my eyes.

*We might not go all the way*, I told myself, *but she is going to give as much as it takes to make this evening work*. She would not be made a fool of. I looked around. No one was laughing at us. No one dared.

The reality of it said otherwise. Her perfume reminded me of her father's aftershave, not some exotic blend. Her dress was what might be expected on a math teacher's salary. The sleeves of my tuxedo were too short. We resembled a couple of trainees at a finance company Christmas party. And yet, to me, our oddball couple was rather fetching.

She pulled away for a moment when she felt me harden. No mistaking it; she raised her eyes, and we exchanged half smiles. Then, she drew close to me, clinching. I slid my hand down below her waistline. She smiled and nuzzled my neck. Joanna was more than a great dancer; she was an enchantress in an off-the-rack Barney's shift.

It was a warm night. Shortly after ten thirty, Joanna took my hand and we made for the door leading backstage, and from there, outdoors. I watched as she gave her parents a stare-down look while we exited.

According to Mitch, this is when I would lead her to the little-used road for deliveries. When we got there, the apple trees on both sides of the road were bathed in a foggy late-May moonlight. The air was heavy with the scent of lilac and apple blossoms. A kind of intoxication enveloped us. Walking side by side, close but not touching, waiting for Mitch's next prediction: that she would brush my hand with hers, a signal that she wanted to be kissed. The script had changed. She took my hand and led me in among the apple trees to a bed of leaves covered with a kind of tarp. We sat down. I pulled her to me and kissed her.

"Yesterday, I made this bower for us," said Joanna.

"You did this?"

"No need to soil my dress," she said.

“And a pretty dress it is—”

“No need for flattery. I’ve thought about this night for a long time.”

“In general, or specifically?” I said as I rolled over next to her.

“I used to be self-conscious, but now...no more braces. I feel liberated, ready for love. Who knows? It could be with you, cowboy” she said.

“I don’t know. I was kinda looking forward to having my gums lacerated.”

She laughed. “You’d like more than a few kisses. So would I, but...” she said. “I know how boys think about me. I was first aware when I was ten, even though it started earlier before I understood what sex was all about. You might not realize it, but I’ve seen what you boys think about me. In the bathrooms, on the walls, many a future artist’s talents is on display, a man on top of a girl, or a girl giving a boy a blow job. At Woolley, there are no girls, ergo, no separate bathrooms for females. After, someone else always comes along to add labels: Joanna and Bobby. Joanna and X. Very original.”

“I— I know they wash it off, but it’s back in a day. If I catch someone doing it, I’ll kill him.”

“Whoa, young man. I don’t need a champion— I’m not looking for sympathy. I know you boys fantasize.” she said. “You of all people should understand what it’s like to be stared at with one object in mind.”

I felt ashamed, the blood from my loins draining, my hands cooling. “Everyone jerks off. I admit it. I masturbated with you in my mind, more than once. Now you make me ashamed.” The words came out that way, but they were false, although I had masturbated to mental images of her mother, a stunning lady with silver gray hair and ample bosom, mainly because she always smiled at me in an understanding, foxy kind of way. Up to now, Joanna had never even looked at me, much less acknowledged me; therefore, I’d based no fantasies on her, possibly because of the braces and glasses, precisely the reaction she’d planned on.

Recalling this had me feeling sorry for her, not exactly sorry, apologetic like I needed to make up for it by complimenting her. So I’d invented the false confession, which, much to my surprise, inspired her to offer a confession of her own—the details of which I never expected to hear from a girl on a first date.

“Don’t feel bad; I’ve had you in mind, twice on the same day in fact,

especially after you asked me to the dance,” she said. “From the first time I saw you I wanted to be nice because you’re brown-skinned, the first Woolley student that wasn’t lily white, but you were stuck up. I imagined you using it to cover up your loneliness—cut off from the other boys, some sort of underprivileged scholarship case full of resentment—until my dad told me you were Phillip Randall’s nephew. Not to mention the star athlete, you and funny boy, QB Mitch.”

“Don’t knock it. Football ‘n sports is about the only fun we have here.”

She guided my hand to her chest. I felt her up while we kissed. The busier my hand, the more passionate her embrace.

“I thought about you rooming with Mitch,” she said as my hand pulled up her dress. “You have nothing in common.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t be friends. Besides, Mitch is a great quarterback.”

“Don’t I know it. Warren to Mazur. Touchdown!” she said, removing her panties.

There it was, the first full-blown mature pussy I’d ever seen, besides my mother’s, who hadn’t concealed her nudity until I was well into my teens. The tiny hairs covering it glistened in the moonlight.

“He’s a great operator, but about as sexy as appendicitis.”

“Shut up about Mitch, will you.”

She laughed. “You’re Jealous?”

At first, I only stared, amazed that this small reddish patch held such fascination. A Rorschach of emotions engulfed me. It was beautiful; it was ugly. At first, I couldn’t decide. I let my tongue make up my mind. It tasted exactly like I thought it would, a mucous secretion with a tangy, salty aftertaste. It wasn’t so much the taste as how my tongue affected her.

My concentration was so complete that I hadn’t noticed her moaning. I felt only her trembling body as my tongue explored her inner sanctum. I found the spot Julissa had described. It was then that I heard her cry out. There was no deliberating as to whether she had started to orgasm.

Her expression, when she finished, told me not only had she come with the intensity of a Beaufort Scale Category 4 hurricane, she now had

a kind of hold over me. I wanted her to reciprocate, but when I tried easing her down to my knob, she turned away.

“I can’t do that. It’s dirty.”

“What do you mean dirty? I took a long shower.”

“Not you: It. Blow jobs.”

“After what I— You seemed to enjoy it.”

“I shouldn’t have let you; it’s perverted.”

“Says who?”

“The Pope and the Holy Mother Church.”

I started to laugh. “That sounds so funny, coming from you, the tender, yet practical lass who orchestrated this whole business down to the cover we’re lying on.”

“Okay, so I’m a girl, a woman really. We’re unpredictable. Now, stop fussing and let’s do it, or maybe you don’t want to,” she said, smiling coyly as if she’d known all along it would come to this, and I should realize blow jobs were forbidden in her world even after marriage. She grabbed me and pulled me down for a long kiss, heedless that I still had the remnants of what she’d ejaculated in my mouth.

It was a complicated dress; I needed her help to remove it. Once she realized what I was up to, she tore at the dress to get it off. Then it was my turn to be undressed, which she managed with the utmost alacrity, heading straight for my privates as soon as she’d pulled off my underpants, massaging my knob until it was hard, bending over it once to plant a token kiss, smiling.

“We’ll never be eighteen years old again,” she said, channeling the rebellious genius of our generation while spreading her legs.

For some reason, I assumed I’d be tentative when it came to actual intercourse with a proper girl like Joanna. I wasn’t. Neither was Joanna. She had a condom ready, slipping it on my knob before I could object. Having heard the first time might hurt a girl, I pushed into her gently.

“Don’t move. I want to feel you.”

Ten seconds later, I started to move.

“Oh, that’s so, so— Feels so—”

“...so good. I know.”

After that, words between us ceased.

By and by, Joanna had us doing things I’d never conceived of. Who’d

imagine it of an eighteen-year-old girl? I hadn't. What really got us off was a position she called doggie style. I was just about to ask if she hadn't done it before, that she'd been lying about her past. After all, she went to Metcalf High where sex scandals were common. She told me she had found her parents' mail-order sex manuals. I wouldn't put it past her mother to have a selection. Written for Catholics, however, they'd neglected to include a chapter on oral sex.

"I know what you're thinking," she said after we'd finished. "Don't worry; you're my first," adding cryptically, "seems it's one of those dubious accomplishments, whether true or not, that makes a man a he-man."

I accepted her *my first* as gratuitous; I didn't know what to believe.

"It's all the boys at Metcalf High think about... being the first to go all the way with a girl."

I'd long since ruled out Julissa as me being her first because of— well, because of. Strangely, Joanna now had me placing an exaggerated importance on being her first. No matter how it made me feel, I wasn't about to show it meant something.

We dressed and returned to the dance as it was breaking up. The smell of semen and cervical fluids hovered over us. We danced with our arms around each other, which seemed to scandalize a few faculty onlookers, but not her father, who maintained a stalwart, but liberal, demeanor.

The band was killing "My Funny Valentine," a sweet solo by the lead alto. Joanna hummed the tune and made up her own words, teasing me:

♪ My looks are laughable. Unphotographable. Yet I'm your favorite work of art..."

I broke away and went to the bandstand. Spoke to Lester. He recognized me from an East Hampton club dance organized by my aunt for my uncle's birthday, where I'd sung "Night and Day" and "They Say It's Wonderful" with the band. Lester gave me the mic and from the heart directly to Joanna, I sang a full two choruses of "Funny Valentine," substituting her words.

I walked her home across the baseball diamond when the dance was

over. On the way, she insisted that we not acknowledge each other until well after graduation. No smiles, no hungry stares—act as if we’ve never met, she said. She turned away my hangdog expression explaining it might be better for us to make our foolish mistakes, the ones young people make, with others, rather than making a mess of our lives off the bat. If I chose to pursue her, she’d be there for me, she said. If it was meant to be, it would be. Just because we’d had a prep school fling, didn’t mean a thing. It made me want her all the more.

“Anyway, I always knew I was going to screw one Woolley boy,” she said. “It just happened to be you and you’re going to Yale and I’m going to Carnegie Mellon.”

“Two institutions nowhere near each other.”

“All the better to make mistakes with others because we won’t be near enough to hurt each other.”

I wondered if by “mistakes” Joanna meant “fucking others.” If so, I found it not only diplomatic but also endearing. I reckoned I had a lot to learn about the process of “making mistakes.”

I left Joanna with her mother, then hid behind a tree to watch for fallout. Her younger sister, Judy, came out on the porch. Ethel, the girls’ mother, said something that made them laugh. I had the crazy notion that everything had been rehearsed. The whole thing a mother’s way of easing a daughter through the loss of her virginity, including the practice of putting a rubber on a skinned banana. Crazy, I told myself. But by watching them tease Joanna in such a tender manner, I now felt she had been chaste.

It thrilled me that Joanna was not only good at sex (I’d been told many girls did not get off until they were in their twenties, and then some.) Not so Joanna. She also had a sense of humor and she liked smart talk and jazz. She knew all about Lester Young and Charlie Parker, she even had a few Monk records. Her final words of the evening I have never forgotten: “No more braces or glasses. Gone for good, like my virginity. Woolley has been as confining for me as it was for you. Only I suffered through eighteen years of it, not a paltry four like you. From now on I’m going to live.”

Telling Mitch nothing happened—we’d merely walked among the apple trees, talked, and kissed once or twice—had him pestering me

years afterward about what had actually happened during our time away from the dance floor. What frustrated him, even more, was my telling a slightly different story every time the subject came up. That's when he came up with the idea that it might be interesting to create a graphic representation of our sexual consummations. At first, I forgot all about it. When he showed me the first draft a few days later, he and I were in the center of a diagram, drawn with the precision of a chart depicting our solar system, with dotted lines running in all directions. The one solid line traveled from me to Joanna. He dubbed his brainstorm *the tinkertoy*.

“Just a simulation,” he said. “Later on, it'll be something to look back on.”

## A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

**G**raduation came and went. The letter from Yale I was waiting for never arrived. A letter did come, a Dear Gus kind of letter, a refusal. Despite the flattery, despite my so-called flawless academic record, and my ranking as a tennis player, the interviewer had been mistaken. More than mistaken, misleading. I was not going to Yale, at least not in the coming fall semester.

With me listening on the extension, Uncle Phil, one of Yale's most distinguished alumni, called the admissions office. To no avail. They could do nothing. The interviewer had been overruled. The selection process was strictly confidential. Maybe next year. In the meantime, why not try junior college?

The more I thought about the conversation, its wording, and its abruptness, the more a picture of discrimination began to take shape in my mind—some sort of bureaucratic bias similar to what I'd witnessed in *Gentleman's Agreement*, the Gregory Peck film on anti-Semitism I'd seen with Aunt Alice several years before. It didn't take much: somewhere along the line someone had ticked a box on a form, and I was headed to junior college.

*The interviewer had been overruled.* What a joke! Aunt Alice called the Woolley School to ask Clifton Wales, the headmaster if he'd had any blowback. After all, the interviewer had come to Woolley specifically to



interview me. He had left the headmaster with the unqualified impression that I was accepted. Alerted to the probable injustice, the headmaster called the university, receiving disavowals and reassurances that in the end changed nothing.

No matter how much Uncle Phil and Aunt Alice sought to comfort me, the rejection took a psychological toll, a basis on which to blame everything that was wrong with my life. Next, a summer internship with BBDO, the advertising giant, fell through. I moped around the house, scarfing up books by James Baldwin and Richard Wright. A summer of supposed triumphs was fast crumbling to dust. Worst of all was my feeling of inferiority as regards Joanna Benson, that my rejection meant I could no longer meet her on equal terms. I stared at the phone every day, picked it up, but never dialed it. Intellectually, I knew my reluctance was foolish. She would put things in perspective. Emotionally, something kept me from calling. A weakness of character was the label I attached to the whole affair, and to myself in particular.

Uncle Phil, at my aunt's behest, secured an internship at the theater that was staging his latest production. Besides being the gofer, I spent as much time as possible backstage, soaking up the mechanics of rehearsing, watching the pieces being fit together to create a whole. I fell under the director's spell, marveling at his ability to keep so many balls in the air at the same time: the psychology of characterization, the blocking, and the bits of business, the use of props, handling actors, dealing with script changes opposed, and argued against, by Uncle Phil. Once in a while, the director invited me to sit with him at the back of the theater to watch a run-through and take notes. Almost immediately, my mood changed. I thought less about Joanna, although I missed her, and more about my options for the coming fall. For the moment, I felt compelled to accept community college.

In July, Uncle Phil and Aunt Alice left for Hollywood to write the movie script for one of his plays. When my internship at the theater was over, I headed to East Hampton with Mitch Warren in tow.

As it often did, the Long Island Rail Road train broke down just past Westhampton. Mitch and I shared a cab with two girls, Isabella and Antoinette, who were headed to Montauk for a weekend with two City College boys. Adroitly, Mitch turned away two men trying to bull their

way into the cab in favor of the girls, "Please, gentlemen, our dates," he said, gesturing to two girls who were thrilled to get away from the noise and the dust.

Leaving Mitch to do the preliminaries with Isabella, the girls' spokesperson, Antoinette and I played a kind of keep-away, exchanging furtive glances, looking up, then down, the kind of quick looks that hint at arousal.

Mitch loved to talk, and I liked to observe. To each his own. When Mitch talked, he missed things; when I observed, I concentrated on the subtext.

As the cab neared East Hampton, Mitch saw no reason to let the girls slip away without a last-minute, all-out come-on. After all, he was only following the finger of fate: two cute, potentially hot girls must have fallen into our arms for a reason.

"Isabella and Antoinette," said Mitch, unabashed and self-confident. "Royalty, I say. Two young ladies—the reincarnation of two illustrious Catholic queens."

"What makes you think we're Catholic?" asked Isabella.

"A Catholic myself, dear woman," said Mitch with mock outrage, "I know one when I see one. The little cross around your friend's neck. The rosary in your purse that I took the liberty of observing."

I scribbled some phone numbers on a piece of paper and handed it to Mitch.

"Royalty deserves royalty. When you tire of the City College churls, give us a ring and we're to the rescue." Mitch was so over-the-top with his hyperbole that the girls couldn't stop giggling.

I had to admire Mitch's optimism and his originality. He was both ahead of his time and behind it, one chromosome away from being a standup comedian or, had he lived in the Middle Ages, the town crier. In one instance when I was present, he crashed a party dressed in a coat similar to the ones worn during the French Revolution by Danton and Robespierre, acting the charming scoundrel so convincingly he wasn't asked to leave even though he was out-of-his-mind inebriated and bewildered because he couldn't remember the punchline to the bad jokes he was telling.

The cab dropped us at Uncle Phil's summer rental, a veritable

mansion that had me gasping at its grandeur. Me, who was used to his extravagances.

“This is your house?” asked Isabella, snatching the paper from Mitch’s outstretched hand.

As Mitch’s little farce unfolded, I flinched a bit at the pernicious effect rank materialism was having on the two young ladies—the way they kept looking at each other, evidently comparing our accommodations with those awaiting them in Montauk. I hoped Antoinette, the one I’d flirted with, would tell Mitch to go to hell.

“Alas, it will have to make do until Randall Hall opens up,” continued Mitch.

“Randall Hall?” said Isabella. “You mean you have a bigger house than this all to yourselves?”

“Counting rooms, ladies. It’s so tedious,” said Mitch. “You have our number. Give us a tingle and we’ll show you around the Hall if you have a couple of days.”

“A couple of days?”

After the cab departed, I opened the garage. We piled into the 1954 Plymouth Belvedere that Uncle Phil had stashed away, and headed to the Mayflower Club, where, by chance, we met Anita Hobart in the parking lot. I treated Anita and Mitch to hamburgers, which they gobbled up watching me destroy Deke Fernandez on the grass courts in the first round of the club championship. Because the train was delayed, I had almost been obliged to default.

When we finally put the Plymouth to bed, we were high on whiskey sours and beer, exhausted after a long day. Too drowsy to object, Mitch listened to my laminations on life and college. Finally, he’d had it, interrupting: “Fuck community colleges, man. They’re for the manual trades, for the birds,” said Mitch. “A lot of them are excellent, but you’re coming to DC with me.”

“To do what?” I asked.

“What do you think? To study, of course, at a four-year college, a good one.”

“To Georgetown? They’re probably full up, like Yale.”

“Not Georgetown, man. Like Yale, it’s full up,” said Mitch. “I’m talking about GW, George Washington. It’s a great school. You live with

me at my parent's. Later, we get a place. Compared to New York, DC is cheap. Rentals, we can have a two-bedroom, easy. Ninety dollars near DuPont Circle. We buy a car, and it's off to the Eastern Shore in the springtime."

"Move to DC?" I thought about it—amazingly I liked the idea of a clean break—even paused to think some more, before adding, "Might as well. I don't have anything else. So if your parents can tolerate me tagging along—"

"Tagging along! My parents are convinced you're a good influence on me."

"Can't wait to see my aunt's and uncle's faces. They're stuck on Yale. That'll be my good riddance!"

"Gotta take what the defense gives you," said Mitch.

"In this case," I said, "what the universe gives me."

"Things have a way of turning even better, right partner?"

THE MAYFLOWER CLUB HELD FEW SURPRISES. FOR AS LONG AS I COULD remember, everyone, adults and offspring alike, rich parents, and club employees were the same as the year before and the year before that. The faces changed, but not the traditions. And while I enjoyed the luxurious facilities, the dances, the parties, the tennis, and golf, the ocean, and the limpid pools, it had to be paid for. Not now, not by me. Not even by Uncle Phil or Aunt Alice, not in dollars; in some other currency. In men's souls, perhaps. In some eventual rebalancing of the scales. I didn't exactly know how to phrase it. Perhaps, by watching James Baldwin or Richard Wright enter the Mayflower Club by the front door—a long overdue down payment.

I took a bite of my pickle, then finished off my hamburger. Mitch and Anita strolled in from the ocean. I waited while they lunched, listening to their plans for the future. I tried picturing mine. Where did I fit in? I had no idea, but, after four years in a veritable prison, I looked forward to new beginnings. The move to DC would be a big one.

Although we had never dated, Anita Hobart and I were good friends, mostly because we were resident cynics. I kept the flies—the go-all-the-

way-on-the-first-date boys—away from her. She kept me abreast of the backbiting directed at me, of which there was, it seems, a lot.

When they'd finished and Anita had departed, I suggested driving back to town immediately, then catching the train for DC.

"Even Anita Hobart makes me uncomfortable. Her gossip is too much sometimes. Maybe I'm paranoid, but just maybe she's a kind of double agent."

"Why to tell me; I'm white, motherfucker," said Mitch. "Maybe I'm a double agent."

Mitch stared at me, visibly hurt by my casual utterance. Embarrassed, I couldn't think up anything better than, "You lack the composure to be a double agent, motherfucker."

I set three dollars on the table for the waiter, who quickly snatched it up while placing the telephone in front of me and plugging it in. My aunt no doubt.

I was surprised when it turned out to be the two City College girls, Isabella and Antoinette. We drove to Montauk to fetch them. During the ride back to East Hampton, I decided it was better to stay the night, then leave early in the morning, by car instead of train. I was feeling mischievous. I wanted to outrage the membership, a sort of prank on the ruling classes that had kept me from getting into Yale. There was a dinner dance at the club; I decided to take the girls.

Oh, I knew how it would turn out. That was as predictable as eating turkey on Thanksgiving. And like turkey, there were many ways of preparing it.

First, it would provoke a record number of stares and murmurings of the type I was used to reading on clubhouse faces: *Typical of the Randalls and their boy, you'd expect something like that from him. But two such common girls. Kinda pollutes the whole affair.* Next, it would turn the men against the women. Older, more narrow-minded people, women especially, might get up and leave. Younger men, however, wouldn't budge. Such was the beauty of our two young ladies that the men would stick around to admire them, perchance dance with them. Last, it would psych out my next opponent in the club tennis championship: the fellow would be obliged to carry the added burden of being the great white hope.

Next to the debutants, powdered and perfumed in their expensive

dresses, our dates scintillated. Not that there were no beauties at the club; there were. Finishing school graduates bred to conform and wait patiently for the opportunity to carry on WASP lineages and traditions. Couplings based on money and power, headed for the divorce courts before the vows were even exchanged. One party always wises up, usually the female, who eventually tires of hubby's drinking and/or his so-called overnights with the visiting manager from the fill-in-the-blank office. None of them thought much of me, even the ones who had played with me when I was younger: their parents had considered me cute, a token—the lone person of color allowed in white spaces.

Antoinette was tall, so tall you couldn't tell she was Puerto Rican. Her red hair, cherry dark and burnished, and her blue-gray eyes defied ethnic clichés. Isabella was an inch shorter, fair-skinned and Irish. We spent the rest of the afternoon spiffing up the girls, touring the South Hampton shops.

When we returned to the house after the dance, Mitch began reliving moments and soon had everyone rolling around on the carpet, chiming in and laughing so hard it became contagious. Even harder after we turned the girls on, the first time either of them had smoked reefer.

I was the first to pull my date close. Our making out got Mitch and Isabella going. We adjourned to our room; Mitch and Isabella to theirs. Although Antoinette let me burrow into her tits, caress and nuzzle them, each time my hand slipped down below her waist, she slapped it away. Each time I tried to direct her hand to my crotch, she pulled it away. We fell asleep half naked, half gratified, her virginity unsullied, my libido unsatisfied.

When we got to Bedford Park in the Bronx the next morning, Isabella directed me to her home on a leafy side street. As the girls gathered their belongings, bemoaning that they still had one week of vacation with nothing to show for it and nothing to look forward to, Mitch came to the rescue.

“Say, girls, would you like to keep us company on the drive to DC? Of course, we'd need some real bedroom encouragement to bring you along.”

“You— You guys think we're that kind of girls?”

“There’re only two types of girls: those who do and those who don’t,” said Mitch.

“Leave them alone, Mitch. They’re saving themselves for a couple of nice boys.”

“For your information, that kind of thing before you’ve married is a mortal sin,” said Antoinette.

“You should know better, Mister Georgetown University, model Catholic,” said Isabella.

The girls got out of the car and moved leisurely toward the front stoop, stopping to huddle on the sidewalk, just out of earshot.

“We’ll wait till you’re inside, ladies,” said Mitch, as he changed from the back to the front seats, “...to make sure you’re home safe.”

“Always the cavalier, Mister,” said Isabella, casting a sideways glance at Mitch. “Gallantry personified.”

Curious as to why the girls were taking so long, Mitch rolled the window down and slapped the side of the car. “Ladies, what’s happening? Going or staying?”

Myself, who’d been fussing with the radio, trying to find a jazz station, turned to Mitch, “Let’s go.”

“Hold on. Big debate.”

Intrigued by the girls’ sidewalk conference, we watched silently, occasionally shrugging or hunching our shoulders.

At last, Isabella came back to the car window, as if to say goodbye. “It may be a mortal sin, but you only live once. Out you go, Georgetown. Get in the back.”

Mitch and Isabella got in the back; Antoinette seated herself next to me. We drove off just as Chet Baker launched into “But Not for Me” on WRVR.

Toward the end of the New Jersey Turnpike, I looked through the rearview mirror at Mitch. “I hope you know we can’t stay with your parents now, not with this bunch along.”

“Not to worry, my friend. Plan B. Sister Marsha shares a four-bedroom with one other girl. Complete discretion assured.”

The traffic came to a stop at the Delaware Memorial Bridge. As we waited for it to clear, I raised the number one question, “That was some decision, mortal sin and all. What made you change your mind?”

“Anything to get out of the Bronx for a week,” said Isabella, cynically.

“That’s all we are? *Anything to get out of the Bronx...*” she had me laughing.

“For the moment,” said Antoinette.

“For a moment,” said Mitch, “I thought it was my pungent wit and good looks.”

“You’ll do in a pinch,” said Isabella.

“So will you,” said Antoinette, her voice dripping with supercilious nuance as she snuggled up to me.

“Even though I don’t believe in mortal sin?” I asked.

“You don’t believe in God?” asked Antoinette.

“I never said one way or the other.”

“There are only two kinds of people: those who believe in God and those who don’t,” said Antoinette. “What do you believe in then?”

“I don’t know you well enough to discuss my beliefs, even though I don’t have very many, the one exception being the Golden Rule. It’s all the religion I need.”

Crossing into Maryland, we stopped at a roadside diner for lunch. Tasty, but greasy. Chesapeake Bay oysters, shrimp stuffed with crabmeat, fries, and coleslaw.



MITCH’S SISTER’S HOUSE WAS ON EIGHTEENTH AND P STREETS. SHE’D made sandwiches. We picked and poked, saying we’d get after it later then excusing ourselves to catch a Hank Mobley set at the Bohemian Caverns. For all the girls knew, they were about to be introduced to dancing girls with veils, Arab men strumming ouds, flutes and drums from the Côte d’Ivoire, such was their total lack of resonance with the jazz idiom. They’d never been surrounded by so many Black men and women. They bore up well, perhaps reassured by my relaxed demeanor.

Back at Marsha’s, I made BLTs for everyone. It was late. Marsha’s roommate had the TV on. We heard the forced laughter of a sitcom coming from the floor above.

“My roommate, Virginia Hubbard,” said Marsha. “She’s studying to be



a concert pianist. I'm used to her piano all day, and sitcoms all night. Wonder what she's watching?"

"*Amos 'n' Andy* reruns, probably," said Mitch.

The roommate wandered in, ignoring Mitch and giving me the most piercing of looks. She glanced at the remaining sandwich as if she'd lost it and just remembered where she'd left it.

"It's yours if you want it," I said.

She looked from Mitch to me and, never speaking, grabbed the plate and took off for her quarters. Scarcely five minutes had passed before I heard the piano, loud enough to wake the dead, like pounding away was her way of saying thank you. She stopped for a moment, then started up again: Franz Schubert's "Erlkönig." I listened for a moment, then after the intro, I joined in, belting out the proper German lyrics:

♪ *"Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!  
Gar schöne Spiele spiel' ich mit dir;  
Manch' bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand  
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.*

The piano stopped and the TV started up again. Mitch and I looked at each other. It wasn't the first time Mitch had been amazed at my knowledge of songs in foreign languages, but it was the first time he'd heard the accompaniment come from the floor above.

After eating a sandwich, Antoinette scooted away. I found her lying on the bed with only her panties on when I entered. For a moment I couldn't get the mysterious piano player out of my mind.

"Who was that singing?"

"It is I. Hamlet, the Dane... Halvard Solness, the master builder."

"That's way over my head, honey," she said, thrusting her hand into her panties, modestly caressing herself. "I was thinking you might like to take them off. You see, I kinda know about sex; I've just never done it, except for masturbation, also a mortal sin, one I've had a lot of practice at."

"I just escaped from four years at a boys-only boarding school. I have had my share of what you Catholics call self-abuse."

I adjourned to the bathroom. After fifteen minutes in the shower and

a vigorous brushing of the teeth, “Hey, in there,” said Antoinette. “What’s happening? I’m getting anxious. This is my first time. Is anything wrong?”

The faucet. Me rinsing my mouth. Still dressed, I opened the door. “There isn’t going to be any first time tonight.”

The caressing stopped abruptly. She withdrew her hand.

“No, I’m not crazy. I just don’t like the way—”

“The way what? I’m ready to do it. I keep my word. Plus, you got me all sexed up, and now—”

“Ready to do it and wanting to do it are two different things. Look, Antoinette, you’re a great chick, a beautiful chick, but we coerced you into agreeing. It’s not the same. You feel that way now, but in ten days or ten weeks, or even tomorrow, there’s a good chance you might regret it.”

“Phooey. Honey, I want you.”

“This is the hardest thing I’ve ever done, believe me. Turn down a beautiful girl, a sensitive girl. Hell, we could very easily fall in love, but it has to be organic. Spontaneous, not the result of a bargain. Right now, I have a lot of things eating away at me; I don’t want the added burden of feeling guilty about you.”

“What about Isabella? If she does it, and I don’t? That’d cause some bad feeling between us.”

“That’s taken care of. Mitch won’t touch her.”

“You can control him?”

“Sometimes, I listen to him. Sometimes, he listens to me. This kind of thing he listens to me,” I said emphatically.

“So you do believe in God.”

Antoinette’s words stopped me cold. I looked at her lovingly. What a sensibility! *This girl will make some guy a great wife, though it won’t be me. Gotta whole lot of mistakes to make and they shouldn’t be made with her. That would be too cruel, too reckless.*

“You’ll come to New York again soon?”

“Sometime. Right now, you’re going to her room and Mitch is coming in here.”

“Then this is it, huh?”

“This is it. You can stay here with us as long as you want. I’ll be busy most days. We can do stuff, the four of us in the evenings. You can do

stuff alone. There's lots to do. When you're ready to leave, I'll give you train fare."

"Do you want my number, at least?"

"Sure," I said. "This isn't exactly like I pictured it, you know. I hope you're not angry, Antoinette."

"I was probably going to scream and holler once you were inside me. I even saw myself shouting I love you. It's crazy but I'm not angry."

"Shall we exchange prisoners then?"

"By all means, Master Builder," she said. "You have no idea how long the mortal sin thing has been a part of my thinking. Every time I liked a boy, having to hold myself back. Tonight, I thought I'd be rid of it."

Rather abruptly, the girls decided to return to the Bronx, and who knows, they said, perhaps to Montauk. If I was sad to see them leave, Mitch was devastated. "You prick, that was the surest of sure things, expertly engineered by yours truly, if I do say so," he said. "You owe me one. I mean she was so—"

"Yeah, and when it was over, she'd be chasing you from coast to coast with a child support warrant. I did you a favor, man."

I was accepted at GW in less than one-half hour. I convinced the registrar to let me take upper-class electives, avoiding prerequisites for the time being. Courses in creative writing and journalism, history, and French language requirements. Having been granted credit for calculus and biology taken at Woolley, I aspired to more interesting challenges now that I could skip math and science. GW also offered theater and music classes. I signed up for the student production of *Oklahoma*, earning the lead after I auditioned at the start of school.

I spoke to Uncle Phil and Aunt Alice briefly, allowing them to express their reservations about GW as if the fact that my aunt had never heard of it was a valid reason to denigrate it. They were too busy with the script to argue, and I was too circumspect to hype the university at that juncture, intimating that it was only a stepping-stone to eventually matriculating at Yale and adding that I was looking for a job. When we discussed the Plymouth, Uncle Phil interrupted.

"Keep the damn thing, son," said Uncle Phil. "In our rush to the Coast, I neglected to tell you it was your graduation present for the great work you did at Woolley."

“We’re behind you, dearie. Do what you think is best,” said Aunt Alice.

“Love you both,” I said. And, hanging up, I headed for the stairs, knocking at the door behind which Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” had begun to issue forth only a moment ago.

“Who is it?”

“Me.”

“Enter.”

I ducked inside and stood with my back against the door.

“You know this?” She began to play. Schumann’s “Muttertraum.”

“I know it.”

She began again. Next thing I knew, I’d sung my way through a half dozen tunes to her accompaniment.

“Are you just going to stand there, Mickey?” she asked when it was over.

“My name’s Gus.”

“So you say, so you say. My Mickey, you are. Tonight and always” she said, standing up in her nightgown. I could see the outline of her body, her nipples, her dark patch through the flimsy fiber. She poured Smirnoff into two shot glasses, handing one to me.

“Are you going to fuck me, or fuck off?” She raised her glass to exchange clinks. “Bottoms up, Mickey, old pal.”

She removed her garment and lay down on the bed, smoothing out the musty sheets that she’d doused with French perfume, her offhand solution instead of a good washing. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, so delicate and ineffable. She devoured me like a great spider. Her arms and legs were everywhere, scratching and biting, clawing, and squeezing my balls. If it was nasty, she wanted it that way. Tender or painful, it didn’t matter, as long as I kept at it. When it was over, I tried a little tenderness, putting my arm around her, only to be kneed in the balls.

“None of that, Mickey,” she barked. “Get out of here and don’t come back till you’re called for.”

I was called for and I came back, despite feeling it would not end well. It was always the same exhilaration, the same humiliation. The combination of music and sex, exploring art, and mutual degradation.

Through Student Services I interviewed for several off-campus jobs. I turned down a store detective job offer from Woodward and Lothrop, opting for outside work helping a history professor build a house near Falls Church. It took about two weeks for me to become more than a helper. I learned quickly. Carpentry, roofing, and the basics of plumbing. The teacher was a nice guy to work for and he paid me well.

In the evening after my first day's work, when I showed up at Virginia's door in work clothes, she hollered, "Is that my Mickey?"

"Yeah."

She appeared at the door wearing my dirty undershirt.

"What's this about?" I asked.

"I like your smell better than I like you. That's what."

What was wrong with me that I'd turned away a sensitive, warm-hearted girl like Antoinette for a cold, domineering bitch? The answer jumped out at me. References. From the first moment, even before we'd formally met, I realized that Ginny Hubbard and I shared the same cultural references that bind people of the same social stratum together. The Schubert piano music, Puccini operas, the no hang-ups about sex, the books and records scattered around her room, the intrauterine device on the dresser, right down to her jeans torn in all the right places, and her Audrey Hepburn haircut. Her being into so many things I'd never heard of captivated me. A girl like Antoinette, given a loving husband, would be a faithful life partner, contributing children, one per year, but not much in the way of the Bohemian trendsetting that Ginny was into.

"Take off those clothes and get in the shower."

She kicked my piled-up clothes, scattering them angrily before jumping into the shower with me. I lifted her, pushing into her, nearly shattering the glass.

Later, Mitch said he could feel the house shake.

About one month into our relationship, I began to doubt my ability to carry on with Virginia at the same time I pursued my studies and my job. If only I didn't live in the same house... I suggested moving into Mitch's parents' house as originally planned, but Mitch demurred.

"Why trade the relative freedom here with Sis for what would be, for me, living under a microscope?" he said. "It'd be fine for you; they're not your parents. If you're tired of her, I'll get Marsha to kick her out."

“That’s not fair to her; she was here before us.”

“But she wasn’t acting as crazy then, according to Marsha.”

Most nights when she wasn’t holed up by herself, refusing to let me in, she wanted to eat out, catch a movie at the Circle Theater, or jazz at the Caverns. We danced at ritzy supper clubs once or twice, but it was too rich for my blood. The next time she proposed it, I told her I wasn’t interested in watching her dance with other fellows when her whole purpose was to make me jealous. She introduced me to the Phillips Gallery, delivering knowledgeable commentary on each painting as we passed by. Ditto the National Gallery and various Smithsonian attractions.

Out in public, she behaved—if you called flirting with anyone, man or woman, normal behavior. Her conversation tended to impart knowledge rather than deliberate on it. Not to say she didn’t know what she was talking about. Highly sophisticated, artsy, and discerning at once, most people, including me, felt lost in her constant stream of clever insights and censorious deliberations.

I found Djuna Barnes, Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, and Lawrence Durrell, her favorite writers, self-indulgent. To me, *The Alexandria Quartet* was a tangled mess of narcissism. I preferred Theodore Dreiser, Somerset Maugham, Lillian Hellman, Henry James, Sinclair Lewis, Scott Fitzgerald, and the great Russians. She told me I was too young, and in my haste to be noticed, too ignorant.

The nights when she was holed up, incommunicado, I paced the floor, imagining she might be with a man, nights that had me in a jealous frenzy. I thought about my father’s irrational states, wondering if I hadn’t inherited some of his Gemini fury. But that didn’t prevent me from nearly breaking down the door one night. She laughed, “That’s how I like my Mickey, that old pal of mine.”

“Enough of that Mickey shit. I’m Gus.”

“I’m not sure you know who you are.”

“Have you ever heard the expression: The devil is a woman?” was all I could think of saying.

She laughed. “I’m on my way out to meet someone. A man. You want me, ravish me. Don’t be gentle. Let’s see who cries out. Show me what you’d do to any man who came near me. Show me, you miserable puke.”

The word “ravish” struck a chord, the way she’d snarled it. I staggered back, my mind boggled by her unfeeling attitude toward lovemaking. Up to now, we’d been playing a game, a little rough perhaps, but nothing sadistic. I’d seen pictures in Greenwich Village bookstores of people, men and women, tied up. There was something in Virginia’s voice that not only suggested she was headed in that direction, but also that I would, by submitting to her, learn to enjoy it. Maybe I’m square, I thought, but sex is not a blood sport. This crossed a line that I never knew existed. Sex, for me, was a consummate expression of affection, an affection that might not long endure, but would nevertheless be tender. I would not cross that line, no matter the degree of fascination she embodied.

I turned around and fled.

WHEN I RETURNED AFTER SPENDING THREE HOURS IN BROWNLEY’S Pub on Pennsylvania Avenue, the house was in an uproar. Cops and men in white coats, Mitch explained, had forcibly removed Virginia after a quarrel with Marsha turned violent. She’d rampaged through the kitchen, smashing things with a long-handled frying pan. The next day, three burly movers arrived and carted away the piano and the rest of her things.

No one could remember why the argument started, only that Virginia had been drunk. I wondered if it had something to do with my leaving abruptly. In any case, it seemed like an excellent pretext—possibly a cowardly one—to restart my college career on a new basis: no more Virginia Hubbard. Yes, courtesy dictated that I inquire after her, but that would only prolong the inevitability of it all. The solution I came up with was asking Mitch to check with her family. It was better that way. Coming from Mitch, it would appear normal, the brother of the landlady she’d quarreled with. Anyway, it was the kind of thing Mitch loved. He found her parents. They lived in Northwest DC, a retired navy captain, his wife, and two other daughters besides Virginia. Seems, explained Mitch, she was what her parents referred to as “high strung.” They put her in what they called a spa, a kind of care facility on the Georgia coast, specializing in addiction and schizophrenia. Lots of

JJ SEMPLE

seaside activities, clean air, and healthy eating. Access to musical instruments.

I charged into my classwork full of enthusiasm, only mildly haunted by occasional remembrances of Virginia Hubbard, and if she was scaring people or fucking them. Perhaps both. She belonged to the gilded age. In any case, no more ditties.

*♪ I'll always welcome home my Mickey  
That old pal of mine.*



## DEATH IN THE FAMILY

**F**our months into my college career, my studies progressing nicely, I spent Christmas vacation with Uncle Phil and Aunt Alice in New York.

I showed several samples from my creative writing class to Uncle Phil who, never one to lavish flattery, amazingly enough, encouraged me. One piece I based on my relationship with Virginia, he praised extensively.

It had been a challenge to get it right. Using fiction guidelines more or less established by the *New Yorker* that looked down on overtly explicit sexual material, I was able to tone down the explicit details—a process that had me vowing to deal with sex more openly should I become a professional writer. What a joke! The one topic that preoccupies most of mankind—men and women, day and night—has to be so neutered it hardly qualifies as naturalism, much less as reality. I was convinced that the individual reader knows the difference between art and pornography: a “blowjob” and a pat phrase like “a temptation she couldn’t resist.” Or some such nonsense.

A couple of days before Christmas, Aunt Alice ambushed me as I was typing an assignment.

“Gus, dear. Gus—I so dislike the name—Gus. We wanted to name you Peter Randall, using your uncle’s surname, but your father wouldn’t listen. Gus is a name for grease monkeys and pugs.”

Ray-Ray had named me after Gus Lesnevich, a fighter he'd lost to in 1937, but ended up becoming friends with. Naming me after the 1941 World Light Heavyweight champion gave me something to live up to, he said.

"No matter, Auntie. *Gus* gives me a chance to make a name for myself, and not live off someone else's reputation. After all, a name is a name is a name."

"That sounds quite profound, if not original. Those writing classes must be, uh—"

"Subliminally instilling me with—"

"Yes, imbuing you with..." said Alice. "What was it? Oh, I know. Claudia Creskoff."

"What about Claudia?"

"She needs a date for the cotillion tomorrow night. The Plaza. Meg and Bill are begging me to ask you."

"The Metz and the Getz? They're for high school kids—"

"You're too imbued for that now?"

I sighed and raised my hands in surrender. "No, no. I'll do it."

"It can't be that— Well, she is attractive."

"It's her bratty friends. Who knows who she really is? She doesn't."

In my senior year at Woolley, I attended one of the society dances. It had taken all of Aunt Alice's powers of persuasion to finagle a last-minute entrée into *Social Register* respectability for me, caring not a wink for herself or Uncle Phil. She'd done it for me alone. Watching her fret, I didn't have the heart to tell her that I couldn't care less.

My attendance at those dances reminded me of Joanna Benson's description of being stared at with one thing in mind. The what-the-hell-is-he-doing-here look. Sure, there were a few cool people, but they stayed neutral, unwilling to brave the disapproval of the herd that had me classified as an interloper. I'd felt especially ostracized without a date. That was something my aunt, the matchmaker, had forgotten: that I was this otherworldly being plopped down amid various all-white cliques that stared at me like a pack of oinking, grunting, truffle-hunting pigs. Unlike the big-time prep schools, whose members could count on safety in numbers, the Woolley School was unrepresented at these dances. For a

moment I thought I saw Joanna. Wishful thinking. How different the night would be with her.

Nevertheless, this time with Claudia, I vowed things would be different. At the very least, I would not be a total wallflower.

As soon as we arrived, Claudia huddled with her Miss Porter's School classmates, who, following her lead, cast sidelong looks at me, turning away when I caught them.

On her own, she was polite as could be. Huddling with her friends, each one of whom I was expected to dance with, was another matter.

I gave each of Claudia's friends a perfunctory twirl, suffering through the conversation that consisted of 'what school do you go to' and 'do you know a person,' usually someone with a French-sounding name like Archambault, first name Bradley, Skyler, or Grant. One young lady showing true inclusive colors asked me if I knew her best friend's boyfriend who went to a school in Rhode Island—she couldn't remember which—because that friend had a colored classmate that I must surely know. When I told her no with an expression conveying I'd understood the implication of her assumption—that the two of us must know each other because both of us were brown-skinned—she gulped and hurried away, cooling herself with an invisible fan.

My dance-card debt to Claudia paid in full, I looked the girls over, zeroing in on one girl who'd been flirting with me. At least I thought she had been...

"Where do you go..." The conversation started conventionally. Something told me—her eager eyes, perhaps—that the evening would not end conventionally.

"GW."

"What's that?"

"George Washington University."

"Sounds like a public school," she said as I whisked her gracefully away from the pack. "Where is it? Mount Vernon?"

"Yes, and Alexander Hamilton is the dean."

"What's your name?"

"Gus."

"I thought so."

“Thought so?”

“Yeah, the Mayflower Club.”

“That’s why you were looking at me? I wondered.”

“You won the tennis championship this year.”

“That’s right,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Pamela— Pam Wyatt,” she said. “So why do they call you Peter Randall at the club?”

While we danced, I tried unraveling the confusion surrounding my name, my aunt’s insistence on calling me Peter Randall at the club.

Pam looked at me and nodded, smiling warmly. A contagious warmth, that emboldened me. “I think I understand,” she said.

“Pamela, let’s scoot out of here and go over to Basin Street East. Catch us some Duke Ellington?”

In the cab heading to the club, I took Pamela in my arms, kissing her long and tenderly until she broke it off to speak.

“There is one thing you should know.”

“You’re having your period?”

“Wha—” she stammered, half appalled, half laughing. “We, uh— That’s— You do move fast. We haven’t gotten to that.”

“Yes, we have; we’re just putting it off until after the music.”

“In that case, let’s skip the music. My parents are in Bolivia for Christmas. Every year it’s more exotic and less familial.”

“Ordinarily, we’d skip it, but this is Duke’s last night,” I said. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Only that people at the club find you strange, as in defensive, as if you think everyone is against you and you can’t let yourself connect because you’d be rejected so you don’t trust anyone.”

“Including you? Is that what you think?”

“No, and there are a lot of others like me that wish you’d get off your high horse. Not everyone there is a racist, you know.”

“Well, that is good news.

“Don’t be so cynical.”

“Lookit, baby. All I care about tonight is you.”

After the last set, on the way to Pamela’s parents’ apartment, I sensed her delight from the expression on her face. “That was so much better

than the dance. I had no idea something like that existed.” She pulled out an eight-by-ten of the two of us taken by the club photographer and showed it to me again. “This, I’ll treasure.”

In the apartment, I found the record player, putting on the music from *South Pacific*. After, we danced to the music of two more shows, *Kiss Me Kate* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. And ended with my serenading her with my version of “They Say It’s Wonderful.”

“Gosh, that was nice,” she said, “you have a great voice.”

The room we made love in wasn’t the typical arrangement of wistful schoolgirl yearnings: college pennants, flags, and filched traffic signs. No Marlon Brando or Montgomery Clift posters. Pam Wyatt had taste. One wall was covered with a collection of Indian scarves, tapestries, and shawls. The opposite wall featured a collage of photographs, mostly taken by her in and around the Emily Wallace School, the Connecticut all-girls boarding school she was about to graduate from. The autographed photo of Wille Mays put me even more at ease. Before taking off her clothes and jumping in bed, she tacked our picture right next to an array of field hockey team photos with Pam in the middle. Our photo, with her smiling at me and my arm around her shoulders, changed the whole dynamic of the display. She stood back to evaluate it.

“I’ll find a place for it tomorrow in daylight. Maybe in among the horses, huh?”

IT WAS ALMOST 4:15 A.M. WHEN MY CAB PULLED UP BEHIND THE ambulance stationed in front of our Sixty-Third Street apartment building. I caught a glimpse of Roberto, the doorman, checking the identity of the passenger before quickly ducking back into the building, almost as if, after recognizing me, he went out of his way to avoid me. An ambulance? The usually friendly night doorman? Two plus two stills equal four, I reasoned. Something was very wrong, and it concerned my family, I was sure of it. Why else would the doorman avoid me?

Like most young persons, I’d never once thought of anything befalling my aunt or uncle, much less anything happening to me. A lot for my mind to turn over as the elevator climbed its way slowly up the build-

ing, the numbers blinking one after another. Six, seven, eight. Finally, finality. My aunt turned from the couch where she was sitting. Her face told me everything I needed to know: Uncle Phil was dead.

A prick of guilt unnerved me momentarily. The day my father yanked me off third base, that day so many years ago when I'd failed to meet my aunt and uncle. Once again, I was missing in action. But what could I have done, except provide the moral support I would now offer? It's all that mattered. *I need to absolve myself. Have to, to be effective.* And that meant narrowing in on the source of my guilty feeling, which was easy: I was doing it with Pam while it happened.

What if I'd been at a basketball game? Or I'd stayed overnight at a friend's house? Guilt is a negative emotion that dulls creativity, and creativity is what my life needed to be about. I couldn't go through life saddled by guilt.

"Oh, my darling boy," said Aunt Alice as I sat down next to her. She handed me the photograph she'd been looking at, one I'd taken of Uncle Phil at a rehearsal five years before.

"When you took that, no one could have imagined that he only had five more years."

"He was never more alive than when he was working on a new play," I said, handing the picture back to my aunt.

"Oh, dearie. What are we going to do?" She shook her head once, twice. She didn't stop. I thought she'd never stop. "To wake up and find my love alongside me—dead."

Uncle Phil wasn't an emotional man. Had he somehow been present in the flesh during the viewing of his body, I pictured him hollering something like, "Stop that infernal weeping."

One thing neither of us did was cry. My aunt found new places to sit and shake her head. If I showed any emotion, it was while watching Aunt Alice stagger around, lost in her thoughts, her usual mastery of the moment in abeyance. Mulling over their lifelong partnership, their love and affection expressed in so many small ways, had me crying on the inside like the song says, silently.

One after another, she dialed up memories. Like punching the buttons on an invisible Wurlitzer jukebox: "Here's a nickel, play B7." How, as a child of four or five, I'd walk up to relatives at a family gath-

ering and stare at them until they'd shoo me away, but when I walked up to Uncle Phil sitting in a chair reading, he'd look down at me, smile and pat me on the head, his way, she said, of expressing love.

After the funeral, a veritable pageant of the rich and successful in show business, the director I'd interned for came up to me and squeezed my forearm. "I have my eye on you," he said. "You may not know it, but you're going places. I don't know what in. You'll find, and that will be it."

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, AUNT ALICE SUMMONED ME INTO UNCLE Phil's office. From the way she looked at me, it was apparent that things had returned to normal to some degree. By some tremendous inner effort, she had decided that grieving should be put on hold and normal activities resumed. While choosing where to sit, I noticed something I had never seen in her expression. She dropped the papers she was shuffling and looked me in the eye.

"I've been going through our situation. I spent the night reading and rereading letters and papers I knew nothing about."

"Oh."

"Nothing to do with you, dearie. Simply a matter of mismanagement. Matters I've stayed clear of, but now am obliged to bring order to. We have assets—royalties, books, land, film rights—that have not been properly managed. I'm going to change that. There are also debts. You know most of that: the rented houses in East Hampton, the Yale Club of New York City, the Mayflower Club, voyages, et cetera. What I had no idea about were gambling debts and, it seems, a woman or two. More about that later."

"Is there something I can do?"

"You already have. Number one is enrolling at George Washington, followed closely by finding a job. Preparing a child to be independent is all a parent can do. Your initiative shows you are independent."

"I don't need money. I'll work my way through college like Uncle Phil did. We talked about it the last time I saw him. In his day, he said, it was easier and harder. I told him there are many ways. Right now, I'm making five an hour. Living with Mitch, eating at home, I don't have a lot of spending."

“Go back to Washington today. Get ready for the next term. I won’t say we’ve had a nice vacation; we haven’t. We have to put it behind us—you, at your school, myself, repairing our finances. When that’s done, and the money’s rolling in again—” My aunt gave me a half-smile look I was familiar with. She’d made up her mind; it was only a matter of time before what she’d pledged came true. “When that’s done—and it shouldn’t take too long—I’ll be going to Positano in Italy for a year, visiting friends and painting.”

“I’ll be busy, too.”

“We won’t see each other for a while, dearie. My thoughts will be with you.”

I WAS HALFWAY TO DC WHEN IT HIT ME: I WAS ON MY OWN. AT FIRST, the rush of it had me almost giddy. From boarding school monotony, where days are the same, planned and predictable, to free agent, my future was now unplanned and unpredictable. As the train rumbled along, a doubt arose, casting shade on my confidence. What if I couldn’t make it? What if I ran out of money? I’d returned my Gulf Oil credit card to Aunt Alice; henceforth I’d buy my gas. And she’d be sending me one hundred dollars a month instead of three. I’d have to fend for myself. What if I became ensnared again—by a woman like Ginny Hubbard? The last words of wisdom my aunt offered me were: “Remember, dearie, your uncle was on his own, without financial support when he was sixteen. I’m sure we can tighten our belts for a spell.”

I told myself not to worry. I had my job. When it ended, I’d get another. I knew a lot about carpentry, not everything, but enough to follow blueprints, enough to take on most jobs.

The universe (my favorite scapegoat for cause and effect; don’t know where I picked it up) had other plans. The job ended one week later; the professor no longer needed me. Plumbers and electricians were coming in and he’d take care of eventualities.

Finding other jobs turned out to be challenging. First, there were the unions, their regulations, and their biases. Yes, I encountered the kinds of previously mentioned looks that doomed me from the get-go. Had



that issue not arisen, I still would have been unable to consecrate enough hours for apprentice training.

One-off jobs were out there, but they lasted only a few days and they didn't pay very well. I ended up spending more time looking for jobs than working. One job I took was in Manassas. Travel expenses and lost study time had me breaking less than even.

That's when I saw the poster. *Be a Marine officer. Let the USMC pay for your education.* Words to that effect. When I told Mitch, he laughed. "Yeah, they'll pay, but you'll be indentured; you won't have time to direct a play. Want to take off on vacation for the summer? Forget it."

"I'll talk to them."

"Don't take my word. Ask someone."

"Who?"

"Reggie Blaze for one."

I recognized Reggie from the student union, where the *Oklahoma* cast clustered after rehearsals. He huddled at another table with the staff of the *GW Hatchet*. I'd seen him once at Abart's during an Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers engagement. We'd acknowledged each other but we hadn't spoken. I decided to visit the *Hatchet* office, not only to talk with Reggie but also to inquire about joining the staff. After all, creative writing was my major.

When I mentioned my interest in the Marine Reserve program, he first asked me if I was into sports. I told him football, a receiver on the high school team, basketball, and a nationally ranked tennis player.

"It's better if you're used to physical effort," he said. "For the money, you can't beat it, but it takes a lot of time."

I'D SPOKEN TO PAMELA WYATT A FEW TIMES SINCE I BROUGHT HER home the night Uncle Phil died. I called her, hoping she'd come down to DC over the weekend. It had been a while, but now that she was at Vassar with more freedom of movement, I thought we might be able to pick up where we left off.

Her mother answered the telephone, awkwardly it seemed, from the way she passed it quickly to Pamela's father.

“Good morning, Mr. Wyatt. Gus Mazur here. May I speak to Pamela please?”

A short pause, as if her father was holding the phone at arm’s length while conferencing, before he answered, tentatively, with what sounded like gasps and hissing, then an equally awkward, “Hello, young man.”

“Is Pam there, sir?”

“Yes.”

Both of us paused briefly.

“May I speak with her, please?”

“She doesn’t want to speak to you.”

“Really?” At first, I thought it was some sort of joke. *Not talk to me... What on Earth!*

It took me a moment to realize he was serious, that she was... I dunno—crazy? Had something against me? I racked my brain. “Can I ask what’s wrong? What I’ve done, uh—”

“I only know she’s right here and she will not speak to you.”

“She can’t speak to me?” I asked. “Or won’t?”

“I promise you I don’t know why— She’s waving at me, telling me no.”

“Something must be wrong then—” I pressed my ear to the receiver, hoping to hear what was going on in the background. All I heard—or thought I heard—was a whispered: “Tell him something.” There wasn’t much I could do. The last time we talked everything was fine.

“I’m going to hang up now, Gus.”

“Wait... I, uh... uh”

What had happened since our last conversation? I was frantic.

“You take care now, hear.”

I heard shuffling and a dispassionate *phew*. Then the line went dead.

The photograph of us at Basin Street, *lovy dovy*. Had she torn it asunder? I was floored. I could understand a girl telling me she didn’t want to see me anymore but refusing to tell me why? I racked my brain again. I thought about calling Anita Hobart, then decided I was too upset and confused to listen to her make fun of me, which she probably would have. Anita found everything amusing. She’d probably use my misfortune to come up with a fabrication to fuel the rumor mill that flourished at the Mayflower Club.

I began to rue the day I first detected the look a woman gives a man when she wants to. I'd seen it first with Eloise Winter, and I'd seen it with Joana Nelson and Pamela Wyatt. Neither a smile nor a lingering gaze, I dubbed it *eye mail*, signals telegraphed, offered and accepted. One did not refuse. Doubly hurtful because Pam and I had hit it off so well. And now, I was certain some outside factor was responsible for this new humiliation.



## THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

**W**hen the Marine Corps offered to pay my college expenses, tuition, books, et cetera, plus a monthly allowance, I signed up for their ROTC program.

One of the first things I did with the extra money was rent an apartment. Mitch and Marsha were cool, but we'd been roomies for so long we began to wear on each other, that and various undercurrents concerning women. I was into self-expression; Mitch was headed into business. What's more, his obsession with his silly tinkertoy initiative bugged me. I was surprised that his sister, a Georgetown Law graduate, thought it amusing. For Mitch it was serious, something that had never been done before, he said.

"I'll make it aspirational," he boasted. "People will want to be on it."

Mitch had dubbed his mad ravings the tinkertoy—a visual representation of sexual interactions that had begun with him and, much to my chagrin, me at ground zero. Given its present state, it wouldn't be long before it reached logarithmic proportions, prompting the collapse of Victorian morality across our country, he proclaimed.

I didn't pay him much mind. In fact, I brushed him off. I hung out with a new crowd now. New friends at the university. Reggie, for instance. If drinking, pot smoking, and Officer Candidate School had ignited our GW friendship, Reggie's status as a cocksman had quickened

it. Coeds, many of them from below the Mason-Dixon Line, openly solicited Reggie for sex—his Blackness a temptation many young Southern white girls seemed unable to resist. It was as if a list had been passed around and multitudes of eager young ladies, mostly cheerleader types, had put their names down. The only hang-up, a lack of a space in which to consummate these assignations. Reggie lived with conservative relatives, who, besides insisting that he concentrate on his studies, frowned on visitors.

It was during one of those casual encounters that Reggie communicated his predicament to me. As a result, I began lending him the key to my apartment at Twenty-Fifth and Pennsylvania Avenue for his Friday afternoon trysts.

Reggie was respectful; he was always gone by 4:45 p.m. When I got home, the key was under the proverbial doormat, the bed was made, the bottles dropped in the downstairs trash, and the dishes washed, dried, and stacked. Later on, Reggie told me that the women presumed the apartment was his, they assumed that the dirty dishes were also his, which prompted Reggie to ask: “Hey, baby, I got a late class. Would you mind washing the dishes for me while I get ready?”

“Oh, Reggie, could I?”

I took to leaving more and more dirty dishes. To please Reggie, his admirers took to washing them. Only one girl ever came by uninvited looking for Reggie. When I opened the door, my smile cut short her surprise. I didn’t know her name, but I knew why she was here.

“You lookin’ for Reggie?”

“Yeah. Where is he?”

“At Quantico for OCS.”

“Oh.”

“You drive?”

“No, I walked,” she said.

“Come on in and relax.”

It was an awkward invitation, awkwardly accepted, what with both of us knowing she was here to fuck Reggie, which made it doubly difficult for me if I was to try my luck, because, one, I needed to feel there was an incorporeal compatibility as well as a physical attraction before getting down with a woman, and, two, I wasn’t overly attracted to cheer-girl

good looks. I felt intimidated around females who were too picture-perfect.

I liked women who made quirky fashion statements. Virginia's silver platinum hair colorings and her Greco-Roman tunics over jeans, hipped boots, straight out of a Maxfield Parrish poster.

As for my visitor, nothing was out of place; she was pinup perfect. Sure, I could have beaten around the bush until the farce imploded and I blurted something like, "So, baby, we both know you're here to fuck Reggie, but you got mixed up on the time and found me here instead. Be bad karma to leave now; the gods wouldn't like it."

After looking me over briefly, my visitor stepped inside with a big "might-as-well" smile... I served her black olives and potato chips. We sampled some wine and talked about GW basketball. She told me she remembered me from the tennis team, small talk that made it easy for her to leave, should she care to get up and go. I didn't want to put her on the spot by making a pass. Nevertheless, when she'd finished her chips, there was a notable pause broken by me channeling my inner Reggie and asking, "Would you like to come over here, sit by me?"

When she stood up, her expression gave no indication of whether she was headed for the door or the couch. She chose the couch, causing a rush of blood to my extremities and a slow hardening of my knob, which, when she fondled it, nearly burst.

She unzipped my pants. I marveled at the way she used her hand and mouth together. "It's a felony in my home state, Louisiana. Jail-time offense," she said, looking up at me, smiling, pleased, I think, that she was giving me so much pleasure.

"Don't stop."

"I like giving a man a sendoff. That's what I call it. Love swallowing, too. Learned from the Brothers."

With that, I started to throb. I was going to come in her mouth; there was no holding back.

"It's your turn," she said, rolling over, rubbing her tits. "Take your time. Thorough is how I like it."

Now that I understood where she'd learned how, I wanted her to tell me more, perhaps explain why the white girls I knew, even those most coitally active, were freaked out by oral sex. But that would have been

too much like sociology class and I didn't want my head filled with a lot of particulars while we were at it.

Not only was she skilled, she knew how to make it last, backing off from time to time while riding me when I was on the verge. Her ardor surprised me, as did the sweet smell of her hair and her extensive shivers when she came. Maybe I've been wrong about blonds all along. Her name was Pris.

Years later, during a marijuana musing, when we recalled those days, Reggie theorized he must've knocked up a few of his partners. "Eventually, although it might take ten thousand years, there'll only be one race of people," he said. "So why all the fuss about race now when the future is inevitable?"

"If we can avoid destroying ourselves," I added. "Getting rid of the hate and the unspeakable cruelty, takes time."

"In the meantime," said Reggie, quoting from a book, "'While we await a leader who has the fascist playbook down, get ready for many years of pain caused by factions wanting to disprove the laws of nature: if it's different, not only will you want to try it, you are going to try it.'"

"Yeah, whatever happened to the Visigoths, and the other races that overran Europe in the Dark Ages?" I asked.

"Blended in with the rest of us..."

I WASN'T MEANT FOR ROTC AND ALL THE TIME IT CONSUMED. I hadn't bargained for the drilling, the meetings, party and travel expenses, trips to the rifle range at Quantico every couple of weeks. I went to my commanding officer, a captain, and told him I wanted to quit, that my life was going in another direction.

"You'd make a great officer," he told me. "Physically fit, six foot three, one hundred ninety pounds. No psychological or mental issues. Assertive. Commanding presence. A take no shit kind of officer." Blah, blah.

"I'm into creative activities, sir, singing in musicals, writing. I'm a journalism major. I'm even directing a play. If I stayed in, I'd be miserable. I'd make everyone around me miserable. The corps wouldn't want that, much less tolerate it."

I half expected him to call me a fairy and kick me out of his office. But they don't appoint inflexible dudes to manage students. He wasn't that kind of person, even though singing in musical comedies probably didn't impress his in military-minded sensibilities, but the prospect of making others miserable did. They count on an officer being gung ho his whole career. If they can catch a potential sorehead early, it's better to let him go.

My CO told me that I could pay back the money the Marine Corps spent on my education, or I could serve two years at the Marine Barracks here in DC as a PFC. I didn't have the money, so I took the two years, even upping for a third year to get posted to the American embassy in Paris as a Marine guard. I decided to serve my hitch and graduate when it was finished.

It was a lonely tour, my stretch as a US embassy Marine guard. With little else to do between shifts and off hours, I devoured the great French writers in the original. As for sharing my enthusiasm for the books I read, I doubted my fellow Marines could distinguish Jack Kerouac from *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

Convinced my thoughts weren't elitist judgments, I persuaded myself that my fellow Marines didn't appreciate the finer aspects of American culture, much less the French, because they'd never been exposed to either. Who knows what might have happened had they had the same liberal education I'd had?

At college, I'd disagreed with the academic hard-liners—the radical professors in my English seminars—who pooh-poohed American culture in favor of those of other countries. Duke Ellington refuted that theory, sparking a cultural exchange anchored by the worldwide appeal of jazz.

My only other cultural touchstone was Reggie Blaze, now a second lieutenant also serving in Paris. But because the Marine Corps frowned on enlisted men fraternizing with officers, contact with Reggie was limited to outside the embassy—even though we'd been friends in college.

We couldn't be too chummy, causing me to spend more time with myself. It hardly mattered; once on liberty we rarely ran into other marines, who preferred the dance halls on the Grands Boulevards to the jazz clubs, bars, and bistros of Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter.



Nevertheless, until I met Emma Salazar, I was lonely, and although I never intended to marry, I came close. It happened after my enlistment ended and I'd decided to stay in Paris, my version of the typical American in Paris trip—painter slash writer slash musician slash fill-in-the-blank would-be artist trip. My stay began with an unannounced visit from Mitch Warren.

## SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY

**M**itch was somewhere on the street. I couldn't see him in the fog—not until I leaned out the window. He had shinned up the buttress and was singing like a pirate in a Hollywood musical, only coming down to dance around me and sputter in my face. Something about getting on the train in Brussels and winding up in Geneva with a lady physician before continuing to Paris. Seems she got tired of him when they ran out of ways to do it in her consulting room, her bedroom, her car, and the attic of her parents' house.

In his permanent state of inebriation, it would take him a couple of days to get used to the low ceiling in my apartment, that night crowning himself repeatedly on the beam between the kitchen and the other room. I say "other room" because that's what it was, a kind of catchall living space—bedroom, dining room, bathroom—a tiny bathtub covered by plywood to hide its existence when not in use, a toilet wedged into the space over the stairwell. At least I had a toilet—the other tenants had to use the common facility in the stairway.

I was living at 92 (katre vin dooze) rue Quincampoix where I witnessed the demise of civilization as we know it. I can pinpoint the date—1963, the year a fast-food restaurant opened in Paris, beating McDonald's by some fifteen years. It had been several years since I'd seen

him. Although we no longer hung out as much, it was great seeing my oldest friend

I loaded up a bong and before long we were stretched out on the floor, free-associating. Mitch filled me in about his new wife, Isabella from the Bronx. He said it like it was some sort of compromise that he was ashamed of and had to justify repeatedly. I told him she was nothing to sneer at—beautiful, smart, and most of all a Catholic, which, like it or not, he couldn't put down.

When he told her he was going to Europe, she confessed that she'd once slept with me. She might as well have fed him fishhooks with his spaghetti. He'd ingested them; I could see the lines hanging out of his mouth. The more he tugged, the more they tore into his gut. Perhaps that's why he was drinking. One could never be too sure with Mitch. I muttered some things like I couldn't remember, it had happened before they were married, everyone in the tinkertoy had fucked everyone else so it was, all in all, no big deal.

"Yeah, brother, no big deal," said Mitch winking at me through the booze, pot smoke, and cranial bumps. "But you remember it. She's a good fuck." I wasn't about to answer, but I couldn't help remembering my surprise when she'd called me out of the blue one night when I was back in the States on leave.

Mitch wouldn't get physical; we'd never had a fist, or any other, fight. There weren't enough grounds, but the matter hung off his countenance like a policeman's badge at a crime scene and I sensed an unrequited urge to balance the scales.

"Can you picture her in this place?" he continued. "Her fucking suitcases would fill it up." He let his eyes roam around the room as we spoke to show he secretly concurred with anything she might say. "Anyway, I came here for a little extracurricular activity."

The next morning Mitch and I got as far as the first Arab bar before parting company. Him to the bar, me with my *Periscope* (Cue magazine for Parisian cinemagoers) to the Action LaFayette for a William Wyler film festival. At that time, Paris art house cinemas featured more black-and-white American films than the entire multiplex population of the United States. Part of the "the French appreciate American culture—jazz, blue jeans, and old movies—more than we do" thing. I wasn't up to explaining

that I'd stayed in Paris to get away from the various pressures in the States and ended up seduced by the expatriate way of life. So, I avoided him during the day. After all, he was only looking to get laid.

If he was going to find solace in booze, fine. I had my escape: John Ford, Akira Kurosawa, John Huston, François Truffaut, Howard Hawks—with an occasional Iranian flick thrown in. And, like most males, we weren't about to open up to each other. When Mitch went on a bender, he kept on going, and I knew that he might very well arrive back in DC with only the cloudiest of memories. He wasn't about to give himself a chance to see Paris through sober eyes. He was looking for his version of the meaning of life, the kind people get out of a bottle, getting busted by sadistic cops, being smashed in the face by an irate sailor, and left lying face down in the gutter outside a tattoo parlor. Mitch, hardly a fitness fanatic, had a Steve McQueen sensibility in a Danny Kaye body.

In those days, self-destruction was fashionable, as a means to enlightenment, that is. Our role models were Charles “Yardbird” Parker, Dylan Thomas, Charles Bukowski, Jackson Pollock, and James Dean—anti-heroes all. That was before the “Change industry” got started in earnest. Change with a capital C. Nowadays, you can pick up any *Village Voice*-type, inner city, alternative newspaper and discover myriad ways to change. Back then, we welcomed change, wanted it; we just never thought of paying for it.

Mitch was always in the thick of things while I tended to hold back. Granted, I never thrust a needle into my veins or got into senseless fights, but I was not yet my own person. My latest affectation was the writer—the prototypical American in Paris—riding the Metro to the American Center for writer's conferences, yet primarily to take afternoon tea and look the women over. Only I didn't go there much anymore because I'd hit a dead end.

That evening, after four whiskeys, three beers, and a couple of grams of pot, Mitch announced he was treating me to a late dinner. I suggested a Chinese restaurant along the Quai, purveyors of steamed delicacies. Though the spot was usually crowded, there were only a few customers and after the final group of noisy French students departed, only one person remained—a young lady. Mitch fixated on her and wouldn't stop leering except for the slaphappy grin that slowly took shape under his

drooping lids. “Hey, miss, you there, honey. Like to have a drink with you.”

To my surprise, she stood up, walked over to our table, and sat down. Emma Salazar, a French Jewess working as a fashion model, must have been really lonely to approach such uncouthness. A Gustav Klimtian sense of sexual abandon complemented her attire, a country frock fringed with lace. She was devastatingly beautiful, and, like Marilyn Monroe, who tamed the wild wranglers Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, Eli Wallach in *The Misfits*, equal to anything we threw at her.

The more repugnant our manners (Mitch was sloppy drunk), the more she lightened things up as if dealing with us was no more than a modeling exercise like balancing a book on her head or a pencil on the soft upcurve of her nose. She was funnier than either of us, topping every joke, pun, or laugh with a natural, catchy, Jewish humor—and she took two gulps of wine to every one of ours.

Mitch was getting serious. He dug deep into the charm bag, all of sudden holding forth on cinema, women’s clothing, opera, French literature, and Renaissance architecture. It was working; he’d already burned off several layers of overlapping highs and was actually communicating on a higher plane. She was soaking up the charm. Once again, I was an observer, which, according to my dance teacher who’d favored touch over talk, was not a bad strategy.

“How’d you like to have a nightcap?” he asked, finishing the last of his crème de menthe. “At his apartment.” He nodded at me.

Out on the street, she was nearly as tall as me and a thousand times more graceful, more feathery, like she might suddenly decide to walk the distance on her hands while reciting a Yiddish ghost story.

Back at the apartment, she passed between rooms without bumping her head. I marveled. No one had ever not bumped their head—at least once.

We settled into some good smoke, which she refused, washing it down with white wine. Mitch was on the verge of passing out. Head laid back on a large pillow, he was barely awake when Emma kicked off a game of follow-me!

From a sitting position, she thrust herself up on four limbs, arching her back, belly button to the ceiling, and started to move around the

room like an oversize inverted crab. Stretching to the limit, she passed over the coffee table like a swing crane, knocking over candles and bottles. “C’mon,” she said, “You can do it. It’s a modeling exercise.”

My head was spinning from too much time in bars, lack of exercise, too many hash-larded cigarettes. Nevertheless, I was soon arching like someone had yanked my belly button with an invisible umbilical cord. I was crabbing, or reverse crabbing, or crabbing invertedly.

She moved over to Mitch and kicked his foot, “You. You, too. Get up. Everybody up.” His lids opened for a moment and then closed over the same slaphappy smile.

The tiny room was too small for any more giant crabs; she decided to take up less space, lowering her arch to pass under me—a kind of human limbo pole. Her breasts plowed my back from underneath. Once, twice, again, I lost count. They seemed to be furrowing deeper, yet I stayed up there, rigid, the only outward sign of my distress the slowly rising quiver in my pants. She scuttled out from under me and led us through the Busby Berkeley crab walk revue—a series of synchronized movements to the music of Dexter Gordon that got more together the less we spoke. I looked over at Mitch. He was out cold. I knew she liked me. I couldn’t understand why.

How could she prefer my self-conscious, haunted, starving-artist appearance to his affluent good looks? I could see that it wasn’t just because Mitch was no longer available; she liked me. Not just a spontaneous whim, she had insight!

“You were laughing at all his jokes; he was practically down your dress on the way home. You didn’t even look at me,” I said.

“Couldn’t you tell? I really liked you. That’s why I came to your table... I think so.”

I walked her to the Metro. We kissed for a long time at the Étienne Marcel station. “Give me your number, uh, so... uh.”

“I don’t have a phone,” she said. “Where I live—they are very strict. I am not free to receive visitors. I’ll come back.”

She kissed me again, a long sensual kiss. I wanted to curl up inside her—no more crabs—like two mammals, cats, playful puppies, tiger cubs stretching out together. She smelled like lambs at play, like lilies of the field, like Tinkerbell the fairy. I pictured us breakfasting at Tiffany’s,

feasting at Fauchon's, munching caviar at Maxim's, tucking into lobsters at the Tour d'Argent.

"I'll come back. I promise."

"When? Never... I think so," I said.

"Don't make fool with me."

We kissed again.

"Soon, I promise."

Then, like Persephone, forced to return to her underworld kingdom, she was swallowed up by the gaping hell of the Metro. I reversed my field and headed up the stairs. I heard the gate close and lock: the Paris Metro was closed for the night.

I sat back and waited. I figured Emma would be back. But only once, especially since she didn't really know me. So, I waited for the inevitable, for Mitch's drunken sludge of a mind to suffer an interrupt. At the appointed moment, I knew he'd be there, and I wouldn't. Under-energized, barely conscious, he'd thereby exact his revenge for my screwing Isabella, not in any malicious way, but by merely operating on low power. It was so symmetrical as if ordained.

She came on a Wednesday. I was at the Action Christine, watching a William Wyler double feature. When I got back, Mitch didn't tell me at first, as if anything else mattered. Only after I was in the kitchen, preparing the condemned man's couscous did he venture forth matter-of-factly.

"Emily came by today, you know."

*As if I could know, you son of a bitch, and her name's Emma, asshole.*

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"She couldn't wait, Gus."

"I asked you to keep her here: tell her stories, take her for a noodle dinner, buy her a bouillabaisse, tie her up and pour maple syrup on her face."

I plunged my face into my hands and watched the motion picture version flash by in the barest fraction of a second. I saw her, ill at ease to find herself alone with Mitch, but not the least bit out of breath after climbing the stairs. There too was Mitch, standing aside to let her survey the scene of our crabbing. As he muttered aimlessly, telling her that I

wasn't there, loading his words with obnoxious irony, I saw her eyes linger on the spot, as if by focusing, I might suddenly appear.

"Did she leave something, an address?" I asked without looking up.

Mitch shook his head. I visualized her sighing, turning, and once again heading to the Metro. Like a kid with his face pressed to the glass of an ant colony in a formicarium, the kind I had once owned, I followed her along its anonymous tunnels, its interconnecting caverns, watching her reedy, limber gracefulness disappear into a parallel dimension for those who are no longer living.

TWO WEEKS AFTER MITCH'S DEPARTURE, I DUCKED DOWN TO THE corner boulangerie. A young woman with her back to me. The hair over the shoulders matched. Could it be? Emma? A short prayer and she turned around smiling as if she knew I was several feet behind her. In the gleeful celebration that ensued, words came tumbling out faster than we could form them—somersaults of Franglais with only a pittance of cognitive sense. The tears of joy on both our faces said it all. As we walked arm in arm down the street toward rue Quincampoix, she explained how she'd kept her promise, but couldn't remember the building. She'd come back twice to ask shopkeepers on rue Rambuteau if anyone knew me. After offering another short prayer to thank the universe for sending her to me, we adjourned to the bedroom. I took her to a crêperie in the Fifth that featured the music of Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. After hearing King Cole's version of "Somewhere Along the Way" a second time, she asked me to repeat the part about being *lost on the avenue*...

I sang the whole song to her on the Quai de la Seine, in the same spot Gene Kelly had danced and serenaded Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris* as if they had used that location and not a set. We danced and sang it together until she'd memorized these words:

♪So now I look for you  
Along the avenue  
And as I wander, I pray  
That someday soon I'll find you  
Somewhere along the way



She proclaimed it our song.

The following day she moved into my apartment.

“I like people,” she told me in French, “but I also like to be by myself. I don’t like gossip. I’m old-fashioned, but I also like modern conveniences. I’m a contradiction; I’m carefree and I’m organized at the same time. And most of all, I’m jealous. Look at another woman, I’ll—”

“Castrate me?”

“Chéri, don’t joke like that.”

“I can do old-fashioned. Some of my best friends are modern conveniences. As for contradictions and gossip, I’m for and against as the case may be.”

Besides her modeling, Emma was earning a teaching certificate in philosophy for her after-modeling career.

She straightened up the apartment and she had me enrolling in the American College—anything, she insisted, to get me back on my feet. The Marine Corps was finished, she said. Time to get serious. Three months later, I had a singing gig that paid. And I was enrolled in a journalism program with credits I could carry over to GW.

Up to then, Emma and I, Reggie and Mimi, his girlfriend, were all over Paris, into its many *divertissements*.

I came close to marrying Emma.

Because of a Metro strike Reggie and I arrived thirty minutes late to our dinner date at a falafel restaurant on the rue des Rosiers in the Jewish quarter, a frequent target for terrorist attacks.

The police and security services wouldn’t let me pass. Only after order was restored was I able to identify the body and mourn with her mother and sister, who’d taken to me, a mysterious dark-skinned, part-Jewish boy who knew close to nothing about the rituals or doctrines of his fiancée’s faith.

As a reminder of the capriciousness of karma, Reggie’s girl, Mimi emerged unscathed; she’d been in the ladies’ room when the attack took place. Every time I looked at her, I saw Emma, even though their physiognomies were completely different.

Reggie Blaze had been a civilian for over a year now and he’d had his ups and downs integrating back to civilian life. He’d worked for a prominent English-language newspaper that laid him off in a cost-cutting

crunch shortly after a new editor took over. Convinced the real reason for his dismissal was the new editor's aversion to his race, he was tempted to file a complaint with the French government, mainly because he knew his work was universally appreciated, both by the French and the foreign press corps. More importantly, Reggie figured it was high time that he take a stand against prejudice, something he'd avoided his whole life. Some folks advised walking away, accepting the situation stoically so as not to burn any bridges in a profession that depended on word of mouth. When Reggie decided to persevere, I asked Aunt Alice for the lawyer who still handled Uncle Phil's business accounting in Europe. Reggie came away with a five hundred thousand franc settlement. After that, he did a year in Cameroon for the Peace Corps, then back to France as a freelance cameraman/editor with a Reuters day job.

Emma's death was the close of a bittersweet chapter in my life. Much later, after witnessing so many examples of friends who'd married early, men and women whose dreams and ambitions were crushed, I decided that completing my degree at GW was going to be a hell of a lot easier as a single person.

Emma's disappearance was so sudden, so immediate; I was lost again. Stunned is a better word. Stunned and bitter. I missed her grit, her French sensibility about practical matters, qualities she failed to mention in her declaration. Nurturing was the word I most associated with Emma. Nurturing and oral sex. Emma liked it both ways: me on her; her on me. It made me recall my conversation with Mitch and his insistence that the acceptance of oral sex closely mirrored the struggle for civil rights, especially as concerns the liberation of women. Emma, like most French women, was in the vanguard.

In words tinged with sardonic resolve, she told me she would be rating my cunnilingual abilities, and I should reciprocate. We spent hours at it on little forays into the countryside around Paris.

"After we're married," she said, "we'll buy a beat-up country house, the shabbier the better. You'll fix it up. Invite friends. At four o'clock, you'll put down your hammer and proceed to the bedroom. I'll stop what I'm doing and meet you there."

"It's a date."

"Oh, God. Just thinking about it, I get so horny."

Had I become over-reliant? In many small ways like finding my socks or my favorite soup spoon or beer glass, yes. But far worse was the ache of our sudden separation, her vanishing like my hopes of a Yale education. So many plans, so many words left unspoken. Emma was gone, but not the inheritance she left me: I refused to return to the vapidness of my former existence.

I reviewed my relationships. Julissa Stewart: finished before it had started; Eloise Winter: circumstances had intervened; Joanna Benson: a tale of foolish pride; Antoinette: class differences; Pam Wyatt, Ginny Hubbard, and eventually, Emma. One way or another, all were failures, mostly my fault, although thanks to Emma I couldn't help thinking I was headed in the right direction.

Which only underlined itself as the perfect moment for my re-entry.



AFTER REENROLLING AT GW, THE FIRST THING I DID ON MY RETURN to DC was to call Mitch and Isabella. The first thing I noted was the obsequious way Mitch related to her. I wouldn't call it pussy-whipped; it was more like deferential in every aspect except one: she was all-in on the tinkertoy. *Quelle surprise!* Prim and religious now approved of Mitch's sociological research. I preferred to call it his life's work. When they showed me its newest three-dimensional iteration, not only did it take up an entire tabletop, I noticed a line between Isabella and myself, which, given present company, should have been embarrassing. But I had to hand it to my old friend, I'd misjudged him, believing he'd be too proud to include it. Judging from the sprawl, it had become aspirational. According to Mitch, couples were sending letters demanding their names be added to his masterpiece. (Each entry had to be verified by both partners and/or by third parties.)

"The rate of oral sex is soaring on the questionnaires I get. At the same time, many say they don't enjoy it."

"Phase two. Only normal," I said.

"Phase two?"

"Yeah, it simply means people are experimenting, but they're not

doing it right so it's not enjoyable. Phase three is when everyone's doing it right."

A moment passed as Mitch processed my analysis. All of a sudden, his expression changed. By the way he looked at me, I was sure he was thinking Isabella must have done it for me while, at the same time, she refuses to do it for him.

"What's that?" I asked, changing the subject by pointing to a circle on one of the entries.

"Oh, that. The tiny mark means they do oral; the red circle means they enjoy it. Nifty, eh?"

That was the allure; it was a graphic display people could study, like they studied the Paris Metro map, tracing the route with their index finger and following the moving finger with their eyes.

During dinner, at the China Inn on H Street, Isabella made with the matchmaking, continually mentioning how Antoinette was not married and how she needed a good man like me (her words, not mine) to pry her away from the alcoholic truck driver who abused her.

"What say the four of us meet for dinner, talk over old times?" she asked, handing me a recent photograph of the two ladies together.

I nixed that idea, explaining I was just getting situated in college after four lost years. "Reviving study habits isn't easy, but, sure, in a week or two I might be up for it."

"She won't stop until her best friend's name is on the chart," said Mitch.

Isabella shot me an eyeful of frozen modesty, a smirk with overtones, meant for the two of us. She'd become something of a Pandarus.

"He likes the thin ones," said Mitch, snatching the photos. "Pretzel thin, like Virginia Hubbard."

"Well, hon, when you're that unhappy," said Isabella, "there's not much else to do but eat."

From the images they'd shown me, yes, Antoinette had gained some weight. I kept silent about my taste in women. But sure, I'd have dinner with them. We were still friends, albeit on separate paths, his involvement in his family's insurance business, now morphing into farming of a sort. Once the tinkertoy topic was exhausted, the conversation was reduced to getting Antoinette and me together.

Because my apartment building on Twenty-Fifth Street was about to be demolished, I was invited to move into rooms with a separate entrance in Mitch and Isabella's huge new house on the 3100 block of Adams Mill Road.

Weight gain or not, Mitch and Isabella's overzealous matchmaking efforts had me putting their reunion idea on permanent hold. Anyway, unforeseen circumstances in the form of Ginny Hubbard soon intervened.

Yes, that Ginny, the one who had to be forcibly removed from Marsha Warren's house, was on the scene again. The first time I saw the new Ginny was in a boring geology class on my first day back at GW. She was wearing an expensive black lambswool jacket and faded dungarees. Heck, she'd look great in lambswool trousers and a dungaree jacket. Her silver hair was longer now, swept back and tied.

The prof, an old-world wag with a Hungarian accent, cracked suggestive jokes on American morality that made the students giggle, even though they didn't half understand what he was talking about. Ginny laughed with the others, a bit late, as if she first needed to check if others were still laughing. One time when her laugh was completely out of sync with the class, she looked back at me to see if I was watching. I was. And that's when our eyes locked. Yet, as beautiful as she was, there was something peculiar, her... I don't know, her body language maybe. I looked for her after class, but she'd vanished.

In and of itself, it wasn't much but it made me curious. It was rumored she'd been treated for schizophrenia. I'd heard about the barbaric remedies used in those cases—shock treatment, heavy drug therapy, and even lobotomy, enough to freeze the blood in your veins—most likely excessive, from what I'd read, but what did I know? I'd never been sick, and I avoided doctors.

Yes, we'd locked eyes at a distance. I didn't know if the sensations I felt were due to a powerful emotion she was projecting, or if I was only imagining there was something more. Whatever it was, it affected me deeply; I could almost sense something radical had happened to her. I was sorry she'd vanished. I supposed I'd see her at the next class.

The next day at the student union I was waiting on a club sandwich when a voice called my name. It was Ginny, standing next to me in line.

She sounded like a frog with laryngitis, but she looked as beautiful as ever.

“I heard you were home, Gin.”

“At my parents? It’s never been a home for me.”

It took me a moment to decide I’d better not go there so I asked, “What’s wrong with your voice?”

“The medication they give me. They keep changing it. Process of elimination to find which one is affecting my voice. So far, no results. Guess I’ll have to eliminate two or more at a time.”

“You doing this under supervision?” I said. “Maybe it’s permanent. Gives you a touch of Eartha Kitt. Very sexy.”

“I’m my own supervisor. After four hundred volts,” she said. “That’s what they shot into me. Three different times, they did it... before I found out they don’t give a shit.”

“There are good places. Menninger Clinic, for one.”

She gave me a distracted look like the whole subject wasn’t one of her favorites. We sat down. I looked around. After four years away from school, the faces were new. No one paid attention to us. I waited for Ginny to continue. Her eyes scanned the room before coming back to me, boring into my innermost self, disturbing my feelings of collectedness. Over sandwiches, she covered the basics. I got the rest of it in bed.

Feeling me inside her, she said it was right where we left off, but it wasn’t the same, it was better—the sex. As for the rest, she was an enigma. No spontaneous tears. No histrionics. Lot’s sixty-nine. Ginny didn’t need liberation and she didn’t need her name on the tinkertoy. I vowed to have Mitch remove it.

Outwardly, she was sweet, kittenish, and very affectionate. Behind her eyes, trust, behind that, was I seeing resentment? Not toward me specifically, but toward life in general. I couldn’t tell. The cat that purrs, the tigress that scratches. It was as if her moral and psychological sustenance at the immediate moment and henceforth after that, depended solely on others and how she related to them, and vice versa. She held a lot in, but so did I. I saw no reason to distrust her.

Ginny loved to cook; she was good at it. I loved eating what she cooked. We drove to Larimer’s. I gave her money. She loaded me up with bags and boxes. We came home. I read, wrote, or did homework while

she cooked. We spent hours at the upright piano I'd bought for two hundred dollars. Practicing all the great lieder: Benjamin Britten, Gabriel Fauré, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms.

Her wit was still quick, but the caustic remarks were a thing of the past. It was as if she'd come to terms with what she called middle-class mediocrity. Lacking that, she had nothing to rail about; she just didn't care. She took her medicine, studied up on the latest drugs, and defended the treatment her physician prescribed in what seemed to me a fruitless search for the perfect medication, one with no side effects.

We continued to see each other, both of us on our best behavior. When she mentioned marriage, it seemed reasonable. She was a changed person. As long as she took her medicine, it might work out.

She was a hit with all my friends, except Mitch and his sister. People were in awe of her beauty. It wasn't only her beauty; it was the breadth of her passion and her total lack of pretentiousness when it came to winning over people with the originality of her ideas. At first, I thought she was repeating prepackaged opinions or acting a role, but there was no pseudo-intellectualism or self-consciousness in her pronouncements. In a group discussion, she was smart, but *never* smarter than... Watching her win people over by belittling her own pronouncements as if she didn't want to be taken too seriously, she swept all my doubts away. And yet, if I had no doubts about her mind, when it came to human relations, I detected doubts of her own making hiding in the darker regions of her soul.

We graduated from GW. I hunted for work, anything to do with writing or journalism. Sometimes we went to the One Step Down or other DC clubs for live jazz or to the Circle Theatre for classic films. Lots of parties. She stuck to one glass of wine and never smoked pot. We were a couple, two people watching each other while extracting pleasure from our loins.

She wanted to host a party. "Invite your friends," she said, telling me the party would mark our engagement.

It was about this time that I became employed.



WBN HIRED NOAH GOODSTEIN AND ME AS APPRENTICE FILM EDITORS. Goodstein, with a degree from the prestigious NYU film school and a recommendation from a high-level insider—no one knew who; me, with a degree in journalism from GW and three years' service in the Marine Corps. From the beginning, it was evident Goodstein was not meant for film editing. Simple tasks like rewinding, not to mention more conceptual tasks like negative cutting, bewildered him. He couldn't rewind a reel from heads to tails without snapping the film and he nearly lost a finger every time he sat down at the foot splicer. To make matters worse, neither I nor Goodstein was permanently assigned to a production unit. We took orders from the moneymen, who were fond of bragging that they put the two of us through an "immersion course," and we were now able-bodied emergency manpower. On a given day, one or both of us could be dispatched to a needy unit. After a week no one wanted Goodstein and everyone not only needed me, they wanted me.

Terry Lewis, the first assistant in charge of negative cutting, realized I was a quick study. Terry taught me how to cut negative and the two of us spent late nights into the wee hours of the morning doing just that. Terry took one reel, I took another, and, keeping company with a case of beer, we raced each other to the finish, until, over time, I was almost as fast as Terry.

Funny, aside from myself, a lowly apprentice, no one seemed to wonder why Goodstein was untouchable.

It took Jules Kaitz, Herb Hecht's French editor, to eventually confront the bean counters, forbidding them to assign Goodstein to his unit ever again. The remaining units followed suit. But such was Goodstein's New York backing that I was called in by the moneymen and told to "look after" Goodstein and get him "feeling comfortable," which meant I ended up doing Goodstein's work as well as my own. Finally, Herb Hecht himself, WBN's Emmy award-winning producer, ordered Buzz Pegler, our management overseer, to get rid of Goodstein. Thinking he could go to New York with that ultimatum, and it would be the end of it, Pegler was stunned to learn that Goodstein was to be kept at all costs. Once again, I was ordered to shepherd the wayward lamb. That's when Kaitz with a commanding stare ordered me to "find a way to get him out of here."



Jules Kaitz had met Herb in Paris while filming a series of postwar denazification films. After finishing the series with Jules as his supervising editor, Herb and his plentiful US dollar budget persuaded Jules to join his team at WBN. I remember that first day—how everyone was in awe of Jules. Not only had he barnstormed through postwar Europe, he'd also cut feature films in Hollywood and France. He'd even been nominated for an Oscar.

I began to hang out in his room, just watching. Jules worked long hours and was hell on assistants. He never talked and I never spoke to him; I just watched, sometimes late into the night. I learned what makes a good show. In one of his few cryptic pronouncements, Jules described it this way: The difference between *mal fait et bien fait* is not only that great; it's infinitesimal, he'd insisted. Perhaps, only a half hour's more effort. Taking the time to address an issue instead of letting it slide—self-justifying with excuses such as “No one will notice” or “It'll take too much time.” The little tasks the average person chooses to ignore, usually a matter of hours, not whole days or weeks, are the difference between so-so and great.

Jules liked the fact that I spoke French. He attributed my staying late to run errands as a sign of genuine interest, which any editor is glad to see because training a film editor is not a formal transfer of classroom knowledge, so much as a process of individual initiative. Jules began delegating me simple tasks and making sure I got paid for overtime, which pissed off his top assistant. I was accused of being a brown noser. It never occurred to the people who resented our relationship that we liked each other. That ended in 1965 when I was promoted to Eddie Walter's assistant on the *Hartley-Brentley Report*.

A plan was hatched. After much acrimony, the unit chiefs were able to extract a promise from the moneymen that Goodstein must learn at least one skill.

He was assigned to cut the negative for a Douglas Brentley interview while Terry Lewis and I were in New York helping to cut the negative for one of their big projects. All of which meant that, before leaving, Goodstein spent an intensive week learning the theory and practice of negative cutting from Terry and me. We not only explained, we also demonstrated

the process of preparing A and B rolls to hide the splices in 16mm print stock.

Terry showed Goodstein a strip of 35mm film, pointing to the space between each frame wide enough to hide a splice. Then I showed him a magnified 16mm clip with no space between frames, the point being that 35mm didn't need A and B rolls; the splices could be hidden in the space between the frames.

After a week's study, a quiz: "So how do you hide the splice in 16mm?" asked Terry. With both Terry and I straining to elicit a response, Goodstein—pleased with himself after many repetitions—was finally able to come up with, "By hiding the splice in the black leader, uh, by checkerboarding the A and B rolls so that there's black leader on every other clip, which means to make a release print the lab has to run the raw stock through the printer twice, once for the A roll and once for the B roll. And because black leader is opaque."

His description was followed by a painful hands-on practice session that featured Goodstein threading a synchronizer with a work print and two rolls of junk negative until he was able to cut a couple of hundred feet to Terry's satisfaction.

The machination was I would dilute the glue for the splicer with acetone so that, when printed, the splices would not hold. The person responsible, the one who cut the negative and hand carried it to the lab, would be none other than Goodstein. The lab would, of course, tell the other networks and because the incident was now public, WBN would be forced to dismiss the culprit. Someone would replace the glue and that would be that. Of course, I had already matched the negative for the Brentley interview, which I would take to the lab on my return from New York. Goodstein had worked with an expendable internegative, not the original.

More a mercy killing than an assassination, I mused. Goodstein was moved to some department in New York.

AT ONE POINT, JULES'S TOP ASSISTANT WENT TO CBS AND JULES ASKED for me and I was promoted to first assistant in Herb Hecht's unit. My knowledge of France and its language relaxed Jules. When the

moneymen came snooping, we joked in French at their expense. I was even an honored guest at meals cooked by his charming, but homesick, French wife.

Right down the line, I owed Jules. When schedule crunches came as they inevitably did, he had me cut silent montages and lay in narration and music. Even when I was wrong half the time, he showed me what I'd done wrong and how to mend it. I never made the same mistake twice. Jules Kaitz trained me and got me promoted, but the real debt I owed Jules was his going to bat with Herb to let me take over after Jules went back to France in a pique of temper over never being provided with a Steenbeck.

Now I wasn't so naïve as to ignore the possibility that even though getting rid of Goodstein was said to be a unanimous fiat if anything went wrong, I, the then low-man-on-the-totem-pole apprentice, would be the fall guy. There was also the moral aspect of sabotaging a person's livelihood by devious means, a conundrum that I gave only minimal consideration to, my rationalization being that having to do Goodstein's work plus my own for menial pay more than made up for any injustice Goodstein might suffer.



I STOPPED SEEING GINNY. YES, IT WAS ABRUPT, BUT NOT IMPULSIVE; film editing gave me lots of time to think. The more I thought, the more it added up: Ginny would be a burden. Behind the strides she made, there was a surfeit of maintenance being done to keep her stable. I wouldn't be good at that.

I was determined to learn all I could. Not that I liked film editing that much; it was a great beginning. But editors lived in the dark, like trolls. Hour after hour, the same routine, and even though someone of Jules's stature made as much as a top writer/producer, editors were content to stay where they were. I was looked askance at when I said I was an aspiring writer. I was restless and not afraid to say so.

. . .

IT WAS TOO LATE TO CANCEL GINNY'S PARTY. MITCH AGREED TO cohost it. And while Ginny spent hours handcrafting invitations, as if her efforts would somehow keep our relationship intact, I explained I couldn't manage everything I was doing and her, too. There was no question of carrying on. I beseeched her not to make any announcements or declarations.

After letting her alone for a while, I explained that we were not engaged, officially or unofficially. My words went past her ears, to the part of the brain that registers pain. I lost the battle in trying not to hurt her.

"But my parents. They're counting on it. That we are about to be married," she said.

"Disabuse them," I said. "It's not the end of the world."

Far away and drifting still further, she sang slightly off key. "♪ I'll always welcome back my Mickey," adding abruptly, "Oh well, that's life, I suppose," returning from the window to pour herself a glass of vodka.

Uh-oh, it hadn't taken much to summon up the old Ginny, the alcoholic urges, the singing of ditties. How much worse might it have gotten had we married, facing the myriad of challenges one faces in the daily grind?

While Mitch and I invited a few friends and Isabella invited Antionette, Ginny invited only one guest, a character I'd run across ever so often at Tasso's or Brownley's, name of Delmas—first or last name, no one knew.

At one point, after things got going and not a little alcohol had been consumed, I walked out on the front deck. When she heard the sliding door, Antionette, who'd been gazing at the field across the street, did not need to turn around to see who it was. She'd gone out expressly, knowing that I'd follow. I sensed a kind of superficial exasperation she'd been nurturing since our last meeting, feelings she was eager to let go of once we came face-to-face.

I walked straight to her and took her in my arms. While we kissed, I heard the door slide open. Antionette's expression went from secure-in-my-arms contentment to terror. I was slow to register, slow to see Ginny standing by the door between Delmas and the guy, I didn't remember his

name, who'd driven Antionette to the party. Anyway... I wasn't watching him. I should have because...

He blindsided me.

The blow caught me off guard, and while I was coming to terms with it, a glimpse of Ginny gesticulating wildly brought me back to the moment. Was I reading her lips correctly? Had I seen her mouthing *Kill him*? If not, her body language was projecting it. The realization might've cost me a bit of concentration but not enough to make a difference

I dodged a wild swing that missed me but clobbered Antoinette, who, as she let go of me, slid to the floor in a pile of legs and arms.

"Bitch!" the guy screamed at her. "Serves you right, whore."

I hate abusive behavior and bad manners, people cursing at women especially.

Antoinette might be out cold, but the guy had no intention of stopping with her. It was a bad mistake. My father hadn't begun my fight training at the age of nine only to teach me to box; he'd taught me to kill my opponent. I hadn't fought anyone since the ninth grade. I was a little rusty, but I made sure it ended quickly. Mitch came out, visibly upset he'd missed the action. I sat the guy down. Isabella and some other guests ministered to Antoinette. Marsha brought a Kleenex to wipe the blood on her face. Isabella lit into me, blaming the fight on me. Mitch told her to shut up, insisting that he had the facts.

"But Gus here was kissing her..."

"And she was digging it. What do you want? They like each other. Besides, you're the one making with the matchmaking."

"Well, he should have known Dimitri is jealous. Now we have two lifeless bodies on our hands."

After Dimitri revived, I gave him a shot glass of whiskey. The fun over—people love a party that ends in a fight—and I'm thinking that's why I never joined a fraternity: the parties, the excessive drinking, and the belligerence. Fights over things forgotten by the next sunrise. Mitch led him down the steps to his car parked out front. Antoinette volunteered to accompany him. Isabella told her she was crazy even to say something like that.

Marsha Warren gave up on the sleeping arrangements so Isabella put herself in the guest room. I went to my room only to find Mitch in my

bed. Once again, Isabella kicked him out. I went outside to smoke a joint and overheard Isabella and Antoinette talking.

“But I’m okay now and I want to sleep—well, you know what I mean, with him,” said Antoinette, still a bit slaphappy. “My protector,” she said, staggering toward the door. I heard Isabella grab her friend and yank her into the bedroom.

I drove Antoinette to the Bronx the following day. Once again, neither of us came up with reason enough to want to spend the rest of our lives together. Standing there like two store window dummies, frozen in lifeless regret, it was obvious! We were going to disappear from each other’s lives. At some point in the future, we might think of the other person, wonder what went wrong, and why we were unable to connect. And the pain of lost possibilities would be almost unbearable.

A short while after the party, I began to have the feeling that someone was stalking me. It wasn’t just a sense. At least, the first incident wasn’t. It occurred in the detached garage in the alley behind the house, accessible from the back door of the house via a short path through a small garden.

Ginny surprised the hell out of Mitch as he went to get his car. She was waiting for me, she told him.

“All alone? In the garage?” he said. “What if he doesn’t come out here for a week?”

She was unable to answer.

According to Mitch, she was shaking as if her pent-up anticipation was shattered when she realized it wasn’t me. In her condition, Mitch had to take her inside and give her some tea.

“What’s she doing here?” asked Isabella when they entered the kitchen.

I hadn’t returned her calls, she said, and she had something important to tell me. What, she refused to say. Isabella told her not to do it again or she’d call the police. Isabella didn’t like her, and she didn’t feel sorry for her.

Mitch did. So did I.

*Feel sorry for her.* I guess I’ll always feel guilty about her no matter what. Later, I called her at the number she gave Mitch. Nothing much came of it, only that she forgave me for kissing Antoinette, which

reminded me about Mitch's telling me about her shaking, and that I'd also seen her doing it during and after the fight.

"Why were you shaking?" I asked her.

"I dunno. I get that way sometimes."

That night I dreamed I was in a house somewhere in DC. I knew it because I recognized a distinctive DC checkered cab parked out front when I walked in. The trees around the house were tossing in the wind. The street looked like any other; I didn't recognize it. I closed the door. The momentary quiet was interrupted by faint laughter which, as it grew louder, sounded more like a machine imitating a human, only louder and more mocking, a ghastly variation of Ginny's raspy voice.

A bell rang. And the laughter stopped but only for a moment. It was in that half-asleep, half-awake state that my thoughts began to coalesce around the sensation that I was being watched. More than that, stalked.

Logic dictated that it was Ginny Hubbard, and perhaps the Delmas dude she hung out with.

At breakfast, I kept my dream to myself and listened to Mitch rattle away on the wisdom of buying DC real estate. How, in comparison to New York and Boston, DC houses were undervalued. A New York City brownstone cost a minimum of \$85K while the house they owned cost barely \$20K.

"Someday soon DC houses—not only the ones on this block—are going to climb out of sight. The prices. Get 'em while you still can. In fact, why not two or three?"

I agreed to let him show me around Saturday.

I settled for a large house off Connecticut Avenue on Macomb Street NW that had lost its purpose sometime between the year it was constructed and the second Roosevelt administration.

MIXED DOUBLES

**F**or the past week, I'd been mixing a film in the Big Apple—a film that would run three times at most and then lie forgotten in WBN's vault, a large un-airconditioned space with wooden shelves, slowly decomposing in the sweaty heat of Washington summers. Ten months' work only to be buried in obscurity after a short run, a victim of television's voracious appetite for content.

The long hours and the stress of working from one deadline to another no longer affected me; in fact, they'd become something to count on, as if toiling away half the night in a room with no windows worked off bad karma. More likely, my unrelenting discontent stemmed from the nagging feeling that I should be in some altogether different line of work. And because I felt it, I carried it with me, allowing it to infect those around me, namely my boss, Herb Hecht. It wasn't that I didn't care whether the show failed to hit top management's viewership targets, the notorious Nielsen ratings.

I cared, but I avoided public display. It wasn't a lack of volition on my part; it was part of my nature, out of my control, but it made others believe I didn't care.

. . .



EVERYTHING WAS READY FOR THE MORROW. FRIDAY, WE'D SCREEN THE final version, in time for an early flight back to DC.

But it was still Thursday. And I had several options for the evening—drinking with Herb, going to a movie with my assistant, and hanging out with my aunt watching one of the John Wayne westerns she had 16mm prints of. All of which I refused. Sitting in a mixing studio ten hours a day, ordering egg salad sandwiches, and whammo, I was constipated. I needed exercise.

My aunt reserved the court. As a board member of the city's most exclusive clubs, she insisted that I be given two hours of quality tennis. I liked walk-on mixed doubles. It's a great way to meet chicks. Okay, caution and convention dictated I probably shouldn't be thinking about other women since I'd just ended it with Ginny under difficult circumstances. But I was ready to throw caution to the wind, and I didn't give a hoot about convention.

IT WAS 5:15 P.M. WHEN I ARRIVED AT THE COURTS. I'D BE IN AND OUT by 8:00 p.m. Dinner and the subway back to my aunt's apartment, I'd be well rested for the final day of mixing.

"Gus Mazur. I have a reservation."

"I—I don't see that name, sir."

I tried reading the reservation book upside down. Something must have clicked for I blurted out, "Try Peter Randall."

"Uh-huh," said the receptionist.

I felt the man attempting to reconcile the walnut tint of my skin with my aunt's milky pallor. I was used to the once-over; it amused me. Sure, I could get defensive, but in a way, I understood the man's reaction, even though I didn't agree with it. After all, encountering a dark-skinned person in an exclusive club wasn't much different than meeting the immigrant who cleans your office at the country club dance. No sense in making a big deal about it, unless there was a direct insult. This guy had recovered nicely after his initial reaction and was taking everything in stride. No need to be prickly.

"Peter Randall," I repeated.

The receptionist shuffled some cards and looked up at me. “Still nasty out there?”

“Slippery, it’s supposed to dry up.”

“Here you are, Mr. Randall. Your partners are on court seven,” he said, handing me the key for my locker, smiling.

The electronic calendar behind the desk read December 28, 1967—only three more days to the New Year. “Ring out the old year, ring in the new. Ring-a-ding-ding,” I mumbled.

“Shirley MacLaine!” exclaimed the receptionist. “When she’s about to leave her stinker of a boyfriend.”

“Dig it,” I said. “You like movies, eh?”

“Yes, sir. *The Apartment*. Jack Lemmon, Shirley MacLaine,” said the receptionist, relishing the occasion to be treated like a person. “Saw it in film appreciation class.”

I headed to the locker room mulling over the notion that Americans might have more in common with one another than I had been inclined to believe.

When I finished changing into my tennis whites, I trotted out to court seven and introduced myself to Lil, Coop, and Wanda. To select partners Coop and I shook odds and evens. Coop won. Probably influenced by Wanda’s shapely legs, he chose her for a partner.

From the get-go, I disliked Coop’s gloating, like he’d ended up with Billie Jean King for a partner and I was stuck with a no-name recreational player.

“No changing partners; we go all the way with the same ones,” insisted Coop, further ingratiating himself with Wanda. “It’s fairer that way,” he said. “More interesting.”

While Coop continued to admire Wanda’s legs with the bulging eyes of a cartoon wolf, Lil and I sized each other up. There was something about her unassuming expression that told me my rather spindly Chinese partner and I were going to kick Coop’s ass. Which we did.

Wanda, a stereotypical debutant with a no-sex-till-after-marriage look about her, was a good player but she hesitated at the wrong times, almost as if she’d been bred not to be too assertive. Lil, on the other hand, was a monster. She chased down every ball and returned it, no matter the angle, and her left-handed spin serves had Coop and Wanda lunging for

them. Coop had a weak backhand that Lil and I exploited. It was 6-1, 6-3 after two sets.

Coop was angry, venting his ire by calling our close-to-the-line shots out and glaring at Wanda as if every point Lil and I won had somehow been Wanda's fault. As the match wore on, Wanda, who'd tolerated Coop's bullying at first, began rolling her eyes at her partner's lack of sportsmanship.

It was five games to none in the third and final set and it was my serve at 40-love. I placed a serve to Coop down the center line in the deuce court for an ace. The ball's skid mark was evident—so blatantly so that, despite his rage, Coop didn't dare call it out, especially since the match had attracted a small audience that was clapping and oohing as the points flew by.

Game, set, match. The final score: 6-1, 6-3, 6-0. Lil and I hugged at the net. I'd misjudged her. Perhaps it was the way she rolled her hips. The walk of a female athlete—undulating and insolent. Turns out that she'd been on the Columbia University tennis team.

Afterward, Coop was a changed man—on the surface, sociable and solicitous. Inwardly, though, I could see he was struggling with something, not only because Lil and I had trounced him at tennis. He hated the fact that his tennis club now admitted people like me. He probably had a pet name for us. Something like *hairball*. That's it, I thought. I am a hairball. It was as if I had tuned into Coop's inner dialogue and was reading his thoughts. Once he got going, the spleen kept coming and I kept transliterating his thoughts: *Mixed race, that was certain, probably from the underbelly of some outer-limit subcontinent or newly formed colonial reject where they breed them tall and hairy. How dare he bring his flea-bitten, scraggly beard into the club! The thought of touching it sickens me. And the way the two women acted: Wanda, at least, showed a degree of decorum, but the Chink went overboard with smiles and entreaties, putting her hand on his shoulder while they kibitzed between points—every come-on short of opening her legs. We'll see who comes away with that slant-eyed piece of ass. As revolting as she showed herself to be, judging from the way she bounced around the court, she'd be an easy lay.*

"What about dinner, you hungry people? I know a great Italian nearby," Coop said. "Sorry if I got a bit carried away. I get charged up, competition-wise."

With those words, my awareness returned to the here and now. I figured Coop was hoping to get Wanda or Lil drunk and then lure one of them to his lair. I pictured an apartment with wall-to-wall carpet, plenty of fake Warhols and de Kooning's on the walls, and his pièce de résistance, a waterbed.

I realized I wasn't wanted. That's why I decided to stay.

I looked at Lil. Her expression, her eyes particularly, were telling me something. I waited for her response. "I'm hungry," she said.

"So am I," I said.

"We can walk. Or take my car. It's an MG," Coop said, winking at Wanda, "only two seats."

Wanda demurred, saying she had a yuletide party to go to. In a vain attempt to persuade her otherwise, Coop placed his arm around her shoulders and led her aside. "Don't break up the party, honey. We can eat and go to your party later," he whispered.

Wanda, who'd been as much repulsed by Coop's gnarly hobbit legs as he was smitten by hers, recoiled at his touch. "I'm afraid," she declared in a condescending *Social Register* voice, "it's a private party."

The three of us walked the two blocks to Gino's Kitchen, a below-ground family joint, straight out of a 1940s movie. Lots of atmosphere. The menu reminded me of my mother, who was half Italian, the dishes she prepared were the ones no longer found on menus. The casual conversation segued into Lil's asking me the "What do you do, Gus?" question.

"You're not a salesman," she said. "That's one thing I'm sure of."

"I work for WBN. I'm a film editor. I'd be a lousy salesman; I couldn't sell anything I don't believe in."

"You work in the Chrysler Building?" Coop asked.

"WBN in DC."

"What are you doing here then?" asked Lil.

"We come to the city to mix films shot in thirty-five millimeter."

Coop looked at me. From his expression, I surmised that he had more questions on the tip of his tongue, probably wanting to know my annual salary. I cut him off with a frown.

The waiter appeared in time to refocus our attention on eating. Coop started to play the expert, barking out must-try suggestions. I ordered a

side of spinach and manicotti with braciola, a dish my mother excelled at.

As I headed to the men's room, Coop was busy ordering, throwing a hundred-dollar bill on the table. "My treat, honey. Order anything you want."

At the rate he was coming on to Lil, I figured he'd overplay his hand, and then I'd see about the looks she'd been giving me. My flirtations usually started with eye contact, not with a lot of talk, a natural extension of the techniques my dance teacher taught me.

When I returned to the table, Coop was trying to get Lil to sample the cocktail he'd ordered and she was beginning to waver.

"Long time since I tasted alcohol," she exclaimed, taking the first sip. "I don't usually drink. None of my friends do."

"Have you guys finished ordering?" I asked.

Coop nodded. "Like the taste? It's sweet, huh?"

"Not bad. What do they call it again?" asked Lil.

He'd ordered stingers all around. I had no intention of drinking mine; I ordered a glass of Bordeaux with dinner.

"Relax, my dear," said Coop. "Drink up."

*Said the spider to the fly*, I muttered. "Have mine, why don't you."

"Don't mind if I do," said Lil, rather defiantly as if she was proving a point. "Mmm, it's sweet."

Something passed between us. Coop caught it, redoubling his efforts to exclude me. He launched into a monologue on the wine regions of Italy. Probably bullshit, but I was no expert and Coop seemed sure of himself.

I was the odd man out as far as the Lil sweepstakes were concerned. Coop's malevolent glare was a warning to back off. I filched a piece of Lil's garlic bread. Coop was so into his rap that he missed the sly smile she directed at me.

When the meals were served, the Chianti Coop ordered came with it. I took a sip—a tourist wine with a rough taste that told me Coop was full of shit. I'd had a hundred Chiantis, never tasted a smooth one I'd stopped drinking it altogether.

"So, Lil. What is it you do for a living, a smart tennis-playing woman like yourself?" Coop asked. "Export-import, I bet."

I caught Coop's racial profiling—his connecting business acumen with her being Chinese. If Coop imagined her as a prosperous merchant because of her race, where did that leave me, I asked myself. But that wasn't the vibe Lil was giving me.

She had finished her stinger and seemed to be sailing smoothly. "I'm a piano tuner and a painter," she replied.

"Oh yeah? You can tune me up anytime," said Coop to his guffaws.

To my surprise, Lil was overcome by laughter, literally splitting a gut.

No wonder. By now, she was alternating a sip of Chianti with a sip of my rejected stinger. And she had only picked at her food.

"What do you do, Coop?" I asked.

Before Coop could answer, Lil pounced. "A salesman. No doubt about it. He's a salesman, Coop is."

"I have a tire business. You either need tires or you don't. I can sell anything. Just happens to be tires."

"Cooper Tires—that's you, is it?" I asked.

"I wish. Mine's a retail tire business. Down the hatch, everybody."

"A retail tire business," repeated Lil to more uproarious self-induced laughter.

Coop was right about one thing: the food was good. But shepherding two drunks, I discovered, was something else. Lil was my partner. I'd inherited her.

"Empty, dammit. Let's have another," said Coop, upending the Chianti bottle. "Cancel that," he ordered, gesticulating wildly. "Cognacs, all around."

"Not for me." I waved off the waiter.

With two sweeping movements, Lil finished off both my stinger and her half-full wineglass. Traditional Italian music: accordion, mandolin, and pipes now competed with her laughter. Our party was beginning to attract the attention of the management and the other customers. Lil got up to dance, undulating provocatively to the music. Coop, as drunk as Lil, came up behind her and started to grind against her buttocks.

"Hey, keep it real." Lil's cautionary had little effect; Coop kept grinding.

The manager came over to me. "No dancing in here, sir. Eating only. A restaurant."

I nodded, just as the two Cognacs were placed on the table.

I peeled Coop off Lil's back and led them back to their seats. "Stay cool, guys," I said. "You hear?"

Lil started guzzling her Cognac, shaking her head rhythmically between each sip. "Let's go somewhere else. I want to dance," she said, standing—this time adding outstretched arms in a gliding motion that resembled a maladroit Isadora Duncan. With Coop behind her, they bumped into tables and into each other like two puppets with their strings tangled.

The manager was pissed. "Sir, you and your friends have got to leave. Now, or I call the police. Come back. You're welcome anytime, just yourself."

"Let's go to my place," announced Lil in a loud voice. Somehow, we made it to the street before the manager could call the cops.

Outside, it had warmed up considerably. Lil and Coop continued bumping into each other and into inanimate objects: lampposts, cars, and NYC litter baskets. Lil grasped a lamppost and twice swung around it, letting go and propelling herself into Coop's outstretched arms.

"Where's the car, Coop?" I asked.

Coop staggered around a while before locating his car. He insisted on driving. I grabbed the keys and opened the car doors while Lil explored new vistas in choreography, dancing around me and tickling the back of my neck with her scarf.

To fit all three persons in the car—myself, the driver, of course—I put Coop in the passenger seat. The next maneuver was getting Lil to climb over Coop's inert body to where I could wedge her in between Coop's legs, her butt on the floorboards, the back of her head in his crotch. Mostly out of it, Coop was alert enough to slide his hands down the front of Lil's blouse every time I had to steer with my left hand and shift gears with my right.

Squeezed as she was between Coop's legs, Lil couldn't move. Neither her arms, her legs, nor her head. She couldn't keep Coop's hands off her nipples, not until I finished shifting. All she could do was wiggle a bit and repeat "Hey, that's not funny" each time I had to shift gears—before I could yank Coop's arm out of her blouse. Had she not been wasted, she might have offered a nominal resis-

tance. As it was, she was as helpless as a beached sea animal. I continued to shift and yank, and Coop continued his robotic groping. Downshift to first gear, Coop's arm goes into its downstroke, pause while I shift, first to second, second to third, third to fourth and I'm finally able to yank Coop's arm out until the shifting cycle began again.

I headed uptown on Broadway hoping the fresh air would sober them up. At sixty-five mph, the MG's little motor sounded like a gaggle of chattering geese. Unconcerned, I pressed the pedal to the floor, hitting seventy-five miles per hour before finally slowing down as we approached 125th Street. The few bystanders who bothered to raise their heads were startled to see a woman's head in the crotch of a man, one more example of white people's flaunting their public personhood. That I wasn't white added to their puzzlement.

Coop had conked out by then. I turned the car around and cruised back toward the Village at a speed timed to catch every one of the synchronized lights without once having to extract Coop's arm from Lil's bodice.

Luckily, we didn't run into a curious late-night patrol car that might have made it their business to investigate. I was pretty sure they would have jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Lil lived in the Washington Mews, in one of the historic Greenwich Village row houses tourists enjoy strolling through. When we arrived, I was thinking *Great, I'll make sure Lil gets inside. Then drive to Times Square and park the car. I'll put the keys in Coop's pocket and grab a cab for home.*

After prying her loose from between Coop's legs, I helped Lil find her keys, then watched her stagger to the front door where she fumbled with the keys, and I realized I'd better help, or I might still be watching her when the sun rose.

Sure enough, after trying each key one after the other, even in the dark, we realized—yes, it was beginning to dawn on Lil—that her house key was not on the ring.

Perhaps Coop had a flashlight. I ducked back to the car. Coop was dead to the world, passed out and snoring fitfully. I checked the glove compartment; nothing of any use there. It was Lil's turn to think clearly, and that was simply not going to happen. Not yet.



“Lil, don’t you remember leaving home without your house key? Maybe you have two sets of keys, huh?”

She took the keys from me, studied them, and looked up at me. Something was wrong. The reason was beginning to dawn on her. She opened her mouth, as if on the verge of an explanation. Words failed her. Whatever it was, was lost in the mire of her limited consciousness.

“My friend... she lives across the street. She has a key; she’ll let me in,” said Lil, screaming. “Evelyn!”

“Jesus, Lil. Shh, you’ll wake the neighborhood.”

“Don’t worry yourself!” She screamed “Evelyn!” again, once more, a fourth time. Lights went on up and down the Mews. This time the cops showed up.

Evelyn came barreling out her door in a bathrobe, sizing up the situation and rubbing her eyes. Once she’d understood, she was sympathetic, unfazed, pacifying the cops and vouching for Lil as if it were only a slight misunderstanding,

One of the cops walked over to the MG and tapped the passenger side window with his nightstick. “You know this guy?” he asked me.

“A sick friend; I’m taking care of him, Officer.”

I became alarmed when they shifted their attention to pressuring their way into Lil’s house on some pretext. That’s when brave little Evelyn began pushing them back to their car. “Everything’s fine. She lives here. No need to keep the neighborhood awake...”

Staring at me in a malevolent manner as if I was the instrument behind their dismissal, the cops bid a reluctant goodbye. The windows along the Mews went dark. Evelyn reassured Lil with a matronly pat on the shoulder. Almost as quickly as it had awakened, the neighborhood was once again at peace. I turned to leave.

Lil had sobered up a bit, probably on account of the cops. But she still couldn’t figure out what had happened to her keys. Evelyn opened the door and quickly returned to her house.

“Hey there, Gus, want a cup of coffee?”

“I don’t drink coffee.”

“I have tea. Good Chinese green tea.”

“In that case...”

Lil’s duplex had a passageway on the ground floor that led to a dining

room and then to a large kitchen and a breakfast nook at the back of the house. From the condition of the nook, it looked like most of her meals were consumed there. Butter, jam, and a half-finished bowl of soup lay on the table. The living room and bedrooms were on the second floor.

Lil led me upstairs to the living room that contained all the fixings of an auxiliary kitchen: sink, refrigerator, counter, cabinets, but no stove. The decorations were a cultural *mélange*: Chinese, for sure, Spanish, French, and American.

“Your paintings?” I asked, walking through a door to a studio to survey her paintings—an unmounted work in progress on an easel and an array of canvases leaning against the walls.

“My humble contributions to the art world.”

“Pretty competitive, huh?”

“You said it.” Lil ducked back to the cabinets for a moment, returning to the coffee table with several tiny bottles whose liquids she started mixing with a spoon and an eyedropper.

“Chinese recipe for intoxication. Want some?” She finished brewing her intriguing concoction gulping it down with a throat-clearing cough.

I waved her off. “You’re forgetting I didn’t drink all that much, Lil. How would you know? You were soaking up everything that asshole dished out: his bullshit and his stingers. You didn’t even know I was there. And you didn’t seem to mind his hands all over your tits.”

She blushed—at least, I thought it was a blush. I heard somewhere that the Chinese don’t blush. Typical racist nonsense probably.

“That creep. I have no excuse for drinking too much. But don’t exaggerate. You were a big help; you let him grope me.”

“Bullshit, Lil,” I laughed. “The whole way— He was so far down your front, I thought he’d come up with a handful of pubic hair.”

She shivered. “The thought of it... Ugh.”

“Try it sometime. Keep the creep from feeling up the girl while you steer and shift gears in an MG.”

“I’m sorry. It was funny, though,” she said.

“I’m glad you think so.”

I looked at her. Her expression told me she was embarrassed—her sheepish giggle expressing the absurdity of the situation. “Hey, it’s me, Lil, your partner. We won, remember.”

“Partners,” I said. “Drank his ass under the table, you did.”

Lil smiled, rejoicing with a hearty, “Yes, I did— I must have a greater tolerance than I thought. Hey, you likee I make tea, partner?” she asked, mimicking broken English. “That’s how I spoke when I first came to this country.”

“From... Formosa? You lived there?”

“Mainland China, Beijing.”

“Mainland China. How’d you get out?”

“My father was a military attaché. He got us out to England just in time to escape being purged.”

“Is that how you got your Brit accent? What do you call it—the “posh” or “BBC” accent that intimidates Americans?”

“Boring boarding schools in England and Switzerland. The accent got soaked up through overexposure.”

“Boarding school. Been there,” I said. “At the time, I hated it, hated the long semesters, the day after day same routine. Hindsight, the education was worth it. Worst, it was boys only. I wouldn’t send my kids to one.”

“Me neither,” said Lil. “But of course, everyone says that until they have their kids.”

“How did you feel about only living with females?”

“I prefer the company of men.”

I sputtered. A few drops of tea landed on my shirt.

“No, not that way, you,” she giggled at my subtext. “One at a time.”

“That’s better.”

“There was a math teacher the girls had a crush on.” The way she said made me think she’d won that competition.

I didn’t know what to make of her. Perhaps she was being deferentially shy, but no, she’d taken the initiative, inviting me in, even vamping a bit with the tea service. She might be a flake. And yet there was something tender in her smile, which, put into words, told me she needed to feel safe. I decided to listen.

For the next twenty minutes, Lil narrated her family’s escape from China and her father’s success in the trucking business. He’d purchased a timeworn International Harvester pickup, and used it for custom deliveries throughout the Tri-state area. Soon, he’d acquired bigger

trucks and more Chinese drivers on his way to a capitalist success story.

When she'd finished, I pointed to a nicely fitted wall cabinet containing four long rows of records. "You're a piano tuner," I said. "Must have some Coltrane in that lot, somewhere."

Lil walked to the cabinet and brushed her fingers along a sixteen-inch section of John Coltrane LPs. "A few," she said while taking out a record whose cover I couldn't quite read from where I was sitting but recognized the moment it started to play: John Coltrane's version of "Body and Soul" from one of his first dates with McCoy Tyner on piano.

"Here, have some of this." She passed along a hand-rolled joint that she'd conjured up out of nowhere.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Smoke it. You tell me."

"You play piano?" I asked, in between tokes, passing the joint back to Lil. Whatever it was, it had me loose and light-headed. Somatically enfeebled in my movements, basic hand-to-face gestures in slow motion. I could talk but not move. Was she drugging me to tie me up and torture me?

"Mary Jane and a smidge of Chinese compound. And yes, I play *that* piano, not jazz, classical. I can't improvise yet. I'm trying, though." When the record finished, she sat down at the piano and began to play.

"Shit, I'm hallucinating, imagining that someone's playing Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin," I said.

"His number Five Sonata. You know it?"

"Love it." It was one of the pieces Ginny played. "Now, I'll never get any sleep."

"Who said anything about sleep?" she said.

"I gotta work tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's come and gone. Where were you when it happened?"

My face went blank as I grappled with the meaning of her words, but I couldn't think straight. "What were we talking about?" I said. "Oh yeah, what time is it?"

Lil got up, walked over to the couch I was sitting on, and stroked my chin in a slow halting motion. "Nice man likee China girl?"

More baby talk. Like I was a masculine primitive, and she was my love slave. It had the opposite effect.

She put another album on—Billie Holiday’s version of “Body and Soul.” She sat down next to me and caressed my genitalia. She must have sensed the music’s seductive effect on me. “What’s happening down here? Is it sleeping? No, no, it’s waking up, getting bigger, your little man.”

“What’s in that shit?”

“Several levels of overlapping highs,” said Lil. “The three stages in rapid succession: lethargy, enthrallment, and horny, or as they say in mainland China, fuck your brains out, partner.”

The music, sensual; my condition, stimulated—hyper sexually stimulated. If I could only move... and then, after what seemed like many minutes of getting swallowed up by the music, stage three kicked in. I was hard and horny. There must have been a time delay factored in the shit I’d smoked. Ten minutes had gone by; I was no longer powerless.

Lil added *Forest Flower* to the record changer. We sat on the white leather couch facing each other, our eyes projecting wordless messages the brain had little trouble decoding. I picked up my tennis partner and carried her into the bedroom.



I PARKED COOP’S CAR ON A SIDE STREET OFF TIMES SQUARE, LEAVING the chore of waking him to the prostitutes circling his MG like a school of sharks. At that hour, the City That Never Sleeps had a plentiful selection of taxi cabs. I reached my aunt’s apartment at 3:45 a.m., hitting the sack, exhausted, yet unable to sleep. Too much to process. First, there was Lil and my thoroughly inadequate first impression of her. This was not a revised assessment to justify our mutual attraction, our humping. She’d done as much humping as I had, perhaps even more. That’s what made her unique—unmitigated passion, the same intensity she’d exhibited on the tennis court.

I replayed the previous evening, how a series of ordinary events—tennis and dinner—had terminated in vigorous yet tender lovemaking.

How had I so misjudged her so? Was it the way she shifted her weight

from one buttock to the other as she waited for a serve? Or how she bounced around the court, retrieving balls that were clearly out of reach? It was later in the bedroom that I realized my mistake. The breasts that she'd wrapped so tightly while playing tennis, once exposed, were deliciously full. Large dark brown areolae resembling twin tantric mandalas appeared to spin hypnotically as we undressed during that never-to-be-repeated brief moment when two young people first view and thrill to each other's naked bodies. Spindly she wasn't.



I WOKE IN A PANIC THINKING I'D MISSED SOMETHING, ONLY TO FIND IT was 6:00 a.m. and I had plenty of time to prepare for the day's events. After showering and dressing, I was ready to face Aunt Alice, whose commanding voice was barking orders to Gristedes over the telephone.

In all my thirty years on Earth, I was never so surprised as when Aunt Alice announced she'd be renting her Sixty-Third Street apartment and setting up permanent residence in Washington, DC. I'd thought about it all day Thursday, wondering if I could change her mind. Not much chance of that, I decided. Her long-term decisions were always well thought out.

Too bad. Not only was my aunt's New York apartment a convenient base for visits to the Big Apple, but it was also luxurious in a kind of Roaring Twenties Art Deco fashion that made me feel I was destined to live a life as unconventional as hers. Her moving to DC didn't jibe, not with what I knew about my aunt.

Perhaps, the other forces at work in my aunt's life had motivated a change of domicile. My uncle, the playwright Phillip Randall, whose acclaim rested on works critical of the rich and well-to-do, had he not died unexpectedly, would have witnessed his wife's reinventing herself as a prominent socialite, a member of the plutocratic class he'd once satirized.

While he was alive, my aunt's reputation as Uncle Phil's muse had been assured. Nowadays, except for the occasional revival, his plays were almost forgotten. And although Aunt Alice still received royalties and residuals from the motion picture versions of his plays, Broadway had

moved on and so had my aunt. Her conversion to socialite had unintended consequences—more related to the difference between the showbiz and the *Social Register* crowds than to anything else. That the former was based on talent and the latter on the blueness of one's blood were circumstances she had difficulty balancing.

One challenge was the heartfelt conviction that she must hide the Jewish portion of her ethnicity. Not that she was a “Jew-hating” Jew. She wasn't. But she did take certain defensive measures that made me worry.

It wasn't an easy thing to deal with when her growing social prominence exposed her to interviews with society reporters who had researched every aspect of her background and her husband's career. She dreaded discovery, which, if it occurred, would blackball her at the Mayflower Club in East Hampton, following which, she believed the rest of her Anglo friends would dump her. It was, in fact, a very real fear, for even in 1967, ethnic origin was a gating factor to upper-crust acceptance. By changing the *s* in Masur to a *z* after immigrating to the United States in the 1880s, the family was instantly more Hungarian and less Jewish. This enabled every descendant, including Alice, to pass the Mazur surname off as descendants of Hungarian royalty.

I hated that this noble lady, my surrogate mother, was, as a matter of choice, exposing herself to the same sort of mental anguish suffered by European Jews who'd attempted to hide their racial identities from the Nazis during World War II.

At the same time, I considered her fears an overreaction. After all, she'd been a ravishing debutant in the Twenties. She'd married a famous person. Their friends were Hollywood actors and directors, highly visible politicians, high-class Broadway producers, and distinguished foreigners of various ilks. They'd lived on the Côte d'Azur in the thirties, hobnobbing with Cole Porter, Picasso, Salvador Dali, Hemingway, Aldous Huxley, and Scott Fitzgerald.

Although she now pooh-poohed New York nightlife, in the thirties and forties she'd been a figure of interest to society columnists like Alexander Woollcott, Walter Winchell, Louella Parsons, and Drew Pearson. Granted, she might never have gone to “Harlem in ermine and pearls” when it was fashionable for whites to go slumming there. Her crowd stayed downtown, where the white acts—plays, comedians,

singers, impersonators—performed. She belonged to a glamorous showbiz set that hung out at the Stork Club, Delmonico's, the Copacabana, the Hotbox, the Harlequin Club, and other Eastside or Village joints, largely unconcerned, one way or the other, with “colored people,” that is until I came along.

She was amazing on so many levels. During the war she worked for the OSS, even parachuting into occupied France once.

And yet, despite her exploits, I was sure she'd never eaten pizza. What does pizza have to do with life's accomplishments? Well, for one thing, it has to do with what Black people call *getting down*, something her side of the family knew very little about.

All my aunt's meals were formal affairs, even breakfast. And try as I might I failed to picture Hattie, the maid, serving pizza on Royal Limoges bone china. Or my aunt ordering a slice in a restaurant or a street stall, for that matter.

Certainly not in those subterranean wormhole concessions at the Times Square end of the Forty-Second Street shuttle, the ones whose odors—grilled sausages, peppers, onions, and too much stale cheese—assail your nostrils as you scramble to transfer from the Lexington Avenue line to the Broadway-Seventh Avenue line.

Come to think of it, she'd probably never taken the New York subway.

Every time I enjoyed a slice of pizza, it made me think about my aunt and her literary cronies. Now Hemingway... I could see him eating pizza in the subway... but Aunt Alice and Uncle Phil? Not a chance. And that's why Uncle Phil's plays were so successful in the 1930s. A complete disregard for the problems and the lives of working-class Americans permeated his plays. It was a time of escape and deferment of reality.

“We'll be neighbors, now that I've moved into my new house,” I said. “Well, sort of.”

But not really... Aunt Alice's house was in Georgetown, the Park Avenue of DC. My house on Macomb Street fronted a ravine that tailed off into Rock Creek Park. I'd vacillated before buying, finally renting with an option to buy at a favorable price. Was it a fixer-upper investment or a well-intentioned folly doomed to failure given the increasing responsibilities of my career? I didn't know.



Once I moved in, however, the negatives began piling up: Eight small rooms on the ground floor, four on each side facing each other suggested a building for doctors' offices more than a single-family dwelling.

Ivy creeping its way under casings and windowsills. Plastic siding peeling off. A deteriorating roof. A problematic boiler and a leaky roof. Rotting vegetation on all sides. God knows what else. Yet, strangely, those things didn't temper my enthusiasm. I was eager to prove that I could handle this kind of challenge, especially now that my aunt was moving to DC, and she would be impressed by my energetic strivings. That is if they bore fruit.

"We'll be a family again—living in the same city," I said. "I'm only fifteen minutes away from your house."

"Won't that be cozy," said Alice.

"You don't have to snap at me."

"I'm sorry, dearie. It's the way the new year is shaping up. They want me to be closer to things," Aunt Alice replied.

"Who's they?"

"Didn't I mention it? I've been working for the Democratic National Committee."

So that was it—politics. I knew she'd been friends with Eleanor Roosevelt, but working for the party? "I didn't realize you were that into politics. You've always been synonymous with New York showbiz, Auntie. Ever since the thirties. Uncle Phil's plays on Broadway. Opening nights. All your glamorous friends."

"Those times are as far away from today's world as Oz is from Kansas," said my aunt, borrowing a favorite phrase of mine. "Show business for me now consists of royalties and contracts, stuff my lawyer takes care of."

"Well, he sure did a great job of righting the ship."

"Under my supervision..."

"Of course," I said. "Now I understand why you bought the house in DC, even though you've only used it three months a year up to now—DC's hottest months: June, July, and August."

"If you rent out this apartment," I continued, "I won't have a place to stay in New York." I was small talking now. My aunt was a master planner. I'd never change her mind.

“That’s right, dearie,” she said. “You’ll stay in a hotel with the rest of your bunch.”

“I was hoping to be back in February,” I said. “Where will you stay when the apartment is rented?”

“When the time comes, who knows? At the Pierre mostly.”

“My bunch, as you call them, stays at the Hotel Sutton on East Fifty-Sixth Street. My boss likes it because it’s a second home for a lot of writers. Eddie Condon plays there. Okay, if you like that kind of older jazz, which my boss does.”

“Meaning the musicians are mostly white?”

“That’s not fair, Aunt Alice,” I said. “You probably wouldn’t like them either.”

“What do I know about jazz? White or Black?”

She hadn’t always sloughed it off that way. When I was twenty-one, she’d thoroughly enjoyed the time I escorted her to the Café Bohemia to hear Miles Davis, even confessing she’d been able to recognize some of the jazzed-up versions of Rodgers and Hart and Jerome Kern tunes the quintet played. Something Uncle Phil never could do.

When he came into my room to talk to me, while he was still alive, and I was listening to Charlie Parker’s version of “Embraceable You” or some other jazz interpretation of a standard, Uncle Phil would listen for a moment, and then turn around quickly and stalk out, muttering polite (he was always the gentleman) expletives about the sanctity of Cole Porter, a Yale classmate of his, even after I’d reminded him that “Embraceable You” was not Cole Porter, but a Gershwin tune. To Uncle Phil, jazz was noise, with no discernible melody at all. To me, it was the portal to a new world—a language that spoke directly to my essence.

It was after one of those times that Aunt Alice admitted to once hearing Billie Holiday sing at Café Society on Sheridan Square, the same square on which the Café Bohemia was subsequently located. I took this as a bid to support my love of jazz. At the same time, she commiserated with Uncle Phil’s annoyance whenever the strains of Clifford Brown’s trumpet or Sonny Rollins’s sax issued from my room. Aunt Alice hated pettiness, hated it when people became irritated over insignificant things. I made an effort to confine my listening to times when Uncle Phil was busy, although I did challenge him once to identify “I Surrender,

Dear” from Thelonious Monk’s *Brilliant Corners* album. Uncle Phil stormed out with a harrumph.

I had to credit my father. We never did get along, but Ray-Ray’s decision to let me attend Woolley put my life on an altogether new track. Under Aunt Alice’s tutelage, I thrived: boarding school supplied the stimulation and companionship I’d lacked in Oklahoma, even though as a boarder I dissed it. I loved Aunt Alice, often fanaticizing that she was my real mother.

After Uncle Phil’s death, Aunt Alice reorganized her life, most notably purchasing a house on Thirty-Fourth Street and Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown although she still resided in New York City until the fateful day she announced otherwise.

Alice began each day with breakfast at 7:00 a.m. Once she got going, her to-do list sessions could run interminably. This Friday morning, she came to the table with several sheets of paper, and, while Hattie served breakfast, she began to set things in order, “Now, dearie, you must tell me about your wedding plans. The date and the place. I’ve been so busy, I lost track of it.”

“Wedding plans? What wedding—?”

“Why, dear boy, the young lady that resembles Madeline Carroll. One week in this city and you’ve already forgotten her... I must say, she is lovely.”

*Lovely and deadly* I mumbled under my breath. “How did you hear about my wedding plans?”

“Why, her letter and picture, of course. Where is it? I have it somewhere.”

“Auntie, I have to be at the studio by nine. Give me the papers. I’ll go through them and call you if there’s a problem.”

“Oh no, dear boy. There are details we must go over, papers to be sent to my lawyer. I must answer— Her name’s Virginia, right?”

“Virginia Hubbard. Madeline Carroll. Who knows?” I asked. “Who is Madeline Carroll, by the way?”

“Hitch’s star in *The 39 Steps*,” she said, “We saw that movie together when you were fourteen. I’m sure of it.”

“Along with a thousand others, you can’t expect me to remember.”

“Alas, dearie, no, I can’t expect you to...” her voice tailed off, then

resumed, using an altogether new tone for what was really on her mind. "It will give me great pleasure to pay for your wedding."

"Hold off on preparations and ceremonies," I said. "We have some things to iron out."

"Oh," she said, dragging out a list and handing it to me. "Sounds complicated."

"It is," I said with as much finality as I could muster.

My aunt gave me one of her patented penetrating looks, before finally conceding the discussion was going nowhere. "Now, here are some important things I need you to do. I'm opening the Georgetown house by March fifteenth... because of your— Anyway, I'll be back on that date."

I examined the list, intoning several highlights, "Call maid to... Gardener to make sure the watering system works. Larimer's blah blah. Harold, mechanic, tune-up car. Always buy gas at Gulf station on Twenty-Third Street. Jeez, Auntie, I have your Gulf Oil card that only works at Gulf stations."

"All the details, phone numbers, names, and addresses are on this list." She handed me another page. "It has been in your garage while you've been here this week? No one but you drives it, right dear?"

"No worries, Auntie, 'Madeline Carroll' is taking care of my house. And she doesn't drive." I decided that throwing out any name was better than saying the car was not being looked after.

"She's living there now—before you're married?"

"Well, you want your car looked after, don't you? That's the only reason she's there."

"I'm old-fashioned, dear."

"It bothers you that we might, you know—" I said laughingly.

"Let's not be coarse, dear."

"Oh, before I forget," I said, lightheartedly, "I was shocked to see Negroes playing tennis at your club. When did 'restricted membership' fall out of favor?"

"Changing things was a battle, believe me."

"Oh, and lucky I guessed right and gave the desk the name Peter Randall."

"You liked that? I thought it clever. There's more than one way of

setting things straight with that name you've been burdened with. By the way, did you enjoy it?"

"Real fine," I said, "if every time I play tennis, I get a partner like that—"

"That's nice, dearie, but could you stop modifying every word with 'real'? It's so Oklahoma, a habit you've yet to let go of."

"Geez, that's real thoughtless of me." I winked at my aunt.

"Tsk-tsk. And stop winking at me; I'm not one of your conquests."

"Seriously," I said, "you remember how tennis became the one sport I was better at than Pop?"

"I certainly do. He'd get so mad when you won, smash his racket, sometimes two," said Alice. "In those days, he had money. What a fighter he was though."

"That's for sure. Big heart!"

"*Pourtant*, we did get along as children, your father and me. I always got him to do what was needed."

"And I need to be leaving, Auntie. If nothing goes wrong, it's an early flight back to DC, so I can relax and give my complete attention to your papers tomorrow. Saturday, all day."

Aunt Alice rummaged through her papers. "I have some more lists, dear. Just a few important items like your singing."

"Madeline plays the piano and I sing. Classical music is fun but I much prefer the Great American Songbook. She has no flair for that type of accompaniment. Well, at least, I'm not just singing in the shower."

"I could talk to Frank Sinatra, he's such a nice young man."

"You know Frank?"

"Of course, dearie, he appeared in the musical version of Uncle Phil's *The Filly from Philly*. We went to Hollywood to help with the screenplay. You were away at college, I believe. We dined with him several times."

I tried picturing the generational disconnect of my aunt and uncle dining with Sinatra and one of his wenches, Angie Dickinson or Lana Turner. Then I recalled those moments when Aunt Alice took over a room. She was no fuddy-duddy. Neither was Uncle Phil. They could command a room, especially my aunt. And Frank, according to grapevine gossip, was no heathen. He dug intellectual company, especially bookish

people, writers, and playwrights—loved listening to expatriate stories of the twenties.

“Auntie, you shouldn’t mention my name with his.”

“Don’t be so modest, dearie. You have a very fine voice.”

“A hobby.”

“I know, but...”

“But nothing. I have a great job, and I might get a promotion very soon.”

“And what about the Marines? I know you resigned, dear. But it all happened so quickly.”

I’d gone over the details with her many times, sometimes wondering if she wasn’t a bit senile the way she kept at me about it—concocting a fantasy, that I was a deserter à la Jean Valjean, pursued by some relentless Inspector Javert and she would have to hide me. Now there’s a movie I remembered seeing with my aunt when I was a child because it scared the piss out of me, *Les Misérables*—the 1935 version with Fredric March and Charles Laughton. The story of a son-of-a-bitch cop who pursues a man for personal reasons rendered me unable to sleep for three months. And now my aunt seemed to have cast me in the role of Jean Valjean.

“Nothing sinister about it,” I said.

“Yes, but one cannot simply resign from the army,” she said.

“The Marines, auntie.”

“Yes, the Marines.”

“I was in Marine ROTC at GW, and I quit. I’ve already explained the whole thing. When I quit, I owed them time which I served as an enlisted man in Paris, as you know.”

“You aren’t hiding anything, are you?”

“Like what?”

“Well, there’s one reason they kick you out or let you quit without much fuss.”

“You think I’m a homo?”

“It’s fine if you are.”

I laughed and leaned back, my chair teetering, almost tumbling over, “You’d pay for my wedding even if I married a man if that was even possible?”

“Dearie, I was in the Village last Saturday. There was a march. I never

dreamed so many masculine-looking men could be, uh, that way. You hang around the theater long enough like your uncle and me, you learn that marriage is often a front—even more so in Hollywood—married couples that, well, you know what I mean. Nothing against them; I just wanted to make sure.”

“Yes, Auntie,” I said, still laughing. “You crack me up. Give me your lists. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Goodbye, dear boy. Peter, our son. Beloved Peter Randall.”

“Goodbye, Auntie Alice,” I said, leaning down to kiss my aunt on the cheek at the same time I gently extracted the papers from her clenched fingers.

## FAIR AND BALANCED

**M**y cab arrived at Twenty-Third Street Audio at 8:35 a.m. I preferred mixing at Capital Labs in DC, but Herb Hecht was a perfectionist with an inexhaustible budget he didn't mind spending. In this case, changing facilities was warranted: Capital could only mix 16mm films and Herb's documentaries were always shot and edited in 35mm. So Jerry, my assistant editor, had packed up film and audio tracks—narration, effects, sync sound, and music—and loaded them and every other potentially useful item into the WBN station wagon for the drive from Washington, DC, to New York City, allowing Herb and me to take the Eastern Air Lines shuttle.

Everyone at WBN News, except for Herb, acknowledged that 35mm was overkill, both financially and artistically, at a time when the average American household watched television on a small screen, low resolution, standard definition, rabbit-eared, substandard audio quality, black-and-white TVs. No one would ever know if the film had been mixed in DC or NYC, much less shot and edited in 35mm. Once transferred to an even lower quality videotape, the difference between 16 and 35mm, if any, was slight. But as he was nearing retirement, the network allowed Herb to continue shooting 35mm in deference to his award-winning body of work that had earned him much acclaim and the network many dollars.

Mixing in New York, at the same studio once used by the Beatles,



gave Herb bragging rights with the news department managers at WBN headquarters in the Chrysler Building and the chance to invite Gannon Crisp, the president of the World Broadcasting Network to view and bless his latest masterpiece before it aired—a one-hour documentary entitled *American Skeptics: Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser*. He was certain that Crisp had never been to Twenty-Third Street Audio and would be impressed by the million-dollar audio board, decks, and racks, the luxurious seating, and the luminous lighting.

All part of Herb's struggle to keep a documentary unit alive and well in the nation's capital, a unit that had taken artistic themes (ancient Greece, van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare) and woven them into appealing, hour-long documentaries (an average of twelve minutes of the hour being devoted to commercials, of course), in a well-meaning but largely ineffective attempt to raise American cultural sensibilities. Even though his viewership was above average, and his sponsorship devoted, Herb was considered an elitist in certain quarters.

I realized the documentary genre Herb was celebrated for might disappear with his retirement. He'd have only an hour to promote me directly to Gannon Crisp, bypassing Crisp's underlings, none of whom went as far back as the two of them did to the earliest days of television. Face to face in an informal setting I was sure Herb would convince his old friend to let the younger generation carry on his work. Only one problem: I was committed to another show, and Herb knew I didn't want to commit to a unit that might be dissolved at any moment.

When Herb told me about Gannon Crisp's imminent arrival, I took exception. "Herb, don't you think we should screen it first ourselves, make sure there are no problems before we invite him?"

"Probably, but there's not enough time."

Fortunately for Herb, Crisp's secretary called at 10:30 a.m. to say he couldn't make it, putting Herb in a bad mood that quickly improved when the soundtrack and picture went out of sync toward the end of the last reel and Herb was forced to admit that I had been right.

"Got to hand it to you, young man. That would have been nasty, the president of the network watching it go out of sync," said Herb.

"Don't you know? It's the editor's fault," I joked.

For the moment, that ended Herb's plan to boost me to Gannon

Crisp. Now we had to screen the picture with the new audio track and skedaddle to LaGuardia ASAP.

To that end, Jerry, myself, and several audio engineers spent the next two hours fixing the sync problem while Herb paced nervously, ducking out midday for an ice cream cone. The problem, the head audio engineer discovered, had nothing to do with the mix elements. The master recording machine had a defective pulley tensioner.

After resetting the audio tracks, we rerecorded the mix, which, after so many run-throughs, went off without a hitch: all the various track levels and effects ins and outs had been written down and marked on the board to facilitate remixing. We screened the show one last time. Herb was ecstatic until he glanced at his watch. It was after 4:00 p.m. The prospect of a Friday night traffic crunch muted the celebration, and his mood turned sour.

One of the audio engineers rubbed it in. “You’re in for the Friday afternoon Midtown-to-LaGuardia meltdown. You won’t touch down in DC much before seven or eight o’clock.”

The head engineer handed me the mix units and I handed them to Jerry, who stuffed them in a large carryall.

“You can take off, Jer,” I said. “You were a big help this week. Thanks.”

“Drive carefully, Jerry,” said Herb, “and don’t get lost this time. We don’t want this stuff ending up in Ellicott City.”

The control booth intercom crackled on: “Don Wolff for Gus Mazur on line two.” The mixer passed me the heavy red receiver. I took a deep breath, nodded, and the engineer punched me through.

“Hey, Don,” I said.

“Boy oh boy, you kinda sound like the end of the world.”

“Been a crappy day.”

“Well, this’ll cheer you up: a certain Gus Mazur is about to become the youngest producer ever for the *Hartley-Brentley Report*.”

“Wolffie, shit, if you’re pulling my— Uh-oh, Herb’s giving me the high sign. Trying to make the six p.m. to National. I’ll call you this weekend.”

“Screw it. Enjoy your weekend. See you Tuesday. Be ready to roll. Meantime, try and stay sober.” Don Wolff’s sardonic sign-off chortle segued into Herb’s irritated shout from the door of the screening room.

“I take it your promotion came through,” said Herb.

“Yup.”

“Well, hurry up, the limo’s waiting.”

“You’ve got another call, Gus,” said the engineer.

I looked at Herb.

“A quick five or you’ll have to take a later plane. A lot is riding on this one, Gus, boy.”

As I held out my hand to take the receiver, I had a presentiment it could only be Ginny. My finger was shaking slightly as I punched in the line, unaware I was vocalizing sotto voce: ♪ “Dreamers with empty hands may sigh for exotic lands. It’s autumn in New York... Glittering crowds and shimmering... Autumn in New York.”

The connection went through. The voice, that of Eartha Kitt, twice removed... Ginny.

“Hell-oooh... Who’s this?” Breathy but lackadaisical, somehow provocative. Maybe a little tight.

“Ginny, how did you get this number?” I asked. “Where are you?”

“How many times have I told— I hate being called Ginny or any other pet name.”

“How about Lorna Loopie or Rhonda Regal?”

“I’ve got a name for you, asswipe. Walter Weirdo.”

“I like it!”

“You would.”

“It’s a name I could run for Congress with,” I said. “Why did you write my aunt, tell her we’re getting married? Why are you calling me at work?”

“I was worried about your house and your dog.”

“Don’t be,” I whispered. “Have you been drinking?”

“While you gallivant around the Big Apple, I’ve had a sip or two,” said Ginny, letting the words play out slowly.

Everyone was watching. It was impossible to conceal the unwelcome nature of the call. I didn’t want to start something.

“The Big Apple! Where the floozies dress at Bergdorf Goodman instead of Woodward and Lothrop.”

I thought about Lil for an instant, shopping at Bergdorf’s. Everything

about her—from dress to speech to bedroom manner—projected refinement and class.

“You’ve got to stop calling,” I repeated.

“Whoopee, big celebration tonight. You got promoted.”

“Who told you?”

“I have my ways.”

“Okay, goodbye.”

“Wait, I knew there was something—” In the background, I heard fussing, then the line went dead. I dropped the receiver into the cradle, grabbed my bag, and hightailed it out of the studio just in time to catch sight of Herb coming out of the men’s room. He headed toward the elevator at the far end of the long fluorescent-lit corridor that seemed to shimmer and pulse in time with my humming. 🎵 “Autumn in New York...”

As I descended to street level, I found myself mulling over our conversation. Something kept nagging me. Ginny’s “Whoopee” kept ringing in my mind. Maybe it was just the phone. Maybe some frequencies had been clipped giving it a kind of flat intonation that hinted at mockery. Whatever it was she was up to no good.

Herb opened the rear passenger door and bowed me in with pointed irony, “The Golden Boy departs—beauty before age.” I settled in behind the driver while Herb slid in beside me, gently punching my knee with his fist.

“Well, that’s that,” he said. “Chalk up another in the win column. Couldn’t have done it without you, young man.”

Herb liked to talk shop. So did I. Up to a point. Inevitably, we argued, usually about some irritant Herb couldn’t quite shake. Herb always began with a safe topic, gradually shifting to something more controversial, a topic he knew I would be bound to defend. Today, it was the Steenbeck versus the Moviola and Jules Kaitz, the once-upon-a-time celebrated French film editor, the champion of the Steenbeck.

“So, the Steenbeck is better! So what?” I found myself saying. “It’s not which machine you use to edit a film; it’s how you use it. I’m used to the Moviola.”

“Stay with me, my boy, and I might be able to get you a Steenbeck,” said Herb.

That's when I realized the Steenbeck–Jules Kaitz discussion we were having was a ploy to raise the subject of my promotion. And that's when I regretted not hailing an outlaw cab driven by some Russian émigré for a solo ride to the airport.

What Herb failed to mention was that WBN had refused to purchase a Steenbeck for Jules even though they had proved its money-saving efficiency by churning out one award-winning documentary after another on postwar Europe in record time, including their Venice Film Festival prize winner on denazification. Ironic, because it was that unfulfilled promise that eventually caused Jules Kaitz to hightail it back to France when the Steenbeck he'd been promised never materialized. Ironic, because during his five years at WBN, Jules trained me in every aspect of film editing. Doubly ironic, because his departure was the impetus behind my swift climb from apprentice to supervising editor.

"I don't get it," insisted Herb, "but I wish you the best, young man."

"Herb, you're the best boss I've ever had. It's been great working with you. I've learned from you and Jules. I'd continue to learn if I hadn't taken this new job, but I have."

Despite the limo driver knowing all the shortcuts, the Friday evening commuter grind was taking its toll. It was going to be close.

We rode in silence across Midtown weaving around jams, scuttling down alleys. Virginia's "Whoopee" kept playing in my head, along with her initial coquettish "Hell-oooh," so when Herb broke the silence again, I was relieved for a nanosecond.

"Look, old man," said Herb, "I just don't get why you're giving up top money as the best damn editor I've ever had. If you want a raise, tell me. Give me a number."

"We've been through this, Herb. Besides, Jules, not me, was the best editor you ever had," I said. "If I didn't know better, Herb, I might think you were trying to keep me in my place."

Herb hadn't seen that one coming, and even though he knew I was kidding, he was taken aback—the discomfort a liberal white person feels after the most innocuous accusation of racism.

"Yes, I know. But a *junior* producer!" said Herb. "Think about your career path. Where you go from here— A *news* show, for God's sake. And

you won't be protected. One false move—like the Goodstein incident—and you're outta here."

"I can freelance," I said, trying to make it sound like I wasn't bluffing, "if and when something happens. Plenty of work for an editor in DC. USIA and other government agencies. The new public television station, WETA."

"You'd be wasting your talent."

"Not a question of talent, Herb. It's—I don't know—a chance to prove something to myself."

"What, for instance?"

"What is a producer in television news anyway?" I asked. "He's not your Hollywood moneyman. In TV, producers are cameramen, lighting and soundmen, directors, and occasional on-camera replacements for the high-paid talent when none is available, but mainly they're writers. If you can't write, forget it. And I can write, Herb, I want to write. I want to learn the business from the bottom up, and this job came up."

"So, you want to write?" asked Herb.

"Yes."

"Okay, write the script for my final project. Is that good enough?" asked Herb.

"Herb, you know I'd love that, but I'm already committed to *Hartley-Brentley*," I said.

"A news show, a good one, but still hard news. Hard news grinds a person down. I know because I was there at the beginning of television; I covered the World War, the Rosenbergs, and Army-McCarthy. The day I left the News Division was the happiest day of my life."

"I get what you're saying, Herb."

"Do you?"

"Yeah, news is a dehumanizing business. I get it. But it's also a learning opportunity; I don't intend to do it forever."

"Look at the networks—CBS, NBC, and WBN—all their news shows contain subtle hints of liberal righteousness," said Herb. "Like they know what's best for the viewer. Our documentaries are more informative, less strident. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Old men do brag about their achievements."

"And I'll be an old man, if we don't get to the airport soon," I said to

no one in particular before turning to Herb. "People don't want the moral high ground or Culture 101 rammed down their gullets. They want to escape: TV game shows, pro football, sensational murders, savored in air-conditioned comfort."

Herb stared at me as though I'd just uttered treasonous thoughts.

"What they want is wrestlers killing each other, a congressman with a mistress stashed away," I said. "Hard news or not, producing is a faster track than film editing."

"You're right, alas."

"I don't want to be right; I want to be rich, like everybody else, and I have a hunch News may be the place to start."

"Americans do need to learn more about themselves," Herb said, "and we need to learn more about them. And when you take over this unit, your first film can be about any one of the subjects you're so impassioned about."

"You're not retiring for a year. That's a long time in TV land. As of now, I'm committed to *Hartley-Brentley*."

"You don't get it, Gus. Hard news perpetuates the madness; we want to captivate viewers. Instead of becoming angry at their TV screen, they're awed by it. Another thing. The news shows are not only biased, they're afraid of controversy. Our docs use historical and fictional figures to tackle difficult situations without seeming to judge. Take the Dreiser documentary. *Sister Carrie* is as close as you can get to questioning middle-class values. It doesn't directly condemn them; you can't equate the turn of the century with the 1960s, but it does point out the inherent vulnerabilities of American capitalism, something news shows never do. Viewers don't get riled up and the message gets delivered."

"Why, Herb, you must have been a Communist in the thirties. Did the House Un-American Committee drag you before Congress? Wow, are we in danger of getting arrested if conservatives read between the lines and decide we're a bunch of subversives for using Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser as straw men to foist our radical ideas on the American public?"

"Don't laugh. A lot of my friends were ruined by those assholes," said Herb.

"I thought we were supposed to be impartial observers."

“Not while fascists are planning to take over, by any means, legal or other.”

“You are a reformed radical, who, as time passed, became an award-winning, respected member of the community. Now you’re back to square one.”

“Joke, if you want, but keep your eye on Dick Nixon,” said Herb. “He’ll be president unless— Look, he’s Joe McCarthy reborn and repackaged. He and the so-called silent majority. Their time is coming. It happens about every twenty to thirty years—the conservatives find new confidence. Behind Nixon, they’ll pervert everything this country once stood for.”

“What does it stand for?” I asked. “That’s something people my age ask themselves and each other. Why this war against brown people, why no equal rights? Equal justice under the law, my ass.”

“Truth is, my boy, this country is and always will be about three-eighths authoritarian and five-eighths progressive. But the progressives never seem able to capitalize on their majority.”

“You can thank our forefathers for their useless Electoral College and the equally useless US Senate.”

“Let’s not argue the Constitution,” said Herb.

“Fine.”

“However, as a news producer, you’ll be swallowed up by the fight for ratings; every story you do will be fodder for the ratings. Do you think Gannon Crisp is a progressive? Hell, his vision starts and ends with the ratings for the six o’clock news.”

“And you’re the only one who’s immune from the ratings roller coaster,” I said.

“You got me there, laddie,” said Herb. “I will give you one thing, though. Rapid advancement. In News, you never know who’s going to evaporate all of a sudden and who’s going to take their place. I’ve known people to jump from the newsroom to anchorman in the space of a year. Film editor—there’s not the same elasticity.”

That was it for the moment. Another unforced silence had us lurching along through the outer reaches of Queens, between Woodside and Jackson Heights before either of us spoke again. Familiar landmarks on both sides told me we were nearing the airport. I was relaxed, wishing



I could walk the rest of the way. Suddenly, it hit me. I'd never actually *been* to Queens, only driven through it. Queens. Now, there's a topic for a documentary. For most Americans, it's as foreign as the other side of the moon. I thought of Antoinette in her Bronx enclave, equally as isolated from the so-called mainstream.

"Tricky Dick?" I said, resurrecting the topic. "You think he could beat Johnson? Or Bobby Kennedy?"

"Kennedy's not running, not yet he isn't. And Johnson would be a fool to risk it, as unpopular as he now is."

"So, it's Humphrey?"

"It's a long way to next November. Anything can happen."

Before pulling up to the departure gate, we endured ten minutes of uncomfortable silence.

I thought about Aunt Alice's off-the-wall *Was I queer?* inquiry. Even in boarding school where coming-of-sexual-age dalliances among young boys did occur, I had never indulged. As far as I knew, behind my back or to my face, no one considered me a homosexual. Or ever approached me, for that matter. Did her wacky probing have something to do with her clearance for the DNC job?

I wondered, too, about the moment my aunt had handed me her lists, her trembling hand. A condition I hadn't noticed before. She was always in control, yet as high-strung as she was, trembling might only be a glass of wine too much, a one-time tic. The thought of never again listening to another tale of old Broadway sent a shiver down my spine. Dementia.

As next of kin, I had her doctor's number. I made a mental note to check with him, which I did a few days later. No cause for alarm, he told me, after going back and forth on doctor-patient privilege. "Anyway. I'm seeing her next week," the doctor added reluctantly.

My attention shifted. A burning car on the side of the road. Angry faces on both sides. Impatient drivers honking. God, how I hated New York, even though I grew up here. So glad I'd let Mitch persuade me to move to DC.

"Is that it, sir? Debate over?" I asked. We smiled and shook hands. "See you Monday, I mean Tuesday."

"Yeah," said Herb, "Don't come in Monday. It's New Year's Day."

“I’ll drop by tomorrow to check on Jerry and double-check the lab order.”

“Oh,” said Herb, “I forgot your Christmas present. Here.” He handed me a cellophane-wrapped set of plastic coasters featuring an image and title for each one of Herb’s twenty (soon to be twenty-one) documentaries. I had to hold myself back. Herb was serious. I couldn’t very well laugh in his face—after all, in his own way, he meant well.

At last, our cab pulled into the Eastern Air Lines drop-off. From the platform, we weaved our separate ways through the overflow pedestrian traffic to the boarding gate.

Immersed in correspondence, Herb didn’t acknowledge me as I passed by on my way to an empty seat.

Herb’s mentioning Goodstein had startled me and although I betrayed no sign of involvement, I wondered why Herb, having never mentioned the incident before, had brought it up.

That Herb. I didn’t mind his psycho-lecturing, but, as an underling, I couldn’t fully reply. It’s okay for Herb to criticize my beard, but I daren’t mention the hairs growing out of his ears in a floral pattern. How repulsive they were! Perhaps an anonymous letter with a pair of tweezers to his wife, Fanny. I was tired of rewinding and splicing, days in the dark. I wanted more action. Coasters! Geez, Herb, just what I’ve always wanted for Christmas! How’d you guess?



ONE HOUR LATER, WASHINGTON AT NIGHT SHIMMERED IN THE moonlight as we circled the Lincoln Memorial. The temperature hovered just above freezing. I grabbed my bag and caught a cab for the fifteen-minute trip to Macomb Street and my house, the last one on the dead end.

What I found when the cab pulled up to the house on Macomb Street NW were an empty garage and a hastily scribbled letter.

---

Mickey,

I’ve taken the car, which I’ll return in a few days.

Virginia

PS. Don't worry, I know how to feed the dog.

---

A moment of dumbfounded surprise before the facts began to sink in and I recalled the preflight conversation—the exaggerated way Ginny had pronounced “Whoopee.”

And the dog? I'd left him with Mitch. And now—damn the phone company—I'd have to find a pay phone to call him.

I stood there holding the letter loosely by my side between thumb and forefinger, finally raising it, reading it again as I shuffled from room to room surveying the scattered array of inanimate objects. Nothing had changed, yet everything had. The house and its contents were right where I'd left them—with two exceptions—my aunt's car and the dog.

I cursed the phone company again, saving a few choice grumblings for myself for not arranging to have a phone installed while I was in New York.

I found a phone booth outside the Cleveland Park Library and called Mitch.

“You should have come here with us rather than going to your—”

“Half a mo, Mitch. Do you have the dog?”

“No, I gave him to Virginia yesterday. She said you wanted her to take him after she cleaned your house...”

“Cleaned my house?”

I had three months before Aunt Alice turned up. Time enough to get the car back. No panic. I'd get it back one way or another, sooner than later. Right now, I felt numbed by the timing of and the enmity of Ginny's actions. My blood pressure rose. It must have been blood pressure because I felt it fanning out from my solar plexus—an autonomic sensation, out of my control. Or was it? I sat down to gather myself—breathing deeply through the nose, blocking out all mental activity, concentrating only on my breathing.

At first, I thought of angina because Uncle Phil had suffered from it, and I remembered the symptoms. There were none. No shortness of breath, sweating, dizziness, or indigestion. I decided I was just plain angry. I'd let my anger express itself in ways that affected my metabolism.

Next time it might be scarier. I thought about the Gurdjieff book I'd just finished, vowing to remember myself, his recipe for self-control, making it a reflex response in emotional situations. The same thing Herb was at me about in his roundabout manner.

I tried putting myself in Ginny's place, only to admit I didn't know or understand her, which, I granted myself, was pretty much the same with everyone I knew. Who really knows the other?

Stripped down to my underwear, I cleared a space in the living room and unfurled a hooked rug. When I emerged from Savasana in an alpha state at the end of a thirty-minute yoga session, all negative emotion and sensation had vanished—my body and mind had cleared.

Being in thrall to her beauty was not healthy. Yet, even though I'd ceased to utter oaths in her name, I tasted her in the air and felt the feathery touch of her fingers on my neck. That was exactly what she banked on. I had to stop reacting to her every ploy.

I looked in the fridge, hoping to find something that might alleviate the bitter taste in my mouth. Juice, a yogurt, something—I didn't know exactly what. It was empty.

Still a bit spooked by Herb's unexpected mention of the Goodstein incident, for a moment I imagined the universe was closing in on me, payback for my role in his dismissal. But everything had worked out since that time almost four years ago. I was a producer.

I checked the money I kept in a cigar-box piggy bank, then my pot stash. Nothing awry, probably because I'd never told her where either was. The times I'd caught her rummaging through my stuff at my Twenty-Fifth Street pad, she'd laughed off.

"If we're getting married," she'd said, "I want to know if my hubby has a pornography collection or a secret lover."

"Married when hell freezes," I'd replied.

I'd learned to write things down in a crisis, even a simple list was helpful. I picked up paper and pencil and started to write but smoked a joint instead—a cowardly way of dealing with the situation.

Like Uncle Phil once told me, "Never think of yourself as a victim; if you do, you hand your power to your enemy. And the result of that, my boy, is self-pity." Recently I'd been handing my power to marijuana an awful lot.

I checked the upstairs. Nothing had changed in the last week. I took a long shower in the master bathroom, then dressed in jeans and a heavy woolen sweater and went downstairs.

It wasn't a home yet; I'd barely moved in. The rented furniture, the boxes, the bundles, the trunks and suitcases—junk mail piling up. I walked back to Connecticut Avenue and called a twenty-four-hour locksmith.

I could stay in the house all weekend, feeling sorry for myself, listening to Billie Holiday's torch songs. Stay home and struggle with self-doubt—that secret part of myself. I still didn't know where it came from. Although work helped push it away, it was forever reappearing at inopportune times, lurking, undermining. Must be the Irish in me.

Monday night would be especially gloomy. I pictured myself walking into the new job Tuesday morning, acting as if nothing had happened. I could bring it off if I had to, but wouldn't it be better to talk to someone? It was only Friday night; sitting in these graceless surroundings all weekend was a ghoulish prospect.

I walked through the house again, saving the bedroom for last. One or two of her dresses still hung on hooks and hangers. I looked at them with revulsion. It was almost as if they, and not the person who'd worn them, were responsible for the situation. I grabbed a dress, a favorite I'd been foolish enough to buy her, and considered tearing it to shreds. There was a time when I would have torn the dress to shreds. But tearing a dress apart doesn't impress the universe. I put it back on a hanger, forming a picture of her in it, watching the action on the screen in my mind unfold.

There had to be someone I could talk to. Not a barroom acquaintance—someone who could help me get Ginny out of my life for good. What's the point of having friends if you can't count on them? Maybe I was being unfair to my friends. Maybe they just wanted to stay out of it, thinking I'd be all revenge and recrimination.

With the right person, I could be objective; I could be fair. No justifications, no rationalizations. The more I thought about it, the more I realized there were no sides to take. No right, no wrong. Just emptiness, and starting all over again, which, in the long run, was a challenge that would make me a better person, one the universe could admire.

Why think of friends as a group? Narrow it down to one person. When the locksmith finished, one name came to me, and it wasn't a close friend—Skipper, Ginny's sister. She'd listen, and she probably didn't know what was happening.

I hitched a ride to Connecticut Avenue with the locksmith.

I'd watched Skipper observe Ginny at family gatherings: birthday celebrations, holidays, dinner parties. I didn't know her well, but she appeared to disapprove of Ginny's goings on. Being the first one to tell the story might matter. Ginny had a way of spinning things in her favor so that others would commiserate and take her side. Skipper was an outsider, unfamiliar with the tinkertoy mechanics that fueled my circle of friends. She'd be neutral.

I picked up the pay phone.

"Hello?"

"Skipper?"

"Oh, hi, Gus. I was just thinking about you."

*Oh, shit, she knows*, I thought. "About what?"

"About that tennis game you promised me."

"Anytime."

"By the way, preliminary Olympic skiing trials are next week."

"Where are they?"

"Waterville, New Hampshire," said Skipper.

"Uh-huh. You going?"

"Of, course. I'm pretty sure I can make the cut."

Pause.

"Are you busy?" I asked.

"What's up?"

"You don't know about Ginny?"

"What about her?" asked Skipper.

"She ran off. With my aunt's car and my dog. Left me a note: 'Don't worry, I know how to feed the dog,' it said. Hell, she's fed the dog maybe five times since I've known her. And that's no certainty."

"You didn't know that Delmas got out of jail yesterday?"

"No, I was thinking it was one of my friends she disappeared with. Shows how paranoid you can get, hell, I can get."

"I think you'd better come over."

“What’s your address?”

“1802 R Street. I share it with two others. They’re invisible.”

“1802. I used to live at Twentieth and R.”

“I’m out of Scotch.”

“I’ll pick up a bottle on the way.”

Before leaving, I went to the bed, starting to draw the covers over it, when I realized more than one person had slept in it.



I TOOK A TAXI TO SKIPPER’S HOUSE, STOPPING ON THE WAY TO PICK UP a bottle from a Black woman on Virginia Avenue who sold after-hours whiskey. My most savage emotions were under control; I looked forward to more than small talk, resolved to take off quick-like if that’s all Skipper had to offer. I’d not had much more than idle chitchat with Skipper previously, harmless particulars that family members, who only see each other several times a year, feel safe in disclosing to in-laws and such. She’d mentioned her downhill skiing ambitions for the 1968 Winter Olympics once or twice.

Perhaps she had some insights into Ginny’s state of mind. She’d come to dinner a few times, listening carefully as I waxed on about network television, its foibles and personalities.

Although Skipper didn’t stand out like her sister, one quality captured my attention the first time we met: Her face was beautiful at certain moments, like when an inner presence shone through, illuminating the whole of her face in a burst of transcendent pulchritude. The grace and confidence of an athlete contained in a look, a smile. Yeah, I know it sounds like I’m making her into a Botticelli Venus, but I swear it; at certain moments, she dazzled. The rest of the time you waited for one of those moments.

When the door opened, I was greeted by an expression reflecting Skipper’s misgivings as to my troubles. She nodded up and down for an instant, then, taking a deep breath, she let me in.

“How’d you know I drink Scotch?” I asked as we climbed the stairs.

“You know I’m a schoolteacher, right? To be a good one, you have to

put yourself in the child's place. I put myself in your place. Pegged you for Scotch."

"Am I interrupting anything?" I said, catching sight of a kind of loom-type apparatus near the bay window. "I see you're up to something there."

"Quilting. I'm trying to learn how. Have a look."

We walked over to a frame holding the quilt. "That's real nice. What's that design in the middle?"

"A classroom, silly."

"The colors are real nice."

"Hey, I'm learning."

"Yeah, well..." I smiled at her. "You got a ways to go, I'm thinking." She looked at me, seemingly a little miffed at first, only to start laughing. I joined in.

"At least, the colors are nice, maybe I could do abstract quilting. Maybe I'll just quit. The world doesn't need another half-assed quilter. An Olympic skier, well, that's another story." She snatched the bottle from me and walked into the kitchen. "I'll get your drink."

I watched her pivot from pantry to refrigerator to countertop. "I can't get over how different you and Ginny are."

"Half sisters, we are. The three of us are. You gotta include Ruthie."

"I've seen pictures of Ruth, but never met her," I said.

"You'll meet her someday. Wish I knew more about old movie stars. I could whip off a comparison."

"My aunt thinks Ginny looks like Madeline Carroll; that's going way back."

"Let's see. I like Paulette Goddard for Ruthie. I know her because she was married to Charlie Chaplin. I have a picture of Ruth somewhere." She headed to her bedroom. I heard drawers opening and shutting before she reappeared with a frame in her hand, holding it out to it to me. "Here," she said.

"You keep her picture in a drawer?"

She placed the picture carefully on a side table. "She always appears at propitious moments. Ginny's like Grace Kelly's evil twin sister, I'm like the sad-eyed lady of the lowlands in the Velazquez portrait of the Spanish lady holding a fan. Next time you're in London, check it out."



“We’ll check it out together... but I see you more as the Italian actress they use to play Indian or Spanish roles. Big, big eyes like you. I forget her name.”

“Sophia Loren?”

Both of us chuckled at that one. “Not her.”

“I’m not like any actress I’ve ever—”

“Nonsense, you even have the same body type. A lighter shade of hair, perhaps.”

“What does that mean, same body type?”

“Like they say in the movies: you’re a lot of woman.”

She did a little wriggle, a Mae West shiver, as if to say, *There, take that!*

“Don’t go to the movies that much. Guess I should go more often,” said Skipper.

“Is that a hint?”

“Why, yes. I think it is,” said Skipper, blushing.

“Cool, I’ll take you to the Circle Theatre next time they show *Les Enfants du Paradis*. We’ll hold hands and eat popcorn.” I sank into one of two matching sofas that faced each other.

“Kind of rare, these couches, aren’t they?”

“Mid-century specials.”

“Kind of sink right in.”

“Don’t worry, I’m used to extracting drunks from them. Here, try this on.” Skipper handed me a Scotch and water, stood back, and looked me over. “You think I’d look cool with a fan?” she asked, smiling as she mimed cooling her neck with an imaginary fan.

“Velazquez, London, huh? Real cool.”

She sat down across from me. “Okay, I’ll sit here, pay close attention while you accuse Virginia of everything from stealing the dog to flushing her Tampax down the toilet,” said Skipper.

“It’s no joke. The dog and my aunt’s sixty-two Mark II Jaguar.”

“I’d’ve called the police already.”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that. I’ll get it back.”

“In one piece?” asked Skipper. “You’re not a softy, are you? I hate softies.”

I felt a frisson. “Never thought that much about it...”

“A man needs to be hard, fair perhaps, but strong. Never equivocate

with assholes, my sister being a big one,” she added. “Maybe you should go to the police... now.”

I wasn’t about to. I checked my watch. “Eleven thirty. It’s been a long day. Think I should go now?”

“It’s too late to deal with the police now. You have to rest up for them.”

“Maybe I’m putting too much faith in her,” I said, “but I have to believe Delmas forced her to take the car.”

“Oh God, you gullible child. You have to go with actions, not intentions. But it’s your decision.”

“I’ll give her a couple of days.”

“In that case, you might as well spill your guts out. It’s good for the soul. And I’m supposed to listen, remember?”

“In exchange, I take you to a flick. Not any old flick.”

“*Claro...* Another drink?”

“Pleezz.” I nodded.

Skipper rose, gathered up the glasses, and headed to the kitchen. Looking back, she spoke softly, “Sometimes I’m not sure I’m in the right family.”

“You’re lucky to have sisters,” I said, “I have no one.”

“You can have siblings and still be lonely, you know,” said Skipper.

“Lonely! Tell me about it. I was this teenage fuckup from Oklahoma who read books, took singing lessons, listened to bebop, and tried to please my parents. Thanks to boarding school, I was cloistered away, with no girlfriend until I was a freshman at GW. My only companions... the many movie theaters in New York City.”

“I never got along with my sister. She thinks I’m a prude. I’m not, but I am half Mexican, born in Austin, Texas, like my father. You’ve been around my parents enough—he’s the last of my mother’s three husbands. He and I, we’re Texicans.”

I had heard a portion of her family’s odyssey, how they survived her mother’s widowhood in her marriage to Ginny’s father, Oscar Hubbard. His torture and execution in Japan during the war—followed by her divorce from Brian O’Malley, Ruth’s alcoholic father. Skipper’s father, Santiago Sanchez, was very much alive and kicking.

Skipper fetched a record from a cabinet, turning the front cover

toward me for my approval, which I tendered with a thumbs-up. She slipped the record onto a turntable and the strains of Sarah Vaughan's rendition of Duke Ellington's "Solitude" washed over us.

"'Solitude,'" I said. "I didn't know you liked the Divine One."

"There's a lot about me you don't know."

I sit in my chair  
 Filled with despair  
 Nobody could be so sad  
 With gloom everywhere  
 I sit and I stare  
 I know that I'll soon go mad...  
 In my solitude  
 I'm praying  
 Dear Lord above  
 Send back my love...

I grew misty for a moment, a victim of alcohol and fatigue, after a long day. A case of the vapors. Whatever it was, I wiped it away with my sleeve. Skipper uncoiled herself from the chair opposite mine, edging her way over to me. Our eyes remained locked for several minutes, time for the song to finish playing. She placed her hand around my neck and drew my face to hers, kissed me on the forehead, then sank back across the floor to the chair she'd been sitting in, rewarding me with one of her transcendent smiles. She brushed some invisible crumbs off her lap and rearranged herself.

I'd caught a whiff of her when she crossed the room. Perfume mingled with the pheromones some women release when they're sexually aroused. Heavier than air, they'd crept across the room like a World War I gas attack. Not all women, just the ones like Skipper, whose hormones are fierce enough to overpower the incense stick she'd lit. I doubted she was even aware of it. It was strong, so strong my eyes began to water. I sniffled. She plucked a Kleenex from a box and handed it to me.

It meant we were going to fuck, one way or another. The worse thing I might do? Blurt out something like, "What's that smell?" That would embarrass her, and it would be over before it started.

In a way, it was a kind of strange revenge for Ginny's mischief. Doubly so—they're being sisters and all. I didn't need revenge; I needed Skipper, under, over, and on top of me. I needed to forget. A body underneath me would do just that! Feeling it was inevitable relaxed me.

"Solitude" was followed by "Midnight Sun." I let loose a Category 3 sigh with such force it almost lifted me out of my chair. I was just about to resume my tale when a second wave now came wafting across the room, stronger than the previous one. I felt my knob hardening; I struggled to control it, even tried ignoring it. Skipper was heedless, unaware of the effect she was having, a siren calling to the lost mariner, reeling me in slowly. While ruminating on what was to come, I lost track of what Skipper was saying.

"Hey, mister. Remember me," she cried out abruptly.

"What's up?"

"You spaced out. Was I boring you?"

"Hell no, it's just getting interesting."

"Do you even know my name?"

"Humm... Now that you mention it, all I know is Skipper, Ginny's younger sister, the schoolteacher, and would-be Olympic ski champion."

"It's Miriam, Miriam Sanchez, Skipper for short." She bowed mockingly to emphasize I'd been remiss by neglecting to learn her full name. "I've always been athletic—skiing, hockey, soccer, basketball. I don't remember when people started using that name, or how the hell such a clichéd American name stuck. Anyway, if the Olympics had women's hockey, I'd be there—certain."

"Damn..."

Skipper emptied her wineglass in one definitive swig. "I'm my father's daughter—proud, moral in the aristocratic Spanish tradition—with a twist. I choose my lovers from both sexes, a fact no one in the family knows, but I feel comfortable trusting you with. I'm not the beautiful one, but I make up for it in other ways."

I couldn't flat-out say it was her voluptuous body, not that her face wasn't striking in its way, especially during those fleeting moments when her inner grace shone through, so I merely added, "Like knitting a real mean quilt."

"Ha ha, my least proficient, uh, talent. My real ability is seeing things

in the Anglo world that need fixing. Being part Mexican, it takes guts to speak up. I'm not afraid to call attention to bullshit. And that includes the members of my family."

"Well, just so you know," I said, "my father is one-half Jewish, one-half an Irishman: my mother, one-half Italian, one-half Cherokee with some Moroccan thrown in somewhere. They met at an Irish fest in Oklahoma, where I was born. Danced the jig, and that was that... my heritage."

"Well, I'm dark enough to make people wonder. Decent people. The rest, the deplorable ones," said Skipper, "may hide their true feelings, but they have ways of finding each other."

"To be honest," she said, "I've always thought of you as a white man who'd been covered with shoe polish. I believe Kiwi calls that color tan. I mean you're not Black, you're not white, not an Indian Indian. Your hair is straight, with specs of gray. And yet, your features are Caucasian."

"That's me describing myself, in the privacy of my imagination." My arms opened as if I was about to embrace the whole world. "To many, I'm just another Black man, what some people might call a hairball."

"I've never seen anyone like you. And it doesn't hurt that you have a confident chin, and walk like Yul Brenner, who, by the way, had a similar indeterminate ethnicity."

"You know who Yul Brenner is, huh?"

"Not really, but I did see one movie. I forget which. Made me think he might be queer," said Skipper. "Are you sure you're not a wee bit? Maybe in boarding school. C'mon, I leveled with you."

"What makes you think so?"

"I dunno. That Yul Brenner glide perhaps."

"Shoe polish!"

"Perhaps, fucking me will help you forget Virginia—I know how intoxicating she can be. It might help me figure out if you're just a tad homo," she teased.

She strutted toward the kitchen, turning back to shake her head and laugh as if her blurting out was only in jest, wild hyperbole. "It wouldn't be the first time I inherited one of Virginia's rejects. Sometimes it pays to have an older sister that men go crazy over."

*A guy who goes crazy over a woman.* I took her words at face value,

mulling them over and realizing Skipper was right; I'd been a chump. Continuing to see Ginny was a mistake and now this new woman was offering me her bed? Did I want to get involved? Involved, no. Involved with an asterisk, possibly—whatever that might mean. I found myself asking why I'd called Skipper of all people. And I had to confess that it wasn't by accident or by kismet, but by design; I wanted her. That's for sure. That's for danged sure.

"By the way," confessed Skipper from the pantry, "if we weren't going to fuck tonight, I'd have pried you out of that chair long ago and pushed you out the door. I'm doing it for four reasons. One, you're sexy. Two, you need to feel a body under you tonight. Under, on top, all over you. And don't feel threatened about my same-sex confession. I've had a few women and they were cool, only I always came away missing something that I finally realized was a dick."

I could hardly contain what was happening in my pants. Was it the effect of her revelation about her lesbian relationships? I did my best to assume a neutral expression so's not to reveal the least change of attitude, muttering only a hurried, "Yeah, yeah. Right! Okay," that I hoped did not sound too desperate. "What happened to three and four?"

"Yeah, I wanted to find out if that shoe polish rubs off," she said. "No more drinks; I want you ready."

She pulled her blouse over her head. She wore no undergarment.

"Four is all about competition, fucking my sister's ex. A guilty pleasure."

She held out her hands, pulled me out of my chair, and we adjourned to the bedroom in a strip-tease race to shed our clothing and be the first under the covers. Twenty-five minutes later, we were nibbling at each other and kissing.

I began to nod, my eyelids suddenly heavy. "Hey, are you dozing off?"

"A very long day," I said, sleepily, "still can't process it all."

"Want coffee?" she asked.

I stopped nibbling her back. "I don't drink coffee."

"I'll get us something to drink," she said, jumping off the bed. "Okay?"

"Juice."

"Orange or grape?"

“Grape.”

She came back, handed me a glass, and crawled over me, making sure to brush my chest with her breastworks, before sliding in next to me.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’m fine, aroused, but fine,” she said.

“More?”

“Uh-uh.” I place my glass on the night table. She took my hand and coaxed it down between her thighs. “Still drowsy?”

“I’m awake... somehow,” I said.

She hit me with a small pillow. “Lower. My pussy. Aah,” she moaned. “Now.”

After another round of intercourse, she was still wide awake, entreating me to finish my story. “I’ve always wanted to try my hand at therapy. My sister Ruth is one. Says it starts with listening.”

“Whew, where was I?” I asked.

“Something about a party.”

“Right, leading up to the party. I’d just returned from East Hampton with Mitch.”

I spent ten minutes describing my meeting with Ginny at Marsha Warren’s, our musical affinities, her behavior, and her breakdown. I followed that with various sidebars related to our getting back together after my time in the Marine Corps, Ginny’s impromptu salons, and finally the party at Mitch’s. I didn’t go out of my way to embellish my role, but somehow it ended up that way. When I got the part about the fight with Dimitri, Antoinette’s boyfriend, I intended to walk back some of my bravado. But that seemed to spoil Skipper’s listening pleasure. She interrupted.

“So you fought over Virginia?” she asked.

“There was another girl there I knew before Virginia. Her boyfriend didn’t like our kissing. Neither did Ginny.”

“You’re good with your fists, though. That ethnic mix comes in handy when it’s time to react, I bet?”

“Nothing to do with ethnicity. My father was a professional; he taught me a thing or two.”

“Who won?”

“He hit me; I hit him. That was the end of it!”

“No man’s ever fought over me; I do my own. Someday maybe you will. I’d love it.”

“I don’t go looking for fights.”

I was sniffing, my nose stuffed, my eyes watering. I paused.

“Now you have me horny again. Men fighting over women turns me on.” She handed me a Kleenex. “Here. Blow your nose.”



THAT NEXT MORNING AFTER A FRESH ROUND OF LOVEMAKING, I grabbed a cab to the World Broadcasting Network to move my gear into my new workspace and make sure Jerry had deposited Herb’s mix items and they were ready for the lab.

The only item not going to my new workspace was a photograph I’d taken of Ginny on a ski trip to British Columbia. I’d taped it to the shelf of my editing table. My first impulse was to tear it up—hesitating after remembering the conversation with Herb about controlling impulses. Besides, I liked the shot; I put it in a tin box with other memorabilia: *In there she’ll be as harmless as a malevolent genie trapped in a bottle, incapable of mischief.*

That morning, before leaving to round up some of her third graders for a day camp excursion to the DC zoo, Skipper told me she’d be there until two thirty if I wanted to meet her.

After several futile phone calls trying to trace my aunt’s car, I went to the zoo. The variety of Skipper’s activities, the things she described as community organizing, surprised me. Twelve third graders, boys of various ethnicities, were cruising around the zoo from cage to cage with Skipper in the lead. That’s one way to spend a weekend, I reckoned, unable to picture myself trading tennis, bar hopping, and partying for community outreach.

“This is Gus. He works for television news,” Skipper had to shout to compete with a roaring lion, “Who here watches the news?”

A sturdy dark-skinned boy raised his arm.

“What is the hottest story in the news these days, Ronnie?” asked Skipper.

“The war is,” said Ronnie.



“Who’s fighting who?”

Variations of “We fighting... America fighting Vietnam,” came a response from the group.

“And where’s Vietnam?” I asked.

“Russia, Europe, Asia,” replied several boys.

I pointed to a boy who had not yet spoken, “What’s your name?”

“Wendell.”

“Okay, Wendell,” I continued, “what do you know about the war in Vietnam?”

“Only that my momma says Black folks don’t need no Vietnam.”

“Very good, Wendell,” said Skipper.



TOWARDS FIVE PM THAT SAME DAY, VIRGINIA HUBBARD WAS GETTING ready for her pole dancing gig along the Fourteenth Street corridor, an activity her new man, Delmas, explained was the lesser of two evils. He didn’t use those terms exactly. Only that they needed money and Delmas’s income earning opportunity—a sure thing, he insisted—was scheduled one month in the future in Baltimore. To cover the interim, he told Virginia she could either turn tricks or pole dance. It was the only way, he said, for them to stay together. Otherwise, she’d have to go back to her parents because he couldn’t afford to keep her. *And why did you stop playing piano? You might have made something of yourself*, he’d added.

Delmas had a way—somewhere between threatening and pleading—of persuading her not only to buy into his schemes but also to feel his sense of urgency. If he felt any guilt, it was no more unpleasant than gargling salt. It wasn’t until she had wrapped herself around the pole, naked except for a pair of golden lace panties with ruffles and a matching bodice and bra, which she took off after three swings around the pole, exposing her breasts to all assembled, that Virginia Hubbard began to wonder what she was doing there.

She tried putting herself above the open-mouthed lechery etched on the faces of her admirers: that she was royalty, and they were serfs. But that didn’t work. She was as much a symbiotic part of the spectacle as they were. For a fleeting moment she thought, *If every human being walked*

*around fully naked, nudity might not be such a big deal.* That thought passed in review along with a thousand others and she was left with the leers of men who were not men, but animals.

Nocturnal Fourteenth Street was no Great White Way, but it had its sleaze, typified by the Club Kermesse, about which word spread quickly that a great beauty was pole dancing amid squalor. That business quadrupled after her first night required no systems analysis or quantitative modeling. Compared to the blandness of her colleagues on the other poles, her beauty shone like the brightest star in the heavens. Men flocked to watch the beautiful Virginia wrap herself around the pole.

Meanwhile, Delmas and his wingman, Bad Bruce (no known last name) visited several small drug stores around DC in Aunt Alice's Jaguar. The prescriptions they tendered appeared authentic, carefully forged on doctor's ill-gotten prescription pads. While one of them was in consultation with a doctor, the other caused a commotion in the waiting room, allowing his confederate time enough to tear off a bunch of slips from the pad on the doctor's desk while the doctor himself went to the waiting room to quell the commotion. Mind you, they never took the whole pad. That would be noticed immediately.

The rest was easy. Delmas was a passable forger; a sample of the doctor's handwriting was also taken to be studied and copied. When visiting a drug store to fill one of their prescriptions, Delmas wore a special good-luck suit that made him look, if not excessively tailored, exceedingly respectable. They prescribed enough for themselves and a tad more for third-party sales. No sense in overdoing it. Spreading the risk over many suppliers was Delmas's motto. It was only after visiting five or six druggists that their retail inventory was deemed sufficient. A little later, high on fentanyl or Demerol, they listened to the Rolling Stones.

Bad Bruce hung with Delmas much of the time but was never around when Virginia was present. She had a visceral distaste for him, and they never interacted except for a grunt or two in passing. When she returned from her gig, Bad Bruce was long gone, and Virginia was deep in a frown.

She handed Delmas the money from her tips, informing him that the owner offered her a six-month contract at eight thousand dollars.

"Not bad," he said, counting the money she'd handed him, "just for

showing your tits.” No signs of affection were exchanged that night. No kissing or screwing. Virginia went straight to bed and fell asleep with a dream of playing Haydn and Mozart for a singer intoning the words in a garbled German, a singer whose face she couldn’t quite make out. *I can’t see your face. Turn, turn, you bastard. I want to see your face.*

Delmas and Virginia climbed out of bed the next morning, he to the john, she to the kitchen to brew coffee. Despite the pretense of criminality that hung over their every endeavor, they led a joyless bourgeois existence, entirely based on access to drugs.



THE LIGHT OF DAY WAS RECEDING AS SKIPPER AND I HEADED TOWARD the Macomb Street house. Skipper turned on the headlights, taking time to expand on her day-camp vision, “It’s only part of my whole class, no girls yet. Some parents object—Blacks and whites—for all sorts of dipshit reasons, mostly because of religious and racial narrow-mindedness. People who call themselves grown-ups do the strangest things. Racial politics don’t bother me. I move forward. I’d like to make it a city-wide volunteer program, and I can do it. Maybe you could do a piece on it for WBN.”

“It’s a local story. We’re WBN, the worldwide network; they’re WBBN, the wholly owned affiliate. We don’t do local stories as a rule.”

“As a rule? So, you could talk to them.”

“We use the same buildings. They have their facilities; we have ours. I have no influence, hardly any contact with them. Period.”

“I’m sure they’d be interested if you supported it.”

It wasn’t going to happen, but I had to admire her persistence, building me up as some sort of difference maker, when, in fact, I was a relative nobody. I pictured myself urging the executive producer to approve a story before I’d even started the job. Then again, I liked doing things for people. In business, it can be a fault.

“Period,” I repeated.

“Okay, okay, no TV exposure for a worthy cause.” She was grinning now. “But TV producer—I’d chew that job up and spit it out.”

I changed the subject. “So, what happened before I came? What did

I miss?”

“We started with breakfast at a friend’s house, a teacher in my school,” said Skipper. “Then we had a game in the park, basketball, Wiffle ball, tag, hide-and-go-seek, et cetera. After that, an excursion, like the zoo trip today, followed by lunch at, as you saw today, McDonald’s on Eighteenth Street. I’m trying to persuade a local restaurant to furnish a group lunch, something more nourishing. Then we finish with cognitive exercises—math and word games.”

Before entering Rock Creek Park, she turned the car away from the road for a moment, parked on the shoulder, and looked over at me. “And you can’t interrogate them like an investigating reporter,” she continued.

“Was I too intense?”

“You loosened up.”

“Tuesday, I’m going to film a Stokely Carmichael speech about his school lunch program. It’s my first assignment,” I said. “I already know what they want me to feature when it’s edited. The tiniest bit about his school lunch program, but all eyes on the three seconds when he raises his fist and shouts ‘Black power.’”

“How easy it is,” I continued, “to get caught up in the power dynamics and miss the human element—like those kids of yours. At one point, I thought about teaching on the way to a writing career. I’ve studied theories of educational development but have rarely come face-to-face with actual students.”

Skipper moved the car back on the roadbed. “Marion Barry helped me find a nice big apartment closer to school, off Ontario Road,” she said. “How would you like to be a part of it?”

“You mean move in with you?” I asked.

“We wouldn’t have to be a couple, only roommates.”

On hearing Skipper’s rather coy proposal, the word *ominous* came to mind. My breath quickened at the thought of living together after only one night, however great that night had been. Stalked by one sister, only to hear another sister mention the words *roommates* and *couples* in any context, let alone one fraught with complications, convinced me she meant the exact opposite. “Wow,” I said, “I’m not too good at separating the two. I’d be too tempted. Right now, I need space to figure things out.”

“You’re not keeping that big house, now that you’re alone?” asked Skipper.

“Ginny was never part of the plan,” I said. “Besides it’s an investment; I’ll fix it up.”

“Shoe polish!”

“No shit.”

“I watched you with the kids. You got into it,” she said. “You should floor it. Go for broke, especially now. You’re a producer. Take the initiative. Persuade WBN to run Stokely’s school lunch material. Comes a time if you just keep eating establishment shit, you can’t stand yourself.”

I couldn’t persuade WBN to do shit. I was low man, a rookie. I had to get her off my case, but she kept on coming back to my work.

“I make up my mind quickly because I despise the whole courtship process. I know couples who are hot for each other, but are too skittish to move on their feelings,” said Skipper. “I’m liberated; I was always liberated. Even as a child, I knew what my vagina was for. No one told me; I just knew. I don’t like dragging things out, my promiscuous friend.”

“Promiscuous? Where’d you get that?”

“I may not be part of your tinkertoy (I’d explained it to her), but I’ve heard about you and Mitch Warren, your partner in crime.”

“Man... That was years ago. Mitch has settled down. And I’m—” I struggled to come up with a suitable label for myself.

“Don’t struggle. Take the Fifth.”

“Oh, and just so you know: you’ll *be* part of the tinkertoy now.”

We parked on Macomb Street and proceeded up the walkway to the house.

As we reached the stairs, it crossed my mind that walking beside me was another upper-middle-class dilettante trying to set the world aflame, and someday, maybe not for a while, she’d renounce her altruistic impulses.

“In college, I ridiculed the establishment.” I said, “Oh, I was pure. That’s changing, and as much as I would have liked to remain the cynical outsider, I’ve had to, uh, expand.”

“Expand? That’s quite a mouthful for a charter member of the establishment,” she said, just then catching sight of Ginny’s scrawl on the

front door—the words *You bastard*, scribbled in large red-lipstick letters. “Maybe you shouldn’t have changed the lock.”

“Naw, that’s exactly what you do in this situation. She can take the few things she left here, but I want to be here,” I said.

“Are you sure if she came back, you wouldn’t take her in? Hell, Delmas is likely to be back in prison at any moment. I’ll bet he’s out stealing another car right now.” Skipper walked over to the edge of the porch and looked toward the garage. “Isn’t that your aunt’s car?”

“Her car? What?” I walked over to Skipper and peered into the darkness. “Yes, it is.”

“Well, that was an anticlimax. Whoopee,” said Skipper.

“Please, don’t use that word,” I pleaded.

We descended the porch steps and walked down the driveway together in the dark. “The car, yesss.”

*Woof, woof.* I unlocked the door and the dog bounded out, jumping and running around us.

“And my dog, Peter. Good boy.”

“If you give up this bad-luck house, you can keep Peter at my place; I love dogs. By the way, who the hell names a dog Peter?” asked Skipper.

“My aunt wanted to change my name to Peter. Still does.”

“What?”

“I named him Peter,” I said, “so the next time I see her she’ll realize I can’t be called by the same name as my dog, and she’ll drop that crazy notion.”

“I guess I get it...”

“How long have you been locked in the car, boy?” I asked.

“Any longer,” said Skipper, in her best imitation dog voice. “I’d’ve peed all over the pedals and shit on the driver’s seat.”

“Look, last night was great,” I said, “but I think I’d better be by myself for a while. We can still do shit together, fun things.” I had to admit it, I was thinking about Lil when I spoke, wondering if I’d ever see her again. I was sure she’d be more than willing to move things along.

“It’s up to you,” said Skipper. I could see the disappointment in her face, but something told me not to get too involved too quickly. After a moment, she asked, “You still up for the Cuban place on Columbia Road? Horace Silver’s at the Bohemian Caverns tonight.”

“If you’re up for *Ace in the Hole* tomorrow.”

“A movie?”

“At the Circle Theatre. A real good film about a reporter whose ambition takes him to the top, only to watch him fall apart; stars Kirk Douglas.”

“Take me to the cinema often,” said Skipper mockingly. “I want to live life vicariously, through your eyes, dawling.”

“Ha ha.” I laughed, touched by her affected Bette Davis mannerisms.

“You don’t think I’m serious?”

“Serious? I am serious about these.” I walked behind her and cupped her breasts with my hands. She turned, stretching her neck around to kiss me. “Another thing, Skipper. When I start my new job, I won’t have as much time, but we can still do shit together, starting with this New Year.”

I lifted her and lowered her onto my shoes and we walked like stiff-legged puppets around the car to the front. “Oh, shit, can’t be, no no.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Look. The fender, and the headlight. Some anticlimax!”

“Phew, that is bad,” said Skipper, surveying the damage. “Looks like it hit a lamppost. Maybe another car. Can’t really tell in this light. Can you get it fixed?”

“The fender, the bumper, the headlight, the grille? Maybe more, the radiator is bashed in. By March fifteenth when my aunt arrives? That’s almost three months.”

“Should be okay, God willing,” said Skipper.

“But I can’t use any of my aunt’s people; they’d tell her. Plus, parts probably have to be ordered from Britain and Jaguar is none too rapid. I know because I had to have the clutch repaired last year; it took all summer.”



ON SUNDAY, THE LAST DAY OF 1967, WE WALKED TO DUMBARTON Oaks. The streets had been cleared, but there was still snow in leafy places, which made the vast lawns of the Oaks a winter wonderland. I loved the park, its collection of deciduous trees and gardens that sloped

all the way down to Rock Creek. I was thankful for the relative dearth of visitors, especially now when the snow-covered landscapes were at their most pristine.

Skipper again probed me for residual feelings of jealousy or anger. It was as if I had walked through a decontamination shower. My bitter feelings for Ginny had vanished. I was free. Oh sure, there'd be masturbation relapses, not afraid to admit it, but time heals all—blah, blah, blah; cliché, cliché, cliché. True, I'd had second thoughts about the aftermath of our split. Nevertheless, at that moment, neither in my emotions nor in my thoughts could I detect a trace of Virginia Hubbard.

"Look at those kids," said Skipper, as we came to the hilly part of the park, "we should have brought my sled."

"Next time, if there's still snow on the ground."

We returned to her apartment primed for sex and in time for what became known as the Ice Bowl, the pro football championship game between Green Bay and Dallas.

That evening, we each had parties we "simply had to go to" that neither of us ended up attending, although we did drop in at Mitch Warren's New Year's Eve party on Adams Mill Road. From the look on the faces and other mannerisms, body language, and such, a fair proportion of those gathered—erstwhile and current friends of mine—appeared to hint subliminally that I had traded down as far as Skipper was concerned. I didn't realize Virginia had so completely charmed this crowd. Not Mitch though, loyal and true friend that he was, he took to Skipper immediately. But the general chill had us bowing out of the chat about the football game and leaving after twenty-five minutes.

As for so-called trading down, isn't that when you give up a superior asset for an inferior one, but then balance out the exchange by receiving additional assets? If I applied this definition to Skipper and Ginny, I'd be weighing Ginny's beauty against Skipper's unfettered lovemaking and her intangibles—her boundless energy and her directness. Was I being too materialistic? Don't men and women make these kinds of evaluations? Isn't examining things from various points of view healthy? A person's intangibles—are they not a reflection of a formless all-pervasive essence—the soul, if there is such a thing?



## PART II: 1968

“There isn’t interest in the Copts or the Kurds, or the massacre in Burundi... so you don’t cover them. You cover what you think is interesting to the viewers. I can’t imagine anyone getting upset about the Copts.”

— REUVEN FRANK, PRESIDENT, NBC NEWS



## JANUARY

**O**n Monday, the first day of January 1968, Skipper spent three hours scouring the voluminous Sunday *New York Times* while I scanned the *Washington Post* classifieds for rentals in Adams-Morgan. If I could find a cheap apartment, I'd move out of the Macomb Street house, use my option to buy the property, get a second mortgage, and start renovating—not necessarily in that order.

After lunch, Skipper kept the TV on the various college bowl games. Too much TV affected me curiously: the buildup, the event, always followed by a letdown. As much as I looked forward to watching a movie or a game, if it lasted more than two hours, I felt completely drained, deadened, and disheartened. Such was the effect of television that it left me feeling symptoms clinicians associate with depression. I retreated to the bedroom to read up on Stokely Carmichael.

Around 2:00 p.m., I started calling the WAPO (*Washington Post*) classified notices. After viewing a couple of listings on Irving and Harvard Streets, both of them duds, I connected with an agent, actually the owner, eager to show me a two-bedroom in Adams-Morgan.

For some Washingtonians, January first is a day of recovery, auguring another year of work in the bowels of some anonymous government agency. A pause before the grind begins again. Normally, Skipper would want to see the apartment, but the bowl game action held her attention.

If she wanted to relax in front of the tube, so be it. I went alone, parking in front of the address the landlord gave me, at the Columbia Road and Eighteenth Street intersection. Not many people on the street. Everyone glued to the tube, I supposed.

The layout featured a long hallway at the head of which was a large living room with an immense bay window that hung out over the sidewalk, almost into the street. The rest: a kitchen, a small bedroom, an office, and a sun-filled, would-be master bedroom at the back. One hundred and twenty-five dollars per month; I wrote the owner a check for three months' rent.

"Anything you need, just ask," said the man, a jolly Persian. "I'm pretty good at making things right."

It was ideal, not far from Skipper's, yet far enough to make our visits meaningful, like we might actually want to be with each other, not just go through the motions like married couples. Visits to look forward to without the overexposure of living together and the inevitable collapse of affections.

I needed the space. I was still parsing the cause and effect of my affair with Ginny—how, at first, I'd been the subordinate one, a role I wasn't meant to play. It wasn't my vision of myself. And yet I wound up doing just that, despite knowing I was giving in to a weaker part of myself. I tried to pinpoint the moment when I'd assumed the role, telling myself it would never again happen. Equal partners, perhaps, that was only fair, but subordinate—never again.

That's when things got murky. I was no soothsayer, but I sensed Skipper had controlling tendencies in her DNA. What form these might take, I didn't know, our romance was only in its infancy. Perhaps, she didn't know, perhaps because she'd never lived with a man, and she was sending mixed signals. Until I had a better grasp of why I'd let myself get played by Ginny, I'd continue living alone. In doing so, I made the first step toward defining my conception of who I was.

When I returned from signing the rental agreement, Skipper was still at the mercy of the Rose Bowl, mesmerized by the exploits on the tiny black-and-white screen. By the way, she averted her eyes, I could tell something was amiss.

"Who's winning, hon?" I asked.

No answer.

I took off my coat, hung it on the back of the door, and stood in semidarkness watching the reflections from the tube play across her face. “Well now,” I said, “got something on our mind, do we?”

“You want to know? Okay.. While you were gone, I went to the toilet. When I sat down, my feet were in a puddle of piss. Disgusting. Turn on the light instead of pissing in the dark.”

“If I turn on the light I can’t go back to sleep. I’ll get a night light.” That didn’t appease Skipper. She followed me into the kitchen.

“Is there any of that liverwurst?”

“Don’t walk away from me.”

“I didn’t *walk away*; I’m hungry. I’ve been walking all over the neighborhood.”

“I’m not finished.”

“Good. I’ll just be looking for the liverwurst in the meantime. Gotta get something in me.”

“And do you always have to speak like a yokel? There are such things as pronouns, you know, as in ‘I’ve got to get something in me.’”

“Oklahoma manner of speaking. At work, I’m dotting the i’s,” I said. “Is that all?”

“No, it’s not.”

I pulled the makings out of the fridge. “Liverwurst, onion, tomato, lettuce, and Larimer’s Dijon mustard on rye. What a combo!” I said. “Okay, what else am I guilty of?”

“Flush the toilet after you take a piss. At the very least.”

“There’s a permanent water shortage,” I said. “Flush every two, three leaks. That’s seven gallons could be saved. Don’t tell me you’re a clean freak?”

“I’m not a clean freak.”

“That’s funny,” I said. “Cause I remember the first night I came over. You wiping off the rings on the table each time I put down my glass.”

“Well, I’m not a clean freak and I’m not a slob either.”

At that, I found myself recalling a night from my college days. I’d brought a girl to my folks’ house in Oklahoma for Thanksgiving. A rather clingy girl by the name of Susan Barello, always fussing and correcting me in front of my parents and other guests.

One morning Pop took me aside. “Your gal has a royal bug up her ass. A woman like that with a bug up her ass is a critter what likes to talk. Can’t stop talking. You leave the room, she don’t pay it no mind. Just keeps on talking. Bug-up-her-ass woman don’t mean no real harm. Could be she ain’t gettin’ enough. Or some other biological urging, you know, the time of the month. Now if it starts screaming and throwing plates, that’s not a bug-up-her-ass woman. That’s a woman on the warpath. Can’t no man live with a woman constantly on the warpath.”

That was it for Susan Barello. I never dated her again. I didn’t need a nagging chain smoker in my life.

“I’m sorry, hon. You’re not a slob. I was just angry about finding my feet in a puddle of... well, you know what—”

I put the fixings back in the fridge and closed the door.

“Here,” said Skipper, “take your sandwich into the living room. I’ll bring you a pickle—the good ones you like—and a beer. Finish watching the game together. Heck, now you’ve got me omitting my pronouns.”

I nodded between bites as Skipper jumped from one topic to another, talking nonstop while still glued to the tube, eventually arriving at the foremost item at her disposal. “Did you know Virginia is pole dancing on Fourteenth Street?” she blurted out.

“No.” I put down the remaining bit of my sandwich.

“Naked, except for a G-string,” she continued, her words more sputtered than spoken.

“Good for her,” I said. “It beats playing Brahms and Chopin for a living.”

“I think we should go down there. I’d love to watch her squirm,” said Skipper.

“Not in a million years,” I said. “I don’t have to imagine what’s under the G-string; I’ve seen it, almost married it. Besides, I don’t like witnessing humiliation. I don’t like cruelty.”

“Wow, you are a softy,” she said, before realizing she was on the verge of rekindling our argument.

“That may be. It’s just that I’m through with her, done...” I said, “and I don’t think she’d be doing it, weren’t for Delmas. He’s probably forcing her, which makes the situation all the more humiliating. I’m surprised you can’t see it.”

“You finished with your dishes?” asked Skipper.

“Just relax for once. Leave the dishes alone. By the way, who told you this?” I asked assertively.

“Ruthie. I called her while you were out. Hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. It’s your phone bill.”

“Virginia confides in her. They talk all the time. She’s a social worker, you know.”

“And confessor, it seems,” I said. “Maybe she could get Virginia to stop harassing me.”

“Long distance to California,” said Skipper. “Pole dancing must pay.”

“Good for her.”

“And good for you, hon. That you’re so concerned about your ex. So considerate and understanding,” exclaimed Skipper, a second before the TV grabbed her attention and she jumped up as the sportscaster barked, “Touchdown, OJ Simpson! USC fourteen, Indiana three.”



THE IDEA FOR A DIFFERENT SORT OF OPENING SHOT CAME TO ME before leaving Skipper’s apartment. I grabbed my Bell & Howell Filmo camera, said goodbye to Skipper with a “Wish me luck.”

“Luck,” she replied.

*Fuck it, I said to myself, I may be in and out of a job on the first day, but I want to get a tracking shot of Carmichael entering the room.*

When we got to the location for the Carmichael press conference—a storefront on Eighteenth Street—the camera crew unpacked their gear. It was an empty shell of a space, unoccupied, perhaps deserted—the only adornments a ramshackle podium standing four feet from the back wall, a couple of wooden columns holding up the ceiling, and a door to a funky bathroom on the right side of the room.

The crew knew it was my first assignment. I decided that barking orders were counterproductive. I took the cameraman aside; told him I’d watch and listen. When I mentioned my tracking shot idea, the cameraman checked my exposure settings against his light meter. His wry smile told me he doubted my eager-beaver gambit would succeed.

“You know what you’re doing, man, I guess...”

“Yeah. If it doesn’t work out, we won’t use it. I just don’t want to stand around while everyone else works.”

“That’s what a producer does,” said the soundman with a self-assured smile, “takes notes on the timings for the worthwhile parts, like Brentley might question you on what was said.”

“We can do both; I’m counting on you guys.”

“Just so you don’t try it at a congressional hearing with several hours of talking heads.”

I thanked the crew for having my back. What I didn’t already know from years of editing news clips was learned from Don Wolff and from working with experienced crews.

Cameras ready, I walked around, sizing up the other networks’ setups. A familiar looking dude from NBC smiled and walked over to me. “Ray Farcas,” he said.

“Gus Mazur.”

“You work with Don Wolff?” he said, eyeing me like I was an imposter.

“Yes.”

“He’s the best.”

“Sure is,” I said.

“How’d you get the job?”

“I used to be one of Brentley’s film editors, not that it qualifies me for a producer job, but Don helped me and so did Ted Yates and Herb Hecht.”

“You got Ted to recommend you?” asked Farcas.

“Strange as it seems, rival networks do help one another from time to time. I did him a favor for his urban renewal documentary, suggesting Charlie Mingus for the music to Huston Simmons.”

“Good show. Too bad about Ted.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anyway, WBN can’t afford to hire big names like NBC, so they made me a producer.”

Right then the door opened. It was time for Stokely Carmichael’s dramatic entrance. Cameras and sound equipment clicked on.

Wearing a black leather jacket and beret, he strode down the aisle, shadowed by two protectors in similar attire. Crouching down, I started shooting. I must have resembled a squatting turkey walking backward.



With the podium to my back, I couldn't be sure how much room there was before I'd crash into it. I had to sense the spot at which to turn aside so I wouldn't end up in the footage the other networks were shooting. That would surely get me fired. In turning aside, however, I almost stumbled, barely recovering as the various crews held their breaths for the fool attempting to improve upon the tried-and-true methods of filming talking heads—a hopeless task if there ever was one.

Lucky to have avoided catastrophe, I spent the rest of Carmichael's speech shooting the police and protestors scuffling with each other. When it was over, I helped the crew wrap up and we took off for 4001 Wisconsin Avenue.

Back at the office, I hung around until the lab guys finished processing the 16mm film and delivering it to Eddie Walters, lead editor of the *Hartley-Brentley Report*. As soon as the film was set up on rewinds, we were joined by Don Wolff.

"You missed the production meeting. What happened?" asked the Wolff.

"Carmichael was late. There were interruptions," I said, "and hassles with the police. Protestors."

"You got all that, I hope?"

"Yes."

"Brentley's waiting for our cut. Oh, and I told him that you predicted we wouldn't include the bit on school lunches."

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He laughed and said, 'Tell him to include up to twenty seconds of the best school lunch bits.' You should know by now," said the Wolff, "Douglas Brentley's his own man."

"Within the hallowed limits of network TV maybe," I said, "but you preach never trusting anyone who works for television. Brentley didn't, by any chance, say they'd forego the Black power salute this time, did he?"

The Wolff shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"I know Brentley writes his own stuff," I said.

"He wants you to write the lead-in, to check out your chops."

"Already done." I read from a clipboard: "'The struggle for civil rights came to a storefront on Eighteenth Street in Washington, DC, today.

Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Black Power movement and former spokesman for SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), spoke to a partisan crowd today about nutrition in public schools. Some in the audience objected to the heavy presence of law enforcement.’ Roll Stokely film of the police cracking heads.” I handed the Wolff my lead-in.

“You guys cut it,” the Wolff said. “I’ll work with Douglas on his intro and outro. I am toning down your last line: ‘A scuffle broke out, causing law enforcement to intervene.’ Your lead is too one-sided. That doesn’t work for Brentley and it certainly doesn’t work with New York. Let me look at the clip before he sees it.”

“The lead is twenty seconds. What’s the overall length?” I asked.

“How long is the sound bite?” asked the Wolff.

“Seventeen seconds,” said Eddie. “And what about the montage of police and protestors stuff?”

“Try for ten. Seventeen plus twenty plus ten: forty-seven seconds.”

Before taking the job with Herb Hecht’s documentary unit, I had worked a year as Eddie Walters’s assistant, editing hundreds of single system spots for Brentley. Now that we had the timings, this one was no different. The first six seconds—a one-sentence lead-in—featured Douglas Brentley on camera. Cut to the tracking shot I had captured with my Bell & Howell and the Carmichael sound bite to which Eddie appended an eleven-second sequence of the protest and the cops, spectators, and protestors jostling each other, then finish the piece with the mandatory Black power salute—forty-eight seconds in all.

While waiting for the Wolff to come back to the editing room, I reviewed the process in my head—wondering whether I missed something. If I had, I wanted to catch it before the Wolff did.

I had to be more careful with my lead-ins, learn from the Wolff’s rewrite and conform to accepted parameters—nothing too radical, no sly attempts at sarcasm. Every producer was under a microscope.

I was anxious about the tracking shot—whether they’d accept it. I hadn’t told anybody. If I’d asked permission, they would have refused, not the Wolff, but the executive producer, Ezra Eastman, an easygoing, poker-playing compadre from Mississippi, who never rocked the boat,

but would sound the alarm in an instant on anything that might incur Douglas Brentley's displeasure, or New York's, for that matter.

It was getting close to airtime. When the piece was assembled, Eddie's assistant editor left the IATSE area on a dead run to the NABET area, where he handed the clip to a NABET technician who loaded it onto a machine that would convert the analog 16mm film to an NTSC broadcast TV signal so when the Washington control room director signaled it to run, it would do exactly that. Eddie's assistant watched the reel being loaded and then took off for the control room to be available for emergencies.

"Tommyrot," I said, under my breath, just as the Wolff materialized. He appeared to be angered by my remark.

"This is beneath you, huh?" said the Wolff. "It's called paying your dues, or are you above it? Before they published, recorded, and acted in their first success, your role models—the ones you're always comparing yourself to—Scott Fitzgerald, Bird, and Brando were unknowns, pipsqueaks like you and me. Funny, they're always outsiders, your heroes. Like you purport yourself to be."

"I didn't mean it— Hey, I wasn't criticizing the job, Don. I can't believe I've got it. I only meant the coverage. I have a right to think I can do better."

"I know you take it seriously; you have your ideals, your notions and you're trying to find a way to integrate them with the realities of the job and the stories we cover. Just don't let yourself be seen as a sorehead. There'll be times when you can put in your two cents. Believe me."

During the broadcast, producers, cameramen, and editors gathered either in Brentley's office (he was on the set, of course) or in the control room to watch the show on studio monitors, where instead of what millions of viewers saw each night, i.e., the finished product, they watched the various segments from around the world being fed, assembled, and punched in according to the timings set by Roscoe Schindler and his various producers around the world.

After the broadcast was over, the technical crew scattered, while the producers and the director waited for Brentley to reappear and evaluate the show. Most days it was minimal. This evening, however, Brentley entered his office with a wry smile, aimed, I supposed, at me.

“What kind of camera do you have, Gus?” asked Brentley. “I presume you contributed the tracking shot. A Bell and Howell, was it? What lens did you use?”

“It’s a Taylor-Hobson Cooke one-inch, f one point eight,” I said.

“I don’t know if I like my rookie producers taking liberties with our production methods, whether we should fire you or purchase Bell and Howells for our producers. What do the rest of you think?”

“Fire him,” came the unison reply.

I knew he was kidding, but I couldn’t let on lest he change his mind. Better to play along. His wry sense of humor was ready for anything. If the lights went out in the middle of the broadcast, he’d pull a flashlight out of his pocket, stick it under his chin, and recite the doxology or the Declaration of Independence to ten million viewers.

“Perhaps, our young friend with a flair for experimentation,” said Brentley, “would be better served in an assignment unhindered by compromise and the traditional ways of doing things, something more exciting—Vietnam, for instance. Say a year in country before coming back to this job. The money? We can’t pay our camera guys enough. Three times the Stateside rate and most of them can’t wait to get the hell outta there. How does that sound?”

For an instant, I am transported. I peer over the lip of a foxhole through the lens of my Filmo. Bullets are flying around me. A marine in the same foxhole cries out “Corpsman.” Someone is hit.

I shuddered. “Sorry, I was having a flashback. Thinking about Maggie’s. What I’ve seen there.”

“Maggie’s?” asked Brentley. “The place on Wisconsin?”

“Our editors and camera people hang out there. Italian,” said Don Wolf.

“Washington Redskins hang out there, too. As do the walking wounded from Walter Reed,” I said, “narrating personal horror stories of ’Nam. I’ve seen enough to make me— Gruesome. The wounds and the treatments, amputations, missing body parts, half a face blown off. I’ve also heard stories about mass resistance, desertions, refusals to fight. Soaring divorce rates... when they finally get home. Some guys are resigned; others struggle to rehabilitate themselves. Not a one expects it

might happen to them, not really, certainly not to the degree that it eventually does.

“No way I’d volunteer to go there; I’m only a few years away from the Marine Corps Reserve. I might still be called up.”

“Well now,” said Douglas Brentley, “generally we reward initiative, especially if it makes the product better. Any takers that CBS and NBC start handing out handheld equipment?” Brentley’s ironic chuckle started the others laughing cautiously. Slowly, each person returned to his workaday view of reality, all slightly askew when you got down to it.

“I was a jerk not to clear it with you, but about the war—” I had more to say, but I didn’t want to delay the end-of-day exodus. I surveyed the onlookers. It had been a long, busy day and they were restless. Don Wolff looked to Brentley, who nodded his consent.

“Let him finish,” said the Wolff, his slightly ironical demeanor reminding me that now was one of those times pipsqueaks like me got to talk.

“Your cars will still be in the parking lot when he finishes,” Douglas Brentley assured the gathering. “They’re not going anywhere without you.”

“It’s about the war. I wanted to—”

I was interrupted before I could elaborate.

“Half a mo,” said Brentley. “I want Schindler to hear this. Always respect feedback from the new guy. It may be his last chance to be heard before the machine takes ahold of him.” Brentley touched some buttons, opening the trunk line to New York. “You there, Roscoe?”

“Aye, aye.”

“We’re about to get a fresh take on Vietnam from our newest member.”

“Go ahead, then. I’m listening.”

“Well,” I said, “I have friends in the Marine Corps who tell me this antiwar movement isn’t only Jane Fonda and marches to the Lincoln Memorial. It’s enlisted men who, after being sent there, recoil at the horror and refuse to swallow the faulty premises on why they are there. Now, military discipline—the very essence of military authority—supposes that any war the United States becomes involved in is a good war.”

Everyone looking at me made me anxious. My mouth was moving, and yet the only clue as to what I was saying was the look on the faces of those seated around me. As I continued, they seemed to fade into a kind of background tableau. I stopped analyzing what I was about to say, letting the words flow out, uncensored by any conscious preconceptions of form or content, passionate and coherent at the same time. There is something about passion that overpowers humdrum attitudes, in my case, the typical newsman's cynical view of life. No more pumping the brakes, the new gear I found not only shaped my discourse, I realized it was changing the tenor of the room.

"Suppose now," I continued, "like Germany invading European countries in World War Two, America has become involved in a war that is not a good war. Civilian authorities, officers, and noncoms would never admit this because they believe the premise that all American wars are good. It's not in their makeup. They're authoritarians. They exist to take and give orders, not to wonder if a war is good or bad. But what about the men being drafted and sent to fight the war? Most of them are pro at the outset. It's only after they see how it's being fought that they begin to change their minds. Not only about the purpose of the war, but also about the way progress is being measured. How is it being measured? Body count. In World War Two, we didn't use body count to measure progress, we used military objectives: land captured, prisoners taken, and the enemy's ability to resist. The only problem with body count is which bodies are we counting? That is the issue we've not been very honest about. So we bomb a village or come in blazing. They look like VC, all those charred and unrecognizable bodies. Might as well count 'em. Never mind they're small like children or women. Count 'em!

"My friends tell me there's a tidal wave of antiwar activity among the men fighting it, manifested by wholesale desertions, underground antiwar newspapers, posters, petitions, songs, marches, and riots, and even outright refusals to fight, which usually translates to prison terms, and ultimately martyrdom. Can you imagine how angry the officers get? Well, there are reports of officers and noncoms getting hosed. Mind you, I don't support that, but it does show desperation.

"Everything possible is being done to suppress this movement, a

movement of men and women fighting on the front lines, and it's growing exponentially. Why? Because it's not a good war."

I paused for a moment, then addressing Roscoe Schindler, I asked, "Roscoe, weren't you with OAS during the war? You witnessed how the promises of independence given to Ho Chi Minh were reneged upon after the war, and how we allowed the French to take over again. That was Bad War Number One. We didn't learn from the French. Now we're mired in Bad War Number Two. The administration is stuck; they can't withdraw, and they can't win. They are, some of them, in fact, just plain addicted to war and their own arrogance. They feature themselves little Napoleons. But their only strategy is to send more troops. We just can't accept that these—the people we call gooks—could be smarter and more willing to suffer than we are.

"Hell, even our networks tacitly support the war effort. What I'm proposing is we do a two-hour show from the point of view of the enlisted man.

"I know, the sponsors!" I said. "They wouldn't feel comfortable opposing the conventional wisdom... call it what you will, the party line, which, despite the protests and the marches, is still hawkish.

"It's going to destroy LBJ. We can't let it destroy us. We can't follow blindly what we perceive to be the way the wind blows. We don't have to make a declaration; we just have to show it like it is and let the viewers make up their minds. If we can show that we, as a country, have chosen to support a bad war without explicitly saying so, we'll provoke a lot of soul searching. Oh, and too bad about LBJ; he did a lot of good."

Leaving the office a little later, the Wolff passed by my desk and asked, "Wanna play some pool this weekend?"

"Sure," I said.

"Come over to my house. Bring your gal," he said, pausing to put his arm around me. "That was some discourse."

"Yeah, well. I doubt it'll amount to much," I replied.

"At least, Schindler is bringing you to New York to discuss it further. You may find yourself running a documentary unit, after all, my man. They were impressed."

"Thanks for earlier, by the way. I deserved it," I said. "Oh, nearly forgot, Wolffie, do you know someone who repairs foreign cars?"

“Not the Jaguar you drive?”

“Yeah well, it needs some body work.”

“There’s a Brit specialist in Bethesda, I think,” said the Wolff, “He’s not cheap. There’s a Turkish guy I know. He can do sheet metal work if parts can’t be had, which I presume might be the case.”

“I love it. Always trust a foreigner to fix your car. They’re dependable,” I took out a notebook. “Here, Don. Address and phone number.”

As the Wolff wrote down the mechanic’s vitals, I shuddered to think I wouldn’t be able to get the Jag back in time. Three months should be enough but working in TV had taught me the inevitability of karmic slip-ups. “It’s my aunt’s pet. She’ll be here March fifteenth. Gotta have it ready when she gets here.”

The Wolff took off. I stayed a few minutes to shuffle papers and make a list for the morrow. I was looking at the Turk’s address when the phone rang. Who the hell was calling at 8:00 p.m.? Turned out to be Lil. “How’d you get my number, Lil?”

“Easy now, big guy,” she said. “There aren’t a lot of Gusses at WBN. You did tell me you worked there?”

“Real fine detective work, sweetie.”

“Film editor, right?”

“Producer, *Hartley-Brentley Report*. Got promoted. And almost fired my first day.”

“Wow, a big producer,” she said, “When are you coming back to New York?”

“Barring a surprise assignment, we’d be looking at your coming down here before I get time.”

“That can be arranged. When?”

“Can’t say right now. Moving on the fifteenth. Give me your number in the meantime.”

I wrote down the number. Then her voice changed, she was almost breathing the words: “It’s not only for sex, you know.”

“I’m hip, Lil. By the way, you find your keys?”

“The next day, it all came back, that I had driven and left the key to the house in the car.”

“That’ll teach you.”

“That’ll teach me not to drink. The one time I do, I disgrace myself.”



She added a funny little giggle, a mannerism she employed whenever something absurd was mentioned. “A glass of wine with dinner maybe, but never more.”

“It’s all forgotten, Lil. Clean-slate forgotten.”



AWAY FROM TELEVISION, DON WOLFF WAS A LONELY MAN. HE WAS authentic, so he looked for authenticity in others. He was funny, so he looked for that quality in others, too. There wasn’t much of either at 4001 Wisconsin Avenue. That should have made him even lonelier, except for the occasional bright light that fate ushered through the portals of WBBN, WBN’s wholly owned local subsidiary.

In retrospect, I’ve wondered why Don Wolff hoped to discover a sign of authenticity in the dark-skinned young man (that would be me) eating all by himself. Anyway, he’d approached me in the cafeteria on my first day. I remembered taking an instant liking to the man, probably because he came off as a loner despite his exalted status at the network. I’d seen his name in the credit rolls of many a WBN production, from news to documentaries. His dapper appearance described a man at war with his conventional surroundings, a hipster in the midst of conformity and, at the same time, a unanimous exception to its rules. Enter me, Gus Mazur, brown-skinned and bearded, an outsider by birth and by design.

“Wolff, ‘the Wolff!’ Mind if I call you ‘the Wolff?’” I had asked.

“Most people do. I don’t mind as long as they include the two *f*s.”

“A Wolff with two *f*s it is,” I said as the Wolff began a rundown on WBN in particular and on television in general, which he called the “distraction attraction.”

“‘Distraction attraction,’ nice term,” I said after the Wolff had finished, “but it doesn’t have much of a ring to it. What about ‘distraction faction’? Naw, no good. It’s hard to beat boob tube. Covers all the bases. Anyway, Mr. Wolff, while I don’t feel much soul in this place, I do feel there’s lots of money.”

To which the Wolff had replied: “Everyone’s on a first name basis here, from Roscoe Schindler to apprentice editors, but don’t let that fool you, underneath it’s as rigid as the Soviet politburo.”

From then on, even though I had been a lowly apprentice editor at the time, we became friends. Perhaps the Wolff sensed something in me that I had always avoided. I didn't know for sure, but the way the Wolff was able to meld an outsider's cynicism with an insider's professionalism won me over.

In my early days at WBN, I had sometimes acted erratically as if I were trying to ingratiate myself by resorting to crazy stunts, like the time I attempted to drop kick Buzz Pegler (à la Bruno Sammartino, the reigning pro wrestling champ of the day) at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. I had fixated on him as some sort of oppressor when, over time, I discovered he was harmless.

My issues were partly a reaction to the outcome of my ill-fated romance with Emma Salazar, strict Marine Corps discipline, and the exhilarating freedom I felt upon being discharged, and partly because of the drugs and alcohol I continued to consume after college.

At GW, I had been a devotee of the beat generation, the bohemian lifestyle sweeping campuses in the late fifties—a regular at Coffee 'n' Confusion, the Java Jungle, and Brownley's. Drugs, sex, beards, jazz music, braless young women. Outfitting myself in an array of turtleneck sweaters, tight blue jeans, leather jackets from Abercrombie & Fitch, and shoes of rubbed leather; not Hush Puppies, mind you, suede shoes imported from Italy.

Conversations about art and writing steered me into a journalism major and, because of the praise I received from various teachers, I began to fancy myself talented.

When I was twenty-two, publishers and agents took the time to read my overeager, writerly submissions. At twenty-two, I could afford to strike out. Hell, at twenty-two, I lived on spit. Nothing much mattered. Money even less.

If a writer showed flashes, which I did, agents listened. They wrote me encouraging letters. Their bread and butter, after all, was guiding young careers—talents that kept on giving. And yet, feelings of futility kept me spending too much time at movable feasts along with the rest of the lotus eaters, blaming existential circumstances, instead of producing meaningful content. What began with so much promise had gradually come to naught.

Once, I did put my heart into a writing assignment, a paper on W. C. Fields worth one-half of my entire grade for a creative writing class. It wasn't easy to see a single one of Fields's films at the time, let alone all of them. There were no DVDs, no Internet, no websites, no streaming content, but the Circle Theatre eventually hosted a W. C. Fields Retrospective Festival. I got to see his films. I read as many books on Fields as I could find in the library. Inspired, I whizzed through the paper and even turned it in on time. My teacher liked it so much, he showed it to others in the English Department, who tossed compliments my way. The only problem was the assignment itself. I was supposed to have written an essay on Eugene O'Neill's plays that somehow came out as an analysis of W. C. Fields' films.

I blamed this perversity on my parents, on the opposing outlooks they'd instilled in me—how my mother's contention that the outside world is hostile if your skin is less than pure white conflicted with my father's more mainstream American Dream philosophy. Somehow, I was always doing the opposite. Amazingly, I got good grades despite behavior that psychology textbooks label "dissociative disorder."

Growing up, my father pushed me into traditional young boy activities: flying kites, collecting stamps, Boy Scouts, rodeo, and, of course, boxing. I preferred singing lessons, tennis, and comic books.

After graduation, I was unable to find a job. Thinking it was because of my skin color, I grew chip-on-the-shoulder bitter. When I was hired by WBN, thanks in part to Aunt Alice, who knew Roscoe Schindler from political dinner parties and Democratic fundraisers, I brought some of my bitterness with me.

At the time, I was the only WBN employee to wear a beard, an exception that did not go unnoticed by the likes of John Krakling, who carried the numinous title of supervisor of film operations, but never set foot in the editing bays and rarely interfaced with creative personnel. The fact that Pegler worked for Krakling meant he was the assistant supervisor of film operations, an even more meaningless title. When I started, my real boss was Ezra Eastman, DC producer of the *Hartley-Brentley Report*, and, after him, Eddie Walters, the show's lead editor. Krakling and Pegler were middle management bean counters. That didn't mean they didn't have time to harass me.

Krakling especially never missed an opportunity to mention my beard when we passed each other in the hall, openly telling me to shave it off. Lowly apprentice, I had the impression that, had it been up to either of them, I never would have been hired. Later, when I became Herb's editor, overt criticism ceased, but not the dirty looks.

Along with Carlotta Fanning, Herb's researcher at the time, the Wolff guided me to the realization that I could become the person I was meant to be by turning my self-destructive tendencies into creative opportunities.

The first thing they did was to persuade me to apologize to Buzz Pegler, who, because I had not actually touched his person, graciously accepted my apology. My action was more an object of ridicule than one of menace. Although I'd succeeded in leaving the ground, I'd been too drunk to propel myself into Pegler's body, so I crashed to the ground with a pitiful thud. Rejoining Carlotta and the Wolff after offering my regrets, all I could muster was, "Had I not been so drunk, I could have flattened the fucker." Hardly the spirit of contrition they'd tried so hard to instill.

"Only kidding, only kidding," I sniggered.

Nevertheless, the incident marked the beginning of a turnaround, my abrupt about-face. Over the next four years, I not only curbed my erratic behavior, I became a much sought-after editor, capable enough to earn the endorsement of WBN's ne plus ultra producer—Herb Hecht.



I WAS SCHEDULED TO MOVE INTO MY COLUMBIA ROAD APARTMENT ON the fifteenth of January but didn't have time to oversee the move because I was already on the way to Georgia with the Wolff for a civil rights story—the usual last-minute, keep-a-bag-packed assignment.

Skipper volunteered to take charge of the move. I didn't pressure her I told her it could wait until I returned. The rent was paid, and the previous tenants had moved out, but she insisted.

Skipper couldn't remain still. If she didn't have enough stress in her life, she went looking for more—a natural speed freak. "Just give me

money to rent a U-Haul,” she said, “and I’ll have you all moved in.” True to her word, when I returned, everything was in perfect order.

I wanted to fete her with dinner at Duke Zeibert’s, but I couldn’t get a table, probably because of the social pecking order (when I gave my name, the hostess didn’t recognize me as a member of the Washington elite like Redskins’ quarterback Sonny Jurgensen or radio personality Petey Greene, even though I’d name-dropped WBN regulars Douglas Brentley and Don Wolff).

Skipper suggested Blackie’s House of Beef, but after getting shot down at Duke’s, I refused to try another in-crowd joint. We settled for the Cuban on Columbia Road (pork, with rice, beans, and yucca), after which we proceeded to break in my new bedroom. Long kisses; longer strokes, in and out of her, until both of us throbbed at the same moment.

A veritable urban sunroom, enclosed on three sides by windows, it afforded little privacy. The existing blinds were torn and decomposing, ready for the trash heap. Surrounded by buildings on three sides, we imagined prowling pairs of lecherous eyes peering through the darkness. So, we adjourned to the living room to smoke a joint until it was completely dark, at which point we became absorbed by the nighttime traffic on the busy intersection, and how the flow of cars, buses, and pedestrians appeared to synchronize with Hank Mobley’s tenor solo on “Nica’s Dream”—a state of psychedelic euphoria, akin to watching fishes in a tank to music by Erik Satie.

Even in the darkness, Skipper grumbled. “That was like fucking in a fishbowl.” I resolved to hit up the landlord for better blinds.

Two days after returning from the South, I was having a drink at the One Step Down. Dave Katz, the dean of Washington bartenders, formerly at Tasso’s, DC’s Wunderbar pickup establishment, told me about a guy moving to Texas to take up importing traditional Mexican Huichol clothing into the States. He was selling a BMW motorcycle for five hundred dollars—a lot of money, given the state of my Macomb Street house and Jaguar repairs. I needed transportation with the Jag out of commission for a couple of months. I came up with a plan, a long shot.

I took a taxi to Silver Spring, where the seller lived. After ten minutes, I’d convinced him to take the engagement ring I’d bought for Emma as payment (I’d paid 3,750 francs for it, about \$750). The man was

getting married in a few days and had not yet purchased a ring because his wife-to-be was holding out for name-brand jewelry. “Not any old ring, she’s after Tiffany,” he said. And, lo and behold, I arrive with a Van Cleef & Arpels engagement ring, the ne plus ultra of French jewelers, which, according to the snob appeal I’d interjected, was sure to please his future wife.

“Tell her Elizabeth Taylor and Princess Grace were in the store the day I bought it.”

He thanked me for my excellent taste and for materializing in such a karmic fashion. When we finished with the papers, I boarded my new BMW and went on my way.

Three days later, in the alley behind my new apartment, I spotted a guy opening a garage and wheeling out a motorcycle. He was tinkering with the engine when I approached him to ask about sheltering my bike in his garage. At first, he was reluctant, wanting to know if I was a serious biker. I told him it was too valuable to be left on the street and, although I had no Hell’s Angel’s ambitions, I took good care of my earthly goods.

“It’s a great machine,” the man agreed, looking me in the eye, “and, you’re right, it won’t last on the street.” After a while, we struck a deal.

It wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment vanity purchase. At the first mention of a BMW, a murky and vague plan started to take shape. I visualized myself riding across the continent: Paris to Istanbul, back up to Oslo, and Helsinki. With someone, a girl, I couldn’t quite see who, holding on to me. Every time I looked back at her, the smile was there but not the face.



I CLIMBED INTO THE SHOWER THE NEXT MORNING, JANUARY 30, 1968, as usual turning on my water-resistant Radio Shack transistor. At first, the noise of the cascading water muffled the voice. The panicky quality of the announcer’s voice alerted me. Something big had happened. I turned off the water. Naked and dripping wet, I listened as the voice rattled off frantic reports of an all-out PAVN/VC offensive. Numerous cities and hamlets throughout Vietnam had been attacked. Ambushes had been planned and carried out in complete secrecy. A broad offensive

that both US and ARVN intelligence had failed to uncover or predict revealed an utter lack of understanding of the People's Army of North Vietnam's tactics and strategy. The Americans had believed an attack of this scope was impossible. So misguided was US intelligence, critics mocked that, secure in their hubris, American commanders would not have believed it even if they'd possessed the enemy's battle plan beforehand. It was whispered that this war was unwinnable no matter how many bomb loads the B-52s might deposit on Hanoi and how many troops on both sides might be sacrificed.

There wasn't much I and my colleagues could do from our desks in the nation's capital except listen to the ever-worsening reports of the Tet Offensive, as the battle quickly came to be known. It wasn't a failure of the troops; it was a failure of leadership, a topic for a documentary that I hoped to get the green light on.

FEBRUARY

**W**hen Don Wolff wasn't working, he became restless. He didn't drink excessively or use drugs. When invited to the Wolff's lair, I always brought a couple of joints with me, but I never succeeded in getting the Wolff to toké. His two leisure pastimes were shooting pool in his basement and visiting the Laurel racecourse in Maryland. Alas, in winter the racetracks were either closed or too cold. His only true hobby was stride piano he played with the passion, if not the skill, of an Art Tatum.

Because I loved the guy, I often accompanied the Wolff to the track, even though I might have had other plans. I could beg off but rarely did. Hanging with the Wolff had its perks, namely useful advice on how to shoot a wide variety of news events—interviews, demonstrations, committee hearings, et cetera, as well as tips on writing, camera setups, lighting, and, most important, office politics. You could recognize a Don Wolff story; no one else had his balls or his finesse.

The one thing the Wolff said he liked most about me was my eagerness to learn; that alone was worth the effort he'd expended on my rehabilitation, that and the beautiful Virginia who had, on several occasions, accompanied me to his home.

One Saturday evening, showing up at the Wolff's lair with Skipper instead of Ginny had my friend chomping at the bit for details, but reluc-



tant to pry unceremoniously. So, we played pool, three games to be exact, all won by Skipper.

“In case you didn’t guess, Skipper is Ginny’s sister,” I said finally. “She’s good at everything requiring manual dexterity.”

“I wanna hear your story, young lady, every last bit,” said the Wolff.

“Well, I tried out for the Olympics, the downhill ski event. Didn’t make it, but I am going to France next week to play in an unofficial women’s exhibition ice hockey tournament, trying to get the committee to recognize the women’s game.”

“Where in France?”

“Grenoble.”

“Any chance I could get time off, Wolfie?” I asked.

“You’re joking, right?” The Wolff stacked his pool cue, then turned to face Skipper. “Do you mind my asking, how the hell this guy, who last showed up here with your sister, now walks through the door with you?” he asked. “You don’t look anything like her.”

“Gus didn’t tell you?” she said. “I’d imagined he would have. Something like, ‘Wolff, I’ll be with Skipper, Ginny’s sister. We broke up.’”

“Well, that might be the polite or the reasonable thing when dissolving an engagement, but your man isn’t always reasonable,” said the Wolff. “And yes, we’ll hear all about your adventures, young lady... in a minute.”

I took the Wolff’s words to mean he had something to tell me, something he’d been saving up.

“If you guys want to talk business,” said Skipper, “I can practice some trick shots that might come in handy if I can persuade some French people to play for money.”

“There is this one thing that’s best kept inside the distraction factory,” said the Wolff.

“Go for it,” said Skipper.

After the two of us disappeared into an alcove, Don Wolff surprised me with an uncharacteristic cross-examination: “Why the fuck am I being asked about Goodstein?”

“Who’s asking?”

“John Krakling—the other day—asked me if I’d heard anything about you and Goodstein.”

I knew exactly how and why Goodstein had been disposed of. But it wasn't my place to spread this tale of intrigue. "All I know is," I said, "Herb used it to scare me into not leaving him, but I can't believe that Herb'd do anything sinister, like having anything to do with Krakling or Pegler."

"This is television, not women's ice hockey. Everyone has a sinister agenda," said the Wolff, "at one time or another."

"Did you ever meet Goodstein, Don? If you did, you'd know he was no trainee film editor. Supposedly he went to NYU film school, but I never saw any evidence that he'd had the least training. He wasn't a bad guy—anyone who loved Mickey Mantle as much as he did—just incompetent."

"You're missing the point, all of you involved in the Goodstein affair are. Goodstein wasn't here to work; he came here to spy, to find out how to get rid of big budget projects—like Herb's and while he was at it, people like yours truly, older guys with big salaries. Replace us with some guy out of film school. Hell, film schools didn't exist when I went to college."

It was one of those rare times I'd seen the Wolff riled up.

"And who the hell in DC likes Mantle? Mickey Mantle—New York Yankees. Get the connection?"

"There are three divisions at WBN—News, Entertainment, and Sports. Which division is the weak sister? Which one is supported by the other two?"

"News," I replied.

"I know Herb Hecht does great work and you're right in defending him, but there's no Art Division at WBN, despite Herb's posturing. Look at his budgets: hundreds of thousands of dollars for programs that are only shown one or two times. Doesn't make sense. Yes, his Leonardo show was a masterpiece."

"A spy, hmm. Explains why I could never find him. He was always hiding in Krakling's or Pegler's offices." I said.

"That should have told you something, namely why he was protected, not only by the so-called supervisor of film operations, who doesn't know a roll of film from a roll of toilet paper but by New York," said the Wolff.

“A threat to Herb is a threat to each one of us. By the way, did *American Skeptics* win any awards?”

“The usual TV-as-an-art-form awards,” I said, bringing up Goodstein again. “I wondered why Goodstein dressed like a parody of an accountant, the same black tie, white shirt, and black suit. Not the most practical attire for someone with runaway dandruff. I used to come up behind him as if I was greeting him with a pat on the back when I was actually brushing dandruff off his shoulders—of course, I wore my white gloves. You know he played the Jew card on me his last day, said we should stick together, called me a scoundrel, which made me laugh.”

“Stick together?” said the Wolff. “Jews are like everyone else; we stick together when it serves our purposes. Otherwise, it’s each man for himself. Witness the Jews serving as kapos in the concentration camps.”

“Well, I told him I was only one-quarter Jewish and if Jews were so great, why couldn’t he do his share of the work? That’s when he called me a scoundrel for criticizing Jews, even though I had to do most of his work. ‘Scoundrel?’ I feigned indignation. ‘Why not call me a knave, a blackguard? Even a rogue is better than a scoundrel?’

“His epithet,” I continued, “reminded me of Thackeray’s *Barry Lyndon* and Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* or that past master of chivalry, Cyrano de Bergerac. He didn’t know what I was talking about, sorta like a guy who’d studied economics.”

The Wolff checked his watch. “Let’s rejoin the young lady,” he said. “The Jaguar? How’s that coming along?”

“Good. The parts are ordered and Ahmet’s making a fender. If they don’t get here in time, we’ll use his parts and then switch them out next winter when she takes off for Italy.”

“Don’t you think it might be better to just tell her what happened, instead of trying to finesse the situation? After all, it wasn’t your fault. Accidents do happen. Being too clever can backfire.”

“I hate when she’s disappointed in me, but she’s real good at concealing it; she merely changes the subject, deftly, mind you, as if that’s what we’d been discussing all along,” I said. “It’s almost like her leaving the car with me is a curse; something’s bound to happen and I’m being tested to fix it.”

“That’s you projecting your paranoia onto her. From what you told

me, she's bigger than that. It's not unreasonable to believe she'd understand. Plus, she loves you."

While the Wolff served a final round of wine and cheese, we watched Skipper practice an array of trick shots.

"In the next few years television is going to dumb down even more, and reduce the costs by millions while doing so," said the Wolff. "Until now, it's been controlled by a handful of powerful men. That will change. You'll have more channels, thanks to a cable to your house, which you'll have to pay for. These channels will be run by guys like Goodstein, guys with Ph.D.s in communications or macroeconomics. Most of them won't be worth shit. News will be subsumed by entertainment until viewers don't know the difference between fact and opinion. Art will be confined to a kind of public television or channels you subscribe to. You can't imagine the variety of bullshit they'll be able to dream up on a twenty-four cycle. The trick is not to work for this brave new world, but to own it."

"Who's Goodstein?" asked Skipper.

"Cyrano's mortal enemy. I once challenged him to a duel. 'Foils or sabers, you churl,' I said." I mimed drawing a sword from an invisible scabbard. Skipper mirrored my action and we started a pantomime duel: "‘Lightly I toss my hat away, languidly over my shoulder let fall the cloak that covers my bright array. Then out sword to work withal.’"

The Wolff watched us as we duelled around the pool table, until I spoke the magic words, "‘Then, as I end the refrain, thrust home,’" at which point I lunged forward, causing Skipper to feign a fatal stab, clutch her heart, and fall to the ground.

"You're overeducated, my friend," chided the Wolff.

In one acrobatic movement, Skipper rocked herself backward, then forward into the air, and up onto two legs. Hugging and laughing, we embraced. The mock duel and the wine had plunged Skipper into a contact high. She grabbed me around the waist, lifted my two hundred pounds, and spun me around once, before releasing me with a hug and a kiss.

"With your coordination, you could have made it in the circus," I said.

Skipper and I made ready to leave. I hadn't paid much attention to

the Wolff's predictions on the future of television; they appeared but a distant prospect. A new business model for a new age. Television was changing. Everyone knew it. When? No one knew. As for his predictions on my future, I'd never thought long and hard about it, but I did now, especially the part about going out on my own.

My parting words were a lame commentary on the Wolff's revelations. All I could muster at the moment was, "Salaries will take a hit, huh Wolff Man?"

"Not exactly. Not if you're a man or woman who's so popular you can dictate your terms. In this brave new world, theatrics and exhibitionism will rule the roost. The ones who shape opinions will earn the big salaries."

"Did you say 'she'?" asked Skipper. "That women will finally have more opportunities in television?"

"A lot more," said Don Wolff. He turned to Skipper. "And next time, young lady, I want the rundown on your hockey exploits in France."



LIKE COPS, REPORTERS NEED SOURCES. WITHOUT THEM, THERE'S LITTLE chance of scooping the competition. The more exclusive, the better. At WBN News, the Wolff had sources that vouched for other sources, who in turn vouched for still more sources, solely dedicated to him and ready to talk.

"A lot of reporters hate the intrigue, think it sordid and demeaning. Smart guy producers, like me and you," the Wolff winked at me, "specialize. Target a person, get him to trust you—trust is all-important—then use that source to pass you along to other sources."

"Specialize in what exactly?" I asked.

"Vietnam, civil rights are two possibilities. No source lasts forever, you gotta keep a hand in," the Wolff said. "Certain people, you know right away they're interested. The bitter ones, people with an axe to grind. Low-level State Department fellows, military attachés, a White House flunky that got passed over in a run for Congress. Cocktail parties, the ambassador's mistress. Congressional aides who believe they should be the representative. Read the Capitol Hill gossip sheets. Keep

looking for new ones. Feed their egos, as if you're nothing and they are everything. People, despite everything to the contrary, like to talk. The higher up you are, or they think you are, the less likely you'll get them to talk. Brentley says he's had to give up his sources; he's too big. He can't call up some low-level dude anymore."

I considered the challenge. Not only whom I might approach, but also any misgivings about my ability "to sell" such a relationship. I first thought about military sources, even called up my Marine Corps company commander, now an adjutant at Marine HQ at Fort Meade, and, without getting too specific, queried him about military-civilian relations.

Next, I thought about establishing connections to the civil rights movement, only to realize that although I supposed myself a reasonably progressive individual, I had but a wire-service acquaintance with Black aspirations and adversities. For a grassroots test-case connection, I decided to accept Skipper's invitation to attend church with Wendell's family. As luck would have it, the day we attended the Lincoln Congregational Temple United Church of Christ at Eleventh and R Streets, Julian Bond, who remembered me from the Stokely Carmichael shoot, was part of the congregation.

"Julian Bond," he introduced himself. "We've met. Recently, I think."

"At the Carmichael press conference last month. Gus Mazur, producer, *Hartley-Brentley*."

"Brother Stokely, yes. And you were walking backward. Thought you were going to fall over. What brings you to our church?"

"To be honest, my girlfriend," I pointed to Skipper, "talking with that family over there, teaches at H. D. Cooke Elementary School. Their son Wendell is in her Saturday day camp—an activity program for third graders. Got me involved. Relating to the kids as individuals made me realize I didn't know much about the Black experience. And now that WBN is sending me south, I wanted to learn more."

"Perhaps, I can help you. As for so-called 'Black experience,' you could pass. Do you mind my asking?" asked Bond.

"Not at all. I have some dark-skinned relatives, my mother being Cherokee and part Moroccan," I said. "And yes, people do cross the street on occasion when they see me coming."

We made a date to explore mutual interests.



WHEN I MET JULIAN BOND AT HIS OFFICE THE FOLLOWING WEEK, I had no problem confessing that he could do more for me now than I could do for him, even though I had been assigned to the WBN civil rights beat.

“There’s no way I can get you network airtime, not directly. Not without some story developing around you. And then any big story would involve bigger names than mine. Indirectly, however, I have some irons in the fire,” I said. “For instance, there’s a human-interest story involving Skipper that I’m promoting at both the network and the local station.”

“That’s her name, Skipper?” Bond chuckled.

“That’s what she goes by. Skipper Sanchez, I said. “The network’s interested in the story. But it needs some perspective, which you could supply, say, by doing an interview.”

I described Skipper’s Saturday program in detail, her vision of expanding it, and the headway I’d made in getting it approved by WBN, if, and only if, I could attach a name to it, someone like Julian Bond, who then asked me what he’d have to do.

“We’d show you the piece, talk about it, then interview you about its impact and about extending it to other communities. Sprinkle your sound bites, your words of wisdom throughout the piece.”

Bond fixed his attention on the floor, thinking it over for a moment before agreeing.

“There’ll be other avenues of collaboration,” I said, “once we get going.”

It was the beginning of an exchange, which at first consisted of Julian Bond furnishing me with contacts in the Black community for my forays south. If I could exchange information with Bond, I was confident I could build a network of sources. Little did I know that on a forthcoming assignment I would shortly provide Julian Bond with the identity of an SCLC stool pigeon.

The civil rights struggle had picked up intensity in the late fifties,

coming to a head in 1968. From Orangeburg, SC, to Jackson, MS, to Memphis, TN, I built a reputation as an interviewer of recalcitrant white supremacists. It wasn't that I was this great interviewer; my appearance took people by surprise. By the time they'd decided I was either severely suntanned or some kind of hairball, the interview was over.



ON FEBRUARY 8, 1968, A CLASH OCCURRED BETWEEN POLICE AND students from South Carolina State University during a protest at a bowling alley that refused to serve Black students. Three protestors were shot and killed. The media largely ignored the story. WBN sent me.

I decided to ask Harry K. Floyd, the owner of the bowling alley, why he'd refused to desegregate. Wade right in and get some answers. He had an excellent war record and was obviously a patriot, a man living in the past. I didn't want to make him look foolish; I wanted to understand, to help reconcile his war record with his treatment of Blacks.

While waiting by the door for the owner, I caught sight of a Black man flitting in and out of doors. When the man spotted me, he blanched and ducked out of sight. Certain that I'd seen this fellow before, I watched him disappear into the bowels of the alley, where the pins were being set.

*Where have I seen this guy?* I wondered while knocking at the door again.

A geezer, not Harry K. Floyd, stepped outside to survey me and the crew, which he did, judging from his expression, with manifest annoyance. "What are you? Some kind of joke?" said the man.

"Tired of reporters, I dig." At that instant, I was frantic about what to say next. Just about everybody from Roscoe Schindler, the president of WBN News to the Wolff kept at me about not blowing interviews. You can fuck around, they said, waste time shooting the birds and the bees, but you can't screw up an interview. (I signaled the crew to start shooting.) Well, whatever happened, I'd probably blow it. Trading insults with a geezer missing his front teeth wasn't going to cut it.

"Yo, Delmont," shouted the man. "C'mere. Look what the cat brung us."



“Put your teeth in, pop,” I said. “You’re sounding like a snake; all that hissing’s got the mice scaring customers.”

Delmont appeared, raising himself on his tiptoes to look over the geezer’s shoulder. “Why don’t you go away, boy,” he said, “and come back when you wiped off the shoe polish?”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that one, wasn’t funny the first time,” I said. “Look, guys, I’m not from CBS. We’re on the same side, you and I. Believe it or not.”

“You some kind of comedian, boy?”

“I’m sure Mr. Floyd has a good reason for throwing away a perfectly good saltshaker or a napkin holder after a Black man touches it. We don’t want to talk about that; we want to ask him about his war record.” I said. “Bring his bowling alley to a nationwide audience.”

“He don’t do interviews.”

“Not an interview. He served on the USS Alabama, didn’t he?”

“He don’t do interviews.”

“What we want is to ask him about the war. Wasn’t he in Tokyo Bay when General MacArthur signed the surrender?”

“He was, and damned proud of it.”

“He served on the USS Alabama, didn’t he?”

“All through the war.”

“Then what do you have to lose? There’s still a lot of pride in this nation about the war. Let us in now, ask him about the war.”

“It’s private property. Ain’t no one can tell us otherwise,” said Delmont, apoplectically raging. “You saw the sign when you came in that door, ‘Privately Owned.’ Means we say who comes in and out, not some federal law.”

“Yes, and I respect that, sir,” I said, glancing over my shoulder to make sure the crew was still recording. “One final question, now that we’re on common ground, about his war record. How we got from there to here?”

Delmont and the geezer looked at each other. The geezer corralled Delmont, turning him away, and, shaking his head, he slammed the door in my face.

“I thought so,” I said, turning around and addressing the camera, wrapping the interview, such as it was, with the following summary:

“Folks at home and around the nation, what we have here is a case of social change. People feel their jobs and their way of life is being threatened. And they are. That’s the way it is in our fast-paced civilization. The slaying of the three Black men that precipitated these protests was not motivated by race alone, but by the fact that they were college students, who, by the fact of their impending graduation, threaten Jim Crow practices. Understandably, people in the South, as well as people in the North, cling to their traditions. But time marches on, even south of the Mason-Dixon. Resistance to change is understandable. Social and economic pressures will ultimately bring about those changes. In the meantime, we can expect more friction.

“In the words of General Ulysses S. Grant, ‘If we are to have another civil war, I predict that the dividing line will not be Mason and Dixon’s, but between patriotism and intelligence on the one side, and superstition, ambition, and ignorance on the other.’

“Gus Mazur, Orangeburg, South Carolina.”

Besides the comedy at the bowling alley, I got what I needed: interviews with both sides, including politicians and prominent city leaders, police, and the National Guard, as well as stock shots of the demonstrations and footage of the bowling alley. Even taking the most objective perspective, the story boiled down to everyone from the governor to the police shifting the blame onto the victims. It was their fault that they had gotten themselves killed. They were in the wrong place. Not an uncommon occurrence: it would take years for the truth to emerge in this specific instance.

At the local Orangeburg station where Eddie and I cut the piece, the welcome was frosty. The usual attitudes: network interlopers don’t understand local issues. Ships passing in the night. There must be at least one person who chafes under the tyranny of local issues, I thought. But judging from the eyes that greeted us, we detected no spark of empathy, nada. Usually, even in the Deep South, there was one. Not so here.

I left in just enough of the banter with the geezer to titillate viewers, crossing my fingers that New York would not make cuts. We previewed it with the WBN News staff. When it was over, Roscoe Schindler, president of WBN News asked to roll the piece again. After, he announced, “I want that young man up here for lunch. ASAP.”

. . .

WHEN WE VIEWED THE BOWLING ALLEY FOOTAGE, EDDIE WALTERS and I came across the nervous Black man I had spotted making a getaway, a guy I now remembered seeing at the Stokely Carmichael press conference.

Every Black civil rights organization—King’s SCLC, SNCC, as well as Julian Bond’s Southern Poverty Law Center, and the NAACP—was plagued by informers, insiders reporting to the Bull Connors and the Sheriff Clarks as well as to the FBI and local segregationists. If he was a lowly pin setter at the bowling alley, what was he doing in DC? Where did he get the travel money? Why had he acted so guilty? I had Eddie print out a frame to send to Julian Bond.

Bond, in turn, gave it to SNCC and the stoolie was identified and taken care of. I never found out how; I knew better than to ask. All I heard back was, *The problem has been taken care of.*



BY SCORING A TOTAL OF FIVE GOALS AND LEADING HER TEAM TO TWO victories, Skipper Sanchez became a localized sensation in Grenoble. Whether or not the Olympic committee took notice was not determined, although representatives from the International Ice Hockey Federation did attend one match.

Aside from those two games, the only other fulfillment Skipper experienced was her seduction by the team’s goalie—two nights together in a Grenoble hotel and one night in her paramour’s Paris apartment on the rue de Vaugirard. Skipper spoke excellent Spanish, but only rudimentary French, so they settled on English. Mélanie, her name was Mélanie Sarrazin—not the usual sturdy young woman most people imagine a female goalie to be; she was slender and rangy. In bed, the slightly taller French girl and her more stalwart American counterpart were a perfect fit, and, as experienced lovemakers, they quickly uncovered a complementary set of maneuvers that kept them going most of the night.

In the lead-up to their first night together, Mélanie had pressed the key to her hotel room gently into Skipper’s hand during the postgame

swarm on the ice. Skipper, feeling the object in her hand and immediately identifying it, felt an overwhelming excitement in her loins, which manifested itself as one of those shimmering moments of beauty that occasionally passed over her face. The nature of this seduction—the fact that Mélanie had fathomed the essence of Skipper’s sexuality—made it many times more intense.

When the train from Grenoble arrived at the Gare de Lyon, the two ladies took a cab to Mélanie’s apartment. They showered together in one of those tankless (*chaudière à gaz*) French showers that are incapable of producing a constant stream of water at a constant temperature, thus alternating from blasting to trickling, scalding to freezing, during which intervals, the two girls jumped aside, giggling and giddy, before cautiously venturing a hand to the water to gauge whether the temperature had stabilized.

After, they proceeded to a late dinner at La Coupole on the Boulevard Montparnasse. By eleven forty-five, most amusements— theater, concerts, movies—were finished so the place was filled with late-nighters. Skipper was shocked to observe how many diners left large portions of their copious meals untouched as the boisterous French turned to drink and loud talk. Skipper dispatched a *choucroute la Coupole*, consisting of sauerkraut, three types of pork meat, and three types of sausage, while chiding her partner for only dabbling with her *fricassée de rognons à l’Armagnac, sauce au poivre, et pommes grenaille* in the wasteful French manner. Mélanie preferred rubbernecking the late-hour crowd and conversation with Skipper.

“Do you have a boy- or girlfriend in America?” Mélanie asked.

“A boyfriend. He’s a TV producer.”

“I can’t stand being touched by a man,” Mélanie shuddered.

“Even your father?”

“Especially my father,” replied Mélanie, putting the matter to bed, as it were. “*De toute façon, is it good with him?*”

“It’s very good with him. I probably wouldn’t be here with you if you hadn’t pressed the key in my hand like you did. It was so romantic. I felt it in my—how do you say pussy in French?”

“*La chatte. As in : ‘Puis-je te bouffer la chatte?’*”

They looked at each other and giggled self-consciously as if the

surrounding tables had heard every word and were shocked.

“Is that, ‘Can I eat your pussy?’” asked Skipper.

“*Oui*,” answered Mélanie.

“Yes, you can. In about twenty minutes. Can you wait that long?”

“*Oui*, I can wait that long, but not much longer.”

On the walk back to the rue de Vaugirard, Mélanie tried to pry a commitment from Skipper, who brushed her advances aside. “There’s no point in making plans that are bound to miscarry.”

“*Au fait*, did you realize your expression changed when you felt the key? You radiated, your face did... *plein d’ectase*.”

“Full of ‘ecstasy?’”

“*Oui*. Beautiful face.”

Out in the night air, the heavy food she’d consumed notwithstanding, the American girl put her arm around her partner. She’d be leaving at dawn. Not wanting to appear uncaring, Skipper squeezed her friend’s hand, and together, holding hands, they skipped the last thirty yards to the door of her building, where they delighted in a long, sensuous kiss.

“Will you tell him about me when you are back in America?” asked Mélanie.

“Hell no,” Skipper replied emphatically. “He hasn’t done anything to deserve being hurt. I love him.”

On her way to the airport, Skipper experienced an inspirational moment, one she used to shape her attitude toward life and her dealings with people. It was the way her cab driver negotiated the traffic around the Arc de Triomphe, all seven lanes of it, that caught her attention. Unlike the other drivers, who inched their way across, goosing it in short spurts, braking suddenly, steering their vehicles into no-way-out arrangements with other vehicles, her driver plowed into traffic, never looking to the right or left, not moving his head or varying the speed or direction of his vehicle. And because he made no concessions, the other drivers sensed they must give way, allowing him to scoot around the circle from avenue Kleber to avenue de la Grande Armée without once stopping or braking. Skipper took this experience as an object lesson, vowing to apply it. By moving full speed ahead in life situations, undeterred by criticism and jealousy around her, she would not only reach her goal, but she would also leave those who hesitated in

her wake humbled and perplexed, wondering why they, themselves, were stuck.

On the plane back to DC the next morning, Skipper thought about Gus, about the love she'd defended so vigorously to Mélanie? His energy? The principles they shared? But what good are principles when a beautiful woman places a key in your hand? When it's over, no matter how much a couple has in common, the little special things—the shared favorites: books, songs, movies, restaurants, snacks, gifts, holiday delights—are never binding.

Why had she been so vehement in rejecting Mélanie's entreaty? *Couldn't love and lust be compartmentalized into the separate strands of one's being?* she wondered. She decided to let live her glorified one-night, well, really three-night, stand. They don't come along that often.



NEEDLESS TO SAY, WHILE THE CAT IS AWAY THE MOUSE WILL PLAY, I.E., I invited Lil to Washington while Skipper was in France. I didn't know how far it would go or whether I'd ever want to see her again. If it was only for sex, I never would have invited her. And Lil wouldn't have accepted, so she insisted. I told myself there was something about this woman.

I took her on a tour of Georgetown, Cleveland Park, Rock Creek, up and down Connecticut Avenue, ending up on Macomb Street. The renovation was underway. Ahmet, the Turkish guy working on my aunt's car had recommended a friend, who was as skilled in the building trades as Ahmet was in car repairs. The bathrooms and kitchen were nearly finished. One crew was working on the siding, another on the roof.

She was impressed with my being a producer for a major network, but not that much. Not that I minded. What she liked most about DC were the cheap houses in nice neighborhoods, the size of my apartment, and the forty-eight-inch Weber upright piano I rented. "I didn't realize how beautiful this city is," she said.

After plinking on the piano, she fetched her tools. "They're supposed to tune them before renting them out," she said, brandishing her tuning wrench. "Always have them with me. You never know."

“You know Noah Howard, Frank Wright, and Sunny Murray? I knew them in Paris.”

“I know them,” she said. “I fool around with the contrabass, you know, recorded with Alan Silva’s orchestra, as a second bass for BYG.”

“Ever done accompaniment? Jazz standards?”

“Not really, but I could do it,” she said.

I liked watching her tune the piano, the smiles she cast my way from time to time. It didn’t take her long. She was soon rendering a passable version of “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was.”

“Want to sing it with me?” she asked.

I nodded. “Sure, I know it; play it again.”

A little blocky, our first attempt. Both of us were out of practice—but we got better, running through a few more tunes before sitting down to tuna fish sandwiches.

After, she quizzed me on DC real estate. “You could make a lot of money, doing what you’re doing with your Macomb Street house, buying other properties and renovating them.”

I hadn’t thought about it, I told her. “My work precludes juggling too many balls at the same time.”

“I could be your entrepreneur,” she laughed.

“You think I need an entrepreneur?”

Lil liked the apartment, its open-air bedroom, the spacious layout compared to New York apartments of the same ilk, and the fact that I only paid \$125 a month.

“This bedroom’s okay now it’s heated, and the new blinds make it more private. Come summer DC gets very, very hot and this apartment isn’t air-conditioned.

“You think New York is any better?” said Lil.

“Not really. Besides, I can’t sleep with air-conditioning.”

“Me neither.”

“Hey, have you heard this?” I showed Lil the cover of Herbie Hancock’s maiden album. “You gotta check out this Dexter Gordon tenor solo on “The Maze.” I put it on the turntable. After it was over, I asked her, “What do you think Adolphe Sax, the guy who invented the saxophone in 1840, would say if he heard it?”

“He’d pop his gourd.”

I loved it when Lil used hipster expressions. Delightfully incongruous, like watching an Eskimo ride a camel.

ON THE LAST DAY OF LIL'S VISIT, WE SLEPT IN. I WOKE ABOUT 11:00 a.m., ready for sex. I rolled over and found myself facing her naked back, which I caressed with the flat of my right hand. She was awake, but not moving. I could tell Lil was thinking about something else. Buying houses? The likelihood of maintaining a long-distance relationship?

There was also her need, before sex, of smoking a joint, not the heavy shit we'd smoked at her house, pot from a friend's farm in Maryland. That she needed a stimulus to get in the mood was a crutch to my way of thinking—until she got going and she let herself go. I thought about mentioning it but resisted greeting her with a reproach first thing in the morning. Not a good way to start the day.

She turned to face me. "You know, you haven't been very clever in concealing the woman you're obviously fucking. I found any number of feminine articles scattered around. What gives? Why invite me?"

"I have a female companion; we do not live together. Anything wrong with that?"

She backed off as if showing deference to male resolve.

"Is that why you're being standoffish?" I asked.

She pressed herself against me and looked into my face with an injured expression. "I thought you were different, the way you protected me, so much so I made the first move. I wanted you. That never happens. Not with me."

"Don't tell me you haven't fucked the guys you play with. I was friends with some brothers in Paris. Any woman that hangs out with those guys is fair game."

"Nice man jealous China girl?"

"Stop it."

She backed away. "Listen, it's only a game. I talk to you like this; you take me."

"It's weird, Lil; like a Black girl telling a white guy she's his slave."

"I didn't mean it that way."



I took her in my arms. We kissed a long, long embrace that ended in sex, but not before she insisted on smoking a joint.

I brought it up after, "I didn't want to say anything, but now that we're into truth and reconciliation, do you have to smoke a joint each time before sex?"

"Does it bother you?" she asked.

"A little bit, yeah," I answered. "Makes me think you think you won't enjoy it unless you're high?"

"It makes my every nerve ending come alive. Your mere touch has me almost coming when I'm high. I don't smoke a joint when I masturbate; I have all those sexy musicians to imagine I'm doing it with. Does that freak you out?"

"Not really. I'm fascinated by women's sexuality," I said. "It runs so much deeper than a man's."

*Wow*, I thought, *this woman holds her own*. What was she up to, baiting me like that? Was she trying to get me to lose my cool? Or was it a roundabout way of getting me to commit? I couldn't tell. I liked her a lot. My only misgiving: Would she change if we made it a thing? Her Chinese traditions and cultural formalities, all the weight of her ancient civilization, might kick in and I would be suffocated by tradition.

"I used to smoke a joint sometimes," I said. "I discovered two things: one, there are some women that just don't meet you halfway, and that kills it. Turns me off. I can't get it up; two, when I smoked, the first time was great, but when I wanted to go again, I couldn't. I was too enervated. When I don't smoke one... well, you know about that."

We played tennis twice at Congressional. I was a little worried, about whether the members would give Lil the evil eye, similar to the invasive scrutiny they'd directed at me initially. My aunt said I was being paranoid. The club wasn't restricted, neither in its bylaws nor in its attitudes. My paranoia, I told my aunt, was the difference between darkened skin and white skin like hers.

Lil and I were matched against a top pair. We won two sets to one. Lil loved the play and the club. After, in the dining area, we hooked up with Huston Simmons, a friend from NBC, who introduced us to the people at his table. Lil was a hit: she was afforded honorary white status

because she was both beautiful and an excellent tennis player. Invitations to dance were so plentiful I only had a couple of whirls with her.

“Shall we show them some of your experimental terpsichorean moves, or do we stick to the run-of-the-mill foxtrots and waltzes?” I asked.

Lil performed a momentary shoulder wiggle, delighting onlookers. She was having a good time. During a lively waltz, I spun her around so vigorously that the whirl of it had her almost swooning. The dance was capped off by the force of my manhood jabbing her as we floated around and around and she didn’t need any artificial stimulants when I led her to the Chrysler I’d just purchased from a guy at work. In the limited space in the back seat, I had to fold her almost in two before finding a suitable position.

Lil came and went with little ceremony and little progress in establishing further rapport. It wasn’t negative by any means, but it wasn’t that all-important *je ne sais quoi*. Unlike my relationship with Skipper, where living separately lent freshness to each dalliance and novelty to being together, Lil, I felt, might have a more claustrophobic effect on my life.

I hoped I was wrong.

SOMETIMES THE TELEPHONE IS MORE EFFECTIVE AT CLEARING THE AIR than face-to-face. It’s less emotional. No eye contact, or other visual signals, just tone of voice and inflection. That Lil called me the following day to apologize for being standoffish floored me.

“I don’t want to scare you, but I can’t hold it in: I like you,” she said.

“And I, you. However—”

I aired my reservations about being enveloped by a Chinese culture that would force her to bend to its collective will at some point. I spoke respectfully; I didn’t want her to think I was disparaging her roots.

“What do you think I’m doing, huh? You see how I live. Do you see any monolithic set of values limiting my growth as a person? I sense we both want a way of life beyond middle-class conformity,” she declared.

“Every person in the world believes he’s a nonconformist. It’s not so easy to be fancy-free. You’re either super talented or a hard worker. Even then—”

“You have your culture, too. You don’t think there are things about it

I don't understand or like? That every time I look at you and you look at me isn't it a culture shock? But then, once we're used to each other and we look—really look—into each other, we see the essence, not the surface.”

“Look, we have plenty of time,” I said. “Let's take some.”

“I agree. Let's take our time.”

“I want to tell you something,” I said. “I usually jump too quickly. It never works. Lots of passion; no compatibility. We're still young. We have the time. I don't want to lose you, but I need time. That's why I don't live with Skipper, the girl whose stuff you found.”

“Will you continue to see her?”

“She helped me at a very difficult time. That's all I'll say for the moment. Can we move forward on this basis?” I said. “I'll be coming to New York more and more. Like I'm lunching with the president of WBN News this coming week.”

“Oh damn, I won't be here. I'm taking a tennis week in Florida.”

“Anybody but the president, I'd volunteer myself to tag along.”

Mouse or cat, Lil was quite a woman.



“ALWAYS SAW YOU HUNCHED OVER A MOVIOLA,” SAID ROSCOE Schindler, “Never realized how tall a man you were.”

“Six foot three, two hundred pounds, if it matters, sir.”

“Drop the *sir* thing, Gus. It's Roscoe.” I reflected on what the Wolff had mentioned about the Soviet politburo.

Standing across from him in the corporate dining room, I studied the older man in the light coming through the lone window, his cast and contoured appearance that resembled the image of an emperor on an ancient Roman coin, cementing once and for all the relative distance between our two ranks, the lionized and the living chattel.

A Japanese waiter entered carrying a bottle of wine and a bottle of Perrier. Schindler extended his arm as a signal to sit.

The waiter put the wine bottle in a standing bucket and the Perrier on the table before handing out menus and returning to the kitchen. “We take pride in what we serve. We'll talk, but we'll eat, too.”

“Well, I may not be back here for a while. The shrimp cocktail and roast beef should tide me over till then,” I said with a deferential smile.

“Excellent choices, my friend.”

The wine was poured, and orders were taken. Through it all, I had no idea about why I was there or what kind of man the all-powerful supreme leader was. A friendly front that masked a tyrant?

“We’re innovating. A lot of changes next year. I’m talking about who our audience should be, but right now isn’t.”

*That clears it up, I thought. He must have me mixed up with someone else. Either I’m part of the innovation, and he’s lost his mind, or I’m its first victim. Better say something—keep the farce going.* “Who is our audience then?”

“Exactly what I hoped you’d ask.”

Long pause.

“What audience? You tell me,” said Schindler. “Who would you have as our viewers?”

“If you’re asking me, you must have decided already. So, if I get it wrong... It’s kind of riddle or a trap.”

“Gus, your Orangeburg piece blew my socks off, and started me thinking about our viewership in a new way.”

“It did?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I would say... We are the come-lately network, feasting on the leftovers our more highbrow competitors leave us. Doesn’t mean we have to dumb down to gain a share. Means we should go for women and ethnics. The tired, the wretched, and the teeming,” I said.

“Excellent. You rang the bell, Gus,” said Roscoe. “We’re innovating like I said. Changing our whole approach. Beating everyone to the punch, hiring women next year as on-air talent and as producers. Also, ethnics. You’re our first non-white face.”

“I guessed right?”

“You not only got it right; you renewed my faith,” said Roscoe. “Like the Grant quote you used, it made the Orangeburg piece, expanding it. Did you know Admiral Nimitz once said, ‘Some of the best advice I’ve had comes from junior officers and enlisted men’ We don’t listen to the men in the field. Notice I don’t dare include women because we haven’t any to speak of, but that’s going to change.”

“Maybe I can use the Nimitz quote in a future piece,” I said half-jokingly while finishing off the last of my Baked Alaska.

“You’ll get plenty of chances to,” said Schindler, missing the irony in my reply. “From now on, you’re my eyes and ears in DC. You’ll keep your present duties. With more on-camera work, however. You’re good at it. I’ll raise your salary. Never extend a man’s responsibilities without increasing his pay. Undermines efficiency.”

“Tell me: Are people complaining, maybe, that I’m getting special treatment?”

“Let them complain,” said Schindler. “You’ll get assignments from me via Doug Brentley. Should Nixon get the nomination, you might find yourself acting as his dedicated antagonist. Ratings go sky-high during a campaign, even higher when the same person questions the candidate’s every move, every word. Kinda like Joseph Welch versus Joe McCarthy, antagonists locked in a death struggle. The last segment of Friday’s show.”

“As long as you have me here, I’ve been wondering about my Vietnam rant. Did anything ever come of it?”

“Quite a lot, in fact,” said Schindler. “But like you pointed out: the networks as well as our affiliates—each one of them—still support the war. Not to mention our sponsors. Gannon Crisp is—how should I put it—*feels obligated* to support the administration.”

“But the *H-B* pieces I see coming out of New York. Every day, a piece critical of the war.”

“Piecemeal criticism. The administration likes them because they include the body count stats they love. A long way from a two-hour, in-depth piece on mutinies and fragging.”

“So, it’s cool it for now?”

“Changes are happening as we speak. Believe me. Not quick enough for you, maybe,” said Schindler. “We believe that Tet has forced LBJ to make peace talks a priority. We think that Nixon might attempt to sabotage them.”

“How?”

“If the war were to end before the election, who benefits?”

I took a moment to think this through. “Oh, that is real sinister. If it does end before, the Democrat; if it doesn’t, the Republican.”

“More on that later. If and when it happens, we may be able to combine your enlisted men’s story with a cover-up thread.”

He then led me around the offices to introduce me. Although I’d interacted with most of the News Division brass, I felt he was orchestrating these formalities to send a message that as of today I should be considered “differently.” It wasn’t anything he said, it was the way he handled it.

On the way to LaGuardia, I asked myself, *What happened?* I didn’t put it like that exactly. For the moment, I accepted what Schindler said and the way he said it. For my performance, I probably could have done better. A little more left brain. I was more interested in Schindler’s performance, however. Lots of right brain. A man who appreciates theater, likes running his fingers through his silvery mane, coaxing a performance out of an actor. Once he figured out that I came across as guarded, but eager for the slightest sign of affinity to respond in kind, the bond was sealed. Yet, I cautioned myself not to buy Schindler’s vision of the future so entirely. Keep the mask handy. Business as Greek drama. Nixon Agonistes.

Chess played out many moves in advance.

IN THE MANAGEMENT MEETING THAT FOLLOWED, ROSCOE SCHINDLER used his communication skills, left and right brain, to introduce his plans for innovation and to deflect any undercurrents of hostility toward Gus Mazur. More the idea of him than his person, hostile feelings waiting to erupt.

“Mazur had his chance,” said Schindler. “He took it and he aced it.” The News Division chief spread some papers across the table and pointed to them. “Did you see these ratings for that one piece? Crushed our rivals.”

“He’s a glorified film editor, crazy antics almost got him fired a couple of years ago,” said George Pongracic, *H-B* executive producer.

“I’ll take Herb’s and Doug Brentley’s opinions any day. They love him,” said Schindler, emphasizing each statement with his hands, waving them. “We’re stale—that includes me. We’re the Maginot Line. Yesterday’s ideas. Stick with the past and you lose the present!”

Schindler took a book out of his pocket and tossed it onto the table. “Who here hasn’t read this book?” Hands grabbing it, passing it around. “*My Years with General Motors*, Alfred P. Sloan,” said Holger Gross, New York’s *H-B* producer, reading the title aloud.

“Order copies, one for each one of us, Miss Davies,” said Schindler. “About time we came to grips with what management is around here.”

“You know what people are going to say when this leaks out, Roscoe?” said Pongracic. A pause during which Schindler kept nodding knowingly, urging Pongracic to continue. “They’re gonna say: Roscoe Schindler’s new protégé. First, it was Don Wolff. Now the latest in innovation: women and ethnics. No one’s ever sold a news program with a female anchor. Innovation’s another word for wasteful spending.”

“Gannon Crisp...” said Roscoe Schindler, taking his time, “has a new infatuation, a young MBA. Noah Goodstein. A money man and numbers cruncher. It’s either the slide rule way or our way. I’ll take the likes of Gus Mazur, film editor and field producer, any day. Shareholder value and innovation aren’t mutually exclusive. Stick with the past and you lose the present.”



“YOU’RE THE YOUNG MAN WHO PRODUCED THE BOWLING ALLEY PIECE FOR WBN?” asked the elderly gray-haired man, Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen (R-IL), Senate minority leader.

“Yes, sir. Gus Mazur.”

“I included a second invitation along with Don Wolff’s, wanted him to make sure I could meet you,” said the senator.

“Thank you, sir,” I said while shaking hands and looking around the room. “Doesn’t look like Don’s going to make it tonight.”

“He has a full cup, no doubt,” Dirksen answered. “That said, now that you’re here, you’re automatically part of that coterie of Washington cocktail party regulars, something you may come to regret.”

“Have to get myself fitted for a tux,” I added, with deliberate irony.

“Gossip greases the wheels of Washington. Watch out for beautiful ladies looking to plant red herrings with eager reporters like yourself.”

“I’m an old hand with gossip... my ex.”

“Son, in 1964 we accomplished the impossible; we passed the Civil Rights Act. Have things improved? I’d like to know because LBJ is getting hit from both ends—by the crowd that hates the war and by the civil rights people. King is a leading voice in both, and I need to know where our party stands in their eyes.”

“I know about your part in passing the bill. It was a courageous act on your part, Senator. However, enforcement is the gating factor. I used to think passing it was all it would take. I was wrong. There’s still resistance. And enforcement can’t change attitudes.”

“What I sensed in your work was a fair, and... what’s the word...”

“... balanced,” I said.

“Yes, a fair and balanced approach. I liked that you got the other side.”

“You’re never going to convince people like that bowling alley owner. They’re hardwired. It’s the well-meaning people in the middle that swing either way. They may be for it today, but five, ten years from now, they may go the other way.”

“What about the leaders? King, Jesse Jackson, Abernathy, Young?”

“Well, I know Abernathy and Julian Bond,” I said.

“What about Malcolm X? Fascinating figure. Is he still an influence?”

“I’m trying to get the network to let me do a piece on him. They see him as a lone wolf; someone whose influence declined after he left the Muslims.”

“And King. Have you met him?” asked Senator Dirksen.

“No, sir, not yet, but I’m after Abernathy to present me.”

“How well do you know Abernathy?”

“I know him. He’s the logical successor, should anything happen to MLK. A very intelligent man, but overshadowed by King’s magnetism, which leaves him itching for, uh, greater public recognition. He’s not an egotist like Jesse Jackson.”

A brunette in a Jackie Kennedy Dior dress, who turned out to be Jackie Kennedy, interrupted my tête-à-tête with Senator Dirksen. “Who’s your date, Senator?” she asked with a wink.

“Jackie, my dear, this is...”

“Wait. I’ve seen you lately. You’re Gus somebody,” she said.

“Gus Mazur. I’m with WBN.”



“You do all those pieces with civil rights leaders, right?”

“I’ve done a few.”

“Not even Sander Vanocur gets those interviews. He’s my favorite,” she said.

“Have you checked out the color of Sander’s skin and compared it to this young man’s skin, my dear?” asked the senator.

I pulled up my sleeve.

“So, you sympathize with the Negroes?” she asked.

“They’re not looking for sympathy,” I said. “They’re looking for authenticity.”

“Excuse me,” she said, then added. “So are you authentic?”

“As much as my Cherokee blood allows me to be.”

“That’s good enough for me,” said the senator.

“I came with a date who I can’t seem to find. Would you mind accompanying me home, Mr. Mazur?”

“I’d be glad to,” I said as we took our leave, “but I must warn you: my girlfriend’s out of the country.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”



I MET SKIPPER AT DULLES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT. AFTER collecting her luggage, I led her to my newly acquired 1964 Chrysler New Yorker.

“New car. What’s that all about?” she asked.

“The Jaguar is still being repaired. A guy at work, being transferred to our Berlin office, was selling it cheap. House being renovated. New apartment, new car, new motorcycle, and, oh, and a rented piano. I know just enough to accompany myself when trying songs in different keys. Rudimentary, but worth it.”

“Somewhere, there must have been a woman in all this. You haven’t been unfaithful to me? I’m terribly jealous, you know,” said Skipper. “Even though we’re not exclusive, I think about what you’re doing. Would you like me to tell you what I’ve been up to?”

“I confess. There’s only been one woman, Jackie Kennedy. Met her at a cocktail party for Dirksen.”

Skipper laughed, "Very funny," she said. "What's that smell? Like someone's been jerking off in here."

"Funny, Jackie didn't say anything when I drove her home," I said, pressing a button. "See, automatic windows."

"That's better."

"Just the other day, I saw a news flash about your exploits in Grenoble."

"I have a news flash for you, hon."

"Oh, yeah. What?" I asked.

"You're having a birthday party at my parent's."

"Does this gathering of the clan include Delmas and Ginny?"

"And, Ruthie. She flew in from LA," said Skipper, "for a social workers' conclave at GW Hospital. She'll be in town for ten days. Now's your chance to ask her to help you get Virginia off your back."

"Wish you'd cleared it with me first."

"I believe in clearing the air generally, not only with you, Mr. Producer. Might as well be now."

"Maybe they won't show up," I said.

"Don't worry. Any occasion for gossip; she'll be there, Virginia will. She's the cook," said Skipper. "Any chance of WBN doing a piece on my so-called hockey exploits? Be a big hit in this country, especially with women."

"I talked to one of the producers at WBBN," I said. "He's hopeful."

"What does that mean?"

"It means they may be interested," I said. "I can't dictate to WBBN. The biggest stumbling block is no film. Interviews alone won't cut it."

"Someone filmed it. I'm sure. I'll reach out."

"Action film would boost the chances of coverage, maybe even a network piece where I might have some say. We'd still need some heavy hitters to put it across. Douglas Brentley, for one."



PRESENT AT MY BIRTHDAY PARTY WAS THE MISSING SISTER, RUTH O'Malley. Other guests were: Skipper and me; Santiago Sanchez, Skip-

per's father; and the girls' mother, Edith Sanchez; and yes—Virginia Hubbard and Delmas.

The sisters regarded Santiago Sanchez with reverence, referring to him as the Old Man, which, twenty-three years after the Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, and Okinawa, he now was. An older, not yet elderly, man who'd survived the toughest naval battles of the Pacific War, at first as the captain of a cruiser, and, finally, as a special aide to CINCPAC, Admiral Chester Nimitz. Promoted to rear admiral after his heroics in the Battle of Ironbottom Sound, he retired as a captain at the war's end.

He met his wife, Edith, during the war. Skipper was born in Austin in 1944. By producing three daughters with no common characteristics, Edith Sanchez pushed genetic theory to its limits. Morally and emotionally, she was as tough as the Old Man when it came to raising a family constantly on the move. Typical of the challenges she'd faced was coordinating a last-minute escape from the Japanese takeover of the Philippines that cost the life of Oscar Hubbard, Virginia's father.

Although the Sanchez clan—formerly the O'Malleys, previous to that, the Hubbards—used to follow the time-honored American pastime of individual and group recitals at holiday gatherings, these activities had been dropped from the proceedings because the present generation preferred watching television to the singing of songs and the playing of instruments. Why learn an instrument when families no longer enjoy dinner together, was the rationale. It was believed to be very familial to huddle around the TV and watch a classic Christmas movie. Today, the clan got to watch a rerun of my *American Skeptics* show—a delightful coincidence, everyone agreed, but deliberately engineered by the birthday boy.

In Sanchez family get-togethers, ping-pong and pool now took center stage, along with cake cutting and small talk. Delmas shot pool with Skipper and lost decisively. I played ping-pong with Ruth. Virginia and her mother cooked two chickens and ran the kitchen. When the dinner bell sounded, pool cues and paddles were stowed.

“How old are you, Gus?” asked Edith Sanchez after the chicken dinner had been consumed and the birthday cake was being readied. “Do you know, Skip? Virginia?”

“No, for some reason I never felt comfortable asking,” replied Virginia.

“Me neither,” said Skipper.

“Gus?” asked Edith.

“C’mon, Gus,” urged Ruth.

“It’s a Cherokee custom. Not disclosing your age,” I answered sarcastically, hoping they wouldn’t persist.

“No cake for Gus, until you tell us,” said Ruth.

“That’s not fair. He doesn’t have to say if he doesn’t want to,” said Skipper.

“Gus, Gus... Gus,” went the chant.

“Isn’t there some way I can avoid this?” I asked. How many more glad tidings I could resist was quickly approaching zero. I looked at Skipper, trying to signal a retreat.

“I know a way,” said the girls’ mother. “You and Virginia sing and play for us.”

Virginia stood up as if reflexively animated. I looked at Skipper, then at Virginia, and seeing no impulse to refuse in her eyes, said, “I’m game if you are.”

Virginia sat down at the piano. We huddled. After a moment, I turned around and announced: “‘Wohin’ by Franz Schubert.” So began a recital that reached semiprofessional heights, more effusive in emotion than flawless in technique. It was, according to the applause at the end, above average. We were out of practice and out of empathy.

“Another,” said Edith.

“More,” said Skipper.

“That’s all well and good,” I said. “What I like is the Great American Songbook, but now that I’m no longer doing musicals at GW, I’m confined to singing in the shower.”

“Songs I can’t play,” said Virginia, “but Ruthie can.”

“That’s right, Ruthie can play any show tune,” said Skipper.

“Shall we try one, Ruth?” I asked.

Ruth O’Malley, whose only similarity with her sisters was her blazing green eyes, walked over to the piano, sat her tensile body down, and started to experiment with chord variations on “Time After Time.” I

picked up the tune and started to hum it. We parleyed, after which, Ruth transposed the key from E-flat to D.

“It’s a challenge because of the range, but here goes...” I said.

“Wait a moment,” said Ruthie’s mother. “You need a good-luck stool like Frank Sinatra.”

Santiago Sanchez went to the kitchen and came back with one. I sat down while Ruth tinkled out an intro worthy of a Nelson Riddle arrangement. I came in at the precise right instant and off we went on an excursion through a near-perfect interpretation. When we finished, I pointed to Ruth, whose eyes seemed to dance across her face as she smiled. I leaned over and kissed her cheek as we raised our clasped hands.

Santiago bounded out of his chair and walked over to us: “Ruthie, you were wonderful. Gus, that was, yes, a little more of a classical baritone, but the dynamic, the diction, the breath control. Frank would give you an A-plus.”

“You can’t mention his name with mine, sir,” I replied.

“The breath control, not taking one after ‘*You’ve kept my love so young, so new*’—drawing out the vibrato on ‘so new’ and waiting until after the next line after ‘*And time after time*’ to breathe again. Excellent.”

“My aunt started me with lessons, even before I left Oklahoma,” I recounted, “My teacher told me the first day. He said, ‘Every note emanates from a place in your body, from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Feel the place before you sing it, and you will be on key every time.’ Frank Sinatra does this perfectly. I have a long way to go.”

“It’s because you don’t do it full-time,” said Ruth. “That’s all.”

“That’s what I tell him,” shouted Skipper. “More.”

“More,” echoed the others.

Ruthie and I huddled again while the others fell into small talk.

“Wow,” I said, “you brought out the Italian in me. Your playing, that is.”

“That was a ballad. What about something up-tempo?” said Ruth.

After a moment, I announced, “‘Just One of Those Things,’ after which no one will ever ask my age again... Pretty please.”

Now I had two accompanists—Ruth and Lil, both female. Getting complicated, twice over.

On parting, Edith Sanchez took me aside, “I really liked your show on Sinclair Lewis. It was very educational.”

*Educational*, it made my head spin—that kiss-of-death code word for a film with no grit. Poor Herb—it’s come to this in the end: to be damned with faint praise.

“THAT GOT FRIENDLY AT THE END,” REMARKED SKIPPER ON THE WAY to my apartment.

“You mean with Ruth?”

“Exactly. Kissing her and holding hands,” replied Skipper. “Almost like I wasn’t even there. Oh, I know what you’re going to say: that I don’t understand how it is with musicians—the bond and the communication—feeling each other intuitively. No outsider can ever understand.”

“I don’t know if I like where you’re going with this, Skipper, we’re not on an exclusive basis. From the beginning, we agreed on this,” I said. “Is it so wrong for me to appreciate her talent?”

“We’re not exclusive, but when you’re with me I expect a modicum of attention,” said Skipper. “Well, tonight you can fuck your pillow. Drop me off at my place.”

MARCH

**M**ost of the time people don't know what their faces are doing. You see it when they talk on the telephone. Unaware their expressions mirror what is being said, they smile, giggle, frown, and they rage as if their interlocutor was present, even though no one is.

Ruth O'Malley's face, for instance, seemed to reflect not only her own emotions but also those of the person she was conversing with. Bromides like "Have a nice day," she didn't go for. Instead, she'd make up a phrase to fit the moment. "You're happy today. I'm glad." Or "So nice to see you cheerful." Or in the inverse case, something marginally witty, "Nothing like a cup of coffee to cheer you up. If that doesn't work, there's always absinthe and peanut butter." Corny, yes. But personalized, less like small talk, because the words came to her on the spur of the moment.

Some people use facial expressions to deceive, like the cover of a book that suggests one thing while it hides another. Ruth O'Malley didn't use her charms as artifice. Just the opposite; her unaffected nature put itchy types like me at ease. And yet, I thought, she's too good to be true. Behind her cheery exterior, there must be a cauldron of— I couldn't figure it exactly, but it bore watching.

Ruth and I had just come back to her parent's house after auditioning at the One Step Down as an opening act for the Heath Brothers gig on

Saturday night. I knew Joe the owner, who, because I mentioned I might be able to feature the club in a TV spot, let us audition. From the first chords of Ruth's intro, the brothers Heath—Tootie, Percy, and Jimmy—stopped what they were doing and listened. Midmorning, there weren't many people present. Joe, of course. A beer distributor struggling with a keg. The kitchen detail. The first number, "From This Moment On" went well. I was feeling it; Ruth's accompaniment saw to it.

Their next tune, however, "This Will Make You Laugh," didn't come off. Not Ruth's fault, I coughed and gasped, my voice cracking, my throat burning as she kicked off the tune. I tried clearing my throat, tried disgorging what felt like a lump, but nothing happened. Onlookers started to whisper. I sounded like an old car with a manual transmission's stripped gears.

I struggled to find the tempo, even forgetting the words. Self-doubt took hold. Who was I to think I could appear with professionals? By the time I'd finished coughing and gasping, everyone had returned to their chores. It wasn't a fiasco. I'd sort of passed the test with the first number, that much was clear. I ordered a vodka and tonic. Too deflated to continue, I signaled Ruth to let it go. There'd be no Saturday gig. It was a definitive setback, confidence-wise.

Ruth looked me in the eyes. "It's not psychological; it's physical. You'll see. Shit happens."

We spent the afternoon at Ruth's parents' house, relaxing, learning tunes, listening to her play one song after another, sometimes the chords, sometimes the whole tune, leaning back as if the music flowed through her and she was merely transmitting it as she received it from the ether. The same sixth sense that connected her to the piano made her aware I was watching her. And she was watching me back, not with her eyes, with the awareness of a woman who knows she's being watched in a certain way. At the end of one long arpeggio, she stopped playing the piano and looked up at me. "What?"

"You have such an in-the-moment face. Like you never seem to go inside for more than an instant, and then you're right back at it." I said. "It's got the map of Ireland all over it."

She smiled, pointing at particular lines around her mouth, "Here's the river Shannon and there's the—"



“The river Barrow,” I said, pointing to a line on her forehead as I sat down at the piano.

She laughed, but I realized she’d become aware that the topic was no longer music, that my comments on her appearance signaled a come-on in the offing, a rather clumsy one, I’m afraid.

She made no overt move to discourage me, except to change the subject. “I’m leaving for California in the middle of next week, you know.”

I had been so excited singing jazzy vocals again I couldn’t see my face changing from the contentment I’d been feeling to an expression of distress at the thought of her leaving.

Ruth caught my change of demeanor. “You better get going. Skipper’ll be worried.”

The words as spoken said *Go*. Her eyes said something else: I was going to kiss her, and she was going to let me. I pulled her to me. As she slid across the bench, her lips parted, and our mouths collided. Ruth was first to break off, pulling away to look into my eyes at the same time her fingers undid the buttons of her blouse.

“That was nice. I can’t stand a bad kisser,” she said, thus confirming she wanted more. How much more I didn’t know. Surely, she would break it off, but not before I massaged her breasts, passing my thumbs back and forth over her hardened nipples.

Sighing, she unlatched her bra, letting it fall over her shoulders. Standing upright, almost defiant, were the pointy tits of a Valkyrie, small, but aggressive. “Here,” she said, pulling me into her. She threw her head back moaning as I burrowed into her.

“We still have a few days,” she said after pushing me away gently, letting me know things had gone far enough. “Let’s work again tomorrow.”

“I’d love to, but...” I sputtered, struggling to quell my pent-up desire, “after today, you probably think I’m a bust.”

“You have a really good voice,” she said. “All you need is self-confidence—which comes from practice.”

She stood up and started to rub my shoulders. “Anyway,” she nodded, “it’s not the end of the world.”

If she kept rubbing my shoulders, I’d come close to coming. I took

several deep breaths through the nose, a method I used to mollify my libido and subdue a hard-on.

It was at that moment it came to me. Ruth was a free spirit, a butterfly woman, ready to fly away with a change in wind direction. A woman whose whims might exhaust a man. The opposite of Lil, who, once she found the right man, would transform herself into a loyal protector, a watcher of backs. I was certain that neither one of her sisters understood Ruth, neither Skipper with her moral rigidity nor Virginia in her desperate misreading of life.

“There are women—members of the fair sex—whose role it is to confuse members of my sex. There ought to be a law against stopping at such a crucial point.”

“I’ve learned to say no when the situation requires it. First, there’s Skipper. Second, we’re at my parents’ house. I’m not about to take you upstairs. When I get going, it can be pretty— You don’t know me. I’ve seen it all, done it all. Put me on a pedestal... I don’t deserve it.”



WHEN I GOT TO SKIPPER’S, SHE MET ME AT THE DOOR WITH A FACE full of suspicions. “What kept you? Dinner’s cold. Why didn’t you call?”

“The audition was a bust. My part of it, at least,” I said. “I lost my voice, couldn’t get a note out.”

“And let me guess, Ruth couldn’t let you go without making sure your injured sensibilities were soothed. Did she massage your back while consoling you? I know Ruth; she loves bruised egos and wounded animals.”

“So, we worked and talked a while. What of it?”

“I was right. You are a softy,” said Skipper. “You go looking for a shoulder to cry on instead of jumping into the fray again and fighting to make it.

“Anyway, here.” She handed me a message obliging me to call the WBN newsroom, who informed me I was needed in New York the next afternoon for a conference with WBN brass: Roscoe Schindler, George Pongracic, and Holger Gross.

Except for Schindler, I’d never spent more than a few minutes with

any of them. Now, all of a sudden, the three of them, and on the weekend to boot. I wondered if it was Goodstein related but quickly shrugged it off.

“By the way, sweetheart, what’s this about your getting kicked out of the Marine Corps?” asked Skipper, when the lights were turned off and we’d retired.

“Let me guess: you heard it from Virginia,” I replied.

“In a roundabout way.. From my dad.”

“Who got it from Virginia, no doubt.”

“We’re a military family, mister. He’s a retired captain, served under Admiral Nimitz.”

“Real great. A military family that marches for peace.”

“Marching for peace doesn’t mean we don’t support the men and women serving honorably.”

“Well, then you should know Admiral Nimitz gave every accused a chance to refute charges.”

“Refute away,” said Skipper. “Like what could be better than having your college paid for while serving your country?”

“Well, I did serve,” I said. “I was honorably as a corporal. I’d do it over if I could be stationed in Paris again. I’m glad I quit OCS; officers, as a whole, suck. Your dad and Admiral Nimitz excepted.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. When I first heard it, it made me angry.

“Virginia’s getting worse,” I said.

“Used to only spread gossip. Iniquitous, but accurate. Now, it isn’t even true. You are telling the truth?”

“Don’t believe me, babe? Call my CO. He’s over there at Fort Meade. We’re good friends. And by the way, what Virginia fabricated as my so-called ‘getting kicked out of OCS because I couldn’t hack it?’ total bullshit.”

“Oh yeah.”

I understood it might be difficult for Skipper, who’d grown up on military bases in Japan, Australia, and Hawaii, to understand how someone training to be a Marine officer could give it up so near the end, so I explained how I had fallen for an ROTC recruiter’s macho pitch. “I grabbed ahold of the brass ring but discovered what I thought I wanted

wasn't what I needed. I needed to create, and that meant freedom, not regimentation."

During my first two years at GW, my nonconformist theater and literary friends had teased me about my ROTC obligation which, after graduation, meant a four-year hitch as a second lieutenant. The ribbing had only made me dig in my heels. My friends might have been nonconformists, but by refusing to criticize the military—in effect, integrating my artistic aspirations with military service—I was also a non-conformist of sorts. Eventually, I realized that although it was one thing to be a non-conformist, I owed greater allegiance to my life's mission than to an occupation I had no elemental affinity with. What that mission might be I had no idea. I felt certain the universe would reveal it at some point. Right now, it was time to get ready for bed. I started to peel off my clothes.

"I hope," said Skipper, "this trip to New York turns out better than the last one."

"Better than what?" I asked as I took off my underpants.

"Last December. Your trip then," said Skipper. "Say, you're not usually hung like that when you take off your pants."

"So?"

"It's just that I usually have to play with it a bit to get it up like that. Why so hard tonight, unless you were about to bang Ruth and she cut you off," said Skipper. "Go ahead, tell me a lie. I'll believe it. But right now, I need that inside me."

Sometime later, I drifted off to sleep, thinking about the special turn-on that accompanied our lovemaking, how Skipper's face radiated that singular quality of beauty while she orgasmed. *If she stopped loving me*, I mused, *would her face betray her?*



THE NEXT MORNING, I CALLED RUTH TO SAY GOODBYE. THE TIMBRE of her voice told me she was as disappointed as I was that the gig had fallen through. About our abortive flirtation, not so much. Her voice, while affable, told me *Don't go there*. Careful to avoid mentioning it, we

talked mainly about songs—the ones we'd work on... someday.. in the future, then I signed off, wishing her a safe trip.

I tried to reach Aunt Alice—again, to no avail. I'd sent her letters and made phone calls. No answer. If I was right, she'd be making the rounds of her jet-setting friends and then show up ready for action at the appointed time. It was fruitless to wonder where, but she'd be back in DC soon enough.

Even though I'd spent most of the last two months in the South covering civil rights stories, I had also focused on getting the car repaired by the Wolff's Turkish mechanic. Aunt Alice's list of items had been dealt with. I was positive she would not make any preparations for a wedding without informing me. Nevertheless, I had to make sure she got the word that the putative wedding was a hoax.

As for my impending trip to New York, I called the Wolff. "Don, have you heard anything about my summons to New York?"

"Haven't heard any specifics, but if you know what concerns them the most, you can make certain assumptions—by a process of elimination," he said.

"How should I know what bothers them?"

"You probably do know, but you don't know you do."

"That's real cool, but what is it?" I asked.

"Think, a take leap. Guess."

"Market share. Ratings. This's fun, but those formulae are above my pay grade."

"It's not about regression analysis or other business school notions. How does boob tube news get ratings?" asked the Wolff.

"By unveiling a charismatic new personality, someone the viewer instantly relates to," I said, "as much as by beating the competition some other way."

"Correct, but I don't see you as that new personality. Not yet, at least. You're being fast-tracked, but not for out-front work, for behind-the-camera work, producing, directing docs maybe. So, unless they're firing you, which they probably would leave to an underling like Krakling, it must be about some story. Probably one about to break."

"There's my Vietnam pitch—the peace movement, the battlefield, rumors concerning Nixon and South Vietnam leaders. Johnson's reelec-

tion plans, King's failure to duplicate his Alabama success in Mayor Daley's Chicago."

"What else? Dig deep," urged the Wolff, "a story that's not yet a story, and why they might pick you to cover it."

"France, the student agitation—because I speak French. You knew it all along."

"Yes, I did, but I used this little mind game to get you thinking like they do."

"But surely, I'm not at the top of their list. So far, the stories I've done have been of average importance to their ways of thinking. Nothing stands out," I said. "Why would they trust me with something big?"

"They might not, but you're right about one thing: it could make or break you," said the Wolff. "Making it means being professional, not just some of the time, all of the time."

"You think I'm only dabbling?" During the pause that followed, I sensed the Wolff searching for a metaphor to seal his summation.

"You were lucky to work for Herb; he turned you into a professional," said the Wolff. "In New York, you'll be walking into the men's locker room. You know how it is in the men's locker room: the rich and powerful get to size up a newcomer, using ridicule and disparagement in subtle ways. It's the place where a game of golf isn't only about golf, but about whether they can count on you when all your buttons are pushed."



SEATED FOR THE ONE-HOUR EASTERN AIR LINES SHUTTLE FLIGHT TO New York City, I regretted losing the chance to perform at the One Step. Like anyone good at something—I believed my singing to be more than a pastime or hobby—fantasies of quitting my day job for a stage career often crossed my mind. At my age, however, changing careers would be risky no matter how tempting it might appear.

I'd look for an accompanist when I returned to DC. See if I could take it to the next level... The next level! What a laugh! As if I could subsist on two or three hundred bucks a month, the most I could count on earning from singing, even with the best of luck. Pit that against my \$28,000 WBN salary, plus bonuses, perks, and raises. No contest...

I thought about my decision to take the producer gig. If something went wrong, if I fucked up, I could always go back to editing, but I couldn't stay away from the craft (I preferred the French word *métier*) forever; new techniques were in the offing. Wait too long, the technology would pass me by.

“DON'T BEGRUDGE US THE CHANCE TO LOOK YOU OVER, GUS. WHEN selecting a man for a big assignment, we have to consider every aspect,” said Roscoe Schindler, as he motioned me into the corporate dining room. “Let's have some chow, what say?”

Once seated, the Japanese waiter wheeled in a cart with hors d'oeuvres, followed by medium rare lamb chops. Once again, Baked Alaska dessert topped off the well-prepared luncheon, during which I was quizzed on all matters French.

Did I speak it? Yes. Did I still have connections in the embassy? Yes. Did I have sources in other fields? Yes.

“I attended classes at the Sorbonne as well as the Alliance Française. I know embassy people, I know newspaper people, I know getting things done there, and most importantly, I know the French people. I had a great two years and am indebted to the Marine Corps for posting me there.”

Schindler led the post-luncheon parade down the hallway to a rectangular room with a large whiteboard and eight rows of four abreast chairs. “Let's step in here, go over specifics.”

While Roscoe Schindler scribbled a few bullet points on the whiteboard, I was coaxed into a middle seat with George Pongracic on one side and Holger Gross on the other.

March 1968, Paris students' revolts:

- Beyond the students
- Go to the WBN bureau only once or twice, work alone
- Vote of confidence—election
- Coup d'état
- How much like Berkeley in 1964?

At the bottom right corner of the whiteboard in small all-cap letters, I noticed the name Goodstein, prominent because of its isolation.

During the discussion that followed, none of the participants mentioned the name or why it was there as if it had been put there for psychological effect.

So, with Goodstein the elephant in the room, I made sure not to betray any signs of self-doubt.

“Will it spread to other sectors—unions, for example?” asked Pongracic, “That’s one thing we’d like to know.”

“Who the leaders are.”

“Instead of expressing my opinions, I’m taking notes, gentlemen, mainly because, I don’t have the answers... yet,” I said, “but I will once I get there.”

“Could these protests take down de Gaulle’s government?” asked Holger Gross.

“You’ve been lucky so far,” said George Pongracic. “Don’t fuck this up.”

“With that tender adieu,” said Schindler, “let’s find out if Gus has any questions.”

“One question,” I said, sucking it up to inquire. “What’s with Goodstein?” I pointed to the whiteboard. “Is that the same Goodstein you sent to DC?”

“Yes, Gannon Crisp’s new aide-de-camp. He’s doing some investigation on cost-cutting,” said Schindler. “Whether you like it or not, he’s the future of television.”

“That’s reassuring,” I said. Big mistake: I discovered they didn’t do irony.

Roscoe Schindler checked his watch, meaning the meeting was over and I was made for the job.

“I have two stories I’d like to finish,” I said.

My bosses exchanged looks and nodded affirmatively. “Which stories?” asked Pongracic, after a pause.

“A story on Ralph Abernathy and a story that Roscoe approved, about a Saturday community improvement that’s spreading to a number of inner-city schools in DC.”

“Yes,” said Roscoe Schindler, “in a weaker moment I did greenlight it because you had Charlayne Hunter and Julian Bond attached, but realistically, Gus, which is more globally important: students running amok in



France or some ghetto kids?” To reinforce unanimity, the three executives turned to stare at me.

It had taken a monumental effort to persuade the WBBN to run Skipper’s hockey story. Now New York was on the verge of killing her other story and I realized that there was little chance that anything I said might persuade these men to change their minds.

Schindler walked me to the elevator. In the wake of the day’s activities, I found myself looking at the man for the first time. Up to that moment, I’d seen but a presence, a reputation. Now, I was looking at the man, and as such, a rarity, someone who, when he crawls out of bed, looks as well-groomed and in charge as he does during the day. If dishevelment at the moment of awakening was any indication of mastery over events, then Schindler was a time lord, and I was a troll, a novice.

“Roscoe, with all due respect,” I said, “killing that story would alienate an important member of the Black leadership. Julian Bond is moving up, might even run for Congress or mayor of Atlanta.”

“It’s a nice story, as is the other one about girls’ hockey. Fits in with our new minority policies. We’ll discuss it on your return,” said Schindler. “We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, right?”

“Right.”

“Stay away from the Paris office. We want fresh perceptions and new facts. How long is the Abernathy story now?”

“It’s ten minutes, and we haven’t added in the Chicago stuff, which is very revealing in that it shows Mayor Daley beating King at his own game.”

“Sounds like a special,” said Pongracic, who’d sidled up to us as we waited for the elevator.

“Where will you stay?” asked Schindler.

“I have a friend—former Marine lieutenant, Reggie Blaze. We were in Marine OCS at GW together. He stayed in Paris after his tour. Now a stringer. Works for Reuters. Very talented cameraman,” I said.

“A cameraman. Reuters, huh? If you need another shooter, hire him by the hour,” said Roscoe.

“One more thing,” I added. “Can you get me Canadian press credentials?”

“Canadian? Why?”

“Reggie tells me that thanks to the Vietnam War there’s been a surge in anti-American sentiment. If I’m going to learn anything, I don’t need a badge with WBN in great glaring letters. I need one from a small local station in rural Quebec.”

I SPENT THE NIGHT WITH LIL. FOR SOME REASON, SHE WAS MORE interested in my work now, arranging to meet me in the lobby of WBN’s New York headquarters. We managed an unselfconscious European greeting, kisses to both cheeks, witnessed, as it were, by Roscoe Schindler who happened to be leaving the building at the same time.

We were over the hump, or whatever it was that had us thinking our relationship was hopeless. We talked about issues of work, and about being overworked. Everyday conversation, topics that amuse, but tend to distract from issues like love and money. Discussion of us as a couple was avoided, but ever present on our faces during lovemaking.

Lil was eager to accompany me, suggesting we try “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was.” I was still reeling from the cancellation with Ruth but feeling good about working with Lil again. As soon as she started, I could hear a difference. She’d worked on her pacing, listening rather than following the tune the way it was published. And I was back in form. *Could I sustain it*, I wondered.

Unlike our last meeting in DC, there were no awkward moments. I even teased her into making love without smoking a joint beforehand.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING AFTER WORK, SKIPPER AND I DROVE OUT Pennsylvania Avenue from its tree-lined Washington Circle beginnings to Ahmet Bey’s garage in an industrial zone near Suitland, Maryland. There, we witnessed a triumph of Third World scrounging and make-do, embodied in Aunt Alice’s expertly refurbished Jaguar, standing at attention like a disciplined marine awaiting further orders. To my eye, the fender and headlamp assemblies fashioned out of raw matter in strictest detail, installed and painted to OEM standards, sparkled in the overhead halogen lighting of Ahmet’s Quonset-hut garage.

We waited for Ahmet to appear—he was talking on the phone in a kind of glass-enclosed office, with the telephone wedged to his ear while he played with some electronic gadgets cabled to a testing device. He nodded to me. I waved and walked to Skipper, who was perusing a bulletin board covered with old calendars, carryout menus, and various Turkish-related tracts and artwork.

“Hey, baby, looka here. Jazz club in Istanbul,” she said.

“If we can’t play the One Step, we can open for Abdul and the Snake Charmers in Istanbul,” I said.

“Don’t kid around. He’ll hear you.”

“Ahmet and me? We’re cool.”

Emerging from his office, Ahmet greeted Skipper and me with a smile to match our eager greetings. “What do you think?” he asked, gently placing his hand on the fender.

“I don’t know. Looks perfect,” I said, pointing to his office. “By the way, what kind of device are you working on there?”

“Oh, that one. An electronic device that measures galvanic skin response, blood pressure, breathing rate, and other body indicators. Processes them and comes up with what you might call a bio-metric assessment.”

“In other words, a kind of lie detector.”

“More. You don’t answer questions; measures reactions to any stimuli.”

“Way cool, Ahmet,” I said. “You learned all that in Turkey, as a mechanic?”

“In my country, not a mechanic. I am electrical engineer there. I got this business when my uncle died. I still, how you say, dabble.”

“My network might be interested. What do you think about a TV interview?”

“Not yet. Maybe sometime soon—”

“Can we drive it around the block?” asked Skipper, reaching for the door handle.

“You can’t come,” I teased. “Women stay home is the law.”

Ahmet chortled nervously. Skipper frowned. “Very funny.”

“Seriously, Ahmet, are Turkish women liberated?”

Skipper got in the back; Ahmet sat alongside me in the front passenger seat, a bit bewildered by my question, but ready to play along.

“Men and women do the same things there as they do here, but they have to hide it, right?” I asked.

“Stop. You’re embarrassing Ahmet.”

“Not embarrassed,” said Ahmet. “Turkish men have lots... many, many mistresses. Do you have a mistress, Mr. Gus?”

Skipper and I laughed. “Ha ha, he got you there, smarty pants.”

“Very good, you got me, Ahmet. I’d have a mistress, but for this liberated woman here. She’s always looking through my pockets for incriminating scraps of paper.”

“Turn sharp left here,” said Ahmet. “...Do you feel any rubbing?”

“Handles real well,” I said.

“I’ll say,” said Skipper.

“Ahmet, you’re a genius. By the way, that jazz club in Istanbul on your board. You been there?” I asked.

“Many times, many times.”

“You like jazz?”

“Much. Very much.”

“I have a Duke Ellington album of his tour through Iraq, Iran, Syria,” I said.

“Yes, 1963. He got to Turkey one day after President Kennedy was murdered. They canceled the concerts in Turkey. Lucky, I heard his concert in Damascus. Incredible,” said Ahmet.”

“Someday, we’re going to Turkey,” I said.

“Turkey, great country. You been welcome,” said Ahmet.

“I’m real sure we’ll love it.”



IF I COULD ONLY GET THEM TOGETHER IN ONE ROOM, I BELIEVE MY friends who didn’t know each other would like one another. Most of the time one-on-one encounters between my friends never worked; in fact, putting friends together from my various walks of life has always been a disaster, but I’ve never stopped trying.

That’s why I invited Skipper to accompany me to Dulles

Airport the day Aunt Alice arrived. I wanted to observe them interacting. That, and a hunch that I might need a buffer between Auntie Alice and myself on account of the Jaguar. I was counting on Skipper's ebullient personality to help me put my aunt in the right mood.

It wasn't until the Dulles access road emptied into the airport and I was guiding the Jaguar toward the short-term parking lot that I summarized Aunt Alice for Skipper.

"You never know what she's going to say," I said.

"Your aunt?"

"Uh-huh."

"I never know what I'm going to say, so we're even," said Skipper.

"Don't be deferential."

"Don't worry."

"After three minutes, you'll know when she's serious, when she's losing it, or when she's being outrageous."

"I would've been fine," said Skipper, "if you hadn't freaked me out with all your stories about how eccentric she is."

Once inside the concourse, we picked up a cart, checked the big board, and took off for the arrival gate. Fifteen minutes later, the passengers started filing out. Spotting us, Aunt Alice dropped her bag, took two steps forward, opened her arms, and smiled.

"Peter, our son," said Alice, as I walked into her waiting arms.

"Auntie Alice."

I loaded her carry-on bag onto the cart and we took off for baggage claim. Aunt Alice quickly became aware of the presence hovering around us—the dutiful Skipper, who finally had to clear her throat. "Um-um, ahem."

"Who is this young lady, Nephew?" asked Alice.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Alice. I was so, uh, excited, I forgot my girl. This is Skipper."

"Skipper..." mused Alice, "almost as bad as Gus."

"I also answer to Miriam."

"You don't look anything like Madeline Carroll."

"She's not Madeline Carroll. That was her sister," I explained. "This is my girl, Miriam 'Skipper' Sanchez."

“The wedding was canceled?” asked Alice. “And he’s marrying you now?”

Skipper looked at me. “Nobody’s getting married,” she said.

“Well then, glad to meet you, Miriam.”

The two women embraced. “May I call you Aunt Alice?”

“Please do. Now, dear Peter, we’re—everyone is excited, we have lots to talk about, so before we get too carried away, why don’t you fetch the car, while the women take care of the baggage.”

“Meet you back here.” I grabbed her carry-on and departed for the car while they headed to baggage claim.

Skipper watched me and smiled, causing Aunt Alice to turn just as I finished a pantomime meant to remind Skipper to remain mum about the Jaguar’s new skin.

“Look at that man,” said Alice, pointing to a stranger. “Those bell-bottoms. I hope Peter hasn’t fallen for that idiotic fashion.”

“I got him a pair of bell bottoms at Bloomingdale’s in New York. They’re pink and cotton, not polyester. He looks good in them with a navy blue or gray Lacoste chemise.”

“I dare say. And those synthetics—what do they call them?”

“Double-knit polyester.”

“Yes, double-knit. A lot of double-talk if you ask me. Just look at that man over there. He looks like Dick Nixon. America is becoming a country of jitterbugs and soul savers,” said Aunt Alice, “Makes me itch all over. How tastefully they used to dress Gary Cooper and Herbert Marshall in your Uncle Phil’s plays. Returning to the United States is always a culture shock.”

“I dare say,” said Skipper. “Gus tried to reach you over and over—by phone and by mail.”

“I’ve been with friends in Italy, South Carolina, and finally Fishers Island. My mail hasn’t caught up with me. It goes to my lawyer in New York, who takes his time going through the bills, payments, and contracts— Shall I call you Skipper or Miriam?”

“Most everyone, including my family, calls me Skipper. Answering to Miriam will be a nice change.”

“Were my boy’s feelings hurt?”

“The woman you’ve been calling Madeline Carroll is my half-sister,

Virginia. When they broke up, we started up. Gus and I live near each other in Adams-Morgan. I teach third grade at H. D. Cooke Elementary School.”

“Half-sister, eh? I had one. Never got along with her. My whole family thinks she murdered her mother. Sad,” said Alice. “You just happened to be available, I suppose. We used to call it catching someone on the rebound. Quite common among sisters.”

While Alice appeared unconcerned, Skipper balked at her remarks. Being typecast as an “on the rebound gal” had Skipper reflexively searching for a way to assert herself.

So, she followed up, testing the line between disrespect and repartee. “As you say, I happened to be there. He might have lost it otherwise,” she said, shading her voice to intimate sex had played an indispensable role in their relationship.

“I love your house in Georgetown; I’ve been there often, helping Gus get it ready.”

“Breaking up is painful, but a bad marriage is worse. My boy has never been lucky with nice girls.”

“Compared to my sister, I’m a pretty nice person,” said Skipper, eager to emphasize the differences with her sibling, perhaps overreaching a bit. “There was a karmic aspect in us getting together. Took the hurt out of his splitting up with Virginia.”

“If by *karmic*, my dear, you mean you’re more skilled in bed, that’s redefining karma quite magnanimously.”

“He’s never missed her.”

“I’ll bet.”

“A woman can tell,” said Skipper.

“Good for you, dear. I like a woman that’s not afraid to, I believe the expression is, *tell it like it is*.”

They picked up Alice’s bags and were soon back waiting for me. Skipper stopped the cart at the curb and turned to Aunt Alice, who, thanks to a gust of wind that blew Skipper’s coat open, had a moment to survey Skipper’s shapely figure.

“What else are you good at, Miriam?”

“Sports, I played Olympic-level ice hockey this year in Grenoble.

Other qualities? Time will tell. I'm only twenty-four. Twenty-four and not settling. I'm ambitious!"

"Yes, I can see that."

"Why do you call him Peter?"

"Probably vanity on my part. We—my late husband and I—always thought of him as our child, tried to persuade my brother to let us change his name to Peter Randall."

"It's a nice name, but I'm partial to Gus. His being on TV has revived the name. It fits him."

"What fits me, Skip?" I asked as I pulled up to the bags stacked along the curb.

"Peter versus Gus, we were just discussing."

"Not that again, Auntie."

"As you wish, dear boy."

"Your aunt mentioned the polyester fad."

"We don't see much double-knit polyester on Fishers Island now, do we, Auntie?" I mumbled as I heaved the bags into the boot (the British word for a car trunk that always made Skipper laugh when I uttered the term with a fake English accent).

"You might believe my boy thinks I'm a snob, Miriam. Well, I am. Unfortunately, anything I say won't keep America from becoming a country of bookies and bumpkins."

Auntie Alice, who'd been watching me pack the trunk, walked around the passenger side, to the front of the car, and the driver's side, caressing the bumper and the hood as she did. "The car... nice and clean, Peter. Now, will you permit me to drive us home?"

Skipper glanced at me, as if to say, *Hope you're pleased with yourself*. I caught her drift and sent back a *See, everything's cool*. Alice picked up on the exchange. Thank heaven, I thought, she's interpreted it as Skipper congratulating me for taking care of her various lists. "You remember the way, don't you, Auntie?"

"Just because I'm over sixty-five doesn't mean I don't know my way around our beautiful capital city."

"With you, Auntie, the notion of age can be set aside: you're ageless." The question was left unanswered. How much over sixty-five? I had no idea.



When we got to the house on Thirty-Fourth Street, I unlocked the door and Peter came bounding out, immediately jumping on Aunt Alice.

“An English cocker spaniel, how sweet,” said Alice.

“Yes. Longer snout, larger and smarter than the routine American variety,” I said.

“He’s a darling. What did you name him?” asked my aunt.

“Guess.”

Aunt Alice, catching the glint in my eye and the irony behind it, smiled mockingly, “No, not Peter. You did it just to spite me. I don’t mind. Good joke, dear boy. But I’ll still call you Peter. I can’t help it. Peter’s too dignified a name for a dog, like naming him Mountbatten or Schuyler. Don’t you like the name, Peter Randall, Miriam?”

“Truthfully, I like Gus, but I do like Peter for this little guy,” said Skipper, as the dog pranced around, his nails tapping out a rhythm on the tile floor.

“Peter here needs a walk,” I said, “and I have to get back to the office. They’re sending me to France, so I’ve got some things to take care of.”

“Oh, dear boy, by all means, go.”

“I’ll take Peter for a walk and help Aunt Alice get situated,” said Skipper, noticing a set of golf clubs for the first time.

“You play golf, Aunt Alice?” she asked.

“Skip, Aunt Alice is a very good golfer. But Auntie, this young lady’s especially good at any game with a ball or puck.”

“Maybe we can play a round at Congressional this week,” said Alice. “I’m sure we have a lot to talk about.”

“Watch your pocketbook, Auntie,” I mumbled.



IN MY FIRST-CLASS PASSAGE TO FRANCE, I REVIEWED THE MEETING that featured the name Goodstein staring me in the face from the lower right corner of the whiteboard. I didn’t buy their explanation, not entirely. But no other explanation came to mind, at least, no logical one. Perhaps there was no logic. They were sending me to France. Maybe decent ratings for my several on-camera appearances from Dixie had made them cautious about replacing me. Or, like the hunch that makes a

major league manager hold onto a rookie who hasn't yet shown his full potential, maybe they had some obscure metric telling them I might soon break out?

The taxi pulled up to Reggie Blaze's apartment building on the rue de l'Université around 4:00 p.m. I punched in the door code Reggie had given me and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Dragging the extra-long phone cord to its limit to reach the door and admit me, Reggie continued cradling the receiver while calling in a story to the Reuters news desk. Pointing to the phone and smiling, he motioned me to the couch. I picked up my bag, closed the door, sat down, and rolled my eyes up into my head.

Five or so minutes later, Reggie set the phone down and I nudged my eyes wide open. We didn't hug or shake hands; there wasn't any need to. It was as if we'd been together only a few days ago and were picking up where we left off.

"That's one of the things the Marine Corps taught me," said Reggie, "how to take advantage of mere seconds to sleep, including while standing up."

"In a long line."

"Speaking of sleep, I've been at it all day with this My Lai business," said Reggie. "I'm bushed."

"What's My Lai?" I asked.

"You haven't heard?"

"No, not on the plane. Total blackout. What happened?"

"A platoon led by a lieutenant massacred a whole village of civilians. The village of My Lai."

"That does it."

"Maybe," said Reggie. "Five'll get you ten this is just another instance of punishing the little guy, in this case, the platoon commander. Lieutenant Calley, I believe his name is."

"I've been after Schindler to let me do a two-hour doc on Vietnam, and I get sent here."

"You be glad you're here once I tell you about tonight," said Reggie. "Brother, have I got just what you're looking for."

"What?" I asked.

“Well, for starters, Lucky Thompson at the Chat Qui Pêche and a Reuters party afterward.”

“Cool. Don’t know if I’ll last much past the Chat.”

“Yeah, well, there’s always more,” said Reggie. “Tomorrow, a cocktail affair at the embassy.”

“Who for?”

“A new consul. And the girls’ hockey team that played those exhibition matches last month in Grenoble.”

“No shit. My girlfriend was on that team. She didn’t know anything about a party.”

“Informal party. Embassy wants to celebrate the international composition of the team.”

“We may be doing a feature piece on that girls’ hockey team for the local and network sides.”

“Hey,” said Reggie, “I’ll bring my Eclair. Might get something useable for you.”

We sipped pastis from aperitif glasses while Reggie treated me to a crash course on French politics, circa the late nineteen sixties. “Foreigner, whatever, you could marry a French girl, live and work in this country, and still not be able to follow the Byzantine twists and turns of French politics these days, the one exception being French Communist Party boss Georges Marchais still faithfully adhering to Moscow’s playbook.

The men who’d sent me to France hadn’t mentioned the party, but I supposed they’d be more than pleased if I uncovered Communist involvement in the student movement. This was underscored by Reggie’s detailing of the forces behind the student movement: Trotskyites, Maoists, situationists, radicals, as well as unattached students who just showed up to rumble whenever the word went out. Had the party coopted the student movement? Reggie reasoned it hadn’t. Although opposition to the Vietnam War was one of its central precepts, the other two—free and easy access to each other’s dorms, male and female, plus an overhaul of outdated university curricula—were hardly the issues one associated with conventional Soviet morality. If the Communists were fueling student anger, wouldn’t free and open access to each other’s dormitories conflict

with their uptight attitudes towards sex? You never knew about the Communists who'd once agreed to a truce with Hitler, a contradiction in doctrine if there ever was one. Moral flexibility was their guiding precept.

Reggie touched only superficially on the two major parties, the Socialists and the Conservatives, the two behemoths, who, like Godzilla and Mothra, battled each other to a standstill over issues of dubious interest to a younger generation on the brink of exploding. The remaining parties, those that rarely received more than two percent of the vote, were either partisans of some eccentric father figure or fixated on a single issue.

"When I was here, I pretty much ignored French politics," I said.

During my two-year stint as a Marine guard, I learned that France had a Communist Party. Up to that point in my life, I'd been apolitical. At the time, France was fun, fun, fun. When I returned to GW, my outlook changed thanks to a research paper I'd written on the UC Berkeley Free Speech Movement and thanks to the militancy and liberal bias of my journalism professors. Mostly, I was not an ideologue and that neutral stance had followed me into WBN, where it was reinforced by the Wolff, who insisted "Staying above the fray is the way to go." Neutrality was the watchword, even though everyone knew the progressive outlook ruled at WBN.

"If and when things might erupt is anyone's guess," said Reggie, dipping into the kitchen for a tray of Arab snacks: hummus, baba ghanoush, stuffed grape leaves. "One thing you gotta understand: these kids are like the kids in *Children of the Damned*, you know, the one where some kids are born on the same day, all of them telepathic. The adults can't control them because they can reach into someone's mind and grab their thoughts. The students have this disdain for anybody over twenty-three years old."

"Do I look that old?"

"Hate to tell you, buddy, but that's ancient. Their leaders are fifteen. Some of them."

"What's the government doing?"

"No one knows. The police keep changing, soft one day, hard-ass the next. Mostly, everything they do is overkill and repressive. Plus, they lie,

which enrages the students. That's all I know, and not much of that is firsthand."

"What you're saying, man, is the only way to cover this is to station a crew on every university campus in the Paris region, an obvious impossibility, even for our network, should it want to."

"You mean Roscoe Schindler wouldn't throw blanket coverage at a ragtag bunch of Maoists and Trotskyites?" said Reggie, as he passed me a dish of taramosalata and some strips of Arab flatbread. "I'm flabbergasted."

"This is real good. You made this, Reggie?"

"Hell no, Algerian woman comes every day to clean and cook. Something else, no?"

I nodded and dipped into the taramosalata again, sinking back against the cushion to savor it.

"Foreign news is still foreign news," I said after I'd finished snacking. "It takes a back seat. As far as I know, WBN is the only network covering this beat. My boss did say I could hire you if something breaks. Are you busy the next couple of days?"

"No," said Reggie, "but why send you if it's such a big story? You're the low man, aren't you?"

"I don't know. Possibly to fail, which is why I'm not going to." I had mulled the prospect over on the plane, deciding they might have thought that once I landed, I might go native. "Plus, for some reason, Schindler's doing a good job pretending I'm worth confiding in."

"What's this shit I've been hearing about— some list?"

"The tinkertoy?"

"Sounds like a white thing; no self-respecting Black person would associate themselves with something so, uh— Could be incriminating..."

"My roommate, my oldest friend—"

"GW?"

"Georgetown."

"No wonder," said Reggie. "It's a white thing, for sure. I'd watch how I choose my friends. Seriously."



LIKE DEXTER GORDON, LUCKY THOMPSON WAS A TRANSITIONAL figure between the swing sound of Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins and the bebop of Charlie Parker and Sonny Rollins. And like Dexter, he was never boring. So it was that evening at the Chat Qui Pêche, where we were greeted warmly by Madame Ricard, the ebullient owner of the club.

Lucky opened the set with two Jerome Kern favorites, an up-tempo “Look for the Silver Lining” and “Long Ago and Far Away.” The smoke in the subterranean cave lifted for a moment, long enough for Reggie to point out Helene Duforcet and Rejane Mochiri across the room.

Reggie waved to the women. The girls acknowledged him with self-conscious smiles, as if they’d been caught double-dipping, expressions that told him they’d rather be dead than have anything further to do with him. He waved again.

Years ago, we had tried to date the dark-haired, half-French, half-Iranian Rejane, whose ambitions in film programming seemed to preclude romantic dalliances. Her friend, the Duforcet chick, had volunteered her phone number without being asked. The first time I dated her, I learned she was married and just wanted to fuck. Very French, so she said, no moral qualms to hold you back. “American puritanism. If it isn’t you,” she laughed, “it would be *un autre mec*.” Pretty in an unkempt way, she smelled of dirty laundry. Pity, because the scent of any woman should be part of her charms. Helene was just too odorous.

During the three weeks our involvement lasted, she visited me at a friend’s house in the Fifteenth while her husband was at work. We’d go into the bedroom and undress each other. Forty-five minutes later we’d emerge, exchange polite goodbyes, and, without much emotion, go our separate ways. Reggie, who’d also taken a turn with her, called it “barely more fun than masturbating.”

“Why don’t you tell her?” Reggie had asked.

“Why should I add to her unhappiness?” I replied.

“Who said she’s unhappy? Maybe she just likes to fuck other guys.”

“Looking for satisfaction and not finding it, guy after guy, you think she’s happy?”

We’d argued briefly, Reggie accused me of being overly moralistic. “Maybe I am. I don’t think so. I just don’t like to hurt vulnerable people.”

“Can you imagine the poor fucker she’s married to?” asked Reggie.

“Yes, and there but for the grace of God go I. This shit can happen to anyone,” I said.

“Not to me. I don’t need it that bad. Anyway, it’s a plumbing problem. A lot of these old apartments don’t have anywhere near a modern bathroom. People don’t bathe. Hell, in half the apartments, you have to go out to the landing to take a crap.”

“You’ve lived in one of those?”

“Not me, bro. After Cameroon, it’s indoor plumbing for me and this place is perfect except for the tankless water heater.”

“What the hell is a tank—” I asked.

“It’s a damned French invention that heats the water only when you turn on the hot faucet.”

“It’s in the kitchen and the shower?”

“Yeah, but it needs refinement. Good idea, lousy implementation,” said Reggie. “Sounds like an eighty-one-millimeter mortar.”

Lucky Thompson finished the second set with “Cherokee,” followed by Charlie Parker’s “Now’s the Time,” just as the pangs of jet lag overtook me.

After a soulful medley of “Laura,” “It Never Entered My Mind,” and “For All We Know,” I announced, “Sleep is upon me. I think I’ll take off, brother. Maybe you’ll get lucky with Rejane, it seems no one ever has, at least no marine. As for Helene, I’d still be tongue-tied; we never had much to say or do, except fuck.”

On the way out, I stopped at the women’s table, kissed the hand of each in turn, then shooed them across the floor to Reggie’s table. Once outside, I took the rue de la Huchette to the place Saint-Michel, and then, crossing from the Fifth arrondissement into the Sixth, I headed west on the rue Saint-André des Arts. The bookstores and secondhand record stores, where I’d purchased so many books and albums, were closed. For the first time in a long while, I felt unencumbered by the persistent drumbeat of breaking news—away and out of its grasp, in a place where news of any sort couldn’t touch me. Had I chosen to go native, I could exist happy and content, without newspapers or television for the rest of my life.

The rain put me in the moment. I held out my palm to the drizzle

that rendered everything on the street slightly out of focus, took a Washington Redskins cap out of my overcoat pocket, and used it to cover my head.

I wondered about my coworkers at WBN. Did their thoughts ever stray from the news cycle? Surely, they must. Day after day, exposed to the weltschmerz of modern life, did they not feel the accumulated pain and suffering of so many centuries of human misery? Did they merely wish it away by swallowing the toxic brew of denial that banishes thoughts of war, discrimination, sickness, famine, and poverty to a desolate part of the brain from which, once dispelled, they can never be recovered? Surely, there must be a higher plane of existence—a greater purpose that evolution has in store for mankind, that is if we can avoid the apocalypse.

Were these merely the aleatory thoughts that accompany a solitary pedestrian on a rain-swept Paris night or was I for the very first time becoming self-aware? Of myself and the other? Thinking I am here, walking in the street with the rain in my face and I observe my surroundings and my being, conscious of my thoughts, but not tied to or acting on them emotionally. Where my feet are... God is!

What keeps Armageddon at bay? I wondered. Some implied code of morality to which all men unconsciously pledge? Or was it not pausing to think—the newsman's ethic? Plunge headlong into the next news event. *Fuite en avant*, the French call it. Hell, maybe I should go native, after all.

Why do these thoughts keep pestering me? I'm a newsman, not a philosopher. I came to Paris for work. And like my tour of embassy duty, I'm invigorated, fully alive, and ready for what comes next.

An umbrella in Paris is mandatory and I'd forgotten mine. Still, enveloped in an oversize Brooks Brothers chesterfield and a cashmere scarf I'd once purchased on the rue de Rivoli, I hardly noticed the rain on my face. My thoughts? A trace of the past and a sense of the future. I can succeed, if only I don't stray too far afield, don't go native on a whim.

The rain transformed the street lighting into primary colors—blues, yellows, reds. Even Helene had been beautiful tonight. I wondered about her husband. Would she fuck herself out of a marriage someday?

Humming the lyrics of "Look for the Silver Lining," I found myself at the Cinéma Saint-André des Arts, facing a movie poster of Alfred Hitch-



cock's *The 39 Steps* that featured a large black-and-white portrait of Madeleine Carroll. I took my tiny Olympus PEN-F camera out of my pocket and snapped a picture of the billboard—a long-forgotten relic of English cinema, unknown in America, yet still relevant in France.

A few more blocks on the same street and I was in front of Le Mazet. From inside, I heard the live strains of Django Reinhardt's guitar. Must be a copycat, I thought; Django's been dead some fifteen years.

Now completely soaked from the incessant rain, I entered this refuge for buskers and bottlers, a place that guitar-playing marines actually did frequent. Better to dry off listening to the guitarist and the violinist interpret "Nuages," a favorite Django composition. I took off my coat and scarf, set them to dry on a hook, and ordered a Calvados. After three more tunes, the heavy rain stopped, and I was feeling jet-lagged again. Thankfully, I remembered the twisty itinerary to Reggie's, who by now might be back at his pad with one of the two women.

I had to pay attention; the streets in Paris aren't arranged in rectangles. Nor do they keep the same names. Broadway in New York is Broadway from one end of Manhattan Island to the other. Not so in Paris. The streets don't necessarily keep the same names from beginning to end, probably because there aren't enough streets for all the heroes they want to name them after—Napoleon's marshals, in particular, of whom there were many. So, they carve them up. The rue Saint-André des Arts becomes the rue de Buci at the rue Mazarine, which itself becomes the rue de l'Ancienne Comédie on its way south. So too the rue Jacob that stops being itself when it crosses the rue des Saints-Pères and morphs into Reggie's street, the rue de l'Université.

When you live in Paris, you memorize the streets and the Metro stops in much the same way Los Angelinos memorize their freeway system. I'd ceased to wonder about the irregular streets long ago, writing off their idiosyncratic multiple names as a perverse exception to French logic. And yet, the intricate topography of Parisian streets did have one advantage: occasionally, when you took the wrong street, you found yourself not minding. The wrong street in Paris offered the prospect of discovery: a bookstore, a friend, a crêperie, a random encounter.

The apartment was empty. No trace of Reggie. Probably went home with one of the girls, perhaps both of them. I sat down at the piano and

stared at the keys for several minutes as if their arrangement held a coded meaning that had never been broken. I struck middle C, vocalized the major scale, then the C-sharp major scale, right through several octaves—solfège, as I'd learned it at the Scola Cantorum on the rue Saint Jacques. Suddenly, I was wide awake, pushing whole tone and minor scales over the threshold of acceptable late-night noise levels in respectable Parisian apartment buildings, which occasioned much banging on the ceiling, and mumbled curses: "*Arrêtez ce bruit!*" I tempered the dynamics, settling into a rudimentary self-accompanied version of "For All We Know." Bluesy and slow in a Ray Charles mode with plenty of breath and power in the low registers. When I finished, neither a peep nor a mumbled expletive was heard. After staring at the keyboard again, I closed the cover, went to the bedroom, and flopped on the bed with my clothes on. God, I could get into that tune with either Ruthie or Lil, I told myself.

Slipping out of a half-awake, half-asleep dream of *Hamlet* as a lost Verdi opera, I awoke the next morning in a vibrant mood. Gone were the previous day's self-censuring imponderables. A newsman once again, vague wisps of *Hamlet* crossed my mind on the way to the Café Flore: how to turn "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, that are dreamt of in your philosophy" into a distinctive libretto. On second thought, no way I'm going native.



CARTER KEIGHLEY WAS ALREADY SIPPING A CAFÉ ESPRESSO AT THE Café de Flore when I arrived. In line with Roscoe Schindler's cautionary to avoid the office, I was instructed to deal exclusively with Keighley, using a café as HQ. We decided on the Flore. I knew Keighley from an *H-B* meeting in DC. If anyone had a high-level take on the student situation, it was Keighley, who'd already witnessed student unrest during his time as Berlin bureau chief. High-level, yes, but because of the spontaneous manner in the way events developed, he had little grasp of street-level goings-on.

"Most of what the French are calling *les événements* are unannounced and leaderless. You'll be lucky to get anything," said Keighley.

“I’m lucky.”

“So am I.” We laughed. “Tell you what... I have a car over there. Take it, visit campuses. Have you been to Nanterre?”

“Why Nanterre? I’d’ve thought the Sorbonne or Jussieu.”

“Nanterre is the undergrad and grad schools for sociology, economics, and political science,” said Keighley.

“Perfect for fomenting demonstrations à la the ’64 Berkeley Free Speech Movement.”

“The most radical professors and the most susceptible student body. You have time to visit all three and still make it to the cocktail party. Here’s your invite,” said Keighley, and as he handed it to me, he asked, “Have you heard of Dany the Red?”

“Dany the Red? No.”

“Daniel Cohn-Bendit. He’s German, a sociology student at Nanterre, supposedly one of the leaders, if there is one. Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

“For sure,” I said. “I have Reggie Blaze, but I’ll need another.”

“I have two guys who shoot double system—cameraman with an Éclair and his buddy with a Nagra.”

The car Keighley lent me to scout with (a Peugeot 405, nicknamed the poor man’s Mercedes) was a make I’d once owned and loved after my embassy hitch. After reconnoitering the two Parisian campuses—the Sorbonne and Jussieu—and getting nowhere, I crossed the Seine at the Pont Saint-Michel, took the western exit off the Arc de Triomphe, and, via the Autoroute de l’Ouest, merged into the smooth, uneventful flow to the Nanterre campus, where, as luck would have it, I parked and started to ask around.

When a suspicious student questioned me, I showed my Canadian press credentials. “The press, that’s a laugh,” said the student, “more like Interpol or FBI. Which one are you?”

“Neither,” I said in French, “I’m a French-Canadian journalist, looking for a story about student influence over French politics for my paper, *Le Progressive du Boisbriand*, a Quebec French-language weekly.”

Thirty minutes later, after convincing two students sympathetic to French-Canadian causes that my bona fides were in order, I had a dorm room number, which, after losing myself on the campus for another ten minutes, I eventually located. Suspect again, it took another hour to

extract the same basic information from the residents that Reggie had provided, albeit tendered with much more youthful enthusiasm. As to who was in charge and what events were planned, no one seemed to know or, if they did, they were unwilling to share.



EXPECTING TO INTERVIEW MEMBERS OF THE FRANCO-AMERICAN hockey team that Skipper had played for, I had Reggie bring his gear to the reception at the American embassy. Some of the people I passed in the hallways appeared to recognize me. From my stretch as an embassy guard? Not likely, since I didn't remember any of them, specifically the ones who gawked. You can tell when someone is gawking—the open-mouthed, hangdog expression the gawker affects, no matter how hard he tries to disguise it.

I rode the elevator with Reggie and Keighley and a few gawkers. "They've seen you on TV," Reggie explained. "You're a celebrity."

"A minor one," I said.

"Any luck at Nanterre?" asked Keighley.

"Nah. No more than I already know. I'll keep at it tomorrow."

"Better luck, then," said Keighley. "I'll have your crew meet you at the Flore tomorrow at eight a.m."

"Thanks," I said.

"Almost forgot. A telegram for you," said Reggie.

I opened the missive, my eye noting the signature first, "Lotte."

"Carlotta Fanning is flying from Indonesia for a month's repose in Paris. Ever met her?"

Reggie shook his head. "Carlotta Fanning," said Reggie. "I know her reputation, of course."

"She's made a living covering massacres and attempted coups and selling her work to the highest bidder. Meeting her at American Express," I said, "you're in for a treat."

EMBASSY GATHERINGS ARE PRETTY BORING. MAYBE IT WILL BE different my being a quasi-celebrity instead of a Marine guard standing at

parade rest like an empty suit of armor. Nah, there was something astringent about the embassy, something to do with the spooks, the CIA operatives, and the mutual exchanging of spies. Mercifully, it didn't last long. I shook hands with the new consul, who insisted he'd known me as a Marine guard. "And I remember you, sir," I hazarded a guess, "In visas and passports, weren't you?" The guy looked pleased.

Things lightened up a bit when the consul introduced the four female hockey players. Reggie captured the formal introduction and laudatory remarks, then set up for a group interview.

Gus: How close are the men's and women's game?

American Player #1: I don't know of any sport where the men's and women's game is any closer in terms of excitement, overall skill, and finesse. The speed of the women's game is on par with the men's.

Gus: Aside from the competition, what else impressed you?

French Player #1: We were there for hockey, sure. But something else happened: being a mini-celebrity for a brief time was exciting.

Gus: Could you see the women forming a league of their own?

The Goalie: Anything's possible. I've already received letters proposing marriage.

Gus: You all agree then that women's hockey should be an Olympic sport?

Chorus: (chanting) Girl power, girl power. Go women...

Gus: One last question, does the center of gravity have anything to do with why women are so good at hockey?

French Player #2: Do you think it does?

American Player #2: I do. We put our oomph into it.

During the next two days, my crew and I made headway at Nanterre, shooting rallies and spontaneous interviews. I sent Reggie and his soundman to the Sorbonne. He'd know what to get. When a crew ran out of stock, Carter Keighley was quick to supply more. At night, Reggie, Keighley, and I screened the dailies. A documentary was taking shape.

“How much leeway do you think I have, Carter?” I asked when the screening was over.

“What kind of leeway?”

“Am I the producer or not? I really don’t know. They sent me here without any firm directives and now after several promising days, I’m beginning to see a way to make it work. Isn’t that what a producer’s supposed to do?”

“Make it work how?”

“Cinema verité. It’s perfect for it, but I’ll need another crew.”

“I can get you one.”

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Why was I sent here? Honestly?”

“I’m not sure, not a hundred percent, but whatever it was, you don’t have to worry; I’ll see to it.”

“Okay, if they ask you, tell them. No narration. No me on camera, conducting interviews. Cameras catching everything. Twenty-to-one ratio—film stock shot to the final cut.”

“I’ll simply tell them to ask you, that I see where you’re going, that they need to trust your vision,” said Keighley.

On Tuesday, I interviewed several student activists of various political persuasions but was always one step behind Dany the Red. At first blush, the inspiration behind student demands appeared to be the war in Vietnam. Every other issue—access to each other’s dorms, reformation of French society, and curriculum overhaul—had only come into focus after the Vietnam protests. But nothing was fixed; everything was confused. Groups and splinters of groups. Some were open; some were secret. Some had three hundred members; some had ten.

Decrying a system that would soon funnel them into professions based solely on test scores, high-school students were even more militant than university students. Still, all students were inspired by one common ideal, a united front—students taking to the streets. A lot of it was talk. Would workers used to Communist Party discipline take it upon themselves to join the students in the streets? As I circulated among the students at Nanterre, I understood what Reggie had told me about the students. I was a brown-haired, bearded brown man of a young age. Not

that much of an age difference among the students. Yet they had classified me with their parents, which in their eyes defined me as a conventional person who had never done anything or didn't know a damned thing about life. No matter what I had done, the life lessons I'd learned, I was not one of them, and therefore of no use.

As I attempted to glean information about the day's events, students asked me the same questions I was asking them. Even though I wore black jeans, a brown leather jacket, a red scarf, and primitive running shoes. Even with a Canadian press badge conspicuously draped around my neck, they still attributed to me all the qualities of an alien presence they were so distrustful of. Questions like: "Do you know where such and such a meeting is?" or "When are the anarchists meeting?" found them turning my questions back on me.

Roll after roll was exposed and sent to the lab for processing. Spontaneous street-corner debates, usually won by the loudest speaker or the person with a megaphone, group rallies, some of which had "stewards"—security details, prone to pushing, shoving, and confronting the police.

I wondered if the gender-intermingling, dorm-access issue might be used as a humorous subplot to my piece, but quickly realized that even though it appeared to be no more than student hijinks, it was no laughing matter to them. They took everything seriously, including their attempts to include French workers (many of whom were Communists) in a single vast movement. So, on Tuesday, in an attempt to measure the chances of the workers siding with the students, I took two crews to the Renault factory in Boulogne-Billancourt. At the factory, I met up with Guy LeCru, a friend from solfège class, an excellent musician I'd stayed in touch with over the years, previously a line sheet metal worker, now a supervisor. When LeCru worked on the line as a skilled laborer five years before, most of the workers, including him, belonged to the PCF (Parti Communiste Français). According to him, the students' demands were at once too extreme, too unfocused, and too contradictory. The workers wanted one thing: more money; the students wanted everything else under the sun.

Back in Paris, I managed to wheedle a safe conduct pass from Xavier Langlade, a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) security service, whose comrade, Alain Krivine, I encountered while

prowl the Sorbonne. A sense of the absurd kept things interesting, whispered Krivine, but not necessarily peaceful. There was always friction: the Maoists helped the Trotskyites, but not the anarchists. Sex, he told me, played a part in the aleatoric nature of associations. You tended to run with who you were fucking. And monogamy, for all intents, had taken a powder. Krivine blamed the movement's inability to speak with one voice on the almost daily doctrinal revisions that plagued the various factions and their alliances. Lacking a political focus, the workers saw the students as a bunch of come-lately prima donnas, who would soon graduate to ministry jobs in the ruling classes.

I informed New York that I had lots of film, interviews, and silent footage. Holger Gross told me they were thinking about a magazine piece on the worldwide student movement rather than a short *Hartley-Brentley* clip. I told him I had enough for an hour-long documentary.

"We might as well wait for your return since anything we put together now would be incomplete. Waiting too long would cost the story its immediacy if anything dramatic happens." I vowed that if anything dramatic did happen, I'd be there. When I hung up, I began to have second thoughts about that particular boast.

At 6:45 p.m. on the twentieth, I arrived at the venerable office of American Express, situated in the shadow of the Paris Opera. I checked my mail, then waited for Carlotta. I didn't wait long. Cargo pants stuffed with accessories, her long golden hair brushed back and pinned behind her ears, she swept in with the assurance of a Margaret Bourke-White, the renowned World War II combat photographer. She was swaddled in a cameraman's multi-pocketed vest with camera straps bearing the names Leica and Nikon around her neck. After the exchange of kisses, "*faire la bise*," as the French call this ritual: "God, you look great. Living dangerously suits you," I said. "Must be crazy there, huh?"

"Not so different from what goes on at Wisconsin Avenue, if you don't count the death squads and the random assassinations."

I touched her sleeve and nodded toward the exit, "Am I imaging things, or did you notice anything coming in?" I asked

"I was wondering myself. They seem to be gathering."

"Student types," I said. "Pick up your mail and let's watch from across the street."



From the front window of a café, we had a clear view of the American Express, and the people filtering in and out. I took off my coat, and ordered two beers. “Your tattoo, kind of fading isn’t it?” said Carlotta.

“My friend Reggie has the same one. Almost invisible against our brownish skins.”

“Last time I saw you,” said Carlotta, “it was colored blue, green, and red. Only the blue now.”

“When we got ’em, tattoos were being done on the waterfront, ours were done at the Philly Navy Yard, at Sailor Eddie’s tattoo parlor. Now they call themselves artists and have fancy studios.”

A crowd was accruing. “They’re chanting. Can you make it out?” asked Carlotta.

“*‘FLN vaincra!’* I think.”

“What does it mean?” asked Carlotta.

“*‘FLN will triumph.’* The National Liberation Front, the political face of the Viet Cong. I have my Filmo here. No sync sound, but I’m going to get everything I can. Are you down for this? It may get heavy.”

Carlotta nodded. “Let’s go!”

“I hope the guy who said I could film all demonstrations is here, Xavier... Man, this is building up. We better start shouting, *‘FLN vaincra.’*”

“I have my handy Sony tape recorder.”

“I told Keighley I was lucky. This is better than luck.”

“Question is: Will you feel the same if you get your head bashed in?” asked Carlotta.

“I don’t know. Let’s find out.”

“There must be a couple of hundred people here,” she said.

I switched to a wide-angle lens and the two of us waded into the fray shouting, *“FLN vaincra!”*

What followed was an all-out attack by two to three hundred enraged students. Armed with iron bars taken from a nearby construction site, they bashed in the windows and spray-painted walls with anti-American and pro-FLN slogans. *Down with Johnson* and the like. Whatever it was, it was planned, and it was over quickly—maximum damage done in a very short time, including what sounded like a bomb—the sudden appearance of smoke, captured by my Filmo, and the noise of it by Carlotta’s

recorder. “Be easy to sync up in post,” said Carlotta. “You give me pix; I’ll give you my sound?”

As the crowd dispersed, Carlotta and I headed down the rue Auber toward the Paris Opera. Three demonstrators followed us, one a big guy carrying a piece of rebar, who, from the look on his face, intended serious harm.

I stopped and turned, “*Que voulez-vous faire avec ça? Nous frappez? Nous avons la permission. Demandez à Xavier Langlade.*”

Seemingly focused on the camera and the tape machine, the attacker pushed forward into Carlotta’s space, swinging wildly, grazing her arm. “*Vous êtes fou? Voyons,*” I growled. A second blow missed my head by inches. Having overswung, the attacker was off balance. I sent a clenched right into his midsection that started him wheezing.

“You okay, Carlotta?”

“I’m fine. Don’t hit him again.”

“*Salé Américain!*” said one of the others, as they backed away.

“*Je suis Canadien, espèce de fou,*” I replied, holding up my press pass.

“Let’s go,” urged Carlotta. “How often does this happen to you?”

“In the South, once or twice. I’m usually able to talk my way out of it,” I said. “I believe in nonviolence, didn’t you know?”

“That was pretty fancy nonviolence.”

“I need a glass of something. Let’s try The Select. We can meet up with Reggie if I can find a phone,” I said.

“Where is it? And who is Reggie?”

“Montparnasse. Reggie Blaze is my long-time GW and Marine Corps buddy, a reporter and cameraman,” I said. “After, we can have a bouillabaisse in the Fifteenth.”

“What about this place?” she asked, as we passed a bar blaring a Jacques Brel chanson. “It must have a phone.”

We ducked into the café.

“You look fine,” she said, once we were seated.

“So do you. I’ve been following your career, you know. Like what I see, most of the time.”

“Most of the time?”

“You took off without a word to anyone,” I said, gently placing my hand on hers, “just when it seemed we might be a couple.”

“You don’t remember snarling at me, ‘No talking while John Coltrane is playing?’ Too intense for me. Too many drugs.”

“And you, right back at me with, ‘No talking while ‘Eleanor Rigby’ is playing.’”

“You had charm, but you were too mercurial at the time,” she said as I removed my hand.

“Cocaine was my downfall, and at the same time, my salvation,” I said.

“Salvation?”

“I finally bottomed out and realized it. You and Wolfie came to the rescue. The trick is finding a woman who loves jazz as much as I do, so I don’t have to tell them to shut up while ‘A Love Supreme’ is playing,” I said facetiously.

“Don’t joke. It’s not funny. You never did apologize.”

“I do now; I apologize, now and for all time. What I don’t understand is how someone like you who likes Baroque music doesn’t like jazz. Both have the same doo dee, doo dee doo swing phrasing. The difference being that while Baroque music is written down, jazz is made up as you go along. Bach and Vivaldi would have loved jazz.”

“Well, I love Bach and Vivaldi. And I like jazz, the tender kind. You know—the Modern Jazz Quartet.”

“They’re cool.” I rose to call Reggie. “There’s nothing like sex after a street brawl. Order me a café espresso, will you? I don’t usually drink coffee, but I need a rush.”

“Still that one-track mind,” said Carlotta with a laugh.

“Can you blame me?”

“We’ll see to your urges with some good jazz. My treat for including me in on the story.”

Five minutes later, I sat down again next to Carlotta. “Everything’s set. We’re meeting Reggie for dinner.”

The waiter placed two coffees on the table and slipped the bill under a saucer.

“Which reminds me...” I continued. “One day last year, we’re all sitting in Brentley’s conference room on a Tuesday lunchtime, waiting for Jeff Zosio to bring in a load of bluefin crabs from the bay. We’re stuffin’ our faces, telling stories, and laughing. Newspaper’s spread over a table

with the crabs heaped high. I go to pick up another crab. And there it is under the crab excrement—a page of the *Washington Post* caught my eye—John Coltrane’s obit. I read it—trying not to show that I was reading it. Didn’t want to draw attention—feel obliged to talk about it. But *I’m* feeling it. I look at the laughing faces—Ezra Eastman, Zosio, Frank Singleton, the Wolff.. And I feel out of place. Like, who are these people? Why am I here instead of in Harlem mourning?”

“Some, not all, probably didn’t know who Coltrane was... So, what did you end up doing?”

“I went home, got drunk, listened to *A Love Supreme* three times. Anyway, you’re right: they probably didn’t know who Coltrane is. At least you do.”

“Dammit, get over yourself.” She put on her gloves as if preparing to leave, glared at me while doing so, and then, after a moment, peeled them off with considerable precision. She set them on the table as a sort of punctuation for what she was about to say: “Do you like what you do?”

“I don’t know what gives you the impression I don’t,” I said. “I like it. But I’m better behind the camera than in front of it. My on-camera stints are pure expediency. Some people like me; I don’t and I’m my own best critic.”

“Maybe that’s it. I see you on camera and you look detached, uninterested.”

“I want to write and direct stories. Not docs like Herb’s—action stories. Cinema verité...”

“Maybe that’s it,” she repeated.

“I’ve just about convinced Schindler, I think.”

“Good luck there,” she said. “You may have to go out on your own to get anything accomplished.”

“That’s what Don keeps telling me.”

I’d never seen Carlotta so animated. I wondered why she was so worked up. We locked eyes for a couple of moments before her face reassumed its customary color and she smiled. There was resentment, however. Nothing sinister. Something to do with the networks. A deep mistrust that somehow implicated me in her eyes. They’d—every one of them—had screwed her. My being promoted proved it. I could see she believed my job should have been hers, a notion that hadn’t crossed my

mind because she'd left while I was still an editor, in no way au courant with the dealings that had landed me the job. Inwardly, I agreed with her. On camera and in the field, I wasn't in her league, then or now. I never pretended to be, but I had the job.

I spent the next twenty minutes explaining that we were not competitors; news was a means to an end for me. I knew what I wanted, and I'd be moving on. After what she'd accomplished as a freelancer covering the Indonesian civil wars, my job was a pittance compared to her present value in the industry. Why else would WBN be bringing her back now? And yes, it helped to clear the air, she said, and I was probably right.

She kissed me on the forehead as we got up to go. "Let's change the subject, shall we?" she said. "Tell me about Ginny. How it fizzled out."

"Not an upward trajectory," I said.

"You sent me her picture. She's beautiful."

"Looks can be deceiving," I continued. "What we were never able to be as comfortable with each other. She covered up her feelings with crazy mannerisms. Being with someone and not knowing how to approach them, finally realizing she has she's not quite stable. That's Ginny. She made me uncomfortable. Still does because she's stalking me now."

"But you still see her because she and Skipper are sisters, right?"

"Ginny's half-sloshed most of the time, living a fake-gangster melodrama with her soul mate, Delmas, as if she's John Dillinger's moll or something. Strangely enough, she reminds me of my mother, another secret drinker in her bedroom, tossing down sherry to escape my father's wrath, the source of which has never been determined, while he polishes off a quart of bourbon at the dinner table. Next morning, he's up and at 'em—full speed ahead on his construction foreman job. No signs of stress or physical deterioration—until recently. Ironically, he's starting to behave himself in polite company, while my mother's in a home with dementia."

I showed her a picture of Skipper.

"They don't look like sisters."

"There's a wrinkle. I'm also seeing someone else. Skipper and I don't live together. I'm taking it slow."



AFTER THE AMERICAN EXPRESS INCIDENT, THINGS STALLED FOR A DAY, time for the students to decide on their next move. I got a call from a guy I'd interviewed in Nanterre. This student had promised to alert me if I swore to feature him in a TV interview. So, I promised—anything for advanced notice...

We arrived at the Nanterre campus at about 8:30 p.m. on Friday, the twenty-second of March just as the students were preparing to occupy the administration building. This action was a consequence of Xavier Langlade's arrest at American Express on the twentieth. It seems the police believed he'd set off the bomb. Long after the crowd had dispersed, he returned to check out the scene. The police were waiting, and they nabbed him, which enraged the various Nanterre factions.

I got a formal interview with Dany the Red that night. We filmed most of his speech, embellished, as always, with little asides that were meant to titillate as much as mobilize. Cohn-Bendit was a funny guy. Not a rigid ideologue, his anarchistic humor kept journalists focused on him, perhaps to the detriment of other leaders. Who knows? In any case, he was good at using insolence and ridicule against authority to hold the occupiers steadfast.

The next morning, early, I called New York. "I'll be back tomorrow, ready to cut the piece. I've got a lot of exclusive stuff. Besides that, I—"

Holger Gross interrupted, "You know what I saw this morning—footage of Carlotta Fanning at American Express, showing me not only how much I like having her work for us again, but also pissing me off that you gave her our exclusive film."

"I didn't just give her the film," I said. "We covered it together. Our being there was a miracle; there was no advanced notice. She recorded the sound on her Sony, a copy of which she gave me... at the same time I gave her a copy of my stuff. She promised to never use more than fifteen seconds at a time. I had to give it to her—the sound brings the whole thing to life. You want the bomb blast without the sound?"

"You can sync it up?" asked Holger Gross.

"Of course, any editor should be able to. If not, I'll take it home."

"You have a Moviola at home?"

“I have a studio, table, rewinds, viewer, splicer, Moviola,” I said. “The whole schmear.”

“Okay, we’ll use your coverage for a Brentley piece. Keighley told Roscoe you have enough for an hour doc.”

“I’ve got interviews, speeches, action, rallies, mass demonstrations, and seductions. A lot of undercurrents. The French, you know. Dany the Red’s impromptu offerings, most of them one-liners with a bit of political mockery; he really gets them going.”

I attended to two items before my departure for New York on the 23rd:

- A member of the girls’ hockey team dropped off game footage at the WBN office in Paris, which I picked up on my only visit to the bureau.
- Reggie accepted Carlotta’s invitation to accompany her to New York for the interview with Schindler, and then, if need be, back to Indonesia as cameraman and lover.

Their affair had begun over our bouillabaisse. She’d be moving into his apartment for the rest of her vacation. Two colossal talents, they belonged together, traveling the world, risking their lives. Two of the most passionate persons I’d ever known.



IN ONE INTENSIVE WEEK AT WBN’S NEW YORK HQ, I FINISHED cutting and mixing *Students at the Ramparts*, my documentary on student unrest. Eddie came up from DC to supervise a team of three editors. No longer an IATSE editors’ union member, I was not permitted to touch a rewind, much less cut film. To make the deadline, I did so more than once.

Lil had never been exposed to this type of hectic schedule—my working to 11:00 p.m. or later. It didn’t seem to matter. She had dinner waiting when I got home. It was like setting up house. The husband goes to work; the dutiful wife cleans, cooks, and looks beautiful for his return.

It didn't seem to bother Lil. But would she be able to handle it over the long term? Time to talk money and work issues with her.

The program was supposed to air Sunday evening, the thirty-first of March, at the 9:00 p.m. time slot so as not to be up against CBS's popular *Ed Sullivan Show* at 8:00 p.m., which, on that evening, featured a middling guest list headlined by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles.

By then, I was back in DC ready to watch it with Skipper on my new color TV, only to have Lyndon Johnson's 9:00 p.m. announcement not to seek reelection shock the nation and preempt programming on all the major networks.

I had persuaded New York to let me try the cinema verité approach in shaping the piece. At first, Roscoe Schindler was loath to give up on the standard narration-intensive approach. He had Chazz Hartley waiting in the wings to narrate. That was before I convinced him that, besides its innovative status, cinema verité introduced a stylistic approach in keeping with the avant-garde nature of the subject matter that was sure to attract a younger demographic.

Just as well, I thought, after New York informed me that the program was postponed. Not only had the president's announcement caught the nation by surprise, it also had Skipper and her left-leaning friends—who'd been blown away by Robert Kennedy's March 16 announcement that he would challenge Johnson in the primaries and at the August 26 Democratic National Convention—joyfully anointing Kennedy as the surefire nominee.

Had the network run my program after Johnson's announcement, Skipper, and many others, would have been too distracted to pay attention. As it was, she scurried back and forth from bed to TV, changing the channel, chatting on the phone with political allies, arguing about how the announcement changed the complexion of the race and how they, as a group, were going to get the Kennedy bandwagon rolling. I smoked a joint; Skipper refused. How had her sudden militancy so completely escaped me, I wondered? I'd flown to France on the seventeenth. In one week, she'd found a cause. Was it the difference in our ages? Was that disparity impossible to overcome? Or had life in the maelstrom of the news cycle so exhausted me that I'd become jaded? *Get over it*, I muttered...



At the next ring of the phone, Skipper said, "Hello," and passed the receiver to me without another word.

"Gus."

"Hello, Ginny."

"Gus, Delmas has been arrested. I don't know who else to call."

APRIL

**W**hen we talked on April 1, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King's chief of staff, explained several things to me:

1. MLK considered his Chicago campaign a failure. He took responsibility for the outcome and vowed to set things straight with a Poor People's Campaign, an idea inspired by a trip to northern Mississippi, where he'd witnessed poverty on a massive scale. The idea? To flaunt poverty in the face of the white establishment by bringing poor Black people into the nation's capital in caravans, sensationalizing their living conditions in a campaign that included forcing their way into congressional hearings, impromptu visits to various government agencies, marches, rallies, and demonstrations, busing in poor families and duplicating their impoverished surroundings for the elite to witness. How would the public react to watching school children from Mississippi eat a daily diet consisting of one-quarter of an apple and some wormy crackers? What would they say about inferior schooling that assured a future of subpar job opportunities? Would they accept the medieval living conditions, shacks made with

discarded corrugated tin for roofs and scavenged pieces of wood for siding? Martin believed the abject state of these people's lives would so shock the American people that they would demand redress. He even proposed loading the wooden shacks the poor lived in onto flatbed trailers and hauling them to Washington, DC. Like the historical recreations of colonial times in Williamsburg, VA, he would stage set pieces with real-life actors in their real-life roles, dramatizing poverty in its most degraded form.

2. When he outlined this idea, it was vehemently opposed by some on his staff—the so-called realists, Jesse Jackson and James Bevel. MLK was frustrated by the staff's inability to appreciate his plan, which, Abernathy himself confessed, he didn't completely understand. Was it bold? Yes. Was it doable? It would shake the foundations of society, MLK insisted. Nevertheless, the realists challenged him to explain what they would do if this so-called Poor People's Campaign failed, reminding him that, on top of Chicago, if it too failed, the movement would lose so much face it might never recover.

The two sides and the players involved were deadlocked, somewhat acrimoniously, which, according to Abernathy, disturbed MLK, who always did his best to smooth things over when the staff was at odds.

This project became moot, however, when the sanitation workers in Memphis went out on strike and the city refused to negotiate. Because this strike concerned the poor people he'd been so focused on, Dr. King decided the strike would not only help these particular union members, it might also bring the issue of poverty to the forefront.

While in France, I had been unable to follow the events leading up to King's visit to Memphis. Abernathy recounted how the march King intended to make had been sabotaged almost before it began by the Invaders, a group of militant young Blacks, who used the movement as a "stalking horse" to further their anti-white agenda. When things started to fall apart, MLK broke off the march. It was touch and go, a potentially dangerous situation that had police and rioters confronting each other.

Abandoned to their own devices, King and his coterie hitched a ride with a lady, eventually being guided to their motel by some friendly state troopers.

“Usually,” said Abernathy, “we workshop the people until they understand how nonviolence works and how they must act. The Invaders prevented us from getting out of our cars. We were unable to workshop. It’s essential because nonviolence is counterintuitive. Most people want to meet violence with violence. It takes guts not to react.”

“Where is Dr. King now?” I asked.

“He’s in DC. Gave a sermon at the Washington Cathedral yesterday. Didn’t you know?”

“I was in New York all last week working on my French piece. Just got back to DC yesterday.”

“You were in France?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“About two weeks.”

“What for?”

“I covered the student movement,” I said, “what they’re doing and what they’re planning... their connections with French workers.”

“You were there? In Nanterre?”

“Yes, in fact, I have a special airing tomorrow, Tuesday evening.”

“Well, you’ve been asking for an interview. You just found your entrée. Martin loves hearing about other movements. I’ll make sure he catches your special.”

“Will he be in Atlanta today? I can come down.”

“He’s indisposed.”

“Ahem, oh yeah,” I said, “indisposed.”

“Don’t be like other reporters, always implying indiscretions every time he’s not available. He’s tired out; he’s relaxing.”

“Okay, Rev. How about Wednesday?”

“Not good,” said Abernathy. “We’re going back to Memphis.”

“WBN has a large contingent there already.”

“We’ll make it work; I’ll call you.”



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I DROVE VIRGINIA TO THE NOTORIOUS DC Jail. The fact that it was constructed in 1872 does much to explain why its barbarous conditions still exist. Ask someone who studies penal reform whether a run-down plant and equipment influences the draconian attitudes of the jailers, and they become defensive, blaming it on lack of funds and denying institutional or personal responsibility. Cruelty and indifference are the operative ethos inside and outside the institution. From time to time, the *Washington Post* ran stories of prisoners who have been there for years without ever being charged.

When they led Delmas out in jail apparel, Virginia's face lit up all pink and pleased, as if he would somehow be walking out with us. He gave her a sidewise glance, then spoke to me.

"Gotta get outta here."

"We're going to get you out, darling," said Virginia.

"Have you been arraigned?" I asked.

"Not yet. They want to move me to Baltimore."

"Baltimore?" Virginia's face turned bleach white. "Why there?"

"Stay out of this, baby."

"Calm, Delmas. Or I walk. Okay?" I said.

"Okay. What about a lawyer?" asked Delmas.

"You can always go with the city's legal counsel. It's free," I said.

"What about," asked Delmas, "your lawyer?"

"I don't have a lawyer."

"She told me you could get me one."

"She misled you. I have no connections," I said. "I'm not some kind of fixer."

"But your family."

"Contracts, taxes, and civil matters. Criminal law is something else."

"Lawyers know other lawyers," said Delmas. "Maybe yours knows a criminal lawyer."

"I need to know what happened."

Delmas fidgeted, tapping his fingers on the counter, seemingly reluctant to disclose any details. Louder and louder, until the guard standing nearby, started to walk over.

"Without details, it's impossible to..." Delmas stopped tapping and clasped his hands.

“You know Paul Welch, right?” he asked.

“The stagehand?”

“Yeah,” said Delmas, “During downtime, he does jobs for a guy who works at an engineering company. A kind of architect who designs automation systems for warehouses, factories, and shop floors. He hires Paul to get a crew to install this equipment, mostly conveyor belts in warehouses. There’s a welder. Paul and his crew do the mechanical stuff, bolting and attaching as the welder finishes installing supports for the conveyors. Paul collects his crew, and they meet up with the welder at the job site. They work at night, after hours. The architect doesn’t go.”

“And Paul hired you for one of these jobs, I suppose?” I asked.

“It pays good.”

“That’s why you went to Baltimore, Delmas?” asked Virginia. “What could go wrong in a warehouse?”

“That’s just it. It was a pharmaceutical warehouse. The second night, after we got back to DC, the cops were waiting. They searched our toolboxes and car, accused us of boosting thirty thousand dollars worth of amphetamines, Vicodin, methadone, and morphine.”

“Oh, my Lord,” sighed Virginia. “You robbed a drug—”

“That’s just it. We didn’t plan it. It just happened to be filled with goodies.”

I DROVE VIRGINIA TO HER SHRINK AT DUPONT CIRCLE. IT WAS CLEAR she knew nothing, but I still couldn’t stop shaking my head. “You said he relied on you. You didn’t even know about this?”

“He doesn’t tell me where he’s going. Not for that kind of stuff.”

“His cleverly masterminded criminal schemes, you mean.”

“What about your aunt? You’re always bragging about her lawyers.”

“No way. This is a criminal charge. And a drug-related one, at that. There’s going to be fallout on this.”

“He’s been busted before,” she said. “He serves a few months, gets out on good behavior.”

“This company they worked for—people are going to get fired. The warehouse company. They’re going to sue. And the Baltimore DA. They’re going to extradite him.”

“Can you go his bail, at least?”

“And lose my bond money when he jumps bail like he usually does?”

“Please...”

“Virginia, one, I don’t much like Delmas. Two, Baltimore means complications. Three, I’m off to Memphis today. MLK is leading a march there. It’s a big deal; I’ll be busy and out of touch for a while.”

“Your n••••r is more important than mine?”

“Don’t use that word around me, specially since Delmas isn’t Black.”

“I was gonna ask you if your *man* is more important than my man.”

“That’s not the word you used,” I said. “You never used it when we were together.”

“Delmas told me about what the brothers did to him in prison; they’d probably do the same thing to you if you were there.”

“That word... spoken with such loathing. Reason number four: I dislike racists.”

Virginia stepped out of the car, turned around, and leaned in through the window. “Don’t take it so serious. He’s not a racist; he just thinks this country is going through a nightmare on account of this and that group taking what white people created.”

“Which is the very definition of racism,” I said. “To hear you talk like that makes me sick. I belong to more than one of the groups he so obviously despises. I shudder to think what he says about me.”

“He knows you’re not one of them.”

“One of whom?”

“One of them—a n••••r. Trouble is, they don’t know what you are.”

“To think we might have gotten married. Christ.”

“Help him, please. It’s the last time I’ll ask you for anything.”

For almost fifteen seconds, I was too dumbfounded to speak. “God knows, I hate to see anyone locked up in that shithole, even a punk.”

“Don’t be so highfalutin.”

“A reporter at WBBN handles the crime beat. I’ll call her,” I said. “Then, there’s... no.”

“What, who—?”

“Forget it. I’ll talk to her.” I was thinking about Marsha Warren, Mitch’s sister, who was building a reputation as a defense attorney.

“Before you leave?”

“Before I leave. And no fairy tales. Make sure Delmas understands he’ll have to come up with the dough. Oh, and don’t call me again.”



I MET SKIPPER FOR HAMBURGERS AT THE CORNER OF R AND Connecticut Avenue inside Crystal City, a cheap eatery from my college years. I was alternating between the pages of an R. Crumb comic book and looking around the restaurant for familiar faces when she arrived. My crowd had moved on to brighter pastures. Pretty soon the whole of Dupont Circle would be gentrified, I mused.

“You look awful, are you sick, Gus?” asked Skipper. I looked up. Skipper came into focus. “What’s so important?”

“What I can’t figure out is how Virginia, who doesn’t touch hard drugs, still makes the kind of stupid decisions junkies do.”

“What did she do now?” asked Skipper.

“She’s all in on trying to free him, probably by doing do something stupid and illegal.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe smuggle something into him. Stealing some money. I don’t know.”

“What about the lawyer thing?”

“Not only did she try to wheedle bail and lawyer money out of me, she let loose a stream of invective when I mentioned going to Memphis to cover the sanitation strike. When I confronted her, she told me Delmas’s been telling her all the things minorities have been doing to white people.”

“She used *the word*, did she?” asked Skipper.

“Yes.”

“If I ever hear her talk like that, I’ll slap her silly.”

“God knows what Delmas says about my ancestry.”

“Did you make any promises?”

“I mentioned someone who might know a criminal lawyer.”

“Don’t do it, Gus,” said Skipper. “You gotta stop all contact with her. She’s toxic. I can see Delmas falling for that neo-Nazi shit in prison. Virginia should know better.”



“She’s your sister.”

“I don’t care. She can sleep with the devil. I only have to see her and her imitation tough guy two or three times a year, at holidays when my parents set the rules. Did you notice how obsequious she was at your birthday party? She doesn’t dare act out around our mother—although some things are missing, according to my mom, stolen by her to support his habit.”



I LANDED IN MEMPHIS ON THE MORNING OF APRIL 3, IMMEDIATELY joining the Wolff at the WBN enclave in the Peabody Hotel. The word, as the Wolff delivered it to the various crews was: MLK is tired. He wants the Rev. Abernathy to speak at the Mason Temple in his stead this evening. “So, we’ll be there, but only on DEFCON One,” said the Wolff.

Don Wolff and I ate quickly before finalizing our camera setups.

I ran into Abernathy, who reiterated that Dr. King had appointed him to speak to the congregation, but once he’d seen the large crowd and the local and national press assembled, he had second thoughts, deciding that King himself must come to the temple.

Walking down the aisle to the podium clinched it, he said. Nobody applauded or recognized him. No buzz, none. The crowd was waiting for Dr. King; his presence alone would placate them. When Abernathy told the SCLC leadership that he’d decided not to speak, Jesse Jackson insisted that he did not call MLK and that he, Jackson, would address the crowd. Pointedly, Abernathy chose to ignore this request. Instead, he telephoned the Lorraine Motel. On hearing Abernathy’s description of the situation, Dr. King realized it was an important occasion: he had to make the speech.

While waiting for Dr. King, Abernathy shared small talk with the organizers. The Wolff and I stood by our crews, waiting anxiously.

A tremor swept through the crowd, growing in intensity, alive and palpable, as Martin Luther King walked down the aisle to thunderous cheering, making it seem like many more than five hundred people had assembled. That, somehow, the karma of the situation had energized all

who'd gathered, reporters and spectators alike, inspiring Dr. King to ascend to the pulpit and give the final speech of his life.

The Wolff recorded the event with one crew and I with another, capturing silent footage of the audience and cutaways of the notables with my Filmo. After, we headed to the local WBN affiliate to edit and feed the results to the network.

Accounts of that night and the next day vary. Visitors in and out of the Lorraine Motel, many of them women. The narrative goes from an undocumented, imprecise timeline to a minute-by-minute reckoning, the significance of which depends on a given individual's feelings about Dr. King—his life and work. As the end approached, the facts are clear:

---

•5:55 p.m.

Dr. Martin Luther King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy exit their hotel rooms after changing for dinner. The two, plus others on King's staff, are to attend dinner at the home of a local minister, Reverend Billy Kyles. Emerging out of his room, King lingers on the balcony to talk to his driver, Solomon Jones, in the courtyard below.

•6:01 p.m.

Martin Luther King is shot and badly wounded.

James Earl Ray departs Bessie Brewer's rooming house, abandoning his suitcase and rifle wrapped in a green blanket in the doorway of a nearby building, Canipe's Amusement Company. He is spotted by two patrons of Canipe's and by Charles Stephens and William Anschutz, residents of Bessie Brewer's Rooming House.

•6:03 p.m.

The shooting is radioed to police headquarters.

•6:08 p.m.

The owner of Canipe's Amusement Company informs police headquarters that a white man had run through the alley and dropped the bundle, fleeing the scene in a white Ford Mustang.

•6:09 p.m.

Barely alive, King is rushed to St. Joseph's Hospital, accompanied by Abernathy and escorted by several police on motorcycles.

•6:10 p.m.

The first police dispatch includes a description of the possible shooter as a “young white male, well dressed, believed in late-model white Mustang, going north on Main from the scene of the shooting.”

•6:16 p.m.

King arrives at St. Joseph’s Hospital, unconscious but still alive.

Ray is stuck in traffic along Highway 78, heading toward Mississippi.

•6:30 p.m.

Police find Ray’s abandoned bundle in front of Canipe’s Amusement Company, next to Bessie Brewer’s rooming house. The bundle contains the rifle, binoculars, clothing, the *Commercial Appeal* newspaper story that reveals King’s location at the Lorraine, two beer cans, and Ray’s radio.

Police investigate the rooming house and identify a John Willard in Room 5B who drives a white Ford Mustang.

By this time, Ray has made his way into Mississippi.

•7:05 p.m.

Dr. King is pronounced dead at St. Joseph’s Hospital.<sup>1</sup>

Sometime between 7:15 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., the Wolff and I learned that rioting was taking place in many American cities and that President Lyndon Johnson had declared a state of emergency, setting off a mad scramble of news gathering to be “there” and get “the latest.” In the crosscurrent of fact and rumor, it wasn’t easy to determine what and where “there” and “the latest” were. We decided that the Wolff would cover the police beat and the manhunt while I tried to contact Abernathy about SCLC plans to end the garbage workers’ strike, including another march, the cause that had lured Dr. King to Memphis in the first place, which, at that moment, was overshadowed by the tumultuous events of the day.

Intensifying the confusion, four thousand National Guardsmen were added to the forces already present since the first march on March 28, the day Mayor Loeb had declared martial law in Memphis.

The rioting in Memphis didn’t reach the intensity that it did in other

cities, probably due to the already massive show of force, but it did clear the streets of vehicles and pedestrians alike. As the week wore on, getting around the deserted streets wasn't difficult. Most businesses remained closed, requiring Don Wolff, the crews, and me to take our eats at a ribs joint across the bridge in West Memphis, Arkansas, whose jukebox featured James Brown, Otis Redding, and Smokey Robinson. No country music. No Janis Joplin.

On April 8, Coretta Scott King led a peaceful march through Memphis, a prelude to settling the strike, as it turned out. When it was over, WBN realized that the vortex of events was moving on: no longer was Memphis ground zero. On to Atlanta for King's funeral or to the cities still rioting.

The people of Memphis could now return to their personal affairs. Being the momentary center of attention in the never-ending parade known as breaking news: one minute you're plucked from obscurity, put on a platform, and interviewed repeatedly. They can't get enough of you. The next moment, the limelight's passed you by and you realize you've been gussied up by a smiling mediocrity to serve as a surrogate for some elusive demographic. Stardom, like a momentary fever, has passed you by, as you always knew it probably would, and you're left with an empty sensation in the pit of your stomach, wondering how the whole experience began and ended so quickly.

WBN dispatched Don Wolff to Atlanta for MLK's funeral and recalled me to DC. Informing Skipper of my imminent arrival, I learned that Adams-Morgan was relatively untouched by the riots, but it would be four more days before Skipper's school opened again.

As I was checking out of the hotel, I answered a call from Rev. Abernathy: "He was looking forward to hearing about the student uprisings in France; we had you scheduled in for the next week, after we got back."

"Thank you for the opportunity, Rev. I appreciate it, you can't know how much. Where are you headed now?"

"We're bringing poor people to DC soon, after the funeral."

"See you there, my friend," I said, conscious that neither of us had uttered the name of the man so central to both our destinies. It was too soon and too raw, no need to search for words that would not suffice.

*Truckloads of poor people to DC?* Social experiments like Mao Tse-tung's Great Leap Forward that try to change human nature can have unintended consequences. King might have managed it, but Abernathy with his nice guy personality? Similar goals but different energies. Making people into something they aren't. God help them if the weather turns bad.



AUNT ALICE'S DINNER INVITATION HAD ME SEARCHING FOR A plausible excuse to decline. That it did not include Skipper meant a discussion of family issues and perhaps some lifting and loading. Alice was always packing and unpacking crates and bundles—artifacts collected on her world travels.

Just as well, I thought. Skipper had hockey practice. I would have preferred watching it, following it with hummus, baba ghanoush, and other delicacies at Mama Ayesha's Lebanese near the Calvert Street Bridge.

After Memphis, I needed to decompress but realized I wouldn't be able to. Relaxation wasn't part of WBN's DNA, nor was it a part of my aunt's—she raised everyone's blood pressure. Every time I came up with a feasible excuse, the thought of my dotting aunt's disappointment softened my resolve. She hated when things didn't go as planned when she had to reschedule an event or a menial task for me to execute when my no-show meant the dinner menu she'd arranged would become the week's leftovers. Anecdotes of the old days—opening nights on Broadway, Hollywood premieres, the Riviera—would not be repeated and, once again, savored. I used these firsthand accounts to spice up my master's thesis on Uncle Phil's plays. Alice had an inexhaustible supply of them. But most of all, her work at the DNC and my visits were Aunt Alice's way of staying relevant in a world that was slowly upstaging the drama that had once been her life.

Besides, I changed my mind; it was time to tell her about the car. At first, she might be irritated, but ever since I was a young boy, she came around quickly when I confessed to some wrongdoing, part of the

Catholic programming that governed her convictions. The opposite of my father, who kept a running tally of transgressions, which, when they'd stimulated enough bile, erupted in the form of random diatribes and beatings.

I was right about packing and unpacking, but that wasn't the real reason Aunt Alice invited me to dinner. Nor was it about the Jaguar, that issue being quickly dismissed with Alice's complimenting me on my improvisational skills: "I may sell that car. It's very expensive to keep and I'm not as keen on driving in traffic anymore. The DNC has given me a car and driver."

"That's great, Auntie, being out and about," I said.

What Alice wanted to talk to me about was my former girlfriend, the erstwhile Madeline Carroll, who, that conceit forevermore discarded, was now known to one and all only as Virginia Hubbard.

"Dearie, I like Miriam, I do, but her sister Virginia must think she's part of our family because you and she were— I don't even know where to begin with all that. Anyway, now she calls me to ask for money with a story about a friend of hers who's in jail, unjustly it seems... I can't follow what she's saying. I think she must be drinking. You understand, dear Peter, it has to stop."

"I'll take care of it, Auntie. She won't bother you again."

"By the way, dearie, I played golf with Miriam while you were away. Did she tell you?"

"Yes."

"She gave me ten strokes and still won by seven," said Aunt Alice. "Did you know she's working for Kennedy?"

"Yes."

"Lyndon, of course, hates him. What do you think?"

"Young people are for Kennedy; lots of emotion there. Skipper and her bunch like him. Me, I'm supposed to be a neutral observer, as a producer, but he does seem to check all the boxes, coalition- and demographics-wise. Getting things done, of course, depends on Congress, and that's tricky. I used to think Nixon could never get elected, but with all the unrest, that's changing. I meet a lot of people who want law and order, meaning an authoritarian leader."

“I’m supposed to be promoting Hubert Humphrey,” said my aunt. “He’s a nice man, with great Democratic Party credentials, but he doesn’t appeal to progressives or younger voters. Lyndon is not favoring any candidate. He and I have come to an impasse on that. I’ve asked him to let me take on a new challenge: Stopping Nixon. If he won’t work for one of our candidates, then at least help us stop Nixon at all costs. I’m looking for volunteers.”

“And I, for some reason, thought you moved here to retire.”

“To dry up and blow away? Not likely.”

“No, but I was worried. You look ten years younger. This work is great for you.”

“And you, dear boy,” said my aunt. “Have you found what you’re always talking about... your purpose?”

“You don’t find it in a Cracker Jack box.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “Do you think Miriam would like the DNC?”

“Why not call her? I’m sure she’d love the chance to get your Nixon disinformation unit working for Kennedy.”



RUTH O’MALLEY BOARDED HER HORSE, BLEEDA, AT A RANCH NEAR Calabasas, California. Three times a week, she left the office or the hospital, whichever place she happened to be working at that day, for the far reaches of Los Angeles County, US 101 to the Las Virgenes Road exit.

Bleeda belonged to a race of horses rarely found outside the Rhone River Delta, much less at a California riding club or anywhere else in the United States, for that matter. A *camarguais*, this seemingly undistinguished animal was by no means a child’s pony or toy Shetland. Gray or dirty white with dark speckles and a compact, sturdy body, she excelled in stamina and endurance.

Ridiculed by other riding club members, until they tried to outrun her, she was an even-tempered, intelligent beast that took no shit from the larger horses. If bullied, she defended herself ferociously, yet she was never the aggressor. Kind of loner in character and bearing, she resem-

bled her owner: astride her mare, her jet-black ponytail and milk-white skin shimmering and aglow, Ruth O'Malley evoked a magisterial Joan of Arc leading French troops against the English invader, waving a sword and shouting, "Once more into the breach..."

Much to the dismay of the mostly male club members who rode with Ruth, they marveled at how her horse began a ride, giving what appeared to be her maximum effort until the others faltered, then, as if sensing her moment, breaking away from the pack, not stopping until Ruth reined her in. Once at full throttle, she altered neither the tempo nor the intensity of her gait, a trait shared by all members of this ancient race of equines. More than a curiosity, she was a phenomenon, as, of course, was Ruth in the eyes of the male members who constantly hit on her.

She deflected their overtures principally because none of them were interesting enough to risk becoming an item in a place where cronyism and gossip prevailed. Besides, they were all married, and Ruth was busy with her therapy work as a licensed social worker. The only thing she had in common with these people were horses. They reminded Ruth of the characters in Gus's Sinclair Lewis-Theodore Dreiser documentary. Previously unfamiliar with this period of American literature, she'd watched the program at his behest. Impressed, she then read *Dodsworth*, followed by *Sister Carrie*, which left her slightly depressed and wary of amorous entanglements with married men.

Preparing for her day's ride, Ruth was grooming Bleeda when Russ Ludlow, a wealthy car dealer, and Tim Spankley, an LA circuit judge, her riding companions for the evening, stopped to tell her they'd wait for her by the putting green, an attraction Mike Santiago, the owner, had added to keep members amused when they weren't riding.

"I'll be along," said Ruth.

Russ and Tim watched for a moment as clusters of gray hair swirled around Ruth and her horse. Such is the nature of a Camargue horse's winter coat that it reaches a good three inches in length before it begins shedding in clumps during the vernal equinox.

"She resembles a bear more than a horse. You oughta pull it out in clumps, be easier," said Tim.

After watching them from the paddock, Mike called to his fifteen-year-old daughter, "Gabby, help this young lady."



Gabby emerged from the barn and walked to the other side of Bleeda, reaching out to stroke her neck.

"It'll come out on its own eventually, but I like to get it started," Ruth told her.

Gabby began pulling out clumps with both hands, slapping them together and watching the wind carry the tufts away. "It's like a pillow fight with busted pillows," said Gabby. "Where'd she get the name Bleeda?"

"She's a magic horse with a mysterious past. No one knows what her name means. She's a fairy-tale princess from France, where her kinfolk still run wild."

Ruth threw the saddle over her. Gabby helped with the bridle. Bleeda looked back, letting out a muffled nicker, as if to tell Ruth that she trusted Gabby, who, after she'd secured all the leather, asked, "Could I ride her one time, please?"

"That'd be up to her," said Ruth, "but I think we might manage it."

Finally, away, the three riders headed over the mountains toward Malibu. After the men's horses started to tire, Bleeda made her move to the lead, at which point, Russ Ludlow's quarter horse, at his bidding, attempted to force her off the trail. Tim was behind watching, surprised by his friend's actions. The more Bleeda fought back, the more Ludlow whipped her with a leather lanyard looped around his wrist. Ruth, to the right of Ludlow's horse, fell back, positioning Bleeda to a spot directly behind the other horse where Ludlow couldn't see her. Then, with a surge of energy, Bleeda darted up the left side, away from her assailant's whip hand into the other horse's flank with such ferocity that Ludlow's animal broke stride and nearly toppled over, at which point Bleeda was off to Malibu on her own.

"Russ, you asshole. What were you thinking?"

"That uppity bitch. Thinks she's so pure."

"You might have killed someone," said the judge, "over a piece of ass. I'm a mandated reporter. If something happened, I'd have to tell it like it was."

"That damned horse of hers. I'll fix it."

"That's crazy talk. If anything happens to that animal, I'll hold you responsible."

Ruth rode on to the hills overlooking Malibu. There, she lingered for fifteen minutes, patting down Bleeda and stroking her mane. The men had long since returned to the club. Gabby watched them gather like the amateur conspirators they were, trying to hide their intrigues, but too worked up to do so effectively. Her father shooed her away.

These were rich men and women, the source of his livelihood. While he didn't condone their conduct, he wouldn't ruin his business just for one member. As much as Ruth's authenticity appealed to him, he'd always felt some member would force himself on her and there would be trouble. He'd have to have a serious talk with her, hoped she'd understand. Now, with Gabby scolding him for being weak—she'd divined the gist of what had transpired—Mike Santiago realized the moment had arrived. The Ludlow fellow had left immediately after paying Gabby to rub down his horse.

When Ruth returned, she realized the club members had the lowdown. The women eyed her. The men directed churlish smiles at her as if their wives had caught them jerking off to *Hustler* magazine. The TV was blaring the *Hartley-Brentley Report* on a color television. Ruth sat down in the back to watch. Chazz Hartley was wrapping up a piece on cancer research. Next, she heard Douglas Brentley speak the words, "We turn to Gus Mazur at Ohio State University," and there was Gus, beard and all, standing in front of the student-occupied Administration Building, talking a mile a minute about the students' race-related demands. Caught off guard by so many conflicting thoughts buzzing through her head—the incident on the trail, the club members' dissimulating behavior, Gus's sudden appearance at that particular moment—Ruth was too shook up to grasp the details of the piece he was narrating, especially as the peanut gallery began to generalize on his person.

"Who's *this* guy?" asked a man.

"I saw him. He's their 'civil rights' spokesman, so-called, it seems.

"As if we need it rammed down our throats..."

"A cholo... A Macaca,"

"A wog, if I've ever seen one," said a woman.

"A goddamn raghead."

"Some momo they dug up to tell us we should feel sorry for n••••rs."

"I heard he's a full-blood Sioux Indian, a Sioux Jew."

“Makes me sick, these half-breeds.”

(*He sure is good-looking though*, thought one woman. *I wouldn't kick him outta my bed*, mused another.)

Compared to the racist language that flew around the room that evening, *hairball* was almost a compliment. Ruth tiptoed out silently.

She was giving Gabby a couple of dollars to look after Bleeda when her father approached. “I know, it’s best for your business,” said Ruth, “that I take Bleeda elsewhere, Mike.”

“Miss Ruth, this is a hard business. It’s me and Gabby, and she has school. I hate what’s happened, but they won’t stop there.”

“The veneer has come off,” said Ruth.

“Them’s good people, some of ’em, but they’re afraid to speak up.”

“It’s always that way, the bullies get their way. That’s what I like about my horse: she won’t be bullied. You should have seen her today.”

“Nothing’ll happen to Bleeda; I’ll make sure of it.”

“I’ll let you know where to take her when I find a place. I’ll miss you guys, you and Gabby.”

Gabby was in tears. “Daddy, can’t we do something?”

“Maybe you can come over to my new club, when I get one, and ride her, Gabby. She likes you.”

Leaving by the red dirt driveway, Ruth popped a cassette into the dashboard tape deck, launching Irving Berlin’s ingenious lyric, “Anything You Can Do” from the movie version of *Annie Get Your Gun*.

I can jump a hurdle.  
 I can wear a girdle.  
 I can knit a sweater.  
 I can fill it better.  
 I can do most anything.  
 Can you bake a pie?  
 No.  
 Neither can I.

*Annie Get Your Gun* was her favorite musical, and Gus’s, too—so he claimed. She thought it peculiar that the condescending way the screenplay treated Indians didn’t seem to ruffle Gus, perhaps because his

JJ SEMPLE

person embodied so many ethnicities there wasn't enough of any specific one to make him feel degraded. Perhaps he just had thick skin. He'd talked about creating a jazzy version of this tune that they could sing as a duet, sort of like what Betty Carter and Ray Charles had done with "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

MAY

**E**arly in May, it became apparent that the civil unrest in France was about to reach new heights, that the March *manifestations* were only a rehearsal. Barricades; cobblestones ripped from the streets; overturned, burning automobiles; placards; banners; and flags; mass marches and bloodied faces. Images flashed around the world told the story. Ten times as tumultuous as March. A hundred times. Not since the French Revolution had the streets erupted with such ferocity.

New York toyed with once again sending me. It didn't hurt that once the trouble began, my March documentary got additional airtime in a bid to educate American viewers about the students' and workers' political and social grievances.

In the end, however, they opted to keep me focused on what they considered a more important domestic issue—the 1968 presidential election and one candidate, in particular, Robert Kennedy.

As recompense for my French doc, Roscoe Schindler, the president of WBN News, now treated me as an insider with effusive praise for my efforts, including a new contract and a raise. (With the extra three thousand dollars, I'd now be able to complete renovations on the Macomb Street property.)

Roscoe surprised me by green-lighting both of Skipper's projects: the Olympic women's hockey team and her Saturday community outreach

programs, relegating the former to the network and the latter to the local station, WBBN.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Roscoe... Don Wolff told me we were easing off on her two projects. What changed?”

“Come the conventions, we’re going to start hiring a lot of women for positions across the network. Most of the hires will come from local stations, who’ve been more aggressive than we have on distaff hires. Your gal’s stories will help get the ball rolling, enthusiasm-wise—give us something to gauge what appeals to women. Your girl, for instance. She’s a specific type, athletic, determined. She’d be a damn good reporter, has a prosecutor’s instincts.”

I supervised the editing of her projects, shooting interviews with Skipper, and recording her voice-over, laughing silently to myself. You want a woman? I’ll give you one in spades. Give her an inch...

Next, I got Herb’s permission to let Jerry Cugini, my former assistant, now Herb Hecht’s editor, oversee the assembly. When it was finished, Jerry, his assistant, Steve Scott, and I screened it with Don Wolff and Skipper. Suggestions were offered and modifications made. Through it all, Skipper kept complaining that the outreach piece was only going to be shown locally. To exempt myself from domestic backlash, I asked the Wolff to inform her that the final say-so in cases involving potential charges of nepotism was given to an outsider, namely George Pongracic, *Hartley-Brentley* executive producer.

“Depending on the local reaction,” the Wolff explained to Skipper, “it could go national. The final decision rests with New York. Gus, I’m afraid, is not in the loop. There might even be a place for it in Special Projects, but that, too, would be New York.”

Seemingly a bit overwhelmed by the management approval tree, Skipper acquiesced for the moment. I was sure she’d pester me as soon as she got me alone. She had this unremitting obstinate gene in her DNA. Then again, such is the nature of television: once bitten by the boob tube bug, people begin to see themselves as larger than life, imagining their persona filling some great void in the American psyche.



ONCE A PERSON REACHES AN AGE AT WHICH THEY ARE CONSCIOUS OF being admired by others, whether for comeliness, charm, or intellect, they begin, ever so slowly, sometimes at a very young age, to develop the skills for exerting mastery over others.

It had been two years since Ruth O'Malley passed the California LCSW exam. Since then, 95 percent of her work concerned private therapy patients. It was working out well; she had many paying clients and, after three years with Child Protective Services that had culminated in burnout, she found less exhausting work. She was guided by one constant that had little to do with the techniques of psychotherapy—the ability to put herself in someone else's place—and prospective clients tumbled into her capable hands. It was more than understanding or sharing, Ruth was able to look out at the world through the eyes of her patients and feel what they were feeling.

It's for those reasons that Virginia, more than any other family member, spoke to Ruth regularly. Ruth parried Virginia's control mechanisms and victimhood delusions, which relied on weaponizing her beauty. Able to put herself in her sister's place, Ruth looked out on the world as Virginia saw it. Not a pretty sight.

Where Skipper frightened Virginia physically, Ruth put her at ease.

Ruth had just parked her car when she heard the telephone ringing. She closed the garage door with the remote and opened the door to the kitchen. She hoped it wasn't a client in need of moral support. She'd just returned from boarding Bleeda at a new riding club in Westlake Village and she was tired after the long drive back to Culver City. She hadn't eaten all day. She was looking forward to the pea soup she'd prepared that morning.

"Hello, sis," said Virginia.

"Oh, it's you," Ruth said.

"That's not very welcoming."

"I'm tired and hungry, Virginia," Ruth said. "Here, I'll put you on the speaker while I eat. Don't mind my slurping; I'm eating soup."

"Gus drove me to the DC Jail."

"Delmas is still there, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but not for long. They're moving him to Baltimore. That's where the warehouse they robbed is."

“Oh.”

“Driving back, Gus and I argued. I used n••••r on someone like they do: his n••••r as opposed to mine, et cetera.”

“Who are we talking about?”

“Martin Luther King.”

“You used that term on King?”

“Yeah, sort of, but I didn’t mean it.”

“You may think you’re some kind of insider so you have the right to use that word, but you don’t. Not even close. Unfortunately, in prison socializing is drawn along racial lines.”

“I said it fondly like Delmas is my n••••r and King was Gus’s n••••r.”

“There’s no such thing as saying it fondly. You should know better.”

“I didn’t mean any harm. It’s kind of unfair, the whole thing.”

“It’s not supposed to be fair, sis,” said Ruth. “Doesn’t matter how you mean it.”

“That’s just more liberal crap. Anyway, he called me a racist and he told Skipper.”

“Liberal crap? Do you really believe that?”

“Who am I supposed to believe? Delmas lives it in real-time. People like Gus get their opinions from the *New York Times*.”

“Gus has been all over the world talking with all kinds of people.”

“But he doesn’t have to eat, take showers, or sleep with them.”

“I’ve been around conservative people when Gus appeared on TV—people that represent half the country. People even Ayn Rand would deplore. You should’ve heard the names they call him. Think that being called those names gives him the right to use them?”

“You talked to him about this?”

“We talk.”

“You like him, do you?” asked Virginia. “And he likes you?”

“Don’t start any rumors, Virginia. Not if you want Delmas out of jail.”

“You have some news? I haven’t heard anything. I thought Gus was turning everyone against me.”

“I’m not against you. I’ll never be against you.”

“Tell me,” said Virginia. “What have you heard?”

“Gus told me he may have found a lawyer, but he doesn’t want to say anything until it’s certain.” Ruth wiped her face with a napkin, walked to



the stove, and ladled herself more soup. Seated again, she looked around the table for something, spinning the lazy Susan without finding it. Then, looking back at the counter, she grabbed a package of Saltines and some Tobasco to sprinkle on the soup. “Don’t mention this to Delmas,” she said. “Can you hold off?”

“Yes.”

It was several moments before either spoke. Ruth was sure Virginia could hear the soup being slurped.

“Does Skipper know about your phone calls?”

“I’m awful tired, sweetie. I want to finish my dinner and go to sleep,” she said. “Oh, and just remember—no more stalking Gus if you want Delmas out of prison. Not only for his sake it, for yours. It might get you committed again.”

After lying down, sinking into a half-sleep, Ruth thought about her telephone conversations with Gus, pondering why she called him as much as he called her. She felt a passing glow in her loins and decided to masturbate while he was still on her mind.



ON SUNDAY, MAY 5, SKIPPER PEDALED FROM ADAMS-MORGAN TO Aunt Alice’s DNC office in the Watergate complex. Passing through Dupont Circle, she spotted Douglas Brentley—the Washington half of the anchor team hosting television’s most prominent nightly news show—sitting on a bench with a woman not his wife, holding hands. Skipper had been introduced to Brentley and his wife at an Ezra Eastman cocktail party for the *H-B Report*. The woman’s face didn’t register as belonging with Brentley. As Skipper whizzed by, she resolved to keep it to herself, to not tell Gus. Ten minutes later, she was hitching her bike to a railing at the Watergate complex.

“I started working for the DNC,” explained Aunt Alice, once Skipper was seated, “during Adlai Stevenson’s 1956 campaign. It was mostly fundraising then. I’ve worked on every campaign since, to where I’m now the director of this small operation. We don’t chase money; that’s another group. We concentrate on information gathering and candidate research. This may sound a bit spooky to an innocent like yourself.”

She emphasized the word *spooky*, as she scrutinized Skipper to see if she'd caught the CIA inference. "Innocent," Skipper laughed, "that's a hot one."

Alice smiled and started rummaging through the items on her desk. Finding a package of cigarettes behind her purse, she tapped one out and lit it.

"We do demographics," Alice explained. "Identifying various groups, organizing them. But volunteer work—door-to-door, campaign events, propaganda—takes place elsewhere. Here, we process information and pass it off to those who decide how best to use it in the campaign."

"I didn't realize," Skipper said, "campaigns did this kind of detailed research."

Behind Skipper, a young Black woman of Skipper's approximate age, wearing bookish, librarian-type glasses, was up a sliding ladder, busily shuffling through a floor-to-ceiling bookcase stuffed with newspapers, magazines, and periodicals. From time to time, she looked over her shoulder, more interested, it appeared, in the girl being interviewed than in unearthing a particular document. Several other younger women were pouring over documents on tables against the wall.

"This part of campaigning is growing. The candidates may change, but the real campaigns take place behind the scenes, driven by operations like ours . . ."

"I would never have guessed..."

"During the war, I was part of OSS research and disinformation. Eventually, some fieldwork. Many agents were women; women make great agents. Women get things done."

"I'm not sure how I'd fit in."

"You speak fluent Spanish, don't you, dearie?"

"I do."

"And you're already organizing for Kennedy?"

"True."

"You're friends with a *Hartley-Brentley Report* producer—my nephew, right?"

"We're close, yes."

"We need young women," said Alice. "They're good at this work, better than men in many respects."

“To be honest, the work I’ve been doing with Gus—cutting a piece on women’s Olympic hockey has been fascinating. I think I could... Well, I’m not sure I want to spend the rest of my life in a classroom.”

It was as if the words just spilled out of her mouth, without any sense of reserve—the way someone blurts out something to a stranger, something they’d never disclose to an intimate. Skipper wanted to add to this admission but paused to gauge Alice’s reaction.

“I’d think twice about changing occupations. Right now, Cloris here,” said Alice nodding to the girl on the sliding ladder, “is in charge of the Nixon information project. She’s our information specialist—a computer engineering degree from Brown and a master’s in creative writing from Johns Hopkins.”

“Oh,” Skipper nodded to Cloris, who, after descending the ladder, pulled up a chair alongside Skipper. “Nice to meet you. Cloris, is it?”

“Cloris Tucker,” said the girl, whose North African blouse reminded Skipper of prewar travelogues featuring smiling Bedouin women in traditional garb waving to tourists. The brassy tint of her fluffy natural contrasted nicely with everything else about her.

“Skipper Sanchez. People call me Skipper, except for Alice. She calls me Miriam. We might as well be consistent and go with Miriam if I get the job.”

“If you’re looking for excitement, working with Alice is, uh, never dull,” said Cloris. “We specialize in collecting information that the Nixon campaign doesn’t want the public to know about.”

“I’d do anything to stop Nixon,” said Skipper.

“So why don’t you go into another room with Cloris, or downstairs for coffee? Get to know each other, see if there’s a fit. Cloris will get back to me; I’ll get back to you.”



I WAS ASLEEP IN FRONT OF THE TV WHEN I FELT A THUMP. I scratched my head and focused on the person kicking my foot.

“Boy, have I got things to tell you,” said Skipper.

I consulted my Bulova Accutron: 11:35 p.m. “You been there all this time?”

“Number one, Aunt Alice told me she asked you about being gay because she had to preempt any hint of scandal around the work she’s doing.”

“Scandal?”

“Yeah. She used you as an example, said her office couldn’t be outwardly associated with homosexuals; it would impeach its credibility, scare timid voters,” explained Skipper. “Did you know she does super-secret work for the Democratic campaign? Socializing is a front. Well, sort of. She’s all over the place, digging up background on Nixon.”

“I believe it. Always said she could do anything,” I said.

“Number two, I had dinner with her assistant, Cloris, learning about counterespionage methods. I know I can do this work. Most of it is energy and persistence.”

“Does it pay? Those volunteer jobs usually don’t.”

“Not at the beginning, but she said they might be able to fix that later on,” said Skipper. “Of course, I’ll have to finish out the teaching year.”

“What’s with the outfit you’re wearing?” I asked. “You look like a hockey player impersonating a businessman. Or the other way around?”

“My one-woman, all-purpose business attire.”

“Pants?” I said.

“Custom made at Brooks Brothers,” replied Skipper.

“Don’t you think it’s a bit loud?” I asked. “Not as a matter of taste, but the statement it makes.”

“Loud?” said Skipper, visibly exasperated, inwardly shaken, but holding it in. “Anyway, it’s moot. You should’ve seen what the Black girl, Cloris, who works with her, was wearing. A fashion trendsetter if there ever was one. Very smart, a whiz at statistics and math. After seeing her, I can wear anything I want; it’s very informal.”

“Guess I’m so used to men parading around in suits, it’s a shock to see a woman in one.” Still heedless of her indignation, I continued. “Did you eat? I can fix you a hamburger and a salad.”

“I ate,” said Skipper. “You know, I’m not sure I want to spend the rest of my career in a classroom with third graders. I can do the DNC work, easily. I could do your job.”

“Anyone can do my job. Question is: Can anyone get the opportunity to do my job? I’m all for you: Go get ‘em, tiger.”

“I told you about my affairs with women,” she said.

“And I accepted you at face value.”

“Until two minutes ago, when you threw it back in my face.”

“I’m not equating your suit with being a lesbian, baby. Just saying that there’s a lot of homophobic prejudice in television news. That’s the statement I’m talking about. TV is run by conservative men.”

“But a lot of them are queer.”

“Haven’t you heard? It’s called hypocrisy,” I said. “And you don’t want to give people anything to talk about before you get in the door.”

“I didn’t think of that.”

“Except for Nancy Dickerson at NBC, I don’t see too many female correspondents,” I said. “Uh, that day will come. Soon, according to Schindler.”

“What about Carlotta Fanning? You always throw her name out like she was super-female. Super fuck is more like it.”

“For your information, Carlotta is a one-woman show; she’s a mega-celebrity who’s proven herself in wartime on the battlefield and other situations most male reporters don’t even want to hear about. She’s a name,” I said. “She could walk into any network and get fifty to seventy-five K. But she’s coming back to WBN.”

“It’s all in how you carry yourself. I can do it.”

“I’m sorry if I upset you. I really don’t want to argue about Carlotta.”

“You call this arguing? You should see me angry. I’d put you in the corner pocket,” she said, flourishing an invisible pool cue. “You don’t think my hockey and outreach pieces could get me a job interview with WBN?”

“An interview for sure, a job is another thing. Jobs with WBN are decided in New York by the oldest of old boy networks. Local news is the place to start. WBBN or some other affiliate.”

She cuddled up against me. “You really think I could do it?”

“Pants suit and all, you’d be a cinch. Fifty K, to start!. You’re already a force to be reckoned with.”

I let it be for the time being. I didn’t want to dampen or encourage her hopes, nor was I inclined to mention Roscoe Schindler’s plans to her as they might change. Yet, somehow the preceding days seemed like a turning point. Her sudden loss of interest in teaching, the raising of the

lesbian thing, her newfound ambition, and her political activism. Nothing wrong with any of it, but where were we heading?

Another thought I couldn't shake: Where was she till 11:30? Dinner was one thing; four hours more was something else.



A FEW DAYS BEFORE HE RECEIVED A PERMIT FOR HIS POOR PEOPLE'S Campaign, I met Reverend Ralph Abernathy at the Mall with a camera crew. Abernathy was banking on favorable publicity, deeming it essential if the project was to succeed. Yet, from the beginning, positive coverage eluded him.

The Vietnam War preoccupied Lyndon Johnson, dimming his commitment to the War on Poverty, the issue he'd pledged to champion during his triumphant 1964 reelection campaign.

Members of Congress who'd once supported the War on Poverty, now viewed it as primarily intended to help African Americans, and because of the racial backlash that followed the 1967 Newark and Detroit riots, they considered it an issue with little popular support in their districts.

Even for a man full of faith, the Poor People's March on Washington, as it came to be known, was a gamble. Abernathy realized this, intending to use interviews to champion Reverend King's original dream. What came off, however, was a rather too-candid justification of his plans for the campaign.

I got the piece included in the *H-B* lineup that evening, causing the WBBN switchboard to be inundated with angry callers, demanding that the marchers stay home. Sure, the station handled such calls daily, but rarely ones with that degree of vitriol. Since the halcyon fervor of 1964, people's attitudes had changed. They wanted law and order. The goings-on at the Mall frightened them.

The following day as I was flying to Nebraska to cover its primary, I reflected on the undertones in my Abernathy interview, the vibes he gave off. A certain sadness, not palpably evident to viewers who'd watched *Hartley-Brentley* that night, seemed to be telling the camera, perhaps by his body language, perhaps in subtext, that the obstacles were just too great.

Had Roscoe Schindler also perceived this? Is that why he'd called me that morning to inform me I was going to Nebraska? Other producers would now cover the activities at the Mall as well as the riots in France had me conflicted.

I'd asked Schindler why (something the Wolff had always warned against). Yet contrary to the conventional wisdom that believes it can predict an important person's reaction, Schindler didn't seem displeased, rather he appeared downbeat.

"This Poor People's March is going to piss off a lot of people. I don't think it's worth our getting involved too deeply," he said. "Kennedy's rise is more important. As for the French, Carter Keighley has now assembled a great local team in Paris, in part thanks to your piece."

No one had banked on the rain that turned the tents and other facilities into a lot of mud and flotsam. Coupled with incessant leadership bickering, not only were the objectives of the Poor People's March on Washington never realized, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference lost supporters. Would MLK have succeeded where other men failed? It saddened me because I respected Ralph Abernathy.



AS I READIED MYSELF TO INTERVIEW ROBERT KENNEDY, I DECIDED that no matter how upbeat I might find Kennedy and his message, I had to resist the candidate's bandwagon allure that had the media sucked in, leaving them unable to be impartial.

After landing in Omaha, Eddie and I hailed a cab outside the airport. "You up for a drink?" asked Eddie, once we were underway.

I nodded; it was late. Nothing to do until the interview on the morrow.

"Driver," asked Eddie, "is there a bar you recommend?"

"A fine place, yes, sir. Coming up..."

Not knowing anything about Omaha, we relaxed while the cab chugged along the empty streets, pulling up to a New York-style awning that covered stairs leading down to a below-ground, glass-paneled door. After handing us our bags, the driver bid us goodbye and took off. Feeling a bit encumbered entering a bar with luggage, we paused to get

our bearings. There we were, nowhere to speak of, feeling slightly marooned. Might as well have that drink.

What we encountered—it took several minutes for our eyes to adjust to the darkness—contradicted our sophisticated East Coast sensibilities as to any previously held opinions about Omaha, Nebraska. Our considerate driver had dropped us off in front of an immense subterranean queer bar, not a location one conjures up as existing in innocent, uncultured Omaha. Not in 1968.

The odds of our imagining, predicting, or describing the situation we found ourselves in: a million, no, a billion to one.

Joke's on us, but we dared not laugh. That Eddie Walters, lead *H-B* editor, proper Catholic husband for his well-to-do Silver Spring, Maryland parent-teacher association chapter, appeared uncomfortable was an understatement. Yet, how to exit gracefully, without offending anyone or causing a disturbance. Couples—men with men, women with women—were dancing to loud music whose provenance shall forever remain unknown. Up to that point, no one noticed us, or our telltale luggage.

Eddie looked at me as if to ask, "What the hell do we do now?" After a moment, I picked up my bag. Eddie followed suit.

I thought about asking to use the phone. Better to leave the patrons to their pursuits, I concluded. We turned, marched out the door, and up the stairs, from where, I was later informed, we were lucky to find a phone booth at the corner to call a cab. My only supplication: the cab company wouldn't somehow send the same cab and driver. Both Eddie and I were big guys.

I tried leavening the mood, telling Eddie he'd have a story to tell his grandchildren.

What kind of an omen was this? What was the universe trying to tell me? Did it concern my business with Robert Kennedy in any way? Perhaps my personal life? In any case, from then on, I decided to forswear the use of taxis in Omaha. When we got to the hotel, I asked the cameraman the local station had assigned us to drive me back to Rapid Car Rental at the airport.

Her name tag said Vicki Sperling—the girl at the counter. She was tall with freckles and red hair. There was something familiar about her—the faces she made as if she was trying to tell me something unrelated to the



rental agreement in front of me when Ronnie, her subordinate, returned from the outside and started to notice the looks passing between us. Ronnie, the Coop of Car Rental, had a thing for Vicki.

Another customer walked up to the counter, causing Vicki to look at Ronnie a certain way. He shrugged and turned his attention to the new arrival. Vicki wrapped a teal-colored cardigan around her shoulders and motioned me over to the side of the booth away from Ronnie's prying eyes.

"Well," she said.

I was baffled. She made a don't-you-recognize me gesture.

"All very well, miss." She took out a pair of thick glasses and put them on. Bingo!

"Joanna Benson. My God. Wow, have you changed! Just like you predicted. You're, uh, elegant, beautiful."

Almost two minutes passed without either of us saying another word. We just stared at each other, taking it all in—the moment, the light, the universe. Her name tag, pinned to her blouse, rose and fell with each breath. The way she'd filled out, I felt certain she'd had a child at some point.

Her red hair, bound up and curled, like the women in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite paintings—a bit retro but quite stunning the way she'd done it up. I smelled her perfume, Shalimar with its traces of bergamot. We had a lot to talk about.

But first the rental car. Vicki typed and shuffled my papers, from time to time locking eyes with me. Ronnie passing looks too, trying to figure things out. Vicki ignoring him. Finally, picking up my license and credit card and handing them to me, she broke the silence, "You're with the news, I gather? Here for the Nebraska primary, are we?"

"Yes, ma'am," I replied.

She smiled, casting an eye at the papers in my hand. I looked down: her phone number in large numerals. "Call me later," she whispered.

Were it not for the queer bar, I might never have found Joanna. It had me wondering why this of all scenarios.



IN OMAHA'S VENERABLE HOTEL FONTENELLE, ONE FLOOR ABOVE THE noisy WBN operations center in a tiny, quiet room used for candidate, surrogate, and other campaign lackey interviews, I prepared for a sit-down interview with Robert F. Kennedy on May 14, one day before the actual primary voting.

Besides Eddie and me, only two other people were present, a cameraman and a soundman from the WBN Chicago affiliate. A makeup person flitted in, out, and around, until I shooed her away.

RFK was curiously downcast, lending a kind of melancholy feel to the interplay every interviewer (me, in this instance) hopes to avoid. Sometimes, an interviewee cannot put on a happy face. Given Bobby's mood, I decided not to raise the usual issue-related questions that might only elicit routine answers delivered in a couldn't-care-less manner, a sure recipe for a failed interview, something every reporter fears.

Spur of the moment, I began with the following non sequitur: "Do you think self-hate is the cause of all violence, Senator?"

Robert Kennedy looked at me with what I was only able to describe as a smile of recognition. He thought for a good nine seconds before responding. "Yes, at some fundamental level I do think that is true. Hitler is a good example of that."

The question completely changed his mood. He answered the usual talking point questions: farm and rural issues, poverty, racism, growing urban populations, Vietnam, and even welfare, a topic, one would suppose, most Nebraskans had little interest in, except as a stalking horse for reinforcing the notion that the government was helping certain unworthy groups and regular people were paying for it.

In the end, the curious nature of the interview had me debriefing myself, searching for the inspiration that caused me to ask the question that turned the interview around, how and from where it originated?

It wasn't that Kennedy was hostile or rude; he wasn't. He seemed absorbed in something else. My question put us on the same wavelength.

I did remember, however, that RFK's hand shook during the interview. It reminded me of my aunt's condition. After, when I asked the crew if they'd seen it, no one seemed to know what I was talking about.

"We'll catch it when we screen the footage," Eddie said.

But wait. The camera had framed him too tightly. When we screened

the interview, his hands were outside the frame. Without proof to back up my observation, I dropped it. No point in it. Just something I'd always wonder about. After all, there are times when any one of us trembles, if not outwardly, somewhere inside—in a place reserved for the most delicate of fears.

What fears could RFK possibly have? He was kicking ass in a state that had crushed his brother eight years previously. Nevertheless, the whistle-stop event planned for the following day was a scheme that, if no one showed up, might derail his hopes.

VICKI NIXED THE IDEA OF EATING; SHE WANTED TO FUCK, RIDDING herself of clothes as soon as the door to my room clicked shut. I was hungry, on the verge of protesting. Seeing Vicki naked, walking toward me reordered my priorities. Freckles covered her body so tightly it seemed like her skin was actually red, so red she might burst into flames. I walked toward her, thrusting two fingers into her vagina. That must've been what she was waiting for because she snarled and bit me on the back of the neck.

Once I was deep inside her, she began rippling her muscles, much the same way a Scottish maid milks a cow, squeezing my knob like an udder from base to tip. Base to tip. Base to tip. Over and over, rippling. We came together in a throbbing passion that left me even hungrier. After a moment's respite, Vicki was back at it, expertly sucking my knob until it was hard again. I came in her mouth.

No sheets covering us, we rolled apart, feasting eyes on each other's bodies, "You don't lack for anything as a grown woman," I said, "if that's not putting it too crudely."

"I do have nice norks, as they say in Australia. Inherited them from my mother."

"And a nice wad."

"Where'd you learn the Australian word for pussy?"

"I had an Australian buddy in the Marine Corps. His every other word was an imprecation related to Aussie sex terms."

"Well, you fit inside rather well," she said. We kissed. The kiss became so intense I ejaculated in her hand while she fondled me.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I asked when we finished.

“The getting-to-know-you-again formalities behind us, yes, I’m hungry.”

“How long is your shift, Vicki?” I asked while dressing.

“I don’t work for Rapid. I’m a management consultant. I work for McKinney. I’m doing an efficiency study for them. Sometimes I help at the counter. Allows me to uncover customer service issues.

“By rights, I should have been long gone by the time your flight arrived. Aren’t we fortunate?” I detected a tinge of mockery in her voice. Thinking back to the Joanna Benson I once knew, I smiled.

“Actually, I landed earlier, but that’s another story.”

She gave me a quizzical look; I started a new thread, “So is it, Vicki or Joanna?”

“Wait till we’re eating and you’re comfortable,” she said.

“You remember saying something about making mistakes with other people, telling me we should? Well, I’m still not all that good at it. Maybe we should compare notes.”

“Maybe not.”

“You’re so beautiful, Vicki. Joanna? I don’t know which one is real.”

Over a Greek dinner featuring spanakopita and avgolemono soup, Vicki/Joanna recited her up-to-the-moment tale of woe.

“That accent. It’s slight, but Australian, no?” I asked as she struggled with where to begin. “It’s been challenging, huh?”

“If you call getting pregnant at twenty years old challenging, yes, it has. Everything I swore would never happen to me. I’d been so sheltered.

“Anyway, Victorine is my middle name; I use Vicki now. Sperling is my married name. I haven’t changed it because I have a five-year-old daughter.

“She lives with my parents in Metcalf. Her father is Australian. I lived there with him and our daughter for two years. I was lonely after college. I didn’t know anyone in Pittsburgh. A woman with an engineering degree — Well, I was kidding myself.

“I met this Australian guy at my ex-roommate’s wedding. We got into it. What can I say? Met guy, got married, moved to Australia, got pregnant. He wasn’t ready for marriage. There were other women. I was seeing other men, mostly for sex, but I was alone most of the time. My

parents sent me a ticket. I grabbed the baby and ran. I haven't stopped running. Joanna Benson is dead; long live Vicki Sperling."

"Well, Vicki. I'm involved with two women. No commitments. I'm not sure if it will all work out."

"It's crazy, but I feel the same way."

"One thing I do know. When I finally do marry," I said, "I'll leave the past behind, start a family, and my own business."

"What business?"

"Films. I'll make movies."

"I do what's best for my daughter," said Vicki. "I'm finishing a master's in economics, thinking about a Ph.D. Everything I do has a purpose. My job at McKinney, assignments like this at Rapid have been a lifesaver. I'm finally making enough money so I can have my daughter with me. Everything with one exception—you. I let myself go because you're special. I've been waking up in the middle of the night recently seeing your face in a dream. You're smiling. A smile that reminds me of our night in the apple orchard at Woolley," her voice dipped introspectively.

"Well, you changed your mind about one thing."

"Oral sex, you mean. Oh yes, I've even done anal," she said as if she'd been saving it.

"It doesn't hurt?" I asked.

"Heavens, no. I did it all the time with my ex. You know how Australian farmers are with their sheep," she laughed. "I was quite a naughty girl there for a while. Does that shock you?"

I used a lubricant before inserting my knob into her back door. She shivered and shook, "Mmm, I like it. Not all the time. Special occasions. Gently, uh, all of it. Aah. Oh yeah, faster now."

There was something about her voice, its timbre, indicating she wasn't enjoying it. It made me wonder if she wasn't showing off, submitting to anal sex to prove she wasn't the prude she'd once been.

I stopped. "Are you sure it isn't hurting you?" She started to cry. I withdrew.

We lay in bed, neither of us knowing what to do or say, her dabbing at the tears with a Kleenex I gave her. "I so wanted you to like me," she said, whimpering, trying to smile. "I could learn to like it, I suppose, if it

meant a lot to a man I loved, a man who loved me.” She looked away. “It hurt that you never called me.”

“Look at me, Vicki.” She turned; I took her hand, our fingers interlocking. “I’ve always loved you. It’s just that things got in the way. For both of us.”

“I have to go, Gus.”

“You can stay the night. We can talk.”

She put on her coat when she’d finished dressing, stepping back to let me open the door, which I did with a feeling of emptiness, pausing, the both of us, to look at one another one last time. I was letting her slip away again.

There might never be another opportunity. *Steady There’s plenty of time.*

I still didn’t know what love was. I visualized it as a kind of thermal event that kept occurring over and over, sort of like the song I serenaded her as she started down the hallway, *sotto voce*:

♪ Two feet are ever cold,  
Four feet are never cold;  
Everybody has someone  
Why can't I?

“Have to finish my homework: Game Theory with Applications in Economics,” she said on parting. “Did you know I’m the only woman in the class?”

My regret was swiftly turned back on itself. The thought of cold feet. The tinkertoy would be my crucifixion unless I could make it the first casualty of any new leaf I was turning over.

ALONG WITH A HOST OF TV PRODUCERS, NEWSPAPER REPORTERS, cameramen, and talking heads from all the networks, I met Bobby’s magical mystery train in Kimball, Nebraska, the first stop on his daylong event, crossing Nebraska from its westernmost point on the Wyoming border to Omaha in the east.

No one did this kind of person-to-person campaigning any longer, not

since FDR and HST. A fiasco in the making, several handlers predicted. RFK stood fast.

Far from the fiasco that had everyone crossing their fingers, it was a triumph. At every one of the twelve stops, a sea of faces turned out to greet him—a figure-ground where the figure was the smiling candidate and the ground faces of the swarms crushing in to get a closer look. Stop after stop, you could see the throng's reverence reflected in Kennedy's growing self-assurance as it became clear that he now realized he could win, not only the nomination but the election, too.

Between stops, Kennedy regaled reporters, walking up and down the aisle, granting each a few minutes. I got a handshake, a look of recognition, and a comfortable three-minute exchange, during which RFK confided his joy at the great success the whistle stop was having. "I think they like me," he confessed. He'd been alternately so hated and so loved during his career that self-deprecation had become a defense mechanism, an attempt to show the haters he was immune.

At each stop, Bobby tailored his message to the demographics, constantly joking and bantering. Prefab quips like, "President Johnson once said to me, 'Go west, young man.' I thought he was trying to tell me something, because I was in California at the time." Rapid-fire retorts, like when a heckler in Omaha shouted, "Why don't you back the boys in 'Nam? You'd sell them out for a nickel." Only to reply: "I support them so much I'd like to see the South Vietnamese do the fighting."

By the time the train reached Omaha thirteen hours later, everyone sensed what seemed to be the inevitable handwriting on the wall: RFK was going to cream all candidates. And that optimism took into account Vice President Hubert Humphrey's announcement that he'd joined the race only moments before we arrived in Lexington at 2:00 p.m. It might have made a difference in an alternate universe, one in which the whistle-stop was a failure. In this, the real world, his train ride was becoming a bandwagon.

I was still processing RFK's subdued demeanor during the May 13 interview. It had been a long campaign. Anyone's hand might tremble. What did I know? Perhaps, it was physiological, not just a one-off occurrence.

"Oh, to be in Tricky Dick's shoes," said Skipper, when I phoned her

about the excitement the whistle stop had generated. “He’s gonna lose to two Kennedys in the same decade. I can’t wait! On to California.”

What could go wrong?



THE DAY AFTER ROBERT F. KENNEDY EARNED 52 PERCENT OF Nebraska’s votes among a diverse field of candidates, *H-B* ran Skipper’s hockey piece. Immersed in the Kennedy campaign follow-up, I missed it.

When the Wolff called to tell me about it, I was leaving for a belated five-day visit with my parents in Oklahoma. “Staff liked the piece,” he said, “but they didn’t appreciate Skipper’s storming into Brentley’s office, hinting that she should be hired based on that one story.”

“No shit.” I should have been shocked, but I wasn’t.

“I’m exaggerating, but it wasn’t cool by any stretch. She burst in just before the piece ran and was still there when Douglas finished the show.”

“It’s not like I can say I don’t know her,” I said with a shrug.

“No, you cannot. On the other hand, you are a hot commodity; New York loved the Kennedy interview.”

“Jeez, he was a stick of wood,” I don’t know why, but I felt the need to disparage my efforts.

“You never know. The next one you think is great, they’ll hate,” said the Wolff. “So, you’re going to see your parents.”

“Yeah. Must’ve flown over them a dozen times, but never stopped.”

“Yours is one complicated family. Hope it turns out,” said the Wolff, leaving me with two things to ponder: what Skipper’s take-for-granted ways might mean for my WBN career and how to handle my father in my forthcoming family visit.

I was used to the visits turning out poorly: either there was the parent that couldn’t help putting me down or the parent that worshiped me, or both. But ever since my mother was placed in a nursing home for what experts called severe anxiety disorder—what Aunt Alice told me was Alzheimer’s Disease—there’d be no worshipful parent. Nor, thanks to a recent job-site accident that left my father with a limp, would he continue to badger me like he used to. Our roles, I found out, had been



reversed: I was the parent; my father the child—hardly the pixelated weather genie he once claimed to be.

Not that I wanted the upper hand; I wanted to be on a man-to-man, not a parent-to-child, basis with Pop. Two guys with things in common. I liked sports. So did Ray-Ray. I even liked to box, but rarely had time to. Funny, after all the shit Ray-Ray put me through, I now enjoyed the sport.

What's more, we both liked music. He classical, I jazz, but heck, Bach, Telemann, and Vivaldi—swing. Toss in Puccini operas, and you have a basis for something meaningful.

The Ford I rented in Tulsa made for a comfortable two-and-a-half-hour drive to the farm in Carmelita. Having a rental car gave me mobility, and, should I need it, a hedge to make myself scarce in case the visit degenerated. (After his recent accident, my father purchased a small farm with his new girlfriend, Gloria. I had never lived there, never met Gloria. The old house ten miles away was vended after he'd stashed my mother in the home.)

Not blaming him; caring for a sick woman isn't easy. After the accident Ray-Ray was on relief. Aunt Alice gifted him the farm as a practical bulwark against privation. She'd never allow her brother to live in penury. She'd asked me to contribute, which I'd just started doing, not directly—he'd never accept money from his son— but through her.

Turns out they were self-sufficient. My father still did most of the carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work. He'd hired a seventy-year-old man named Clarence to do fencing, vehicle repairs, and other odd jobs. Gloria was a tireless worker, managing the livestock—a dozen or so cows and pigs, plus the garden, the canning, and preserving. She hired a middle-aged Black man, supposedly a cousin, to help with haying and roof repairs.

She met me at the door and ushered me into the living room, where my father sat glued to the tube. I placed my hands on his shoulders. He turned to look at me and smiled. "We get to see you there," he said, pointing to a color television set, probably paid for by Aunt Alice. No matter. I was glad. My father appeared unencumbered by material concerns.

"Come over here and sit down, Sonny." At least he'd stopped calling

me Monk—a nickname I'd hated for as long as I could remember. I could put up with Sonny with its less pejorative ring.

I sat down to the left of my father on the three-person settee. "He's a big lad, eh, Glory?"

"That he is, and handsome, but not married. What a waste."

"Stay here a while, Sonny," he said, nodding to Gloria. "she'd fix you right up."

"I have enough on my plate, Pop."

"Got my M1?" said my father. He liked ribbing me about it. Even though I'd been out of the Corps for years. I played along.

"Pop, I couldn't just walk out the gate with one. Of course, when I told them it was for you, they said, 'Not *the* Raya Ray Mazur!'"

"Yeah, yeah," said Pop. "With your mother being Cherokee and Glory here of the colored persuasion, there's some crackers don't like us."

"Pop, you got shotguns, a dozen rifles. And you have a telephone." I said. "Call the police."

"Mixed marriages around here? Phew, it's not like DC."

"Well, you don't need a military weapon."

"I got used to the M1 in the Pacific but never thought I might need one once I got home. Wouldn't mind a few rifle grenades," he laughed, "stick one on the M1 grenade launcher. *Kpow!*"

"Dinner in two hours," said Gloria, shaking her head at the war talk, "I'll leave you two menfolk to your memories."

"Memories, dreams, and reflections," I said. "Gloria sure is a real pretty lady, Pop."

"I'm a fortunate man, Sonny."

Fading in from black, with a musical sting by Victor Young, we watched Columbia holding her torch aloft as the title and credits flickered across the screen one after another in a stylish display of decorative fonts.

"What are we watching?" I asked.

"Oh, this movie. I watched it once, a while back," said Pop, a big smile on his face. "Has William Holden, would you believe it, as a violin player who wants to be a boxer?"

"Sounds like our family," I said.

“*Golden Boy’s* the title. I never wanted you to be a fighter,” he said after a moment.

“I know, Pop.”

“But hey, we can go a few rounds tomorrow. I can still get around,” said Ray-Ray, pointing to the screen.

“He likes watching those old movies with someone,” said Gloria, in a voice that carried from the kitchen. “You’re a rarity because no one else does.”

I leaned back to take in the action.

Besides the inimitable quality of her cooking, Gloria surprised us with a self-composed account of her escape as an infant from the 1921 race riot, known as the Tulsa Massacre, that took the lives of her parents and one brother, who’d escaped the violence but died later in a car crash as they were racing to pick her up.

In due course, a then fourteen-year-old boy, the cousin now recently hired by Gloria to work on their farm, found her amid the rubble of her burned-out home, hiding in the storm cellar. He took her to live with relatives in Cincinnati for a year before returning to the remnants of her family in Tulsa, confiding her to her older sister.

Pop had heard it all before, but he loved stories and Gloria told hers with a natural feel for drama.

By the time she’d finished her narrative, her homemade hard cider had washed down the baked flank steaks stuffed with mushrooms and green olives, the home fries, and the garden-grown brussels sprouts, leaving me feeling sated and drowsy. I needed fresh air. Nineteen twenty-one didn’t seem all that long ago, I decided.

Gloria walked with me down the path to the mailbox and back, recounting her years at Langston College, playing the trombone in the marching band, and majoring in elementary education and home economics.

“I wanted to be a music teacher, but no music major for me. No future in it, everyone said, even if I could get a job. If I wanted to get married, it was home economics.”



ON THE WAY HOME, I SPENT A DAY IN TULSA AT MY MOTHER'S "REAL world" nursing home. I didn't know what to expect. Would she be coherent? Would she even recognize me?

I wasn't used to my mum smiling; now all she did was smile as if she'd been beatified by a higher power. Tales of her life flashed before my eyes: her grandfather's teepee by the river, tales, too, of "the people" as her kinfolk referred to themselves, her *white man's burden* as she called the men in her life before meeting and marrying my father, and how that changed her life.

A Purple Heart had taken the place of his flesh and blood organ: her boy child sent east, her gradual distrust of so-called American ideals (tricks white people use to keep people of color in line, she called them), her secret negotiations with Aunt Alice to put me out of reach of my father's bullying, how Ray-Ray had fallen off the wagon for a spell after I left, the slow encroachment of failing health.

All now neatly wrapped up in a faraway smile.

I walked her to the dining room. We sat on facing benches as she ate—chewing and forgetting to chew. I wiped her face and led her back to her room.

"I have a friend," she said.

"Mum, do you know me?"

"I have a friend," she repeated.

No nod, twitch or shudder. Just a smile for a friend.

There wasn't much to add that hadn't already been written about the sadness this scourge brings with it. At least, that's what I was told after they had sequestered her there. That it was for her own good, they said. It had happened quickly. I was at the Woolley School, still a minor, and therefore, not part of the decision. But I did know one thing: I had been cheated out of my memories, the ones mothers safeguard for their children.

JUNE

**W**hen I landed at National Airport, Skipper was there with the Chrysler. I had barely a moment before she started in. No kiss, no welcome, no how was your flight? Why had I shunted her off to flunkies? Why hadn't I gotten her a meeting with Roscoe Schindler? Did I think she was going to spend the rest of her life in a classroom with third graders?

"I thought you loved teaching third graders," I said, immediately wishing I hadn't because it only seemed to stoke her wrath.

"That's all you think I'm good for. You and your Wolff."

"Don Wolff is not a flunky."

"Well, he patronized me as if I should be seen and not heard," she said.

"Look, I'm very tired. Can we go to my place?" I said. "Let me take a shower and relax. Then sort this out."

That was the last word spoken for the next two hours. When we got to my apartment, she stayed out of my way as I showered and napped for an hour before slipping quietly into the living room and pouring myself a drink.

"What is it you want?" I asked.

"Not film editing or cameraman; I don't have the technical skills. But I know I could do your job or be an interviewer."

“I asked Don to check with WBBN; they’re full up. Most everyone starts locally before getting a network opportunity. The competition is fierce; you’d be competing with some gal in Dubuque, who’d been at it for a while—people with five years experience in local markets and degrees in journalism.”

“That may be, but I have you; that’s more than some woman in Iowa has. You can talk directly with Brentley or even Herb.”

“That’s all Herb needs—me asking him for a favor after I quit his unit. As for Brentley, he stays above the fray, and he hates being asked for favors. I have zero leverage with him.”

“I have leverage with him.”

I was dumbfounded, wide-eyed. Had I heard her correctly, had she seduced Brentley? No, not possible. What then?

“Here,” said Skipper, “have another drink.” She grabbed my glass and headed for the bar.

“What do you mean, leverage?”

“I saw him the other day in Dupont Circle,” she said, handing me my drink, “sitting with a woman, not his wife.”

“And you want to use that to somehow get you a job?”

“Not me, you could do it.”

“You’re outta your mind.”

“There you go. Old boy network circles the wagons again.”

“That’s not going to happen. But...”

“But what?”

“I gotta go to New York tomorrow with the Wolff to meet with Schindler. We’ll propose you for a trainee job at WBBN, and, considering that they frown on nepotism, that’s the best I can do.”

“Well...”

“Beyond that... We’re through. I mean you and I are finito. Black-mailing Brentley. That’s crazy shit. As crazy as anything Virginia ever did.”

Her expression changed; it wasn’t the face I’d come to cherish, her love face. She’d gone too far and realized it. “You might get something if Schindler’s in a good mood. Researcher, that’s how Carlotta got started. Once you’re in, it’s up to you. But if this is any indication, you may end

up president of WBN. You have the killer instincts—blackmail, threats, coercion. Whew.”

I realized it sounded like a cop-out, promising something I might not be able to deliver on, but arguing back and forth, tit for tat, was senseless. I had to refocus the conversation—get her onto something else.

Nevertheless, I had to acknowledge her natural ability at the third degree, and probably the first and second degree as well—whatever they were.

Like a cop, she kept homing in on the nitty-gritty, topping each question with a more invasive one, something I could never do. I had to establish rapport, a genteel, almost bedside manner. The Wolff could, but I couldn't. Not Mike Wallace-type shit. If she ever got the job, she'd be unstoppable. But you couldn't bull your way into WBN: the old boy network didn't approve of ungentlemanly conduct, but, hey, she was a woman, and the “times they are a-changin'.” Maybe the old boy network is missing something—that a woman could go to places a man can't, interview-wise, that is.

What she didn't know was she had an ally in Schindler, but were he to learn that she'd thought about blackmailing Brentley—even mentioning his name in the same sentence with the word *blackmail*—would not only get her blackballed, it might affect me.

Jobs like mine are word of mouth. And yes, they are old-boy-centric: *once you're in you're in*. Like a game of musical chairs with the same old faces. The networks rarely go outside, except to pick off a revered print journalist like Eric Sevareid with lures of large dollar contracts.

No matter, I'd put in a word for Skipper before getting back on the road tomorrow—the California primary. New York in the morning to get my marching orders; California by nightfall. The team that brought you the King assassination was back at it. All the kinks had been worked out.

I got a call from George Pongracic the next morning. I was not going to California after all. They had enough resources of their own. Don Wolff would lead the auxiliary contingent. More than enough coverage, he said.

“So many people in California means we don't have enough in DC,” he said. “You're the only producer here.”

“Always good to feel needed.”

“Keep checking the wire. If anything happens call me.”

Cancel California. Spend the next three days chasing congressmen and senators, trying to get a head count on who was endorsing Kennedy, McCarthy, and Humphrey.



ON THE FOURTH OF JUNE, I FLEW DOWN TO LBJ’S RANCH IN TEXAS TO follow up on some peace conference rumors on the Vietnam War. I got back to DC on the morning of the fifth, the day California was voting. I hung around the office until after the show, until the results were in and Kennedy had won. Completely exhausted, I was home flopping on the bed around 8:30 p.m. for a quick nap that lasted a good while longer.

Sometime after midnight, the telephone woke me. Skipper was crying hysterically. Groggy, at first, I couldn’t understand what she was saying, sandwiched, as it was, in between her sobs and screams. “Shot. Killed. Ooh, no, no. Not wounded, shot and killed. They killed Bobby, the bastards, fucking asshole shits.”

“What? Bobby? What happened? Slow down, Skipper,” I said, catching only smatterings of Skipper’s babblings. “Bobby was shot?”

“Another Kennedy... First John F.,” she said, “now Bobby.”

“Impossible, must be some sort of bad joke?”

“No, I— Of course, I’m sure. Turn on the TV. What’s next in this country?”

“I’ll be right over.” Herb was right; hard news sucked.



IN YOUR ANCIENT HISTORY BOOK—IF, INDEED, YOU STUDIED HISTORY at your high school—you might recall a reference to Roman Republic politics and the briefest mention of two reformers, big names in politics about thirty years before the birth of Julius Caesar.

Riding the BMW to Skipper’s apartment, I got to thinking about the saga of two brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, tribunes of the people, elected on a platform of anti-corruption and redistribution of public lands.

Initially, they managed several social and constitutional reforms but



were blocked by conservative forces in the Roman Senate from redistributing land to army veterans and the poor.

Their objectives were not guided by altruism alone; far-reaching social consequences were at play. They were attempting to halt the expansion of an unemployed underclass whose lands had been snatched up by speculators and rich landlords. In other words, they wanted to spare Rome from eventual collapse from within—unruly mobs with nothing to do except agitate.

Both brothers were elected, both attempted sweeping reforms; both were assassinated. Ten years apart.

The moral of the story was the brothers relied too much on popular support and not enough on raw power, a lesson Julius Caesar took to heart when he crossed the Rubicon with his army—repudiating a sacrosanct prohibition in the Roman constitution that forbade its commanders from doing so.

Was there a tie-in spanning two thousand years between the careers and fates of the brothers Gracchi and the brothers Kennedy? Does a democracy—no matter the constitutional safeguards—inevitably give way to authoritarian rule?

The elm trees rustled slightly in the night air, cooling off the side streets. I locked the BMW to a lamppost in front of her apartment house. Skipper was sitting on the floor in a daze, barely aware of my presence. Seeing her like that, my mind stopped wandering through the ruins of ancient Rome.

Like so many others she had taken this man to heart, and she was now showing symptoms of shock—shallow breathing and sweaty brow. I was no physician, but I'd seen marines react like this during traumatic events—the death of a family member or a fatal accident during war games.

“Should I call the doctor?” I asked.

Still staring into the void, she shook her head. “No, no doctor. I'm okay.”

“You don't look it.”

I led her into the bedroom, undressed her, put her to bed and got in next to her, and held her while she cried herself to sleep.

Skipper wanted to attend Bobby Kennedy's funeral in New York. I

was busy with a story about a planned 10 percent income tax surcharge, the result of the burgeoning cost of the Vietnam War. I let her use the Chrysler, a way better ride than her Renault.

I was back at work the following day facing the repetitive grind of hard news for what seemed like forever. Were more horrors spooling off the teletype? I didn't want to know. *Do the job, the best I can; leave the grieving to Skipper and her friends.* The more I thought about it, the more paralyzed I became. The teletype and I were not friends.

For the next three weeks, I arranged to have myself placed on assignment, as far away from Skipper as possible. She was in the deepest of funks and I could do nothing. I wasn't Bobby or his ghost, and in her condition, nothing else mattered. She had so identified with the late Robert Kennedy I felt like an interloper. She was better off by herself.

I lived out of a suitcase until she called on the twenty-fourth. When I got back to DC the night of the twenty-fifth, a new heat wave was underway, one of those sweat-drenching sizzlers Washington is famous for. I took a cab to my apartment, rolled the BMW out of its hiding place, and headed for Skipper's. But first I zipped through tree-lined Rock Creek Park to cool off. Everyone who didn't own a motorcycle must be huddled next to an air conditioner. I had the park to myself—its roadways, and its twenty degrees cooler temperatures, even colder when I hit the curves at seventy-five miles per hour.

Skipper had returned from the grave. What's that line from Hamlet? "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." She had been in the grave with Bobby for sure and now she was almost herself again, not the eager idealist, someone new, an approximation whose inner workings I'd have to explore all over again. I was going to do my best to rouse her, amuse and stimulate her. And yet there was this new layer of her being blocking access to her innermost being. I felt it in the way she looked at me when we stood naked in front of each other as if inviting me to cause her pain under the sheets. Pain that would somehow overpower the pain caused by Bobby's death. Rage? Despair? Mania? None of the above.

Her legs wrapped around my waist as she pulled me up into her and we began to pound each other. "Harder," she ordered, taunting me as her vaginal muscles closed hard on my member. She came once, then again, a third time deep in the vagina.

It was clear that “harder” meant pushing the boundaries of physicality to ever-increasing degrees, that I was supposed to punish her because she’d somehow been unable to save Bobby’s life. Instead of love-making, it would be *lovelessmaking*.

There were other words: anal, slap my ass, rape me, spank me, tear into me. Mail-order purchase of strange-looking equipment. At times, she was tender, but the take-our-time moments were further and further apart. It was more like professional wrestling. Who’d get the other in a step-over toehold first?

It would play itself out, I was sure of it. Yet I spaced my visits, leaving her time to sort things out. She became needier and needier—wanting me with her, wanting to move in with me, wanting it rough. For the first time, accused me of not being into it. I didn’t deny it.

“I was always the good girl in sex,” she said, “conventional. I know what I want and I’m not afraid to tell you, or anyone else.”

*Or anyone?* That’s a hint put mildly!

Maybe I’m narrow-minded. Perhaps, I lack what it takes to pretend to rape a woman, much less the animalistic tendencies to actually do it. But throwing a woman around the bed doesn’t turn me on. Apparently, it does others, so maybe I am a softy.

But what happens when you’re sixty-five or seventy? Do you spank an old lady? Handcuff your partner to the headboard? I preferred doing seventy-five miles per hour through Rock Creek Park at night.

The next day was even warmer—92.3 degrees, even hotter in the city center. I packed a picnic lunch and off we went across Chain Bridge via Route 123 to Route 193. We hid the motorcycle on land belonging to Mitch Warren. Skipper had no idea where we were going. I wanted to surprise her.

We backpacked over pathless terrain to Black Pond. When we emerged from the underbrush, reeds of bright light momentarily blinded us. It took a while for our eyes to adjust.

Seen from the air it’s easy to tell how the pond got its name. From five thousand feet, you see the pond and part of the Potomac River just to the north of it. The former is jet-black; the latter, swirling currents the color of red clay.

The pond belonged to a private girls’ school that hardly used it during

the school year, much less during the summer vacation. In the past, Mitch, Reggie, and I, along with our respective dates, skinny-dipped our way through GW summer classes, bothered only by another occasional nudist on the faraway opposite shore.

I watched Skipper's mouth open wide as if she'd stepped onto the set of a Tarzan movie, into a place so pristinely prehistoric that its existence within a fifteen-mile radius of DC was unimaginable. She smiled. She marveled. She took my hand.

"God, it's wonderful. Do pterodactyls fly over?"

"I've never seen one, but I wouldn't doubt it."

Mammoth gray rocks surrounded the pond. I led her to my favorite. We left the food in the backpacks, intending first to fuck and then swim. I spread out a padded blanket.

The psilocybin was just kicking in. We'd timed the drop perfectly, forty-five minutes earlier. Nature was about to put on a floor show. Molecules and atoms began to dance—the Folies Bergère of subatomic particles.

"Do you see it? The micro-macro universe?" I whispered.

She lay on her back, her legs beckoning. We coupled.

After, we took a long swim and then climbed back on the rock to watch the Follies. Two hours later, we were ready for the food, two hand-made hoagies.

A couple of crows, the wise guys of ornithology, landed nearby, announcing their presence with a blast of shrill-beaked cries. They waddled to a fail-safe distance from us and began to evil-eyeball us for handouts.

"Don't feed them," I said.

Skipper's animal-lover instincts set my warning aside. She tossed them a piece of bread to fight over. Three more crows joined the fray.

"Did you know the crows in India have gray heads?" said Skipper. "They're much bolder. They walk right up and steal the food from your table."

"We can't go swimming again until we finish eating or they'll get everything. We might cramp up and drown," I said. "We should have brought Peter."

“Never mind those old wives’ tales. Who are the ‘old wives’ anyway?” asked Skipper.

“The wives of Republican senators, the ones who cheat on their wives with hookers,” I pinched her left nipple.

“How deep is it?”

“Very. Jacques Cousteau deep.”

“If you start to drown, honey, I’ll save you,” said Skipper.

I thought about pretending to drown just to have her “save” me.

Skipper erupted: “I love the water, the rocks, the sky, the trees, the sun, the animals,” she screamed. “I love it. No one can hear us. We’re invisible.”

Spurred on by Skipper’s primal ode to nature we fucked again: “I want to live here. I hate the city.”

Exhausted, we rolled over on our backs to bask in the sun and soak up the radiant heat from the rock. Skipper was first to rise. Holding hands, we dove into the cool water. Nobody drowned.



I WORRIED THAT THE PSILOCYBIN MIGHT SEND SKIPPER INTO DEEPER despair, but I’d banked on the transformational effect of Black Pond. A gamble that worked... so far. I wasn’t surprised by her improvement or by the newly affectionate nature of our lovemaking. We didn’t talk about where she’d been in her mind during the last three weeks; her familiar upbeat manner attested to her lucidity. The subject was ignored for the moment but, at some point, it would have to be confronted. Not by me necessarily. I was her man once more, not her psych.

My morning assignment was an interview with Senator Dirksen on Vietnam at his office. After, I got a call from Herb Hecht asking me to screen a rough cut of his Charles Dickens documentary. Herb sounded worried, almost desperate, imploring me to drop everything. I got the Wolff to take the interview.

Herb appeared restless, always did before a screening, no matter how informal. The projector was loaded, Herb dimmed the lights, and Jerry rolled the film. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Herb glancing at

me as if reading my face was the key to his judgment, something he'd never done when we screened the films I'd worked on.

"Jerry, you done well, my man," I said. "Right, Herb?"

"Absolutely. A nice job, Jerry. Only..."

"Only, you're not satisfied."

"No, not really, it's my fault, but I don't know... it needs something. Any ideas?"

He'd taken the same approach one too many times and now realized his approach had grown stale. Ten, possibly five years ago, it would have worked. But now, in the face of so many new filmmaking techniques, he'd been unable to breathe life into it. Inspiration eluded him. Looking at him, slumped over in his chair, I couldn't help empathizing. *Kinda sad to see the old boy so lost.*

I didn't want to get into it with Jerry in the room. "Jerry, would you mind? I'd like to speak to Herb..."

Herb nodded. Jerry, the dependable, bowed out, his feelings intact.

"It seems old like we've seen it all before," Herb began, "I admired your piece on the French students. Do you think it would work here, even partially?"

"Do you?"

"Well, it would be difficult," he said.

"It would be disastrous. The editing is fine; it's the density of speech and the endless quotes."

"That's what I think," said Herb, "especially after the *Dreiser-Lewis* show's lower ratings."

"You know, Herb, you were right about news. I'm not a good up-front man; I'm better behind the camera. Hell, my girlfriend is better than I am, pushier."

"Well, you look good on the tube; that's half the battle, and you have a unique identity. Your desire to learn comes across as an eagerness to connect with the audience."

"Hey, I'm not complaining. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything."

"Yeah, you learned to fit in, the way any successful man does one way or another."

"About your doc, you know what I'd do," I said.

“What?”

“Reenactment.”

Before replying, Herb took an instant to reflect, making a few notes on his clipboard. “We’ve never done it before. I’d never be able to sell it to New York.”

“Look, you get an actor, an up-and-comer. Dustin Hoffmann comes to mind. You rewrite the script,” I said. “You got a winner.”

“This place is too conservative. New York would never go for it.”

“They’d listen to you.”

“They’d listen to you. You’re the experimental guy,” said Herb. “What I’d like is for you to take over.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “I’m serious.”

“Right in the middle of the show?” I asked.

“I’m burned out, kid,” said Herb, his past pugnacity nowhere to be found. “This show will be the death of me.”

The two of us went back and forth over the feasibility of my proposal. So impossible, I began to see it as possible. And yet, something held me back. “I gotta finish out my year with *H-B*.” I left Herb pondering my suggestions.

With one exception—hiring British actor Dirk Bogarde to narrate—Herb changed nothing, even though he still had time and money. I couldn’t blame him, the lure of retirement and all. Why waste time arguing when the light at the end of the tunnel is burning bright?



I TOOK SKIPPER TO THE CONGRESSIONAL COUNTRY CLUB FOR A ROUND of tennis. She had a decent game, her lack of practice notwithstanding. We played two sets of singles and three mixed doubles. If she played regularly, she’d improve, but her tennis wasn’t up to her ice hockey, and it bugged her.

“I should have started tennis at an early age,” said Skipper. “Golf is something else; I started early.”

“Would you begrudge me the one sport I’m better at than you?” I asked.

She didn’t reply. It was obvious she didn’t appreciate my remark.

Skipper was so competitive; she hated to lose, be it at tiddlywinks or the game of life.

After, we sat around the courts watching the play and drinking Tom Collins, casually conversing about the hit movies of the day (*The Thomas Crown Affair* and *Planet of the Apes*), tennis in general, and the Wimbledon outlook, until some jackass mentioned the Kennedy assassinations—in the plural.

“What do you mean, the Kennedy cabal wasn’t so popular with left-wing extremists?” asked Skipper, after one of the loungers had started bad-mouthing JFK. “Even if it’s true, so what?”

Par for the setting, conservatives and liberals mingled at this club. Some were strident, especially the columnists. One specimen—could have been Coop’s doppelgänger—continued his Kennedy rant, “Didn’t you know the brothers played both ends against the middle? Go downtown sometime, girl, walk through the various agencies. You’ll find aliens and known communists that Kennedy the First put there. And your radicals like Bertrand Russell, you do know he says Bobby was worse than Hitler? You been living under a rock or something?”

I didn’t like this guy’s tone of voice or his calling Skipper, “girl.” But I couldn’t knock his block off, not here, not now. And I couldn’t allow Skipper to blow her top. This guy worked for the *Washington Inquirer*, a conservative newspaper that hated corporate entities like WBN. I knew him: Gideon Rath-Peabody, a champion for the silent majority.

Before the red-faced Skipper could reply (just in the nick of time, she was about to unleash the whirlwind), I forced myself to smile and said, “Actually, I prefer *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Don’t you, honey?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, a bit upset by my preempting her rebuttal, but intrigued enough by my non sequitur to let it defuse the situation.

In a pleasant, but forceful voice, I announced, “I could confront a certain party for insulting you, honey, or we could ignore the insult, get up, and leave quietly.”

I could tell from the nodding heads and the *bear, bears* from the left-leaning onlookers—the people we were sitting with—that they were sympathetic, not so much because of what I’d said, but because Skipper mooned her tormentor. There’s a first for everything—even at exclusive country clubs.



JULY

There next occurred one of the strangest, least predictable events in television lore: the simultaneous firing of three *Hartley-Brentley Report* producers, one of them Don Wolff. How a seasoned reporter like the Wolff became entangled in such a harebrained scheme was more than a riddle, it was inconceivable.

Although I knew about the dubious money-making scheme that Hal (Horace) Greeley, a fellow *H-B* producer, had dreamed up a few years back, I'd forgotten about the time Greeley tried to sell me on the idea.

"It's bound to work," Greeley had insisted, waving a little notepad at me. "Nobody checks."

The little pad of dime-store receipts in his hand was the key to an extra hundred or so dollars a month. Not every month, he exclaimed, but over time, a good source of tax-free cash.

"When you go on assignment," said Greeley, "at the last minute, without time enough to go home and change your clothes, you have to buy a new shirt and tie. A suit or sports coat, that you charge to the company, right? You can't go on camera looking like a dweeb. So, you take one of these, fill it out, and turn it in. Whether you bought the shirt or not is up to you." Wink, wink.

The red flag unfurled. I didn't salute it. Still, I listened, dutifully, yet

impatiently. “As junior man, I’d be the first guy to be booted if they ever found out.”

“But they never will.”

“Not interested,” I said.

“Hey,” said Greeley, “it’s a little extra money, my man.”

Words uttered with extra emphasis on “my man” that betray a pseudo-hipster posturing a white dude uses on a darker-skinned colleague. *Dig it, man. We down, baby. Trust me.*

I laughed Greeley out of my office with a “Good luck, my man.” Exaggerated drawl on the “my man.”

After I turned him down, that was the last I’d heard of it. Like many a ludicrous scheme floating around the station, I forgot about it. I was the junior producer; I’d be the first one blamed if anything fishy came to light. Given my past hijinks, I was the most likely candidate to become involved. I had no idea Don Wolff had fallen for it. It made me realize the tinkertoy was a liability and I should take removing myself seriously as Reggie advised.

This ingenious scheme had started while I was an assistant editor. Now evidently, the offenders had been caught and they included my mentor, the Wolff.

An eager-beaver accountant assigned to go over past expense accounts discovered instances of receipts on the same papers that were numbered sequentially even though they were submitted over five years at different locations throughout the United States by three producers working for the Washington *Hartley-Brentley Report*. After comparing two of these chits, the accountant became suspicious of their similarities and began looking for others. Finding more of the same, he turned in a report to the CFO, who called for immediate dismissal.

These chits were not custom printed slips bearing a letterhead or a logo of a bona fide business, but generic receipts sold in pads numbering one to one hundred, available at F. W. Woolworth and other five and dime stores.

Producer A, for instance, might have submitted receipt #36 for a dress shirt purchased on a trip to Richmond in December 1965, while Producer B submitted receipt #37 for a sport coat on a trip to Kansas City in February 1966—each one on an identical form. Receipts torn

from a pad whose papers matched in every way: placement of the lines, the recurrence of similar expenses despite the claim being submitted from different locations, the placement and ink color of the word *Receipt*, the sickly green background color of the paper, the sequential numbers, and, most importantly, a tiny printer's smudge of blue ink located in the same place on each receipt.

How long had it been going on? When the accountant assembled the lot, the suspect chits numbered one to fifty-four.

When I got to the office on the day the incident came to light, I walked into a palpable gloom. Everyone—secretaries, editors, lab guys, reporters, producers—wore the same expression, as if a massive stock market crash had occurred.

From the palpable fear on everyone's faces, I sensed that taking over was a distinct possibility. All I had to do was waltz into the newsroom with a modicum of self-assurance. Douglas, who'd seen everything, hated weakness in moments of stress. He'd be impressed and probably go along with my vision of tonight's show. Before Schindler had a chance to rearrange the deck chairs, we'd be sailing smoothly, everything under control.

I went to the newsroom to check the teletype. No world war, no sale of WBN to General Motors.

*H-B's* executive producer, Ezra Eastman, was cleaning out his desk when I walked by. He didn't want to talk to anyone said his secretary. "Better you speak to Don," is all she said. Through the glass wall, we made eye contact for one brief instant, only to have Eastman turn away, his expression telling me that circumstances had reached down and grabbed him by the nuts.

I left Eastman tossing his effects into a large box, perhaps cooking up a story to tell his wife. As I turned away, Eastman held up three middle fingers. And I realized the Wolff was implicated.

Don Wolff was a pretty popular guy. It would be a real bringdown if he was let go. The Wolff wouldn't see it that way, of course, probably saying something like, "That's television. You're gone one day, only to pop up the next in a new place."

If Don was part of it, he'd not surrendered himself to the humiliation of cleaning out his desk. At least, not yet. I found him in the cafeteria,

sitting at the same table—the one we'd met each other on my first day. I don't know why, but I was certain he was waiting for me. I sat down alongside him, waiting for his explanation.

"Well, my man," said the Wolff (an entirely different "my man" than the one tendered by our erstwhile colleague, the Don Wolff wanna-be, Horace Greeley).

Like Herb Hecht said: Don Wolff was a hipster, an original 1940s hepcat. Playing stride piano like Meade Lux Lewis and Fats Waller gave him the right to "my man" anyone at WBN, man or woman. "You know why, of course?"

I shook my head.

"You remember Greeley's chit scheme?" asked the Wolff.

I nodded. "I buried it away in my harebrained ideas folder."

"I used it a few times," said the Wolff. "Two, to be exact."

So focused on the Wolff's words, I didn't feel my jaw drop. "I can't believe it, that you'd let yourself... Oh well—"

"No excuse. No one cared— Until now," said Don.

"This place, man. Almost doesn't make sense without you," I said.

"Nothing else to say, except it's television."

"Sure, television. You'll have something by next week, by tomorrow even."

"Douglas tried, so did Roscoe Schindler. But..."

"I'll bet."

The Wolff shook his head. "It got too big. Gannon Crisp had to let us go—Horace Greeley, Ezra, and me," said the Wolff.

"You'll be back."

"Sure, television. Everyone gets another chance," he said. "Some even graduate. You, for instance. You're on your own now. Just show everyone you know it."

"As in know what I'm doing. By the way, what should I do?" I asked jokingly.

"Don't ask me. It's your show now. Go get 'em."

"Okay."

"Okay, isn't good enough," said the Wolff, a team player to the bitter end, and look where it got him. "There's no room for okay in this business."



BRENTLEY WASN'T IN YET. BEFORE MEETING WITH HIM I NEEDED AN accurate picture of the day's events. I walked through the newsroom again, quizzing pool reporters and reading the stories spilling off the teletype. I talked with everyone but avoided answering questions, interacting with people in an altogether different manner—a manner I was not previously aware of. Had I been able to stand outside myself, I would have witnessed a transitional performance, something like Shakespeare's Prince Hal becoming King Henry V. No one knows what responsibility feels like until one is made responsible. A person in authority for the first time only discovers how he or she will act once the situation arises.

I was the only *H-B* producer left. Ergo, I was the new executive producer. Either that or New York would have someone on the next plane. Time to incorporate Don Wolff's blessings into my individuated self. I'd noticed how the usual low-key mood of the newsroom had perked up when I came in. Voices raised and lowered in anticipation. I walked over to Martha Jeffries's desk and signaled Gerry Witkowski to join us. Martha was a Columbia journalism graduate, a Creole from Louisiana. We'd become friends of a lunchroom sort. She was tiny, stylish, and energetic, constantly recommending stories to air on *H-B*. The ones I'd promoted were batting .750, so I knew she had a feel for the good stuff.

While I was filling her in, Gerry, a tireless newcomer with a beard, gathered up pencil and paper, lingering at his desk for a moment to compose himself because of the psychic malevolence his coworkers were directing at him. Most of them had been in the pool forever. It was in their eyes, a deadened sense of initiative. But that didn't stop them from directing their hostile attention at their two colleagues.

Gerry and Martha were different; they hated pool duty and that was enough for me—although, had anyone asked me why I selected them, I could have pimped Martha's pedigree—she was easy to defend. Gerry, on the other hand, had only his beard to recommend him, hardly a basis for promotion. He'd been a local reporter, moving over to the network side three months ago. I had seen several fine stories he'd produced while at WBBN. That, and his beard clinched it for me. So I went with feeling:

As the only bearded employees in the building, we could function without petty distractions.

As I was about to huddle with them, a call came through.

"It's grown-up time, Gus," declared Roscoe Schindler. "I'm making you interim *H-B* executive producer down there. We talked it over. Douglas wants you. I want you. Just the fact that you showed enough sense to avoid this stupid business is enough to recommend you. Can you handle it?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Anything you want to add?" asked Schindler.

"No, sir."

"That's good because we have a newspaper to get out. Well, a televised news service... anyway... I'm sending one of our guys down for the next couple of weeks. I told him to push you. Don't let him take over; you're the man!" said Schindler. "Have you been to the newsroom?"

"I'm there now," I said.

"How's the day shaping up?" asked Schindler.

"I was on my way to meet with Douglas."

"Very good. Grab two people from the pool. Any standouts?"

"One of them does, a woman," I winked at Martha.

"Not that eager-beaver girlfriend of yours, I hope," said Schindler.

"Not a chance. Martha Jeffries."

"Okay, I'll leave it to you. Make sure you vet them with Douglas." He hung up.

"Don't fall over," I said to Martha and Gerry. "Schindler's made me interim executive producer. Grab yourself a desk in our area. I'm huddling with Douglas now. When I finish, we'll assign coverage. It's going to be a long day. Questions?"

Not a peep, just widened eyes and confident smiles.

"One more thing," I said, "New York's sending someone down."

"Who?" asked Martha.

"Who knows? Probably an old hand. We'll see when he gets here."



DOUGLAS BRENTLEY WAS HIS USUAL SERENE SELF. HE'D BEEN AT IT TOO long to fret, and even though his senior producers had been fired and replaced by a junior producer in his rookie year, he took it in stride.

The two stories I proposed, Douglas Brentley deemed newsworthy. The first was a yippee disruption at the Union Train Station that I sent Martha and a crew to cover. The second, a speech by Senator Eugene McCarthy, the one remaining progressive candidate for president, was Gerry Witkowski's assignment.

Choosing the stories that would run and the order of their appearance began as a sort of auction between me and George Pongracic, respectively, the Washington and New York executive producers. If we were lucky, the selection process might end with us, but most likely any one of several higher-ups would make changes, frequently at the last moment because of a late-breaking entry.

When Martha got back, she had footage of yippies spray-painting Washington's venerable Union Station and sound bites of yippee defiance, interspersed with verbal threats to spray-paint Martha herself, who they insulted with such indignities as "the shrimp," "bourgeoise sellout," and "pathetic little bitch." I made sure to include a few of these calumnies in the final cut, as they were sure to garner sympathy for oft-maligned WBN reporters.

As for the final product—the broadcast WBN's faithful viewers would see on a given evening—rarely did one network have an exclusive and although beating our rivals was still the order of the day, today was like any other. Install three monitors in your home, you'd see the same stories on all three networks, many times in the same order. It was television, I mused, not rocket science.

Normally, the summer doldrums provided a certain respite. 1968 being an election year, the politicians, and by default, the media, were out in force. The campaign was heating up. Gerry Witkowski got a dose of Senator Eugene McCarthy's youth movement talking points in a speech that touted gun control, war on hunger, and, it being a DC event, a plea to African American voters.

With Robert Kennedy out of the race, Skipper and her friends had turned to McCarthy. But it wasn't the same. There was a diffidence about McCarthy; voters disliked Johnson more than they liked McCarthy. Not

so with Skipper. She transferred all her energies to the “Get Clean for Gene” movement.

The guy from New York Schindler promised to send never did show up. After that first show, the three of us—Martha, Gerry, and I—waited in his office for Douglas Brentley. I introduced them to Douglas formally.

“I liked the energy tonight,” he said. “What about you?”

I let the two of them answer. Martha gave a brief speech about the youthful energy so obvious in the two pieces we’d done today.

“I want this to be the youth network,” Brentley continued, “during this whole campaign and at the conventions and I don’t want New York sending any fifty-year-olds down here—you know Bill Millikan, Gus—with a lot of stale ideas. We might even take Gerry to Miami and Martha to the Democratic Convention. Think you could manage while Martha’s in Chicago, Gerry? Looks like a barn burner.”

On the way out, Martha grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me on the cheek. No words, just a kiss, and eyes that had me believing all the years I’d spent at WBN were actually worth it.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, DON WOLFF CALLED ME TO SAY HE WAS looking forward to his enforced retirement, however short it might turn out to be. “I was looking around for stories. I got one.”

“Already?” I asked. “What is it?”

“I only know of it, not the core story itself,” said the Wolff. “Only a tiny bit of it, but my nose is telling me there’s something to it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You do know the rumors about Nixon and his attempt to get the South Vietnamese out of the Paris Peace Talks? If it’s real, it’s treason, but don’t count on indictments. What’re an additional twenty thousand lives to someone like Nixon if Averell Harriman fails to come to terms with Ho Chi Minh? On the other hand, suppose Harriman is successful. It would mean the end of Nixon.”

“So, if the South leaves the talks, the war goes on, and thousands more die unnecessarily?” I asked. “Humphrey inherits the consequences.”



“The hard thing is proving any of it. The instrument of all this, is General Claire Chennault’s Chinese widow, Anna Chen.”

“I don’t know for sure, but I might have a way of getting inside.” I was thinking of Lil. If she didn’t have contacts in the China Lobby, as it was called, perhaps she knew someone who did. “It’s a hunch worth following. I’ll run it by Douglas, find out if we can put someone on it full-time.”



“I’VE HAD IT UP TO HERE WITH THE CHINA LOBBY, A LIFETIME,” LIL told me later that day. “For my parents, it was a big deal. But my generation entertains the silly notion that we’re more American than Chinese. Why? I don’t know, given the discrimination and prejudice heaped upon us. What more do we have to do to prove our loyalty and our worth?”

“Racism is here and now, a psychosis with no expiration date,” I said. “The China Lobby has always been Republican, everyone knows that. But if the rumors we’re hearing are true, this goes way beyond party politics.”

“What rumors?”

“That Nixon is using the China Lobby to sabotage the Paris Peace Talks. How they’re doing it, we don’t know.”

Because she’d been turned off by her family’s conservative political views, at first Lil appeared uninterested. She informed me that her parents were friends with the leading lights of the very conservative China Lobby and advocates of its futile objective, that of overthrowing the Communists and returning Chiang Kai-shek to the mainland as ruler.

She didn’t get along with her parents and hadn’t since her teenage years. At the same time, she never refused the monetary support her father provided. Her rebellion was exemplified by her becoming a piano tuner, part-time painter, and sometimes jazz bassist/pianist in obscure East Village clubs instead of a Columbia University graduate student in law, finance, or international affairs—the paths her parents favored.

As we discussed the issue further, I realized Lil began to see it as a way to not so much flaunt her parents as to enter their world without their knowing it—a way to assert herself by doing, not arguing. Searching

my face, she found the answer: she'd do it for herself, and she'd do it for me.

"I'll do it."

"Now, Lil, in this kind of thing, all you have to do is listen. You can't seem too inquisitive," I insisted. "People wonder about someone asking questions. Best to just listen until you get the feel of what's happening."

"Wait a second. Are you telling me it's dangerous?"

"There are ruthless people in politics—American, Vietnamese, German, and Chinese. Have you ever heard of Henry Kissinger?"

"Who's he?" she asked.

"For the moment, an éminence grise with a reputation for backstabbing, betrayal, and double-dealing, later on, who knows... an outsider who saw a chance to promote himself by undermining the peace talks."

"And you're offering me the chance to prove my loyalty by spying on these people?" asked Lil.



SKIPPER INTERVIEWED FOR A TRAINEE POSITION WITH WBBB Baltimore, the sleepy WBN affiliate just thirty miles north of the Capitol. The interview was a mere formality; she had the job. Roscoe Schindler did not do it as a favor to me. He simply decided to make her the first of many female reporters and on-camera talent the network would hire.

There was something about this woman that convinced him it was the proper moment to start elevating women reporters and he better hire Skipper Sanchez before some other network did.

The tape of the two pieces she'd done, both of which eventually went national, qualified her as a minor sensation. The community outreach piece featuring Skipper Sanchez with the kids caused a copycat reaction. Teachers all over the country formed Saturday clubs and day camps with their third graders. The ice hockey story ran three minutes and showed Skipper as a self-confident action figure, a fighter. The network received countless letters from young girls across the country, identifying with her and praising her exploits. The ratings for the two pieces were excellent, and she scored high for on-camera likability.

Just as well, the hegemony of the know-it-all, pipe-smoking white male correspondent was gradually fading. In this age of inflated self-worth, viewers no longer favored the jowled pundit who'd come from print journalism or won a Pulitzer Prize. They wanted an avatar—a personality on to whom they could project their narcissistic yearnings, one that showed up smiling in millions of living rooms every weekday evening at 6:00 p.m. TV was all about novelty, after all. And what could be more novel than an attractive Olympic-level ice hockey star? And although Walter Cronkite and a few others like Douglas Brentley still held sway, it was a time of transition.

Schindler informed me that he was fast-tracking Skipper. By the end of the year, she'd be on the network, he said. Not from DC, however, from New York. Family members on the same beat were liable to have issues despite their best intentions. Best to keep Skipper and me apart, until she passed the usual six-month probation period. At the same time, Skipper gave notice; the school was sad to see her leave. For the time being, she'd commute to Baltimore.

Of course, the interviewers in Baltimore were all smiles between clenched teeth at this upstart New York was foisting on them. Both Schindler and I recognized that, given the slightest opening, Skipper would overcome all obstacles, just as she had as a hockey player, careening down the ice on her way to the winning goal.

HAD SKIPPER BEEN AWARE THAT DELMAS'S EXTRADITION WAS TAKING place that same day, she might have noticed the fortified meat wagon transporting prisoners in the opposite direction and relished the irony of his going one way and her the other.

The two vehicles crossed paths near the Washington-Baltimore Parkway I-95 overpass. As Skipper in my southbound Chrysler passed the northbound prison bus, Delmas was too busy collecting his thoughts to notice. He was still smarting from his DC lawyer's recommendation that he plead guilty and cop an addict plea, which would probably net him a year at most. A suggestion he didn't agree with. And now that he was in Maryland, that course of action was moot. His DC lawyer wasn't

too keen on following the case out of town. At least, he'd had the forethought to come up with a Maryland replacement.

Through the armored bus's slatted windows shafts of late afternoon sun illuminated the dust motes suspended in the moldy air of the cabin. Chained to his seat, he hadn't much to do except daydream. He'd already come up with a series of endearing sobriquets for his fellow travelers: Inside-Outside, Death Before Dishonor, Three-Time Loser, Abject Misery, Mortality Rate, Hail Mary, Mortal Coil, Not Guilty, Samson's Revenge, Dragonfly Dick, and the Kid. A motley bunch.

Previously, he'd been locked up for six months in Indiana with Dragonfly Dick after attempting to sell a stolen car to a dealer. The brakes were worn. The plan was to sell the one he had for cash, steal another one, and then take off—he told Virginia—for California. Only the dealer called the cops.

A small-time forger, Dragonfly Dick had spent most of his waking hours pacing around their cell, as if a wall might suddenly collapse and he could simply walk away.

Day after day, Dragonfly Dick kept twittering, "I don't deserve to be in here."

"Little guys like you have trouble in prison," Delmas told him, "unless your smarts are unique, and yours aren't. You should have been an art teacher in some South Dakota grade school."

Delmas repeated his assessment as they lined up to board the bus to Baltimore, but Dick hadn't listened so here he was again, a victim of his ineptitude.

As Delmas saw it, the replacement lawyer was unknown. He'd find out more in the coming days, but he didn't have much of a support system at the moment. There was Virginia, one-hundred percent loyal, but she could only do so much. And Bad Bruce, of course. He hadn't participated in the drug warehouse caper. Too much like work, he'd said. Still on the outside after a couple of Silver Spring liquor store holdups, he'd do whatever Delmas asked of him. So it was, ever since 1964 when Delmas was locked up for the very first time in DC's Lorton Reformatory.

Delmas had been the kid then. There was a kid in every busload. He looked across the aisle at today's specimen, wondering if he'd find a

protector as he'd found in Bad Bruce who, once he'd become aware of Delmas's superior intellect and legal knowledge, became his bodyguard and protector.

From a legal perspective, Delmas had the stolen car rap down pat. The drug warehouse incident was more serious. They seemed intent on making it a big deal. Now, he had only Virginia and Bruce to help him on the outside.

Across the aisle, Samson's Revenge was testing his chains, frantically, as if he might break loose. Delmas had him pegged, a steroid-ravaged weight lifter, whose body had betrayed him. He'd probably die in prison.

It was dark outside now. The two barely glowing ceiling lights were no match for the encroaching gloom.

It got to Death Before Dishonor first. A private of some sort, still half in an army uniform. He started weeping. As he was unable to hide it, the others turned on him.

"Aw, what's the matter? Is baby boy homesick?" chided Three-Time Loser.

"Hey, man," said Delmas, "remember your first time? I do. It was just as pitiful. Leave him alone, why don't you."

The voice carried authority. The inmates recognized it and they turned to him. As he looked from face to face, Delmas's chest swelled, and he felt a renewed confidence—like the invincible feeling that came over him when driving away in a freshly stolen car. Things were looking up. It was time to inhabit his model prisoner persona, a façade he excelled at. In a few days, he'd have this bunch in the palm of his hand. Bruce would keep Virginia in line, making sure no Gus-type asshole showed up and taking care of him if one did. Superior intellect trumps mindless violence. Violence on the outside was something different; inside he'd be a model of cooperation.

AUGUST

**F**or most, the 1968 Republican National Convention was a weeklong bore. The delegates stayed inside, purposely sealing themselves off from the disturbances in the largely Black neighborhood of Liberty City, about nine miles away. As long as they were kept at a distance, no one cared. At one point, it was rumored that the leading candidate, Richard Nixon, watched the protests on television from his hotel room.

Although it started as a protest, it was only a matter of time before the press started calling it a riot. Like other riots in the sixties, the causes were pretty much the same city to city.

I convinced Douglas Brentley, who persuaded Roscoe Schindler, that, since the demonstrators announced that only Black reporters were welcome—whites would be forcibly ejected—splitting forces was the best way to cover the action inside the convention and the protests outside. I was assigned to cover Liberty City with an all-Black camera crew.

Since the other major networks were taking a conservative approach to their Liberty City coverage, Schindler decided that WBN would support a more liberal attitude. It wouldn't be easy, remaining objective, i.e., listening to the rioters' grievances at the same time we set the right tone to avoid right-wing backlash.

I implored George Pongracic, the executive producer in Miami to let me use “creepie-peepie” portable cameras. Pongracic insisted it wasn’t worth risking expensive equipment in a volatile situation. “You have to rely on,” he said, “on sixteen-millimeter-film camera crews and your trusty Filmo.” I took it to Brentley and the three of us huddled.

“You have enough cameras to cover the floor,” I said. “Let us take the two remaining cameras and we’ll give you real-time footage: rioting, demonstrations, interviews—the lot. That way, Douglas can control the big picture by switching to live action at will. Any time things on the floor slow down, he announces a bulletin and you cut to our live coverage.”

Brentley loved the idea and I lit out for Liberty City.

A cursory look at the community was enough for television viewers to qualify themselves as sympathetic or hostile. Our crews couldn’t be everywhere, but we recorded the action and several interviews. What we didn’t get wasn’t worth getting: plenty of violence for viewers to react to, including the deaths of four Black men, shot dead by no one knew who.

Long-ignored police-community relations were at the heart of the protestors’ grievances, but the pendulum of public opinion was taking a hard right. So even though we captured some of the problematic police attitudes toward the community in interviews, TV viewers polled with the conservatives. Violence scares the upwardly-mobile middle class. Always has and always will.

Yes, viewers were shocked by the living conditions—the concrete and stucco, the lack of vegetation, the oppressive heat, the rubble, and the absence of retail stores. Nevertheless, white viewers recoiled at the looting and the burning.

Before it got too dark, we headed back to Miami Beach. The *Hartley-Brentley Report* for August 5, 1968, was about to go live.

Hartley and Brentley were in the booth. Gerry Witkowski and four New York producers were still on the convention floor. Each producer had a WBN cameraman armed with a portable video camera—heavy unwieldy chunks of electronics, capable of capturing real-time interviews and demonstrations and feeding them live into the broadcast on cue.

A New York producer was sent to DC to help Martha Jefferies with

stories of interest to the nightly news, which would originate from Miami, now that both anchors were there.

Because I ended up in Liberty City instead of working the convention for Brentley, Douglas wanted a producer he was familiar with. I was allowed to sneak the Wolff down to Miami early in the day.

About fifteen minutes into the program, I walked into the control room. On the other side of the console, the Wolff was whispering to the soundman and the director. When the director cued in our footage, I watched the monitors. While the Liberty City footage was running, I caught the Wolff looking at me. As I turned to acknowledge, I was surprised to see a host of emotions crossing my friend's face, one of the saddest expressions I had ever seen on a human being's face—a reckoning of regret and shame. Finally, the Wolff put his hand to his forehead and saluted me. I saluted back.

I knew what my friend was feeling. It reminded me of my early high school days, a time when the word *immature* was being bandied about. It was a very popular word at the time. Adults loved using it on their offspring, but all I could think of when it was used on me was: What other way is there except trial and error?

It took a while, but I started to understand. I was supposed to develop this voice in the back of my head. It had always been there, but only as an observer, mostly on mute, to boot. I took a more active role as I became more experienced. Whenever I was about to do something inane, something I'd be called immature for, I'd simply tune into that little voice and not do it.

The Wolff hadn't listened to the voice. Because he was overconfident, because he believed himself indispensable? I wondered. But I had listened, and by listening I'd earned respect and a new job. Somehow, the tables were turned: I was the leader; the Wolff would now follow.

The Wolff's remorseful expression was to define our relationship going forward.

The next morning early, Roscoe Schindler called me to congratulate me on my Liberty City coverage, and my on-camera reportage. "We may have lost the ratings war yesterday, but we gained three million Black viewers. More of the same today, but a little less Black. We don't want to reverse our field, just tone it down a bit."



“Abernathy’s down here. His interview will balance things out,” I said. “He called me last night to heap praise on WBN.”

“Good, good,” said Schindler. The line went hollow momentarily as if something uncomfortable needed to be said, which made the white noise all the more annoying. “One more thing,” he began again. “I shouldn’t be telling you before it’s announced: Gannon Crisp is appointing Noah Goodstein as his special assistant. Part of the fallout from the Wolff thing. A load of shit. Among other things, Goodstein’s going to investigate his firing and he wants to start with you.”

“I don’t see the point,” I said. “Most people have moved on.”

“I told Gannon we have a business to run. Can’t have someone looking over our employees’ shoulders. Least of all a so-called anti-corruption ombudsman—that’s what they’re calling him. He said it’s either an inside investigation or Senate investigators.”

ON THE LAST DAY OF THE CONVENTION, I RETURNED TO MY ROOM IN time to hear the phone ringing. “Tennis anyone?” said the voice.

“Lil, is that you?”

“None other. I’m in Room 650 in the same—in your hotel,” she said. “I’m with my cousin, risking my life spying on the China Lobby for you.”

“Jeez, didn’t I make myself clear? No counterspy stuff,” I said. “Just be your sweet self making friends.”

“I’m trying to make friends, but it’s difficult. These people are so materialistic; we don’t have anything in common. All they talk about is filling their mansions with a lot of shit they’ll never use and will soon forget about. Some of them have houses with forty rooms and each room is filled with useless junk or nothing at all. They could house ten families.”

“I’m coming down.”

“No, I don’t trust my cousin. I don’t want her blowing in here while we’re in bed,” she said. “I need lots of comforting. I’m so horny after spending all this time with my cousin. I’ll come to your room—1406, right?”

After I’d comforted her a second time, after she’d implored me to *make it last*, I had to admit, I’d been somewhere else.

“I’m sorry, Lil.”

“The older I get, the longer I want it to last,” she said. “If that’s all you have, a three-minute special, maybe you’re telling me there’s someone else.”

I was so humiliated I made sure the second time lasted forty-five minutes. Every time I got close to coming, I withdrew, causing her to whine and make a face, giving me an instant to back down my libido, before plunging in again, causing her to purr. This went on for ten minutes until I was able to control ejaculation by squeezing my coccyx, thereby keeping her on the verge. Every time I withdrew, she dug her nails into my back.

After, she began a monologue about her week on the convention floor, unaware that I was half dozing alongside her. The intense love-making coupled with the battlefield tensions of Liberty City had taken its toll. I retained but a few bits, enough to understand her mindset.

Though she was an admitted political agnostic, there was a fresh note of pride in her reporting as she went on about the dullness of the people and the businesses they were engaged in. She’d been sucked in by the conspiratorial manner of the proceedings, in the usual way outsiders are when taken into confidence. Rubbing elbows with famous people, she’d persevered and now understood the games that politicians and the press played—the politicians negotiating the platform, the press trying to scoop one another. It was easy to follow, she said. The shadowboxing over civil rights and the deadly events in Vietnam were pure Kabuki. The big issues, the ones affecting the lives of ordinary people were not in the Republican Party’s DNA. As for the politics of it, Nixon’s nomination was a foregone conclusion. The only surprise was his choice of vice president, Spiro Agnew, governor of Maryland.

When Lil realized I had been nodding out the whole time, she shook me. “Hey.” I woke with a smile of recognition when I saw her laughing face, “You didn’t hear a word I said.”

“I heard every word, baby.”

“What’d I say then?”

“You talked about the fun you had mixing with Republican bigwigs, how you loved Nixon’s acceptance speech.”

“Well,” she said, “you better get this. The NSA is listening to Nixon.

They've tapped his phone and they're onto Kissinger. They know for sure that Nixon wants the peace talks to fail so he can keep using it against the Democrats."

"Do you think we could get anyone to talk?" I asked.

"I don't think so. If you really want to know where it's at, well, they know they're being bugged, they know Johnson's doing it, and their spies on the inside believe he's going to keep it from getting out."

"If that's the case, Nixon will win the presidency."



IN THE MIDDLE OF AUGUST, RUTH O'MALLEY MOVED TO DC FOR A two-year social work fellowship at George Washington Hospital. Staying with her parents was fine for visits. For a longer period, it was confining, not that she didn't get along with them, she wanted privacy. Skipper was commuting to WBBB in Baltimore, frequently overnighing it while she mastered the skills of a local news report reporter. When she did come home, she spent the nights with me.

For access to a piano, Ruth had only to walk to my apartment on Columbia Road. She had her pick of vehicles—the Chrysler or Skipper's newly acquired secondhand Volvo.

From time to time, on days when Skipper stayed in Baltimore, Ruth invited her "project," as she referred to Virginia, over to cook dinner. Cooking relaxed Virginia, talk came easy with her. The more Ruth heard, the more she believed her sister was schizophrenic. The telltale behavior that led Ruth to this conclusion was, among other things, her treatment of Peter, alternately a solicitous petting frenzy followed by needless cruelty. Once, while Virginia was shouting to her sister in the living room, Peter licked a bowl of ice cream that she had prepared for herself. When she noticed what the dog was doing, she spanked him with a metal spatula then opened the door of the refrigerator and tried to shove him in, only stopping when the dog's pitiful crying summoned Ruth to the kitchen.

"What's going on?" asked Ruth.

"The dog ate my ice cream."

"Give it to him."

“Bad dog,” said Virginia. She offered the bowl to the dog for a moment, then as he prepared to gobble it, she whisked the bowl away and dumped the contents in the sink.

What frightened Ruth the most, what inspired her professional opinion, was the cruelty in her expression—the grimace of a truly sick person. When Virginia caught Ruth’s astonishment, her countenance morphed quickly into a forced smile. From that day on, Ruth found an excuse to keep Virginia from inviting herself over. At the same time, she began thinking about recommending treatment.



I TOOK TWO DAYS OFF TO HELP RUTH MOVE A LOAD FROM HER parents’ home to Skipper’s and to rehearse a dozen songs with her for a One Step Down gig, Friday, August 16.

As it often is with jazz musicians, if the talent’s there, they feed off each other’s energy. Whatever it was that had bothered me the last time had passed. No cracking voice, no inhibitions, no self-pity. If a note or phrasing wasn’t perfect, Ruth had me do it over until I got it right. Her originality, both in accompaniment and improvisation, reminded me of Blossom Dearie and DC’s own Shirley Horn. And just when I thought everything was perfect, she surprised me one day, announcing, “We’re ready for bass and drums. Do you know anybody?”

Until that moment, I’d believed we were performing as a duo. “Wow, you sure we have time to work someone in? But I know two guys.”

“I have charts for every number,” said Ruth. “*Improvise, Adapt, Overcome*. Isn’t that it?”

“Marine Corps lingo... Where’d you learn that?”

“I worked in the Camp Pendleton Health Clinic for a while as a civilian psychologist.”

“You learn a lot, hanging around marines.”

“They did most of the hanging around. I couldn’t get my work done,” said Ruth, picking up her arrangements. “If your two guys know what they’re doing, we’ll be fine.”

•“Just One of Those Things”

•“So in Love”

- “Time After Time”
- “From This Moment On”
- “Spring Is Here”
- “My One and Only Love”
- “Amor” (duet with Ruth)
- “The Good Life”
- “I Fall in Love Too Easily”
- “My Funny Valentine”
- “Yesterdays”
- “Come Back to Me”

Paul Meagre, bass, and Henry Wills, drums, two tasteful DC musicians I had once worked with, came to the next rehearsal and left impressed by Ruth’s ability and her arrangements.

The gig went off without a hitch. All through the buildup, Ruth doubted there’d be much of an audience. Neither she nor I believed that viewers who enjoyed my on-air appearances might also turn out to hear me sing. But Washington was a jazz city.

Present and applauding were a few work-related notables: Herb Hecht and wife; Douglas Brentley; Don Wolff; Jerry Cugini, my former assistant editor; Charlayne Hunter and friend; as well as Virginia and her parents; Skipper; Mitch and Isabella Warren; Mitch’s sister, Marsha; Aunt Alice and Cloris Tucker; Gideon Rath-Peabody, my least favorite columnist; and an enthusiastic live audience that occupied the remaining seats.

The following day, Ruth and I were well on our way to Black Pond when the temperature reached its 95.4-degree high. It was supposed to be the three of us, but Skipper informed me she was staying in Baltimore overnight.

“In this heat?” I said. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Oh, well, next time. Have fun, you two.”

Strange, I thought, not much of a reaction from a woman who’s just been told her man’s going skinny-dipping with her sister.

We parked in the usual place and slogged through the heavy underbrush until we reached my favorite rock. Ruth stripped without hesitating. I couldn’t help staring.

“You like?” said Ruth.

Uh-huh. Well, here goes,” I said jumping in the water quickly to hide my rising quiver. Ruth dove in, surfacing behind me. “Boo.”

Splashing each other lowered the tension. Soon we were laughing easily. Maybe I could swim underwater and grab her ankles, I thought. No, no, she’d be expecting it. I better not. When we climbed out, we stood face-to-face toweling off slowly.

Lying back on our towels, we began a back-and-forth debriefing of the previous night’s gig, until the thread ran out and we fell silent. The tension returned. Not the inhibiting tension derived from some outdated social code, but a tension caused by something basic: Thou shalt not come on to thy girlfriend’s sister. Nevertheless, I resolved to try something.

After a final dip, we ate sandwiches. Ruth didn’t like the crows hovering; I chased them away. We lay back about eight inches apart. I could hear her steady breathing. What the heck, I said to myself. I raised my right arm, mechanically moving it so it hovered seven or so inches above her pubic region. The hand didn’t move; it just hovered. She turned her head toward me. Without saying a word, her eyes directed me to withdraw my hand. Powerful eyes, issuing a command that I obeyed. They weren’t the crushing eyes that humble a man’s spirit—not eyes saying *Never*; rather eyes that said *Not Now*. Eyes that said *Just because I let you feel me up once, doesn’t mean I want you to grab my pussy*. I withdrew my hand, dropping it onto my belly.

At first, Ruth spoke to the sky, only turning to face me when she got to a certain point in her recitation. “There’s a part of me that wants to. It’s not that I’m refusing because I’d be the final notch in your three-sisters hat trick and I’m feeling prudish about it like I’d be betraying my sister,” she said. “Fucking is no big deal. Someday we may fuck, only not now.”

“Why not?” I said. “Just wondering.”

“There is no *why not*; there is no *because*,” said Ruth. “Teenagers ask why not.”

“Owie.”

“Don’t mope.”

“I’m not moping.”

Ruth, smiling now, looking into my face. “I see you. You’re moping. You can’t hide it. Smile,” said Ruth, beseechingly. “There, that’s better.”

There must be a God, I thought. Only He could explain the tension that nudity provokes. And how rejection, when a man’s in a heightened state, is so painful.



I FINAGLED SEVERAL HOURS OF DISCOUNTED RECORDING TIME FROM Byron Motion Pictures, the lab that processed WBN’s long-form docs. We’d just finished recording take 4 of “Amor,” which we did as a duet, featuring a lovebird serenade between Ruth and myself. Her voice, nothing epic, but alluring nevertheless, fit together perfectly with mine.

One more tune and the reel we were recording would be finished. Ruth proposed taking five. The engineers signaled they were going out for coffee. Paul, the bass player, went with them.

I sat down alongside Ruth on the piano bench and put my arm around her shoulder. She recoiled, no dramatic flinching, no excessive show, yet a definitive no. She shook her head like a kindly grandparent, who does her best to not hurt someone.

“No?” I said.

“No.”

I must have appeared hangdog because she followed her rejection with a gently whispered: “There was a time when I wanted you. Right after I first met you. Now that we’re working together, I dunno. Funny. Nothing on you—a feeling it would destroy our relationship, especially since you’re still involved with my sister.”

“Skipper and I have an open relationship; it’s that way on purpose, that we don’t live together. And now, you’ve told me in so many words ‘Let’s be friends.’”

“I’d never tell you ‘Let’s be friends.’ It’s insulting.”

“I dunno. I, I get the urge to sleep with a woman because I feel there’s something real between us, knowing it will feed my inferiority feelings if I’m rejected. I hate it when I’m out on a limb like this. Yet, I do it, despite knowing I could be hurt.”

“You’ve been looking at me differently. I was hoping it wouldn’t happen, that I wouldn’t have to say no.” She touched my arm.

“Some men can’t be friends with a woman—unless... I know it sounds crazy.”

“Don’t generalize, personalize.”

“Okay, I—me—I can’t be friends— Shit, how do I change?”

“You seem to believe you’ve lowered yourself in my eyes because I discouraged you. That’s you projecting your emotional responses on me. If I’d lost esteem for you simply because you made a move, not only would I not be here, I’d be a silly fool to boot.”

“Stop projecting? I don’t even know what that means.”

“Channel your emotions into singing. You’ll forget all about me.”

“I’ll try.”

“You look like you just lost at poker. Soften your expression—not by grinning like a, uh, a fool, but joyously, singing this last song like you mean it,” she poked my abdomen. “I don’t think less of you because we haven’t fucked. What if we did and it didn’t work out?”

“You’re amazing.”

“No, I’m a social worker; I deal with emotional shit all the time.”

I nodded and high-fived her. “Let’s finish this record.”

Ruth played a few bars, enough for me to recognize the tune. The crew had returned and was settling in. I stood up and walked to the mic. “‘I Fall in Love Too Easily’... Good choice. I like it. Let’s go.”

“I like it, too,” she said with a smile that quietly warmed my heart.

And off we went on a run-through.

I fall in love too easily  
I fall in love too fast  
I fall in love too terribly hard  
For love to ever last  
My heart should be well-schooled  
'Cause I've been fooled in the past  
And still, I fall in love too easily  
I fall in love too fast  
My heart should be well-schooled  
'Cause I've been fooled in the past



And still, I fall in love too easily  
I fall in love too fast

“Singing produces catharsis, you dig?” Ruth said. “Let’s record it.”

“Were you sending me a message?”

“By choosing that tune?”

“Yeah.”

“It just came to me like that,” she admitted. “Who knows what may happen in a year? The main thing is the fine music we’re going to make.”



AFTER THIS HIATUS, I PREPARED FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONVENTION. This time, I’d be working with Douglas Brentley in the booth and on the floor, letting other teams deal with the massive, planned demonstrations by yippies and other groups. Douglas asked Roscoe Schindler to make sure there were enough crews to cover any demonstration, no matter the size, so I would not be shanghaied.

I met Lil in the bar of the Blackstone Hotel, which, given that we’d usually met in the privacy of a hotel room, struck my paramour as curious. When I approached her and sat down, she understood why.

“I might as well get it off my chest, Lil,” I said, “I’m in love.”

“Not with me, if your expression is telling me what I think it is. Who is It? Your on-off girl?”

“Sister number three,” I said sheepishly.

“Those sisters. What makes them so special?” she asked, in a voice lacking in bitterness.

“It’s not like I planned it,” I said.

“Don’t tell me you’ve taken a vow, and I flew all the way here, just to be shoved aside.”

Whatever she was feeling, she refused to show it. No Anger. No Pain. No Betrayal. I sat back, trying to extricate myself from my physical surroundings, finding a mental space from which to observe myself. That’s when I realized she was handling the situation better than I was. Her composure had made her impregnable; anything I might do or say simply bounced off her protective shield. A wave of empathy swept over

me, and I realized I was not only headed in the wrong direction, but I was also making a fool of myself. Nevertheless, I had to keep going, blindly perhaps; I refused to change course.

“I’m sorry.” The words oozed out before I could stop them. “It came to me—change. I have to change.”

“Does she reciprocate your feelings?”

“I’m in love, but she isn’t. I may be crazy, but I feel is taking what you call a vow is the only proper way.”

I signaled the bartender for two more gin and tonics that were quickly served over ice and lime.

“So, what’s changed? You’ve been hiding me from sister number two for months; now sister three comes along and you push me aside like you’ve got me risking my life with a bunch of Republican crazies, and now you want me to continue without the one thing I’ve been doing it for all along, namely you and me,” said Lil. “It doesn’t matter that I love you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? That you take me for granted, because that’s what you’re doing,” she said, “and for no good reason because nothing’s changed. If we go to your room right now, she’d never know.”

“She’d never know, but I would, Lil.”

“Well, isn’t that gallant of you. There’s nothing else to say, is there?”

“Except for one more thing that makes me feel like a cad in mentioning it.”

“What’s that?”

“Okay, here goes. It’s totally stupid, I know, but— How come you refuse to give me a blow job?”

“Is that all? I thought it might be something serious.”

“...Since I do you that way . . .”

“And I love it,” she said. “Seriously, have you ever thought I might be saving it?”

My initial reaction was to ridicule her, but this wasn’t the moment for ridicule. Besides, it sounded sincere, like she was saving it. I couldn’t quarrel with that. I took a more conciliatory tack.

“Lil, I look at my life and I am disgusted, if not fully, at least halfway. I have to be faithful to Ruth if she’s ever to accept me, just like I have to

be thankful to the people at work who believe in me. I must start acting like the person I want to be, not the cynical role I've affected. All the while not becoming some pusillanimous yes-man, I have to be more of a — I've been an outsider all my life. I have to show—*I hate the word* —maturity.”

I took her hand and kissed the back of it. Lil pulled it away quickly.

“I like finishing a job,” she said, “I'm going to stick around. And you're going to pay me—a lot.”

“Let's have dinner and talk shop,” I said, “unless you're upset.”

“I'm not upset, just numb like I've been set up,” said Lil.



STILL NURSING A SENSE OF SATISFACTION AT HAVING TAKEN A VOW TO eliminate all philandering, I stepped out of the elevator, feeling I'd taken a truthful first step. I realized Rome wasn't built in a day; I had a long way to go. If I was to be successful, I'd have to avoid self-congratulation, the kind of thoughts I'd been struggling with, when, moments later, I chanced to meet Hunter S. Thompson, the most notorious of the 1968 Democratic Convention's chroniclers, in the lobby. At that moment, neither of us had any idea of the indignities about to befall us.

We'd once met at a Carl Bernstein party in DC. After exchanging a few rumors, we adjourned to the bar to continue. To me, Thompson was a person to be wary of, a self-promoting grandstander whose work was based on pranks, each successive prank more outrageous than the last. Thompson considered me a sort of civil rights frontman, used by WBN to inflate their street creds.

“Of course, you know Daley's preempting our real-time coverage?” I said.

“The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers strike,” said HST, “is good for WBN. Puts you on the same level as the big boys—CBS and NBC.”

“Same kind of tricks he used to foil MLK when he came here in sixty-six,” I said. “Without electricity, we won't have real-time remote coverage like we did in Liberty City.”

“And while you laboriously develop and edit your sixteen-millimeter

film, us print dogs will beat your deadlines,” said Thompson. “By the way, who’s the Chinese chick? Your woman?”

Caught off guard by the question, I stared back at the other man while I searched my memory for where and when Thompson had seen us together. Must have been that first day in the Blackstone Hotel bar. And now, at the thought of her and Thompson, or anyone else, for that matter, I felt a galvanic skin response, the epidermis covering my arms instantly warming, a prelude to fight or flight. At the same time, I couldn’t pretend Lil was mine, not any longer. I’d dumped her unceremoniously. I wondered how hurt she was, abruptly remembering the misery I’d felt when Pamela Wyatt dumped me. Enough to exact revenge? Sleep with some asshole?

I felt cornered as I mumbled the first words that came to mind, “She works for me. Exclusively.”

“On what?” asked Thompson. “C’mon, give.”

“None of your business, man.”

“We’ll see about that.”

A real shit would take Lil back for the duration of the convention, then dump her. Was I that kind of person? Using any advantage to get ahead? Isn’t that what business is all about, especially television with the narcissism and riches that make it possible? If I used a tactic like that to get a story, I’d be lauded up and down WBN, as a hero. Lil was right: they venerated guys who screwed someone to get ahead.

So, despite what I’d done to her, I refused to believe she would ever betray me. Unlike the sisters, it wasn’t in her nature; Lil was reliable, I told myself.

Nevertheless, I was sure I could convince her my motives were pure, that we could still be friends, the irony of which had me hating the way I’d acted. If it came to sex during the convention, so be it. I hated the idea of Lil with another man.

I also considered several incentives, excluding heavy-handed alternatives like a nondisclosure agreement. Showing up with an NDA would insult her. She’d mentioned money, but that, I could tell, was only a pretext. So be it. I’d pay her to resist any overtures, be they from a celebrity like Hunter Thompson or a cub reporter on the make.

After the convention got going, I never did get a chance to talk with

Lil. I was too busy managing Douglas Brentley's portion of the broadcasts. The convention dragged on through the dog days of August. The floor was as violent as the streets, one bloody confrontation after another. After CBS correspondent Mike Wallace got punched in the face, I was asked to act as an unofficial bodyguard for WBN correspondents on the floor.

Because the electrical workers' strike prevented the networks from using video cameras for remote feeds, 16mm film and cameras became a valuable commodity. I ended up doing long hours as a cameraman, on the floor with my Filmo as well as on the streets of Chicago, covering what some were calling riots and others demonstrations.

I was on the convention floor with my Filmo when several delegations petitioned the chair to suspend the convention for two weeks and then reconvene in another city. Needless to say, that proposal was ignored by the pro-Humphrey forces who, with the help of Mayor Richard Daley, controlled the outcomes of all initiatives, inside and outside the convention. Although I wasn't present when so-called security forces knocked CBS correspondent Dan Rather to the floor, I did film the police assault on NBC's Edwin Newman.

About 7:30 p.m. on the twenty-eighth, I was asked to grab a soundman and take my Filmo to Grant Park. Two WBN cameramen had been attacked and were out of commission. New York wanted all the picture and sound we could get for a documentary on the convention to be produced ASAP by one of the DC units. According to the Wolff, I was slated to produce.



VIRGINIA HUBBARD HAD JUST FINISHED PUTTING ON A PAIR OF DARK blue dungarees over which she slipped a light cotton dress, a dress Gus bought her, one of those seductive prints that grace the bodies of young French girls who magically appear arrayed in colorful leafy designs on the Grands Boulevards as the first flurries of spring air bless the City of Light.

Tipsy and talking to herself, she made ready to visit Alice Randall. Her mission: secure enough money to pay Delmas's bail. Her parents

belonged to a class unofficially categorized as *well-to-do, but not rich*—the retirement pay for a navy captain with over thirty years of service amounting to \$9,234 a year with a \$150 monthly allotment for quarters as of 1949, the year of his retirement, updated annually for cost of living. More than enough inflated 1968 dollars for the couple to live comfortably if they eschewed luxuries. As navy brats, the three girls were raised with the benefits of military rank and civilian upper-class values: the well-circumscribed life that I sought to avoid: chatting with neighbors while walking the dog, bridge and canasta, husband-and-wife golf, Arena Theater season tickets.

Her parents turned her down, as did Ruth, Skipper, and Gus. According to her disorderly thought process, Virginia was convinced she could persuade Alice Randall to grant her the relief she sought. The conversation she was having with herself was all the justification she needed to cloak herself in the righteousness of her resolve.

Virginia was staying on Idaho Avenue with Nora Wingate, a GW classmate. She unlocked her bike, rolled it out to the street, and headed down Idaho to Mass Avenue, then turned right onto Wisconsin. The rest was an easy glide to Thirty-Fourth Street where she drifted twenty yards past Alice's house, locking her bike to a tree on the opposite side of the street. Returning was another story. Instead of an uphill grind at night, she told Nora she was visiting her friend, Sally Smith on N Street, mentioning only that she would pick up some money she was owed before returning the following day by bus.



IT WAS FULL-ON WARFARE WHEN I GOT TO GRANT PARK. THE soundman I'd drawn from the pool was a rookie, who, when we arrived in front of the Hilton, got his first taste of the street fighting that had been going on all week.

We passed the corner of Michigan and Balboa a few minutes after Mayor Daley's police attacked the thousands of unarmed demonstrators. In any case, too late to witness Hunter Thompson getting billy-clubbed in the stomach. Thompson, who then, despite his press pass, became part of the crowd pushed by police against the Hilton's plate-glass

window, which shattered when the pressure of the many bodies against it became too great.

After that, we fanned out across the park, recording the action and incidents we encountered. I paused for an instant to reload my camera and check the sound. After listening to a few seconds of tape, I congratulated Manny, my soundman.

“Over there, let’s get some of that.” I pointed to a group moving toward the police line. We cut across some trees to Hutchinson Field. Manny took one step and collapsed. I looked around for the source of the cracking noise I’d heard the moment before Manny fell. Sounded like a bullet, but was it? Nothing in sight; no one around us. I knelt, bending over the fallen soundman lying face down in the grass. Too dark to tell but the back of his head seemed to be oozing blood. I was about to feel my comrade’s head when I spotted a large rock to the left of his head. The rock must have made the cracking sound on impact. I thought it best not to move Manny, not even turn him over, but how to get help and protect the equipment? *Fuck the equipment. Gotta get him to a doc.* I bent over to feel Manny’s pulse only seconds before a blow to my head was delivered.

I didn’t see my assailant creep up behind me. I didn’t witness my head getting smashed in with a sawed-off pool cue or my body falling over Manny’s. I wasn’t conscious as the thief removed my wallet, my press credential, the Filmo, the Nagra tape deck, the Sennheiser shotgun mic, and finally my shoes. I hadn’t watched as my body was dragged across the grass and dumped behind a cluster of bushes.

In the instant between a conscious and an inanimate state, I felt my senses spiraling like a gyroscope gone haywire, falling from the sky in a never-ending cascade of twists—falling, but never landing, finally leveling off. At which point, my deep subconscious lapsed into congratulations: I, for my narrow escapes, everyone around me, except for Douglas Brentley and Walter Cronkite, for the injuries they sustained. I was conversing with the two of them. Telling them how I alone had been chosen to accomplish bigger and better things. A lowly film editor, I was about to be anointed universal czar of television when the sky opened, and a beam of heavenly light shone upon me, followed by music more magisterial than any earthly strains, be they Beethoven’s or Coltrane’s. Out of the

music came a voice: *You will excel in your work. Hark unto Me.* Once, twice, three times, and all was quiet, a stillness more beautiful than any music.



ABOUT THE SAME TIME GUS DISAPPEARED IN GRANT PARK, VIRGINIA Hubbard skipped across Thirty-Fourth Street, her lightheartedness stemming from a surfeit of good intentions. She rang the bell and was greeted by Alice's DNC colleague, Cloris Tucker, who from a single glance assumed that the visitor must be the sister Skipper was always complaining about.

"Is Alice here?" asked Virginia.

Cloris nodded and led Virginia upstairs to where Alice was serving coffee—a weekly dinner with the staff, followed by discussion and planning for the week ahead.

"I hope I'm not intruding, Aunt Alice," said Virginia, "I was looking for Gus, uh, Peter, thought he might be here."

"Sit down, dear," said Alice, "have some coffee... Cloris..." The cue for Cloris to fetch a cup from the pantry.

Alice watched Cloris disappear into the pantry, before turning her attention to Virginia. "Peter is in Chicago. He won't be back till Friday, I'm afraid."

Cloris returned with a cup and saucer, placing them on the table next to the coffee pot. Virginia watched the coffee service ritual with the empty stare of a person lost in minutiae, oblivious to the anomaly that was about to set her off: counting hers, four coffee cups for three people.

"Cream and sugar?"

"He's here, I know it," said Virginia, jumping up and pointing at the fourth cup. "I want my seven hundred and fifty dollars."

"What is it, dear? What's wrong? Are you ill?" asked Alice.

"Where's he hiding? I want my money," screamed Virginia. "Three people; four cups."

Cloris stood up and looked around, "Hey, calm down, sis. What's wrong with you?"

"Is this any of your business? Who the fuck are you, anyway?"

As Alice looked on, she started to shake, unsure how her peaceful



gathering had suddenly devolved into a raucous affair. When Virginia advanced on Cloris, pushing her onto the settee, Alice realized it was something to fear.

“You, punk-assed bitch,” said Virginia. Then, motioning wildly in front of the old lady, “I know you’re hiding him, Alice. Where is he?”

That’s when Skipper, who’d been taking a crap, burst out of the bathroom. Such was the ferocity of her counterattack that no one noticed Alice start to grab her shoulder.

Fixated on her sister, Skipper went for Virginia. “Who are you pushing?” she snarled. Surprised by Skipper’s sudden appearance, Virginia turned white, and started to backpedal. Skipper caught up with her and shoved her. Tumbling over backward, Virginia’s head caught the lip of the marble step to the veranda as she fell.

“This is awful,” gasped Alice. “I think she’s unconscious.”

Skipper turned to Cloris. “See about Virginia, hon.”

Cloris walked over to where Virginia was lying.

“I’m truly sorry about Virginia,” Skipper spoke softly to Alice. “I warned her to stop bothering you.”

While Skipper was comforting Alice, Cloris leaned over Virginia, quickly realizing something dreadful had happened. She looked up and spoke matter-of-factly, “I think she’s dead.”

Quickly coming alongside Cloris and kneeling, Skipper shook her sister, then felt for a pulse. She didn’t turn white; she didn’t panic. Cool as the underside of the pillow.

“Well, we can’t stand around here fretting. We have to move... quickly,” said Skipper.

“Are you sure she’s...?” asked Cloris. Skipper nodded.

“This is horrible,” Alice began to whimper. “I wish Peter was here, he’d know what to do.”

“Why is it when a crisis occurs, only a man can handle it?” said Skipper. “A woman can’t possibly handle it. Well, a woman can handle this as good as, uh, as well as, if not better, than any man.”

“It’s not that, dearie. There’s only one thing to do. And Peter knows it.”

“Think for a moment, Alice. Yes, it was an accident. But will people believe it? And what will it do to your career? You’re older; it may not

matter, but my job, the one I've been training hard for, is finished if we call the police."

It was then that Alice realized that Cloris and Skipper were holding hands. "Oh," she said, "are you two...?"

"Yes," said Skipper, "we are."

"Does Peter know?"

"I haven't had time to tell him," said Skipper. "It's neither here nor there at the moment."

"I'm calling my lawyer," said Alice.

"There's more than one solution, a much better solution, in fact."

"I don't like this talk of a 'better solution,'" said Alice. "She's dead and we have to report it. A horrible accident, but not the end of the world."

Skipper walked over to Alice, standing above her, "No one's calling any lawyers."

"Ohhh," called out Alice, "Uhhh."

Cloris and Skipper froze, watching Alice's eyes turn upward into her head.

"Oh, God," cried Cloris.

Skipper knelt over Alice, opening her eyes, and checking her pulse. "Not good. I think she's had a stroke." Then to Alice, hoping she might hear. "We'll take you to GW Hospital immediately."

"We mustn't do anything foolish," said Cloris, twisting around without any sense of what to do. "The truth always comes out in the end."

"Do you trust me? Are you with me?" asked Skipper in a commanding voice as she stood up and faced her friend.

Cloris nodded.

"Okay, check her pockets. I want to know how she got here," said Skipper.

Glad to be told what to do, Cloris searched Virginia's pockets while Skipper checked Alice again. Then picking her up, she headed downstairs to the garage.

"Bring the blanket," she said.

Cloris grabbed the blanket and followed Skipper.

"Cops can be stupid... especially if they form," continued Skipper, "an

erroneous theory of a crime. They end up bending the facts to suit their theory. But their methods are proven. Even stupid men can succeed by using proven methods and by keeping an open mind as they collect the facts. We're going to dispose of the body and all traces of her being here tonight."

After placing Alice in the Chrysler, they went back upstairs. "And we're going to come up with a theory of the crime that keeps them barking up the wrong tree."

"I hope you know what you're doing," said Cloris, "turning an accident into a crime. Maybe we should call her lawyer."

Skipper faced her girlfriend, her expression meant to squelch all talk of lawyers and any resistance to her will. She held out her hand. Cloris dropped the contents of Virginia's pockets into it. "A bike key. Check outside, down the block. A black racer. If the key fits, bring it here. Make sure you're not seen. Quick, quick."

"What if she told someone she was coming here?" asked Cloris.

"If she did, we might be screwed; I'm betting she didn't. Virginia isn't one for chatter with neighbors," said Skipper. "We'll take Alice to the hospital now. Then, come back and clean this up. My fucking sister! A stroke. What a mess!"

It took Cloris only a few minutes to find Virginia's bike and bring it back. Skipper opened the garage and rolled the bike in.

On the trip to the ER, Skipper ad-libbed several facile arguments, conjuring up enough reasonable points to reassure Cloris. She, Miriam Sanchez, would take the blame if anything went wrong. That should convince Alice that she ought to go along, if and when she regained consciousness. In all, Skipper reasoned, Gus had the strongest motive: Virginia had been stalking him and he wanted to end it!

As for Alice, world-weariness was catching up with her. They'd noticed it in her work. In any case, in her condition, she wouldn't be talking for a while, perhaps quite a while.

After depositing Alice at the ER, Skipper couldn't help tooting, "Just watch what women can do when they set their minds to it."



UNTIL HE WOKE UP AT 11:45 P, M, GUS HAD NO IDEA HE'D BEEN LYING behind some bushes. He raised himself to his feet and began staggering around the streets before collapsing on the roadbed several miles away. Spotted by a driver who believed he'd found a hit-and-run victim, Gus was picked up and dropped off at Michael Reese Hospital.

The hospital was too small to do much investigating on its own. They'd admitted a handful who'd been injured in the park, but nothing close to the numbers ferried to the larger hospitals. Without papers or other ID, the unconscious man without shoes on the third floor was known as just that: "the man without shoes." They had no idea who he was or where he'd been, and they didn't connect him to the rioting.

For ten days and nights, he was unresponsive, the ever-present heavenly music drowning out the low-frequency rumble of hospital activity. Drifting upward toward the source of radiant light, its photon energies radiating both the visible and the invisible spectrums, Gus was unaware that his brain was pulsating at the same frequency as the light.

There was no pain; he was well-dosed with morphine. And no material consciousness to speak of, no thoughts, only a dim awareness. He writhed in a kind of ethereal dance. No, not a dance. He'd left his body, floating upward to the ceiling where he stopped, and, applying a great effort, turned around. From the ceiling, he looked down on his physical body. The dimness spoke: *I can leave this body, but in knowing everything, not be able to find my way back to it. Or, I can get into my body again.* After a moment, a somewhat rational thought. *Better not leave* said the dimness. *There's a time to leave, and a time not to and that time is NOW before it's too late!*



RETURNING TO ALICE'S HOUSE, SKIPPER SET TO WORK LOOKING FOR something to wrap her sister's body in and getting Cloris to wash everything Virginia had touched, including the garage floor where the body now rested. In an upstairs linen closet, Skipper found a set of burgundy drapes. "Perfect," she said.

Cloris Tucker hadn't signed on for this sort of thing when she started romancing Skipper, but she'd never met anyone like her. Cloris had been in and out of the lesbian scene, roughed up and taken advantage of by

tough men and women. Skipper made her feel safe. And she wasn't a dyke, she was one physically and mentally strong lady that no one fucked with—everything Cloris wished for in a partner, powerful, decisive, and smart. When Skipper held her in her arms, she felt invulnerable. Nothing could ever hurt her as long as she and Skipper shared the same bed. Thus, she easily rationalized the mess she found herself in. Everything would be okay because Skipper knew what she was doing. After all, Skipper had sprung to the rescue when Virginia pushed her down. Before she'd come out as queer, no man had ever shown such protective fervor in her defense.

After cleaning and wrapping the body, they were ready for the next part of the plan, loading the body and other items into the trunk of the Chrysler.

“Now for the bike. You're going to follow me to N Street, where my friend Sally lives, put it just inside the gate and jump in the car with me,” said Skipper. “Go ahead, put the dress on.”

Cloris made a feeble attempt at removing the dress from Virginia's body. “It's too tight.”

“Here,” said Skipper. “There's no blood. Don't be so dainty. Pull it off.” More fumbling. Skipper ended up pulling off the dress, slipping it over Cloris, and smoothing it out—both girls smiling as Skipper's hands roamed over her friend's body.

On the trip to N Street, they passed no one. Cloris did as she was told, putting the bike behind a large lilac bush inside the yard. She closed the gate and walked fifty feet to where Skipper was idling in the shadows, listening to Petey Greene on WOL. She slid in beside her lover, and they were on their way to Black Pond.

Cloris changed the radio station to WBN radio, 1140 on *your dial*, just as the 3:00 a.m. news concerning Gus Mazur's disappearance broke.

“What if someone sees this car?” asked Cloris. “Doesn't it...”

“Sshh... Listen.”

“...missing since sometime after eleven o'clock. Again, WBN producer/correspondent Gus Mazur disappeared in Grant Park during a protest turned riot... Judy Williams, WBN radio news, reporting.”

“Isn't it strange that your sister gets to disappear the same night that Gus does?” asked Cloris.

“It’s just a coincidence,” said Skipper.

“Or is it,” asked Cloris, “perhaps it’s an alternate theory of the... I won’t say *crime*, incident is a better word.”

“You mean Gus as a suspect?”

“Well?”

“Oh, ooh. You little minx,” said Skipper, “slide over here and cuddle up.”

“Of course, we’d never let it go too far, would we? That wouldn’t be right,” said Cloris as she placed her arm around Skipper.

“Why, you man-hating little bitch, give me a kiss.”

“Mmm, you taste good,” said Cloris. “After all, Gus had a motive.”

Skipper steered with her left hand while fondling her girlfriend’s breasts with her right. Things were looking good for the two young women. So good they could never have imagined that Virginia intended to spend the night with Sally, who would think it only normal when she found Virginia’s bike in the yard the next morning.

As they approached the jumping-off point for Black Pond, Skipper thought about the physically taxing portion of their ordeal. She parked the car in the same place Gus had parked, well hidden from the sparse late-night traffic. From the trunk, she extracted the body and a twenty-pound weight to which she had attached a tire chain. She helped Cloris find the best way of carrying them, then hoisted the body over her shoulder. With the chains around Cloris’s waist, they began the five-hundred-yard trek through dense underbrush to Black Pond.

Cloris wasn’t the outdoorsy type, but she was a good swimmer, needing only, Skipper believed, her loving encouragement. “Stick close to me,” said Skipper. “If it gets to be too much, call out. Remember, we’ll swim on our backs with what we’re carrying on top. I’ll be watching out for you.” Skipper realized that loading Cloris with the chains was risky as the extra weight might destabilize her.

The moon was just coming into its first quarter. Not much light to navigate with. To strengthen Cloris’s resolve, Skipper kept up a supportive chatter as they struggled through the scrub.

“The day I first met you and you were on the ladder.”

“Yeah.”

“You moved the ladder over behind me so I could look up and see you had no panties?”

“Yeah.”

“I did look up. And when I did, I knew.”

“That’s nothing.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I caught Alice looking up my skirt one time. After that, she’d always sent me up the ladder to look for a book on the top shelf. I think she liked what she saw.”

“That would be something... if Gus found out,” said Skipper.

“You won’t tell him,” said Cloris.

“Of course not,” said Skipper. “Did you do her?”

“Are you kidding? No, just the cheap thrill of looking up my skirt.”

“If I know you, you did it on purpose, bless your naughty little soul. Anyway, I think we’re almost there.”

“Getting lost would be a bitch.”

“You said it, but we’re not going to,” said Skipper. “Once she’s at the bottom of the pond, God rest her soul, maybe we’ll move to Baltimore. Whatever. When I finish my training, it’s New York. I’ll be on the network, a full-fledged reporter, the first woman at WBN. Schindler promised me. And I’ll be great at it. I’ll take all the stories others have given up on.”

“An inspiration to women,” quipped Cloris, sarcastically.

“I’ll have the best agent in New York. I’ll keep her jumping.”

“I’ll be your agent. I’m pretty good at bargaining.”

“We’ll see about that. You certainly are clever. We’ll be a team.”

When they got to the pond, they stripped off the clothes they were wearing, as well as the undergarments Virginia had been wearing. They embraced one last time before easing into the water with their loads. At the center of the pond, they trod water while Skipper fitted the body with the chains and weights. As the body slithered down to the deep, Skipper improvised a final tribute: “Well, Sis, it’s goodbye time for us. You were my elder sister. I looked up to you until I didn’t. We never had it, you and I. You had beauty, talent, and brains. What happened to you? Maybe you’ll tell me when next we meet, as I’m sure we will.”

When they reached the car, it was almost daylight.



WHEN A PERSON GOES MISSING, RUMORS CIRCULATE. IN GUS'S CASE the sources were threefold: Goodstein and his internal investigation, Gideon Rath-Peabody, and the right-wing press, and the most virulent of all, Delmas, who had waited for Virginia's visit on the twenty-ninth of August.

When Virginia didn't show up, Delmas accused Gus. Something he'd done, he told his lawyer, had prevented her from visiting. She never missed a visit. In his plea for Delmas's release, his lawyer made sure the press got this version of the story. Several right-wing rags took the bait, sending up trial balloon headlines like "Girlfriend's Disappearance Tied to Missing Reporter." The gambit paid off: Gus wasn't around to defend himself. The public sided with the prisoner. Letters, demanding Delmas be given the right to make a plea for the missing girl, began to arrive. Prison officials ceded Delmas a forum, which earned him interviews with reporters like Rath-Peabody.

---

Rath-Peabody: How do you feel about what the police are doing to find your fiancée?

Delmas: From here, I try to follow the leads via phone calls to my lawyer and letters. Some letters I received say they've seen them together, always her being mistreated.

*Here the paper inserted a photo of Virginia*

Rath-Peabody: Is there any tangible proof of foul play?

Delmas: Only that she's never ever missed a visit, and she knows how much her visits mean to me. A beautiful woman is always in danger. It never would have happened if I hadn't been arrested and held on phony charges.

Rath-Peabody: How well do you know Gus Mazur?

Delmas: Well, enough to know he stole my girl the last time I was arrested.

Rath-Peabody: You have quite a record. Why should anyone believe you?

Delmas: The case I'm here for is a frame job. I never stole



anything. Someone put drugs in my toolbox and called the police. Could have been Mazur for all I know. He's a public figure. I get thrown in jail; he plays big shot on TV.

---

Politically, Rath-Peabody's leanings placed him in natural opposition to everything WBN stood for. And when Goodstein's investigation leaked out, Rath-Peabody gambled that Gus's disappearance proved he had something to hide, and his investigation would prove a conspiracy to defraud the network and embezzle funds. Besides, he had a motive. The police and press knew he'd accused Virginia of stalking him.

Roscoe Schindler released a statement supporting Gus, insisting he'd disappeared while reporting on the fighting in Grant Park and was indeed a hero.

SEPTEMBER

**A**lways the temporizer, Gannon Crisp, president of WBN, began to waver. After a fiery board meeting that focused on quarterly results, he called in Roscoe Schindler, Noah Goodstein, Herb Hecht, and George Pongracic (executive producer, *H-B*), not so much to bitch about earnings but to consider the adverse publicity plaguing the network.

“The News Division. A cash drain, and scandals,” he said. “It’s not like this year’s sweeps were a windfall for your division either. And now, this missing producer and a missing girl, his one-time fiancée. An internal investigation that found fraud, all of which the press has latched onto...”

“...and somehow linked together,” said Pongracic.

“No thanks to our intrepid investigator here,” said Schindler, indicating Goodstein.

“Wait a minute, I’m not the one linked to the missing girl,” said Goodstein. “Gideon Rath-Peabody has testimony linking Mazur to the girl’s disappearance.”

“We’re going to have to cut ties with Gus Mazur,” said Gannon Crisp.

“Just a moment, what demonic spirits suddenly have WBN shaking in our boots over Gideon Rath-Peabody?” said Schindler. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, gents. Gus Mazur was in Grant Park—witnesses saw him—at the time the girl supposedly went missing. What happened to

him, we don't yet know. We do know he couldn't be in two places at the same time."

"I agree with Roscoe," said Herb. "Mazur's a valuable and dedicated producer. Cutting ties now would cause a backlash. Goodstein here has some personal issues with Gus, a hidden agenda seems to be driving this so-called investigation. I say drop the investigation and concentrate on finding our man. Besides, he's a hero and he's hot news."

"I nominate Carlotta Fanning. She's just returned from Indonesia," said Schindler, "a more intrepid investigator I haven't met. She'll find him. And when the facts come out, we'll see Gus acted honorably."

"I agree," said Herb. "Carlotta's a bird dog."

"Speaking of Carlotta," said Roscoe Schindler, "she's been advising me on our news division relaunch in January. The feminization of news. Gus Mazur did two spots with a young lady—trial balloons as it turned out. Viewership was excellent. So, we'll be unwrapping fifteen female reporters, producers, and correspondents, replacing a lot of old faces with exciting young women, with, you may recall, reasonable salaries. We'll be the first network to appeal directly to women. New sets, new faces, new themes, old shoes to fill."

"Instead of infighting and investigations," said Pongracic, "let's work to make the relaunch a success."

Although rational minds prevailed, Goodstein's investigation continued. Gannon Crisp went along with the board, who, because of the Don Wolff incident, had been persuaded a more thorough examination was needed. They'd paid for it; they were not about to quash it before seeing the final report.



MEANWHILE, IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, DELMAS'S CASE WENT TO trial. Fortunately for him, his lawyer dug into the arresting officer's testimony, discovering the toolbox Delmas allegedly used to smuggle the drugs out of the warehouse was not turned into the evidence room until the following Monday, thereby compromising the chain of custody.

Released forthwith, Delmas attempted to talk to Alice Randall in the hospital on his return to DC. The ward treating her refused to let him in

without a note from Alice's lawyer or Gus, convincing Delmas that any further efforts were a waste of time. Only Gus mattered, according to Delmas. It was one thing to be convinced, another to place Gus and Virginia together at or around the time Virginia was first missed... which, when Delmas realized this, he called Sally Smith. That's when the confusion began: Sally informed Delmas that Virginia's bike was in the front yard, but the girl herself had never turned up.

"What'd ya mean never turned up?" asked Delmas. "If the bike is there, she must be there."

"Unless she parked the bike in our yard and then went somewhere else."

"Or someone else parked the bike at your house."

"We kept a lookout for her, but we never saw or heard anything. The bike was here in the morning."

"Was it locked?"

"Yes. To a post in the yard behind a lilac."

Virginia always locked her bike. That meant the person who locked it had the key, probably Virginia. She might leave her bike and go somewhere else. Just like her.

But with Gus missing and Alice Randall hospitalized, the only remaining threads were Virginia's parents and her sisters. Delmas went to the Sanchez household. By now, the family was worried, but no one was sure that anything had happened. Virginia was unpredictable.

After commiserating briefly with her parents, Delmas visited the One Step Down to question Dave Katz, the bartender. If there was any tinkertoy gossip, Dave might know someone who might know something.

As he sipped a lemonade, waiting for Katz to finish instructing a new dishwasher on the finer points of his chosen *métier*, Delmas wondered if Gus's and Virginia's disappearances and Alice's sudden illness were in any way connected. The thought passed quickly; in his mind, everything pointed to Gus.

"So I hear some locals we both know played a gig here a week or so ago? How'd it go?"

"Gus and Ruth, yeah. First time. Went okay," said Katz. "When'd you get out?"

“Couple of days now. So, good crowd?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, good gig. Good crowd.”

“Have you seen either of them since?”

“No.”

“Heard Gus was missing?”

Dave Katz was a good friend of Gus’s and being pumped by someone he hardly knew, someone holding a grudge, rubbed him the wrong way. That’s when Bad Bruce walked into the barely lit club, paused to let his eyes adjust, then sat down next to Delmas and cracked his knuckles.

“All I know is what I’ve seen on TV,” said Katz. “Reporter missing. Day and night, you can’t miss it.”

Ruth had nothing to tell Delmas, engrossed, as she was, in her job, mentioning only that she and Gus, along with two sidemen, had gigged at the One Step although she did seem a little anxious about the rehearsals Gus had skipped.

The next morning Bruce and Delmas drove to Baltimore. His latest stolen Austin-Healy was still where he’d left it, in the NBC parking lot on Nebraska Avenue, in a place where the cops would never find it because cars were not issued ID stickers and NBC reporters frequently left cars for days, sometimes months, while on assignment.

An hour and a half later, they parked in the WBBB lot and went looking for Skipper. Delmas found her both unnerved and acting the big shot, treating them offhandedly, as if they’d come to her office without an appointment and were told to come back another day.

“You can’t come in here,” she said, pausing at the door of an empty studio to announce, “This isn’t a museum; no tours, and no visitors.”

“Just a second, we drove up from DC,” said Delmas, “not to bother you, so why get uptight?”

“Look,” said Skipper, “you got my parents in an uproar, my sister, too. Now you’re bothering me. Next, you’ll be hounding Gus, if he’s ever found. Go to the police. That’s what I’d do.”

Bad Bruce gave Skipper a slight shove, backing her into the studio; Delmas closed the door. Skipper stood her ground; kept her cool. Inside she raged: “I only see her twice a year.”

“You don’t get along, do you?” said Delmas.

“Everyone knows we’re not fond of each other. That doesn’t mean I know where she is.”

“My candidate is your boyfriend, but if he is in Chicago and can prove he’s not involved, next in line is you.”

“Washington’s a dangerous city,” said Skipper. “Riding a bike late at night isn’t safe.”

“Washington’s a dangerous city, all right,” said Bruce, with a smile or a grimace. Skipper couldn’t tell which, but she was glad when they got ready to leave.

At the door, Delmas turned, “One more thing, who said anything about a bike? I didn’t mention it.”

“Haha. That old gotcha—who do you think you are, Sam Spade?” said Skipper. “My mother, if you must know. Ask her.”

“Oh, we will.”

“They don’t want you coming around anymore. For your information, they didn’t like your barging in and asking questions. So, they asked the police to investigate, and they took out a protective order,” said Skipper. “Of course, you can try to get around the restraining order, but you’ll be arrested. Anything else?”

Using a reserve of self-control, Skipper saved her blush until they disappeared down the hall, her dark complexion turning red, then white. She wasn’t sure she’d heard it from her mother. Yes, her mother had told her that she called Sally Smith after Delmas and his friend left. But had Sally told her mother about the bike? Ninety-nine percent that Sally had, but there was always that itsy bitsy less than one percent.

*Of all the stupid things! Calling the police! Dumb! I can’t keep my mouth shut. The first thing they tell you: Shut up!*

From the moment his disappearance was confirmed, people all over Chicago showed up at the local WBN station to help with the search. Volunteers who’d never seen him swarmed over the city. Not one of them visited Michael Reese Hospital.



A STUNNING CARLOTTA FANNING STEPPED OFF THE TWA FLIGHT TO Chicago in an excellent mood, her golden hair in shoulder-length curls,

her multi-pocket photographer's vest covering the top half of her Mary Quant miniskirt. Outwardly she was King's Road, London, not working-class Bronx, her place of origin. If judged by appearances, she was everything one might consider anathema to the task at hand; Carlotta looked more like an East Village fashionista than anything resembling a sleuth.

Locating Gus would be a challenge, a needle in a haystack. Sixteen days had elapsed since he went missing. And, given that she'd only been to Chicago once, she had little recollection of the topography. Perhaps, she should be fatalistic, she thought. But that wasn't Carlotta, not by a long shot. Carlotta Fanning was one big story away from being a one-named celebrity like Twiggy or Liberace. Being single-minded, organized, and thorough were the tools of her rapid ascension. Her beauty didn't hurt, either.

Three-quarters of an hour after landing, Carlotta flashed her press credentials at the Chicago Police Department District One office and started digging into the paperwork on the events of August 28. Not finding a single note on anything that smacked of Gus or Manny Noble, the soundman, she next visited assorted Chicago newspapers, everything from the stalwart *Tribune* to the underground *Chicago Seed*, collecting bits of information on hospitals and clinics, jazz clubs, gangs, individuals, and groups who had participated in the brawling. Pawn shops where stolen gear might turn up completed her research.

As luck would have it, Manny had recovered and was in his living room when Carlotta called. His memory of the incident was foggy; he hadn't worked since.

After leaving Manny, she took a cab to the Blackstone Hotel where, after registering, she recovered Gus's effects, leaving them in her room before visiting the major hospitals.

After the three large hospitals, she called it a day. Tomorrow, she'd visit the remaining hospitals and clinics. If he wasn't in a hospital, where was he? All other possibilities were too awful to contemplate. The thought of her friend languishing God knows where chilled her spirit for a fleeting moment before the idea came to her: *What would I do if I were Gus Mazur?* The answer came back, Mr. Kelly's on Rush Street, the Chicago jazz club he raved about. *What if he just happened to be there? Can't hurt to check.* She hailed a cab.

Sarah Vaughan's *Live at Mister Kelly's*, one of his favorite albums! That's where he'd be, listening to some songstress. Ordering the house specialty, a porterhouse steak, and a green goddess salad, Carlotta scanned the room repeatedly, getting up and walking around occasionally to check the darker corners.

"Looking for something?" asked the maître d'.

"Is it that obvious?" said Carlotta.

"Yes, ma'am, it is. Don't I know you?"

"Maybe..."

"Television, right? Carlotta," he said. "Nice name. I'm William."

"Yes, I'm Carlotta, William."

"What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"Gus Mazur, friend of mine. Do you know him by any chance? Have you seen him?"

"I know him, know he's disappeared. Saw that on TV. He had dinner here with a woman, Chinese or Japanese."

"What day?"

"Toward the start of the convention, that I know. Must have been that Tuesday. We had local talent."

For a moment, Carlotta was enthused, before backing off. So, he was here. So what? It's a dead thread. But a Chinese woman? That's new. Anyway, not bad for day one. *All I need is a little luck.*

To resume her search the following morning, Carlotta telephoned Don Wolff to ask about Gus's Chinese dinner companion and was given the rundown on Lil and her activities.

"Does she work for the network, Don?"

"Unofficially, yes. Officially, no. But she is being paid."

"Paid because she's got television in her blood, or because she's in love with Gus?"

"It's complicated, but to answer your question, more Gus than the love of TV. She's his Chinese connection on the Nixon-Anna Chennault piece, the key to the investigation."

"Could the Chinese be involved?"

Seconds after hanging up, the phone rang, and a Chicago cop was telling Carlotta that someone had pawned a Filmo. *No point in my getting sidetracked, gotta stay focused, Finding Gus comes first.*



“Thanks, Officer. I’m not sure I could identify his camera, but I do know the lens. Did you confiscate it?” she asked.

“We have it here, ma’am.”

“District One?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be over when I finish my rounds.”



BY THE MIDDLE OF MAY 1968, HUBERT HUMPHREY WAS LEADING Richard Nixon by six points 42 percent to 36 percent. It had been a slow upward grind for Humphrey, as people adjusted to Lyndon B. Johnson’s announcement that he would not seek reelection.

Sustained by a law-and-order stance and by dodging everything related to the Vietnam debate that was tearing the Democrats apart, Nixon bounced back to a 42 percent to 38 percent lead by July (the remaining 16 percent plighted to George Wallace, the Southern race candidate). At the end of August, Nixon got a 5 percent boost from the disastrous infighting that tainted the Democratic Convention.

Gus, of course, bedridden for sixteen days, missed these events. His duties as *Hartley-Brentley* Washington producer were ably assumed by Martha Jeffries. Roscoe Schindler, George Pongracic, and Douglas Brentley agreed that Gus had picked a winner in Martha. As for the *H-B* staff, in addition to Gerry, they added two producers from New York. Brentley wanted to bring back Don Wolff permanently; the others considered it too early to justify such a move, citing shareholder reluctance and Goodstein’s investigation. It was put off for a more propitious moment.

A fully staffed *H-B* was essential as the various threads and entanglements of the campaign required extra bodies in DC. With or without Gus, they promised to anoint Carlotta Fanning special correspondent for magazine-length campaign pieces when she returned from Chicago.

If Carlotta was able to bring Gus back, any show he was attached to would soar in the ratings... momentarily, at least. If he didn’t return, they’d milk the martyred reporter trope for all it was worth.

It was on the sixteenth day that Gus became fully conscious. The

nurse discovered him sitting up on the edge of the bed, staring off into space. He was conscious but entirely ignorant of who he was and what he was doing in a Chicago hospital.

“Not so fast,” she said. “You’ve been out for quite a while. Mustn’t move suddenly. Lose your balance...”

He looked at the woman, his smile so beatific she became instantly entranced and stood aside. He struggled to his feet, removed a tube from his arm, and walked to the door barefoot. He seemed to know the plan of the hospital as if it had been stored in his subconscious memory and was waiting to be retrieved. He headed toward the stairs, walked down one flight to the common room lounge, sat down at the piano, and played all six minutes and forty seconds of Scriabin’s “Vers la Flamme”—a difficult and dissonant piece. He followed it with a proficient, if not perfect, version of “Maple Leaf Rag,” Jelly Roll Morton style. To the Moscow-born nurse who’d followed Gus, he paid his respects in perfect Russian.

THE MICHAEL REESE HOSPITAL WAS CARLOTTA’S LAST STOP OF THE day. As much as she hated failure, she’d resigned herself to that possibility. After a grueling round of clinics and hospitals, she considered the odds of finding Gus at her last stop as next to nothing. But when she’d called ahead and spoken to the attending physician, she learned that they had an unidentified patient who’d been brought to the hospital by a private citizen.

As soon as Carlotta met the doctor at the receiving desk, she realized the search might be over. The doctor couldn’t stop jabbering about the previous day’s miracle, how this strange patient had serenaded the staff for an hour after suddenly waking from a deeply unconscious state.

“Immobility to fully conscious is almost unheard of,” said the doctor as they passed the nurses’ station on the way to his room, “and motor skills, to boot. But he still doesn’t know who he is. You’ll see why he might be unrecognizable, even to himself.”

“You say he played the piano, doctor?” Carlotta asked, “Like a professional?”

“The ‘Maple Leaf Rag’ like Art Tatum,” said the doctor. “I swear it; I was there.”

“Then it can’t be Gus; he only plays a rudimentary accompaniment for his voice, but Art Tatum? Scriabin? Not a chance.”

“It’s that rap on the head he took. Must’ve done something,” said the doctor as he looked to the chief of psychiatry for support.

“The brain,” said the psychiatrist, “is capable of many things, given the proper stimulation.”

As the trio proceeded through the labyrinth of hospital corridors, bystanders who recognized Carlotta joined them, certain that something big must be up. With Carlotta Fanning striding with the earnest rectitude of a Florence Nightingale, the procession swelled. At the door to the mystery patient’s room, the doctor paused, allowing only the nurse in charge, the head nurse, and the chief of psychiatry to pass, shooing the rest of those assembled away.

If it was Gus and he was able to travel, Carlotta hoped they’d be able to leave forthwith. Now 6:00 p.m., the late hour might frustrate her plans. First, however, she had to make sure. If it was Gus, she was authorized to spare no expense in making the arrangements.

A man in pajamas was standing in front of a mirror examining himself when they walked in. His height? About the same as Gus’s.

“They say it will go away over time, right Doc?” said the man, turning to face his visitors. The voice was Gus’s, but the face!

“In time, yes,” replied the doctor.

On seeing the face, Carlotta, never demonstrative under the most trying circumstances, could not suppress the tears she found herself shedding.

“Now, now,” said the man. “It’s going to heal just fine.”

A twelve-centimeter black-and-blue hematoma covered his face from his chin to the middle of his forehead, wrapping around his face from ear to ear.



“HELLO, CARLOTTA.”

“Hello, Gus.”

Carlotta hugged me. I sniffed her nape tentatively like a long-lost

family dog returning from a fugue. Then, holding her by the shoulders, I backed up a couple of inches.

“Thank, God. You know me,” she said.

“Know your smell.”

“Any chance he could travel, doctor? He seems okay except for...” she asked. “I want to charter a plane and order an ambulance to meet us at National and whisk him directly to George Washington University Hospital.”

“Had my appendix removed there. Nice nurses,” I said.

“I’d like to keep you here, perform some tests,” said the psychiatrist. “Ms. Fanning, Carlotta, says you don’t know how to play the piano.”

“I don’t.”

“And what about yesterday?” asked the doctor.

“I played the piano yesterday?”

“Evidently,” said Carlotta walking over to the phone. “We gotta get back home ASAP. How do I get an outside line?”

“Dial nine. Uh...”

Carlotta paused. The doctor had something to say: “Tomorrow’s better... considering, but...” Realizing that he was dealing with powerful interests, the doctor hedged, “How do you feel, son, now that you’re back among the living?”

“Great. I feel great.”

Carlotta renewed her examination, walking up close, looking into my eyes, “How’s your head?”

“Except for this hole,” I said, cautiously pointing to the tender region at the back of my skull. “Okay.”

“We’re not gonna chance it,” said Carlotta. “Never rush if you don’t have to, and we don’t.”

“This is Chicago? We could go to London House,” I said. “Who’s playing there tonight, I wonder?”

“No jazz, no nonsense,” she cautioned me, then to the doctor, she said, “We leave tomorrow if he’s still okay.”

On the flight from Chicago, Carlotta told me she’d left my camera with the Chicago police because they were looking for the person who’d pawned it. Not really into what she was saying, I nodded perfunctorily.

The strange look in my eyes convinced her that I was in another world and didn't want to talk.

From time to time, when our eyes did meet, I smiled. Not the child-like eager-to-please smile she was familiar with. This smile came from a different part of me, somewhere deeper, my soul perhaps—if there is such a thing. A reassuring smile that had Carlotta smiling back almost involuntarily. My eyes didn't shine so much as radiate. *Entrancing* was the word she used. Finding me intact produced a soothing warmth throughout her entire body, she said. I felt it, too, whatever it was. On arrival, a waiting ambulance transported me to George Washington Hospital.

SKIPPER AND DELMAS SHARED THE SAME GOAL BUT DIDN'T REALIZE IT—that of building a case for Gus as the primary suspect in Virginia's disappearance. What Delmas couldn't figure out was why Skipper and her girlfriend were going along with it. Were they doing it out of a perverse sense of amusement—misleading the police, who, by now, eighteen days after Virginia was last seen, were fully dedicated to finding the missing girl?

Delmas was happy to have Skipper do some of the legwork; happy to have the establishment take him seriously and certain the amateur game Skipper was playing would unravel and her meddling would reveal a greater involvement. There was something about her voice in her several phone calls that convinced Delmas that Gus had indeed been in Chicago and that he had nothing to do with Virginia's disappearance. Oh, Delmas would keep accusing him in his pleas to the press, but only to keep Skipper thinking he was on her side.

She called Delmas the night Gus returned to DC, not to accuse Gus directly but to leave a trail of hints and innuendo. "Delmas, you know I'm really worried about my sister. Do you think Gus could have come back from Chicago or somehow lured her there?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I don't see how, but then again people at my workplace think he's involved," said Skipper. "And there was bad blood between them. Everyone knows she was stalking him."

“Worse than the feud you two have been having?” ask Delmas. “Somehow I can’t picture him— The police might see it differently.”

“You know he’s back, in GW hospital,” she said. “Think I’ll visit him tomorrow.”

Skipper realized she was being talky, but unless they found a body, which they never would, she was safe. What’s more, Alice might never recover her full faculties. So why had Skipper suddenly decided to bad-mouth Gus? What resentment had turned her against him? Did she think she could involve him? That the police were a bunch of fools?

Skipper hadn’t counted on the Metropolitan Police Department’s Detective Sergeant Linehan being assigned to the case. Suffering from a condition known as malocclusion, consisting of rows of snagged teeth growing in all directions, he was not attractive to women. This made him an overall nasty person, hard to get along with. He was also a consummate investigator, partly because he was clever and hard-boiled and partly because his appearance scared the shit out of suspects.

In the case of the missing girl, one Virginia Hubbard, Linehan gave short shrift to the theory that Gus had something to do with it. He formed this opinion long before Carlotta Fanning found Gus in Chicago. Although Alice Randall couldn’t speak or write, after visiting her in the hospital and witnessing her various expressions—mostly a jawbone locked in fear and her eyes transfixed on the abyss—he became convinced she knew something about the case.

It wasn’t any old case. President Johnson had called the hospital about Mrs. Randall after he’d been informed by the DNC that a girl who worked for Alice had disappeared on the night of her seizure. A little mix-up of facts stalled the investigation for a short while, in that it was not someone who worked for her, but that someone’s sister, Virginia Hubbard.

To Linehan that meant keeping an open mind about a possible connection between Mrs. Randall’s condition and Virginia’s disappearance. The two employees, one a former girlfriend of the missing reporter had driven Alice from her home where they had been meeting to George Washington Hospital. Could there be something irregular about her DNC work? He discounted that possibility but checked with the DNC anyway. Nothing suspicious.

When he questioned Hattie, Mrs. Randall's live-in maid, he learned she'd heard what sounded like loud voices and a struggle, but just as she was about to check on Mrs. Randall, all went quiet. After that, she went back to sleep, thinking it must be Mrs. Randall listening to the television with the sound up.

"Can you remember any words that were spoken, Hattie?" asked Detective Linehan.

"Why now that you mention it, yes. I remember, 'Who are you pushing?' Someone said that."



I WAS OUT OF BED, SITTING IN A CHAIR, FULLY DRESSED WHEN DON Wolff and Carlotta Fanning walked into my hospital room.

It had fallen to them to bring me up to date on what had gone down during the time I was indisposed. Although a small amount of the blood from the hematoma had been absorbed back into my bloodstream, I could see Don was having a hard time with my disfigurement, offering only a caustic assessment, "You look like a Hiroshima survivor, pal."

"That's a bit much, Don," said Carlotta. "I think he's improved."

I smiled. "Every time I look in the mirror, I have a hard time believing it's my face."

"It's a lot better today," protested Carlotta, "and you seem more engaged."

"I don't have a job," I said. "That much I do know."

"Welcome to the club, my man," said the Wolff.

"That's bullshit, Don," said Carlotta, turning to me. "You have a job with full pay, Gus."

"I'm ready to work now," I paused, "...by next week, at the latest."

"And they'll find something for you," she said. "You're a hero."

"Well, this hero wants outta here," I said. "Tell them that."

"I will," said Carlotta. "For the record, I knew very little about what's been happening, the things that Don will fill you in on. When I first saw you, you'd just woken up. And I—I didn't want to get the facts wrong." She looked at the Wolff, who took my hand in his.

"Quite complicated actually. Your aunt had a stroke at home. She was

in a kind of coma. She's awake now, but not talking. Seems she can turn her head; that's about all. She was taken to the hospital by Skipper and the girl she works with. To this hospital, by the way."

"My aunt's here?"

"Yup."

I was disturbed by this disclosure, waving my hand just as the Wolff was about to fill me in. "Wait. You say they—Skipper and Cloris, I think that's her name—drove my aunt to the hospital?"

"They were having a working dinner with her. The three of them," said the Wolff.

I lifted my hands, waving them in the air before letting them fall on my thighs, exasperated. Then, starting with Virginia's disappearance, Don Wolff narrated a catalog of events and decisions made during my absence that included my aunt's stroke and the details of the police investigation.

"There's more, isn't there?" I said, looking from one to the other. "Bad news."

"And how," said the Wolff. "I don't know him but right after Virginia disappeared, this Delmas guy you're acquainted with was released, immediately hooking up with your other friend, Gideon Rath-Peabody, in a campaign to implicate you as the person responsible for Virginia's disappearance. Seems the Baltimore police bungled the trial."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough?" asked Carlotta.

"I'm not worried about that. The police aren't stupid. They want to interview me; I think I can prove it's not possible to be in two places at the same time."

"Don't get cocky. The police usually work from a theory of the crime," said the Wolff.

"...If there is a crime," I said. "I don't expect she was murdered."

"No one knows, but they do say that after two weeks the police automatically start to suspect foul play," said Carlotta.

"Right now, as far as we know, the police don't have a theory, but with Rath-Peabody hinting you at fault and Delmas garnering sympathy, the police might be influenced."

"Okay, thanks. That's enough," I said. "I'll visit my aunt now."



“There’s your camera and there’s Lil,” said the Wolff.

“What about Lil?”

“Nothing serious.”

“How about tomorrow? Can you come back then,” I said, “with some news about Lil?”

Carlotta shook her head.

“I can,” said the Wolff. “In the meantime, cheer up your aunt.”

I trudged up the stairs to Aunt Alice’s ward. When I entered her room, she was looking at the ceiling, motionless, her eyes fixed in a ghastly stare.

“It’s me, Auntie. Peter.”

She turned her head to search for the voice. Finding it coming from a face bearing the marks of some dreadful accident—a car crash certainly, if not a plane crash—she began to cry. Had she recognized me? I wasn’t sure. I took a Kleenex from the bedside table and was dabbing her tears when her doctor, her lawyer, and a nurse entered.

“This is her first bit of awareness,” said the lawyer. “She recognized you, Gus.”

“A stroke?” I said. “She was great, just two days before I left.”

The doctor led us aside. “A stroke often follows the neural symptoms you observed. That hand-shaking business you told me about— Well, it’s often a precursor to a stroke, possibly Parkinson’s.”

RETURNING TO MY HOSPITAL ROOM A LITTLE WRUNG OUT, I BROWSED through the pile of newspapers and magazines Don Wolff left me, settling for the latest *Washington Post*. After skimming several election campaign articles, I fell into a half-sleep state, where for a moment I contemplated the expression “the real world” as defined by my father.

I didn’t know much about metaphysics except to realize that what had happened that night in Grant Park had opened up new horizons of consciousness. Remembering that I often referred to the universe as if it was some sort of moral Supreme Court, I wondered what had triggered these abilities. Arguably, not mere competencies—extra sensory perceptions and creative energies. Was there something out there besides the Darwinian world? Was the real world *unreal*? Only part of the story? Was

there a realer world beyond our sensory world? Or had Buddhists hoodwinked anyone who listened into believing in the afterlife and other similar notions?

Were there other levels of being? In any case, I recognized that the overworked expression that my father was so fond of using—*the real world*—had a negative charge that gathers up those who escape its gravitational force field and returns them to normalcy and the mediocrity of everyday life. The more I participated in day-to-day activities, the greater the sway of the real world.

And that was something I'd resisted with all my might, even before what happened in Chicago. I felt I'd been chosen. That rap on the head wasn't accidental, it was part of a karmic summoning put in motion at the moment of my conception. I was being offered as a human sacrifice to higher consciousness. I must shoulder whatever came my way—be they tribulations or endowments. Crazy thoughts, I realized, but why was I having them?

I had no memory of playing the piano, but what I experienced during my return to operational consciousness had me aware of the many worlds beyond the real world. Worlds I was now capable of exploring, not as a result of my volition, but rather because of a blow to the head I sustained. One of those worlds might quite possibly be the aleatory onset of heightened awareness. Creative abilities I had no memory of having ever exercised although witness accounts lent credence to these abilities.

From this alpha state, I fell fast asleep, clearly visualizing my aunt and Virginia. Disparate images that didn't quite connect but were somehow related.

It was 12:30 on the twentieth of September when I emerged from my slumber with a premonition. Not fully awakened, a half-asleep state where the blurry images of dreams held sway over Ray-Ray's real world. Something was about to happen.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Skipper and Cloris appeared at my doorway. Meaning to put them at ease, I greeted them with a deliberate smile that did little to allay the shock and consternation I was now used to seeing on the faces of people who knew me.

I hadn't seen Skipper in almost a month, but I sensed she was nervous on account of Cloris, who couldn't take her eyes off my face.

Decidedly, I thought, the newspaper descriptions did not prepare people for the distress my appearance conveyed. That Skipper and Cloris were a couple was a detail I decided to ignore for the moment. What had been evident the moment Skipper started to work at the DNC back in May was now a *fait accompli*. It explained her long hours at the DNC, the fact that our lovemaking had slowly cooled at the same time her burgeoning resentment of me had increased.

“Now that you’re here, you might as well sit down,” I said as the women traded stares and shrugs. “Don’t let my face bother you. Nobody knows what I’ll look like when it’s back to normal—a second chance at classic Greek physiognomy, perhaps, like one of those old statues whose cheek, nose, or ear has fallen off.”

During the twenty seconds that they fumbled with the seating arrangements, bumping into each other while positioning the chairs, I made small talk. “Hotter out there today, eh?” I said.

“Oh Lord and I wore a sweater,” said Cloris.

“I hear you’re on track with your training,” I said.

“It’s okay,” said Skipper. “Look, Gus, I tried to see Alice, but they wouldn’t let me in her room.”

“There’s no point; she’s not functional. Anything or anyone might upset her. You wouldn’t want that.”

While taking off her thick sweater, Cloris got her head stuck. Skipper had to pull it off. “My hair, what a mess,” exclaimed Cloris.

“Why don’t you take her to Black Pond?” I asked.

At the mention of Black Pond, Cloris stopped teasing her hair into shape. “Black Pond. Isn’t that—?”

“It’s not that hot,” replied Skipper.

“Right,” I continued.

Was it my staring that was making them nervous? I wondered.

“But it’s a great place for lovers. Isn’t that right, Miriam?” I said with a smile. I meant it to be reassuring.

“Yes, Peter,” said Skipper snidely. The words left her lips at the very moment her expression changed. Changed because of what I was seeing in my mind’s eye.

I saw that she saw that I saw the vignette surrounding Virginia’s disappearance, from her arrival at Alice’s house up to, and including, the

funeral ceremony at Black Pond. Watched it play out like a bleached-out black-and-white movie on the small screen in my head. I grokked the whole of it—every detail of Virginia’s tragic demise.

“Stop looking at me that way,” gasped Skipper.

“My ugly face,” I said, “frightening, huh?”

“You can’t prove anything,” said Skipper, “you can’t.”

Cloris, open-mouthed, glanced at Skipper and grabbed her sweater.

“C’mon,” said Skipper, pushing her girlfriend toward the door, “let’s get out of here.”

When she reached the door, she turned, “Loving you was the worst mistake of my life. You’re trying to ruin me; you won’t succeed, you—you womanizer.”

*The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.*

Somewhere down the hallway, the two women crossed paths with Lil on her way to my room. Skipper’s foul mood and quickened gait had Cloris jogging every couple of feet just to keep up with her. In passing, Lil smiled, Skipper sulked, and Cloris scooted to catch up. Forty feet from my door, Lil heard a loud crash. Looking back, she saw an overturned laundry hamper and an angry Skipper staring back at her.

When Lil walked in, I was listening to Martha Jeffries interview Richard Nixon on WBN.

“The system is broken. Democrats undermine our ability to govern at home as well as our image abroad. They call it peaceful protest; I call it organized violence. Americans want an end to rioting and an end to this war. As your president, that’s what I intend to do. I need your vote.”

I looked up and started to say something, but before I could utter a word, I watched Lil’s happy smile turn into great goblets of tears and shoulder-shaking shudders. I jumped up, bounced to the end of the bed, where Lil was standing, put my arm around her, and led her to the headboard, sitting her down on pillows next to mine.

“You can’t cry forever, you know.”

She put her hands on the sides of my face and looked into my eyes, sniffing. I took a Kleenex from the bedside table and held it to her nose while she blew. Her tears were replaced by a cautious smile. “I think I’ll take up heavy drinking permanently,” she said. “Anything but that face.”

I threw my head back, exhaling a loud guffaw to acknowledge the

mockery in her words. I took her face in my hands, "I'm so sorry for the way I treated you in Chicago. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You weren't thinking; you were being cruel," said Lil.

"Impersonal. I hate it when I'm that way. Oh, I know. To be a good reporter you can't have any feelings," I said. "In fact, why are you even here after the way I treated you?"

"I love you."

Gently, Lil pushed me back against the headboard. She opened the fly on my hospital pajamas and bent over.

When she'd finished, she tucked my knob back in, tied a neat little bow on my pajama bottoms, and settled herself next to me. A short time after that, fifteen seconds, to be exact, a nurse entered. "It's swallow time, Mr. Mazur," she said, jiggling a small paper cup of pills.

"It's your turn, sweetie," said Lil. "Open wide."

"It's so good to see patients in a good mood," said the nurse, extending the paper cup. "Here."

I took the pills and the glass of water from the nurse.

"How are you feeling?"

I nodded. "Swell," I said, choking back a wisecrack. "I mean okay."

"Nurse, seriously," said Lil, "he needs to get out of here, get back to work. He's in tip-top shape."

"As long as there's no dizziness or trauma to the head where the blow fell, he should be able to soon."

When things settled down and we'd stopped giggling, Lil continued urging me to leave the hospital. I would have none of it. "At first, I wanted to leave ASAP, but I might as well stay here until my face clears up. It won't be long."

"You're acting out of vanity; you can't stand the thought of people seeing you like this. You'd be better off at home, getting better in comfort. You can work from there, perhaps start scripting the Nixon-China Lobby story. I'm sure WBN would agree," said Lil. "Plus, darling, I'll take care of you."

"Seriously, that wouldn't be good. Just because you did me, doesn't mean I'm breaking my vow."

"Your vow! What a load of shit," declared Lil. "Has she visited you in the hospital?"

I shook my head.

“Phew, anyway I know what’s good for you because I love you and I know you. She doesn’t. Sure, she plays the piano like you want, and maybe I don’t, but we can work on it. Just because your face is marred doesn’t mean you can’t sing.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But nothing,” said Lil. “By the way, who’s the Dorothy Dandridge individual with the crazy Afro?”

“That’s Cloris, Skipper’s new friend from the DNC,” I said.

“What about Skipper? Did you say or do something?”

“You know, that’s what I was wondering. Don showed me a clipping with Skipper and Delmas accuse me of doing in Virginia. Why she turned on me so viciously, I don’t know.”

“Women don’t need logic,” said Lil. “For some women, it’s like they’re being guided by an alien brain.”

“Well, anyway, while she was here, the whole story revealed itself. I had this vision. It started when I mentioned Black Pond.”

“Black Pond again, I want you to take me there.”

“Not now, you don’t. That’s where Virginia is.”

“What? Where?”

“At the bottom of the pond. I had a vision while Skipper was here; she realized I’d pictured it like it happened and it scared her, a lot. She stalked out screaming I couldn’t prove anything. But I can if I tell the police to look there.”

“Half a mo, you don’t want to say anything, not yet. The way things are, if you went to the police with the story, they’d wonder how you got it and they might begin to focus on you, even though everyone knows you were seven hundred miles away.”

I was silent for a moment. Was Lil right about the police? Did she believe me?

“You’re right, they control the narrative. I have to wait. In a way— Oh shit, it’s complicated.”

“The best thing for you is to say nothing. Volunteer nothing. There’ll come a time for you to speak.”

“I guess you’re right. It’s complicated.”

“You say you once took Skipper to Black Pond?”

“Yes.”

“And now she’s killed her sister and put the body on the bottom. Great...”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes, I do. I was going to tell you I met Carlotta. While I was filling her in on the latest Nixon revelations, she mentioned you played piano in the hospital. Things like that do happen. I believe you; do you think Ruth would?”

“I don’t know.”

“*I don’t know*, my ass. Of course, you know,” insisted Lil. “You also know you’d be a fool to tell her; she’d never believe you because you’re an outsider; sisters stick together.”

I thought for a moment. Insights, paranormality, clairvoyance. For the moment, what had possessed me was just real enough to be taken seriously, but I realized only the lunatic fringe would believe me. Then again, might it not have been the effect of conditioning? I had mentioned to Skipper that Black Pond was very deep and now my imagination was using it as a prompt or mnemonic to explain my so-called vision. But what about my playing the piano? That, I had no explanation for.

Lil was about to continue the discussion when Don Wolff entered. All she had time for was a cautioning look, reminding me not to talk about visions.



“IT’S NOT AN ORDINARY CASE, LINEHAN,” SAID LIEUTENANT WELCH, relinquishing the Magic Marker to his subordinate.

Linehan removed the cap and walked to the paperboard. “That’s good. Because I don’t like ordinary cases,” he intoned while drawing a large red circle around the name *Cloris Tucker*. “Assuming Hattie,” he began, “the maid, is correct and there was a struggle—”

“—that she’s not sure about,” said Welch.

“Right. But, if there was a struggle, this girl was the weak link. We know she was present, along with Miriam Sanchez and the Randall woman. What happened minute by minute? Is there a connection

between Virginia Hubbard's disappearance and Mrs. Randall's ending up in the hospital? Why did Mazur go missing in Chicago? Why did these things happen more or less at the same time on the same night?"

"Handle it any way you want," said the lieutenant, "but deal carefully with the Sanchez family and with Gus Mazur."

"You know me, Chief. Never inconvenience the rich and famous."

"Have you talked with Mazur?"

"Not yet. He's still in GW hospital, along with his aunt." Linehan placed the marker in its tray. "Anything but an ordinary case."

When the lieutenant was finished with his detective, Linehan got into his 1956 two-door Plymouth, a six-cylinder job, and drove to Cloris Tucker and Miriam Sanchez's apartment. Politely, he invited them to accompany him to the station house at Twenty-Third and L Street NW, which they agreed to do with only a minimum of concern.

"Don't you have to read us our rights, Lieutenant?" asked Skipper when they were seated in the interrogation room.

"Sergeant, miss," said Linehan. "We remind you of your rights when you're under arrest. Right now, we're a long way from arresting anyone. We don't even know if there's a crime."

"No third degree?" quipped Skipper.

"No, ma'am," said the detective.

"All right, let's away," said Skipper with a Shakespearean flourish.

"We'll start with individual statements, each of you in separate rooms, doing your best to remember the moment-by-moment details of what happened at Mrs. Randall's home on August twenty-eighth and writing them down."

Linehan beckoned to a young, uniformed officer who, upon being summoned, came forward to escort Cloris to an adjoining room. He gestured to a single chair and a table on which several pencils and a writing tablet had been placed.

When Cloris was through writing, the young officer, who'd been watching the process from the doorway, gathered up her statement and ushered her back to the other room. While Linehan took his time going through the statements, the two women sat side by side, exchanging looks but no words. From time to time, Linehan looked up at one or the



other, as if he'd just read a particularly incriminating passage and he was expecting some acknowledgment of guilt.

He put down the papers at last and looked at Skipper. "You didn't see Virginia Hubbard that night. You weren't part of a struggle or a commotion?"

"It was a dinner among colleagues," said Skipper, "We ate, we talked, we went home—peacefully."

"Not according to Hattie."

"Who?" asked Cloris.

"Mrs. Randall's maid. She's quoted as saying," Linehan extracted a sheet of paper from a stack, 'I heard loud voices and a struggle, but just as I was about to check on Mrs. Randall, it went quiet again.' She claims she heard someone shout, 'Who are you pushing?'"

While Cloris looked on, concerned, Skipper plied her newly acquired acting skills, embellishing her replies with a gamut of passive-aggressive expressions—surprise, ignorance, and derision.

"Sounds like Hattie's reenacting the TV shows she's been watching in her dreams," said Skipper.

"Then you won't mind recording the phrase, so we can exclude you ladies as, shall we say, the shouter."

Before they had time to absorb what was happening, two uniformed officers ushered the women down a hallway, through a room with lots of gadgetry to a small soundproof booth. Officers not concerned with the case squeezed into the control room to listen to the voice ID process and to enjoy the drama surrounding it.

Unfortunately for Linehan, the ID was a letdown: Hattie, who had been waiting in an adjacent room, was unable to identify the voices. Linehan realized that Hattie had heard Skipper speak during her multiple visits to the house with Mrs. Randall's nephew, so the exercise was more of an expedition than an ensnarement—the whole purpose being for them to get a taste of police work, and to let them understand that, even in noncustodial situations, their freedom of movement was limited: they could be made to do things.

And while the written statements yielded precious little, they showed they'd rehearsed word-for-word accounts. That proved nothing. There's no law against agreeing on a timeline of events, especially since the

details—dinner menu details and topics discussed, time of arrival and departure—were uncomplicated. Nevertheless, during his one and a half hours with the women, the arrogance and defiance Skipper exhibited an all too familiar defensive posture, easy to provoke. For the moment, however, she wasn't the center of interest, so he tolerated her attitude, nodding and smiling to put her at ease as if everything she said made perfect sense and he believed 100 percent of it.

"Well, that's all for now, folks." Linehan's announcement seemed to confuse Skipper as if in her mind she'd been controlling the interview and she was caught off guard when it ended suddenly. "If you need a ride, my partner, Detective Marva Tree," he motioned toward a middle-aged Black woman at the next desk, "will be delighted to escort you."

In two quick steps, Skipper was at the door looking back impatiently at her friend. Cloris looked worried, once again fumbling with her coat and casting furtive looks at Skipper. She wondered if Skipper hadn't chosen the wrong detective to tangle with. When the coat was finally on her back, Marva Tree moved in to block her passage.

"Miss Tucker," said Linehan, "please. I need to clear up a few things with you if you don't mind. Just a half hour, I promise. We can drive you home after."

The timing of this request raised the consternation index. Let an individual believe everything's fine, and then jerk the rug out was Linehan's motto. That Skipper didn't raise a ruckus surprised him. Why, she's slipping out with her tail between her legs, observed Linehan, leaving her companion holding the bag.

No ruckus, no demand for a lawyer? The look on Skipper's face told him she'd thought about it, only to dismiss it, most likely because requesting a lawyer at this juncture would be a sign of weakness in what Skipper considered a test of wills. But instead of coming to Cloris's defense, Skipper took a powder. *It's one thing for her to take off, he theorized, but this investigation isn't going away. She's showing way too much hostile attitude for a person with a clear conscience.*

"Not to worry, miss," said Detective Linehan, motioning Cloris to her chair once Skipper had departed, "just a few odds and ends."

"No iron maiden, Sergeant?" teased Cloris.

“Just routine, ma’am. Routine,” said Linehan, “but if you feel like talking without the iron maiden, now’s the time.”

“Seriously, Detective, I have nothing to add.”

“You didn’t see your friend’s sister, Virginia, that night? You didn’t hear or witness a struggle?”

“You’re repeating yourself, Sergeant. So, I’ll repeat: It was a dinner among colleagues. We ate, we talked, and we went home—peacefully, for the most part. Obviously, when Mrs. Randall fell ill, everything changed; we took her to the hospital”

“How do you account for Hattie’s story?”

“By reminding you that Hattie just said it wasn’t our voices she’d heard.”

“I never thought she had. I only put you through that circus to eliminate you.”

“So, if I’m eliminated, why am I here?” asked Cloris. “I told you we were watching TV, there was some shooting and fighting in the program.”

“What program, what time?” asked Linehan.

“I wasn’t paying attention. I’m sure you’ll have someone looking it up in *TV Guide*.” Cloris smiled and waved to the one-way glass.

“Okay, no struggle. Although, and now I’m thinking hypothetically, that if something did happen, maybe there are extenuating circumstances. If so, we can straighten things out right now... between the two of us. From Miriam’s point of view—she’s a proud young lady—but you don’t have the same class consciousness that makes her treat this situation like a board game.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, you do. She’s used to coming out on top. Where does that leave you if things take a turn for the worse? When an average girl like you and a girl of relative privilege like her end up in a legal mess, who’s going to come out intact? Already my lieutenant has me under orders to treat her with kid gloves. It’s a game for her, it won’t be for you.” Linehan riffled through more papers while continuing his train of thought. “Does, uh, the DNC know you were arrested for prostitution in Massachusetts? Um...” he placed the paper carefully on the desk and pointed, “here, December

23, 1964, near the Harvard campus. A little diversion for the hard-charging business leaders of tomorrow, was it? I don't see anything like that on Miriam's record. By the way, does she know about that arrest?"

Linehan watched her light-skinned face turn red and he realized the girl would suffer in Skipper's eyes if she knew about it. Despite her bravado, the blush revealed the embarrassment she was feeling—the sting of class consciousness that would further undermine the balance of power in their relationship. She drew a cigarette from her purse, packed down the tobacco on her thumbnail, and presented it in ladylike fashion to Linehan for a light.

"That was a frame-up," she replied, after savoring a couple of puffs. "A rich guy I was going to marry, a Harvard student. We were in love. His father broke it up. I'm black in case you haven't noticed. All I got out of it was that I didn't care for men; I never took the money they said I did."

"Look, I'm not out to 'get' or humiliate you, miss," said the detective. "You've been around, enough to know what happens when the system gets a hold of someone with a record."

"So, I'm a convicted prostitute and a lesbian. What do you want me to do about it? Make up a story to ruin the only friend I have, someone I love?"

"You don't want her to know about it, do you?"

"Cops are such rotten pricks," said Cloris, sticking out her tongue at the one-way glass.

ABEL LINEHAN AND CLORIS TUCKER LEFT THE BUILDING TOGETHER. The night air was filled with a drizzle that had turned sickly green from the fluorescents in the surrounding office buildings. Before they reached his car for the ride he'd promised, Skipper came zipping up, working the horn and coming to a stop. While opening the door for Cloris, she looked up at Linehan defiantly. Cloris jumped in. Linehan tipped his porkpie fedora as they pulled away. Cloris looked back at the detective, sticking out her tongue and giving him the finger.

The Volvo stopped for the traffic light at the Columbia Road and Calvert Street intersection. Waiting for the light, Skipper lost track of

the here-and-now, so completely had her mind become absorbed in the intrigue that now troubled them.

“What’s wrong?” said Cloris. “Go.”

The cars behind them honked, yet Skipper clutched the wheel, unwilling, it seemed, to move the car forward.

“The light’s changed. There’re people behind us,” insisted Cloris.

“I got it,” she grumbled, grinding the gearshift into first and releasing the clutch. “I was just thinking about how stupid I was. Thinking we could implicate Gus while I only implicated myself.”

“Who’s this we? I’m the one who just got interrogated by Mr. Wiseass detective Abel Linehan. Abel...” exclaimed Cloris, “a Jew name for an Irish cop doesn’t mesh with his tough guy routine.”

Cloris continued to snap at her friend, disgorging her outrage about Skipper’s receiving celebrity treatment from the cops. Skipper kept insisting they were three moves ahead of the police. Her “it depends on the body” mantra had Cloris at her wit’s end. Skipper might be right; in the meantime, who were the cops focused on, she asked?

“All depends on the body. If they don’t find one,” intoned Skipper didactically as the Volvo approached the Calvert Street Bridge, “Virginia simply disappeared. It happens all the time.”

“Stop it with the body shit,” screamed Cloris. “I went along for the ride, fool that I am, now it’s my ass on the hot seat.”

Skipper parked the Volvo in front of Mama Ayesha’s. “I’m hungry. Let’s not talk shop, sweetie,” said Skipper, as they crossed the threshold. “Let’s enjoy our meal.”

“Yeah, it might be our last one.”

Inside, Skipper backed off enough to calm her lover down. Soon they were holding hands. What was actually happening in her mind Skipper kept below the surface. That she’d made a mistake in trying to implicate Gus was obvious. Now, she might have to implicate Cloris. But that wouldn’t work either, she reflected. Cloris would turn on her.

When they returned to their apartment, Marva Tree was waiting with a search warrant and a squad of uniforms to perform it. Cloris Tucker, light-skinned to begin with, turned even paler.



“UMM,” I PURRED, “NOTHING LIKE A SHOWERHEAD MASSAGE. UMM.”

“Better hurry. They’ll be here soon,” said Lil.

“Don’t rush me.” I turned off the shower and stepped out and started to towel myself in front of the mirror. “I don’t look too bad now, actually. The purple’s almost gone.”

“Well, it is better. Almost gone, you say, hmm.” Lil grabbed a towel and started drying my hair.

“Hey, hey. Not so hard,” I said. “You gotta watch that hole in my head.”

“You sure there’s only one hole? I just found another.”

“Whereby my mortal essence will pass through on the day of my death.”

“Don’t be so morbid.”

“Not morbid, fact. I saw it when I consulted the Akashic Records during my recent experience.”

“Akashic Records? One more reason I have to take you to Ming Lo’s Chi Institute when we’re in New York.”

As Lil toweled my body, a sudden infusion of energy filled my being. I became aware of an entity standing outside of myself. *It is I, Gus Mazur, surrounded by layers of moving energy, inwardly observing myself.*

Somehow, a fragment of rational thought interrupted this numinous moment: *If you do nothing, you’ll be sucked upward into an alternate reality you’re not ready for.* I began breathing through my nose, inducing a gradual return to the world of bath mats, toilet paper, and medicine cabinets. I, the body I was familiar with, the avatar I was known as, was sitting on the toilet seat with my eyes rolled up into my head.

“What happened?” asked Lil. “I thought you might be having a stroke.”

I stood up, a bit wobbly.

“Steady,” she said, grabbing my arms, “after spacing out like that, you could lose your balance.”

Lil looked me over, immediately finding something below my waist to grin at—my knob, enlarged two times over as if it had absorbed the energy that had enveloped me just minutes before.

“Hurry. They’ll be here any second,” said Lil, playfully using my extended member as a towel rack. “Put that away for now.”

I was exploring my head, attempting to gauge how well it was healing when the bell rang.

“I’ll get it,” I teased, lunging for the door.

“You’ll do no such thing,” gasped Lil. “Get dressed while I get the door.”

Underpants and undershirt in the bathroom, pants, and sweater as I passed through the bedroom (speed dressing habits from boarding school), I donned a dilapidated New York Giants baseball cap and zipped up my fly as I crossed the threshold into the hall and headed to the living room.

“God, am I glad to see you guys away from the hospital,” I said as Reggie Blaze grabbed my hand. “Carlotta, Don, and, not least, Lil. She got me out of the hospital, has me seeing things positively, with an asterisk for my face of course.”

Carlotta and the others took seats around the coffee table that Lil had decked out with baskets of dim sum, assorted Chinese dumplings: steamed pork and shrimp, sticky rice lotus leaf wraps, paper-wrapped chicken, fried shrimp balls, barbecue pork buns, garlic pea sprouts, served with Chinese beer and green tea, which the guests fell on without so much as a “Dig in.”

“You do all this, Lil?” asked the Wolff.

“No,” she replied, “done by a friend. I order she makes, I pick up.”

“Well, my dear,” said Carlotta, “*Good Housekeeping* seal of approval to you for all this.”

“And napkins and coasters,” said Reggie as he popped open a beer.

“So,” began Carlotta, in between bites of a shrimp ball, “the China Lobby. Thanks to Lil, we know everything, except— Oh, by the way, hon,” she addressed Lil, “I have a contract here for you. You’ll be paid for risking your life with these jokers.”

“...everything, except the one thing to make the story possible,” continued Don Wolff, “the one piece of the puzzle we don’t have. Without it, it’s moot whether they’ll run it or whether it’ll have any impact.”

“And that one thing is...” said Carlotta, deferring to Lil.

“Does Nixon himself know about it?” said Lil. “And did it originate with him?”

“That’s the crux of it,” added the Wolff. “What did he know and when?”

“What do you think, Gus?” asked Carlotta, reaching over the armrest to take Reggie’s hand.

In succession, I pointed at each of them. As I did so. “One, two, three, four; Carlotta, Reggie, Don, Lil. Five’s a crowd. You don’t need me.”

I could see the disappointment on Lil’s face, see her holding back the urge to light into me for backing out. I’d have to start doing something eventually. Something, yeah, but not this.

“I’m sorry, but you guys have the drop on me, I’d be wasting your time and mine getting up to speed. I have this feeling that something big—not involving Nixon—is just around the corner, something just right for me at this time.”

“You know something we don’t?” asked Reggie.

“No,” I said, “just a feeling.”

Lil jumped on the phone when it broke the silence that ensued. “Roscoe Schindler, darling,” she said, covering the mouthpiece and looking at me anxiously.

“I’ll take it in the other room,” I said.

“Whoa,” intoned the Wolff, “talk about something big...synchronicity.”

“Smacko,” tacked on Reggie.

Lil listened without comment as plans for the following week were discussed, watching the others eat, but not partaking herself.

“Lil and Reggie,” said Carlotta, “to dig in and around the China Lobby’s New York office and at the UN.”

Lil nodded perfunctorily, wondering why my conversation with Schindler was dragging on.

I STOOD AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE BIG ROOM FOR A WHILE WITHOUT being noticed, until Lil turned around, smiling. “Oh, you’re back,” she said.

“I’ll chase down China Lobby figures in DC; Don to write the script and supervise the editing,” said Carlotta.



For me, the conclave registered as a frieze, a still life. People frozen in the process of wolfing down dim sum. A mural celebrating diversity. The Council of Righteousness, I dubbed them, all the time thinking I didn't belong. Lil did. She was involved in this dangerous business up to her neck without hope or desire for a reward. I was only tagging along, a Yale reject, an affirmative action fatalist, once again, over my head.

From my bland expression, it could have been a courtesy call, Schindler inquiring about my recovery. And yet, there was a certain gravity about my demeanor that wasn't there when I left the room. Lil was the first to catch it. As usual, she observed rather than precipitated.

"Well," said Carlotta.

"Herb Hecht has just died," I said, five words that left the others suspended, until I added, "Heart attack. Goodstein and Schindler want me to finish *Charles Dickens*."

"The dean of docs..." said the Wolff. "What a career."

"Two conditions. One, reinstate Don Wolff; two, ease off on hiring Skipper. There're some things about her I can't go into just yet."

"So," asked Lil, "did they agree?"

"Affirmative on both..." Everyone looked at me, seemingly for some sort of summary, an anecdote, perhaps. "Herb *goddamn* Hecht," I said. "You know the last thing he told me?"

"What?" asked Carlotta.

He said he was like a Chopin piano étude, you know how the piece is going to end, and how it's going to get there. I, he told me, I was like a jazz original. You have a faint idea how the piece is going to end, but no idea how it's going to get there. The last time we screened the Dickens documentary together, he told me he was burned out and he asked me to finish it, said it was perfect for me."

"That's Herb all right," said the Wolff. "The essence of pith."

"Perfect for me," I said. I felt my eyes water for the first time since my father whipped me up the hill when I was a fourteen-year-old boy. "He was right, as usual. He always said I'd get fed up chasing Nixon and his cohorts. It's for people like Don and Carlotta, people made of sterner stuff. I need something less frantic, like Charles Dickens, something more rustic. Horse-drawn carriages and gaslit London streets."

"Something to charge your batteries, not deplete them," said Lil.

“No such time as that ever existed,” said Reggie, “least not for Black folks.”

“At least, there will be times when I’m out shooting,” I said, “not hidden away in the dark with Jerry and his assistant. By the time it’s finished, my face should be one hundred percent.”

“Hey, man, conked on the head like you were—” said the Wolff.

“You have nothing to reproach yourself for, news-wise,” added Carlotta. “Finishing Herb’s show will ease you back into it.”

Feeling a wave of *weltschmerz* at the center of my being, I exclaimed. “I hope to do for someone, someday, as much as Herb did for me.” It came out sincere, but overly sentimental, like a toast to a friend that’s really about one’s self.

“You can start right here, bucko, with me,” said Lil. She’d dropped that remark enigmatically, out of the blue. That much public emotion from Lil had all present eager to know more but reluctant to pry; she wasn’t about to elaborate.

All except Don Wolff, who stood up, oblivious to the distress in Lil’s voice, “I’m not worried; you put what you’re feeling for Herb into *Dickens* and it will be fine.”

Carlotta shot the Wolff a look of bewilderment, suggesting that he’d been insensitive to Lil, and should either apologize or keep quiet.

“You owe Lil big time,” said Carlotta, “for the hospital, for nursing you, and above all, for risking her safety with those assholes. While you were daydreaming in a Chicago hospital, she was playing counterspy.”

The others stood. I took a Kleenex from Lil and blew my nose as the guests filed out. “I owe her big time,” I said, placing my arm around her and pulling her to me.

OCTOBER

**T**he news of Herb Hecht's death weighing heavily upon me that night, I took to bed early. Lil stayed up, listening to a Cecil Taylor opus. Still loyal to the vow I had taken, I insisted that we sleep in separate beds. Lil took the bedroom; I slept on the sofa bed in the living room.

Not long after retiring, Lil, a light sleeper, heard shuffling noises coming from the living room. She put on a bathrobe, only to watch me disappear into the office. She tiptoed down the hall, stopping at the entrance of the office. From there, she watched me pick up a pencil and start to write. That I did so in the dark without looking down told her I was writing automatically, putting subconscious commentary onto paper.

Twenty minutes later, when I stood up, Lil slid back a few paces, flattening herself against the wall to watch me leave my office and head down the hallway toward the living room. When the noise of the rustling covers stopped, Lil slipped into the office. In the faint glow of the street-light through the window, she started to read what I'd written.

Unreadable for the most part, it resembled hieroglyphics or scribbles from an unknown language. There were passages in English, but they weren't necessarily coherent. Individual phrases made sense, but the whole of it, not so much. Something about *every fiber of my being* and *the indifference of the universe. No judgment of right and wrong, no Garden of Eden,*

*just cells evolving to the point where they retain a sentience of everything that ever happened in superconscious memory banks, psychic emanations I must learn to understand.*

All this topped off with a nearly illegible, but detailed account of Virginia's death, from the moment Cloris answered the door to the burial ceremony in Black Pond. And finally, a brief coda to ~~take-up~~, *embrace golf*. Doodling and line drawings, connecting the various scribblings. *An open-and-shut case*. Scribblings, Lil realized, that must remain secret if I were not to become embroiled in Virginia's disappearance.

Later, as she thought about it further, Lil realized that my scrawl might be completely unfounded, but it did jibe with other things I'd said about Skipper. She also realized that now more than ever, she had to take me to Ming Lo's Chi Institute in New York while attending Herb Hecht's funeral. Westerners might not believe in spirit bodies or Chi, she told me later, but the Chinese did, and they had centuries of traditions supporting it.

CARLOTTA TELEPHONED ME THE NEXT MORNING OSTENSIBLY TO CHECK on Lil, but really to probe me, asking abruptly. "And you? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"When you came back yesterday after talking to Schindler, you looked at us as if we'd just showed up uninvited like we were interlopers. The expression on your face."

"I wasn't aware of it," I said.

"Since you've been back, seems like you're aware of things that others aren't and unaware of a lot of things others are if that makes sense," said Carlotta. "Lil, for instance."

"What about Lil?"

"That's what I want to know," continued Carlotta. "Are you aware of her feelings toward you? How much Lil does for you."

"I appreciate Lil. I do."

"*I appreciate Lil. I do*," drawled Carlotta in mocking response to my half-hearted endorsement.

"Why are you doing this, Carlotta?"

“I guess I just don’t like mealy mouths,” she said. “Hell, I shouldn’t blame you, not after all you’ve been through. I just miss the Gus I knew in Paris, the one who convinced me he was all about passion.”

“I miss him, too,” I said.

The conversation dwindled to a halt with me feeling somewhat empathetically that Carlotta was aware not only of my mental state but also of my inability to control it. I had suffered a loss of confidence, and, for the moment, I was unable to charge recklessly ahead.

“Do you think I don’t know something’s wrong,” I continued after a pause that had Carlotta worried, “visions, suddenly breaking down, playing the piano. Sitting on the toilet staring into space?”

“Do you have anyone to talk this out with?”

A flat no from me, followed by a pause.

“Which brings me to what you thought about *Dickens* when you screened it with Herb?”

“Jerry has a feel for it. We go over his progress daily,” I answered indifferently, almost as if I could care less. “Herb hired Dirk Bogarde to narrate. I’ll record him, maybe shoot some reenactment footage with him. A little bit of fine-tuning and we’ll mix in New York in November.”

“Don’t sound so excited,” exclaimed Carlotta.

I didn’t answer; I pushed the telephone away, extending it to arm’s length before lowering it to the table.

“Hello, hello. Are you sure everything’s okay?”

I stood up from the table and walked to the window, blotting out the cackling from the phone, and stared down at the pedestrians crossing Adams Mill Road.

Had I been paying attention, I would have heard: “Look, if you need help, I can detach. The Wolff and Reggie can see Lil through the China thing.”



THAT SAME DAY, CLORIS TUCKER WAS ARRESTED FOR PROSTITUTION. Seems she’d been working the Four Seasons from time to time. Dressed up like a movie star, she had no trouble negotiating four- to five-hundred-dollar fees. She picked her Johns carefully, with the help of a

desk receptionist with whom she split 80-20. Very understated, hush-hush.

After the argument with Skipper, Cloris got drunk at the Lehi Grill in Georgetown, picked up a guy, and off they went to the Four Seasons. A vice officer happened to be in the lobby, and he followed them up to their room where he busted them. Linehan ran into the arresting officer at the L Street precinct and took over the case.

He decided to let her stew in the Occoquan Workhouse for a couple of days before visiting her.

When he and his partner, Marva Tree, finally met Cloris, her body language told them she was both sure of herself and anxious at the same time, trying to hide it with bravado.

“Hello again, Miss Tucker.”

“Detective Linehan, is it?”

“Yes, and I’m glad to see you,” he said. “Wondering if you’ve thought about your situation. Not why you’re here; this is minor. The Hubbard girl is not minor.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“You don’t like me. I understand. That’s why Detective Tree is here. Why don’t you two think things over while I look in on some other cases?”

As soon as Linehan disappeared, Marva Tree pitched her proposal. “There’s no reason for you to be here for this small-time shit,” said Marva. “You can be home tonight.”

“I ain’t talking, period.”

“Of course not. But a week or more in here. Eventually, you will,” said Marva. “It’s the overcrowding. People get lost in here.”

“You’re wasting your breath.”

“Uh-huh. None of my business, but... look at me, girl,” insisted Marva, “has Miriam been to visit you?”

Cloris tossed her head back, a spark of defiance in her eyes.

“I thought so.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I hardly knew Virginia Hubbard.”

“No, no. You don’t know her now because she’s dead, isn’t she?” said

Marva. "You do realize you said, 'I hardly knew Virginia Hubbard.' Past tense. Why would you speak of her in the past?"

"I didn't mean it that way. Stop twisting my words."

Marva rewound Linehan's small tape recorder. "Let's listen," she said, pressing the Play button. *I hardly knew Virginia Hubbard.*

"So what?"

"Seems clear. You saw her at Alice Randall's the night she disappeared. The maid heard you fighting with her. She was alive until you killed her. Now you say you didn't know her. No one says that about someone who's dead. A person usually says *I don't know her*. You said *I didn't know her*. Past tense."

"If she heard fighting, it happened when I wasn't there. I hate fighting."

"Right," said Marva. "But you do like girls?"

Cloris looked at Marva Tree and smiled wryly. *Wait a moment*, she mused, *this changes everything. A cop about to proposition me?* She threw back her head again. No longer contemptuous, a telling glow lit her eyes. "Don't tell me you do," said Cloris.

"Maybe we could meet up for a drink sometime, once you get out of here."

"My previous girlfriend was a spade, the first Black girl I ever balled," said Cloris. "I really got her off and she me. But you're old and kind of short."

"I'm half the age of the decrepit old men you service," said Marva.

"How old then?"

"Forty."

"Forty," she repeated. "Next time, wear something sexy so I can get a better idea of you in bed. Right now, I'm not talking."

"Too bad," said Marva, "we could meet up tonight. You know that place on Columbia Road, all black and shiny on the outside. No sign, I forget the name."

"The Place. That's the name. Sure, I know it," said Cloris, "I never saw you there, though."

. . .

“THAT WAS SOME PERFORMANCE. ‘WEAR SOMETHING CUTE NEXT time,’” said Linehan on the drive back to DC.

“Something sexy!”

“What would your husband say about playacting like this?”

“What happens on the job stays on the job,” said Marva. “Next time, she’ll spill. You watch. ’N’ my husband is cool.”

“Well, your playacting had me wondering.”

“I was good, wasn’t I?” laughed Marva Tree.

“You certainly confirmed our hunch. No one uses the present tense about a dead person.”



AT THE LAST MINUTE, I TOLD THE CABBIE WHO WAS DRIVING US TO Temple Rodeph Shalom for Herb’s funeral to turn around. Lil wanted to countermand my order but stopped when the hopelessness in my expression made it clear I was suffering.

“Okay, hon, what do you want to do?” she asked.

“Drive, drive through Central Park,” I said. “I can’t take a funeral right now, Lil. I’m not up to it.”

“Your face?”

“Not only.”

“Even though it’s the only thing people will remember?”

“I’m not up to putting on an act.”

“I don’t much like funerals either, Judeo-Christian funerals least of all,” said Lil. “The glad-handing and phony commiseration. I guess the Chinese are just as bad. I only wish you’d told me beforehand. This damned girdle’s killing me.”

“You’re wearing a girdle?”

“The first and last time. My mother’s latest—”

“Gift! Your mother gave you a girdle? You’re the least in need of a girdle person I know,” I said. “Nice and compact like you are.”

Lil started to laugh. Contagious as laughter usually is, I fell into it for a time before suddenly pulling her close and kissing her.

“What was that all about?” asked Lil. “I thought it was separate beds and stay in your own space.”



“Just something about girdles. My aunt always complained that she felt like she was being slowly swallowed,” I said. “Here, I’ll help you take it off.”

“Here? In the cab?”

“Why not? I have it all figured out.” I rolled over, arching myself above Lil and facing her. “Okay, pull up your dress. Don’t worry. No one can see you with me hovering over you. Now pull it down to where I can help pull you out of it. There, draw your legs up. Got it?”

“Yup.”

“Good.” I flipped myself back to her side, grabbed the girdle, cranked open the window, and started to toss it out, catching myself and handing it to Lil.

“You do it. That way you’re sending a message to women in general.”

Purposefully, she took it and with a flourish, flung it out.

“You don’t mind, do you?” I said to the cabbie.

“I’ve seen everything now,” said the driver.

“Now, I don’t have anything,” Lil laughed, “to hold up my stockings.”

Lil had me and the driver howling.

“Take ’em off then,” I said.

“Bare legs with a formal black mourning dress?” Lil considered the incongruity of her attire.

“You have a garter belt at your house, don’t you?” I said, grabbing her stockings.

“Don’t throw my stockings out, please.”

TWICE AROUND THE PARK AND IT WAS TIME FOR ME TO MEET WITH Ming Lo. As the cab headed south on the West Side Highway, the nearer I got to my destination, the more I wondered if I’d find the proper words to describe my experiences.

It amazed me how the outrageous act of removing Lil’s girdle in a moving cab made me feel like my old self, another reason that meeting with Ming Lo might undermine my sunshiny mood. I had tried unsuccessfully to form a picture of Ming Lo in my mind, a less than reassuring process that had me conjuring images from Charlie Chan movies. But I trusted Lil and I was curious, and after she gave the

cabbie the address, there was no trace of giddiness in her commands to me.

“I’ll drop you off and—”

“Wait a minute, Lil. Aren’t you coming in?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m going to get a garter belt so I can show up at dinner looking like a lady, wearing stockings. I’ll meet you there. The table’s reserved. Seven o’clock.”

“Uh—”

“Don’t worry, hon,” said Lil, squeezing my hand and leaning in to kiss me on the forehead. “Just think about my girdle blowing down Park Avenue and you’ll be all right.”

The cab pulled away, leaving me to face the wind barreling down St. Mark’s Place. For some reason, Lil had let me off a half block from the Chi Institute, which, when I reached it, was an unprepossessing storefront that gave no hint of what lay beyond. The sign offering a full-body massage described the surroundings more aptly than spiritual counsel and assessment.

Inside, an elderly Chinese woman invited me to wait in the lobby, the walls of which were decorated with photographs of Chinese men and women, half of whom were renowned and half anonymous. I recognized Soong Mei-ling, better known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and her husband, the former leader of Nationalist China. Photographic portraits of Sun Yat-sen and various Chinese film idols whose faces I recognized, but whose names escaped me, the one exception being Chow Hsuan, a singing actress I remembered from a Paris film festival I once attended. A portrait of Anna Chennault, the leading light in WBN’s China Lobby investigation, did not escape my view.

I was taking a closer look at the inscription, handwritten in Chinese characters below her portrait when the woman came to fetch me. I followed her to a back room, decorated in a subdued, yet lavish Chinese fashion. Jade and teak carvings scattered about. I was looking over the room when the beaded curtain parted and Ming Lo appeared in a suit and tie, carrying a book in his left hand.

There was no ceremony to stand on: I was not invited to sit or speak. After a minute of staring at me, Ming Lo uttered one word, “Well?”

“I’m not sure I know where to begin or the proper words to describe what’s been going on inside since I came out of my coma.”

“Use the words as they come to you,” said Ming Lo in clear unaccented English.

“I’m fairly sure there are words or labels in your culture that fit my condition which, even if I knew them, what they meant, I would not be able to employ in conversation, not in occidental society. I’d be laughed at.”

“Not only that, each belief system has its terminology,” he said. “Put that aside for the time being.”

I started with a sort of prepared statement, describing my experience in Grant Park. That segued into free-form elocution: “I feel surrounded by a sheath that’s alive as if I’m contained in or connected to an energy field, something more than static electricity but less than nuclear fission. Sometimes, things come to me, like playing the piano, at least people said I do. When I play without being in that other state, it’s nothing special. It’s only when I’m not conscious that these things happen, premonitions of events, past and future. At times, I feel like it’s going to stop, and I won’t remember a thing. Other times, I feel drawn to this power, this energy, and I want to go further into it.”

Ming Lo paused before answering. “The word Chi means energy, not atomic or electric, mind you, formative energy, capable of creating a human form and causing it to evolve, as a tiny baby becomes an adult. Life force energy contained in the air you breathe.”

“Life force energy? There is such a thing?”

“Most people never get to feel it like you’re feeling it now. If they did, they’d end up searching for answers like you are. They might even try to fight it, to prevent it from doing what it’s doing to your being.

“Some dormant neural connections were triggered when you were injured. What causes it is not as important as where it leads you. You cannot do it, by that I mean influence it; it will do you. Chi is intelligent. Listen to it. Accept it. Of course, you can meditate or practice other energy cultivation techniques. In your case, the more immediate is not fearing it. Learn to live with it. It may be with you for a long while, or not. That does not depend on good or evil. Chi has no morality; it simply is. Of course, most people who live with it successfully come to realize it

is benign and their actions reflect this, as they live according to the Golden Rule.”

“Why have I been feeling depressed then?”

“Because you’re not committed to anything one hundred percent and you’re frightened by responsibility. You’re not naturally depressed; you’re just not sure of yourself and that translates to weakness.”

“And playing the piano and other faculties.”

“They come; they go. If they’re still here forty years hence, so much the better. Right now, learn to respect your work from the bottom up.”

“So, what next?”

“Don’t be lured by the supernatural. Go about your life as before. Study Chi if you want, but don’t let it rule your life.”

“Where can I go to study?”

“Here, for instance, but you’re not limited to any one place,” said Ming Lo, as he handed me a book with a yellow dust cover. “The world is a classroom.”

Strange that Ming Lo had the book in hand, I thought, intending to give it to me all along. Must have felt sure it would apply no matter what I told him.

I waited until I was on St. Mark’s Place to look at the book’s cover, discovering a title that meant very little to me: *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, with commentary by Carl Gustav Jung. I hailed a cab, sat back, and thumbed through the pages, looking over the illustrations and reading a few lines.

Ten minutes later, I picked up Lil at her house and we met Reggie, Carlotta, and Don Wolff at Keen’s English Chop House. With so much to share, the conversation flowed easily, at first centering on my failure to attend Herb’s funeral. My absence had caused a firestorm of mostly negative comments. I could care less. I’d felt rotten from the moment the plane landed at LaGuardia.

It had been easy for Schindler to explain, and easy for everyone to move on to schmoozing with celebrities.

I learned that the speeches were loaded with high-minded tributes delivered by high-profile journalists, media celebs, and corporate bigwigs, with casual mention that Herb’s Charles Dickens documentary was now in the capable hands of Gus Mazur, his handpicked successor. According

to the Wolff, Herb had told Roscoe Schindler about a premonition—several of them it seems, wangling a commitment from the boss that if anything happened to him, he wanted me to finish *Dickens*.

The conversation shifted to a topic my colleagues were eager to raise, but half-afraid it might upset me, to wit, Skipper's annoying appearance even though she wasn't on the guest list. After the ceremony, she lost it when Roscoe Schindler told her he was rescheduling her on-air debut. On the way out, she was heard cursing me as well as the whole of WBN in general, until Noah Goodstein consoled her.

Although I wanted to tell the others about my revelations concerning Virginia's disappearance, Lil's eye signals and head shakes were enough to stop me. Only Carlotta picked up on the facial signals Lil directed at me. The conversation came to a halt, and everyone looked at Carlotta; it was time to get down to business.

"Tomorrow, with your help, Lil," announced Carlotta, "we finalize the China Lobby story. I'll fly back to DC with Gus. You guys support Lil while she gets the lowdown."

"Lil's material is crucial," added the Wolff. "Now that Wallace is slipping in the polls because of his asinine choice of a VP. Incredible!"

"Curtis LeMay. Can you believe it?"

"That is a blunder. LeMay's insane saber rattling has Wallace voters flocking to Nixon."

"Am I correct in assuming that we—the neutral press corps—are taking sides in this election?" asked Reggie, facetiously.

"We don't choose sides," said the Wolff, "we follow the money."

My visit with Ming Lo was not mentioned; not even Lil knew what had transpired, only that the ennui I'd fallen prey to was no longer frozen on my face like a death mask. Through the remaining blotches on my face a light shined—the eyes of a man choosing light over darkness, and willing to fight to maintain it. My laughing during Lil's deadpan recitation of her girdle being pulled off and thrown out the cab window, several decibels above the rest of the room, led to Don Wolff's shaking his finger at me, "Look, he's laughing," he said. "Seeing you laugh that loud, I think the worst is over."

"I can picture it blowing down Fifth Avenue, and no one daring to touch it," said Carlotta.

“It’s not an article you pick up off the street.”

“Ew, that’s disgusting.”



HOME ALONE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG WHILE, I BROWNEA A pork chop in the French fry pan I’d long ago seasoned with garlic and olive oil so that nothing—not even frying eggs—stuck to it. Once browned, I placed the pan in a 250-degree oven to slow cook the meat to tender perfection. Fresh spinach sautéed in garlic and olive oil, a baked potato, and a National Bohemian completed my meal.

After dinner, something swept over me. Feeling a little fey, I sat down at the piano. The last thing I remember was letting several deep breaths pass through my nostrils as the here-and-now of ordinary consciousness evaporated and I was playing a Frederick Delius prelude. Unlike previous episodes when my waking consciousness remembered nothing, this time I was aware of self and other: I knew what I was doing, not so much through cognition, but by an alternate intelligence that had me standing outside of myself observing what I was doing at the same time I was doing it. I followed that piece with a restrained rendition of Thelonious Monk’s “Ruby, My Dear.” Halfway through, the telephone rang. After four long rings, I returned to an everyday ego-driven conscious state.

“Hello,” whispered a voice tinged with sheepishness that I recognized as Ruth O’Malley’s.

“Ruth, hello. Why are you whispering?”

“I’m at Skipper’s. Some friends of hers are here. I’m trying to keep it, uh, confidential... Wait, I think they’re leaving. Yeah, they’re gone.”

“What’s up?” I interrupted, “besides Skipper and her friends?”

“Well, number one, I haven’t talked to you since right after Black Pond, you remember?”

“I remember getting shot down,” I said, “a moment I’ll never forget.”

“I heard about what happened in Chicago.”

“I was pretty messed up. Thankfully, some friends had my back.”

“Yeah, Skipper told me all about the Chinese girlfriend you’ve stashed away.”

“Just like she was hiding Cloris, and God knows how many others.

And besides, Lil is only helping me; we don't sleep together. Don't you remember the vow I took after our last conversation?"

"Well, Skipper thinks you denounced her to WBN—on some random pretext, but really because you're jealous of her. And she claims you're acting as if you know something about Virginia."

"Do you think I know something about Virginia despite the fact I was in Chicago and in the public eye the whole time she was in DC at my Aunt Alice's house when Virginia quite possibly came by asking for money? We may not know until my aunt awakens if she ever does."

"According to Skipper—"

"Forget Skipper," I said. "If I were her, I'd watch out for Delmas; he's blaming me, but he's no fool. He'll realize the police are focused on Skipper and Cloris."

"All of this makes no sense, that either you or Skipper would have anything to do with Virginia's disappearance."

"Don't I know it."

"Why does she think you're accusing her?"

"I think she got freaked out when she saw me in the hospital. Had this crazy notion I was giving her the evil eye. At one point, she got up and ran out."

"You're not jealous because she's with Cloris?" asked Ruth.

"Of course, I'm not. It's you I want to be with. I pledged myself to you. And I haven't broken my pledge."

"Did you know Cloris is in jail?"

"No, but it follows. That cop, Linehan came to the hospital. He's no dummy," I said. "What's she charged with?"

"I know, but I don't want to say it over the phone."

"You're all about having the upper hand. It's a defense mechanism. How's that for amateur psychology?"

Ruth laughed. "Hmm, maybe I should have let your hand drop, after all. What are you doing now?"

"Are we proposing to make up for lost time?" I asked. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

"As long as your Chinese girlfriend wouldn't object?"

"She's in New York."

"I'll be right over," said Ruth.

. . .

“YOU’RE DOING IT ALL WRONG. IT’S NOT LIKE A DOG LICKING HIS bowl,” said Ruth. “That’s my sisters for you. Neither one of them taught you how to do a woman the right way. Take the whole of it in your mouth. It’s like sucking a dick, only smaller. Feel it swell and harden. That’s it. Now work it. Don’t bite. Lips and tongue. Ah, I’m almost there. Rub my nipples. Pinch them, not too hard, now caress them. Ah, ahh.”

My tongue found the tip of her clitoris. She tensed, shivered once, and squeezed my head with a scissors grip, holding my face against her vagina so I couldn’t move. “Harder!” I thought I heard her say, unsure because my ears were completely enclosed by her powerful thighs. A clitoral orgasm, an all-out bodily earthquake lasting a full thirty seconds.

Just like a skinny woman. Extraordinary lovers! They don’t have the fulsome tits or the built-in cush of a tush, so they focus their sexual energies on their mouths and their pussies, inventing all kinds of isometrics to use them for. She pulled me up into her. Our motions synced, slowly at first, as I succumbed to the warmth of being inside her, gathering intensity as we came closer to orgasm, finally coming at the same instant, Ruth quivering and wet, me throbbing as more and more of me gushed into her. Kissing her, then relaxing in the throes of passion, I slipped out of her.

“So you’ve been doing Virginia and Skipper like a dog licking his master’s hand,” said Ruth, “when it’s all about the clit, just like it’s all about the dick for a man.”

“Guess I never learned the finer points,” I tittered, pausing to prop up the pillow behind me.”

“A B-minus. Not bad for lesson one,” she said. “As for locking you against my pussy, that’s from riding horseback, gripping the animal with my thighs. Once you know what I like—”

“It will be as you require, my sovereign—”

Ruth cut me off. “You ready for lesson two? I am,” she said, taking my knob in her mouth, using her hand along the length of it, expertly managing to make me hard again, looking up at me with expectant eyes, then breaking off when I started to moan. “I want you in me.”



Ruth spat in her hand, rubbed her saliva on my cock, and guided it into her.

“Your pussy feels squishy. It’s like fucking jelly,” I said after a minute.

“That’s lesson two.”

“I’m not complaining; it’s just different from—”

“—any other pussy you ever fucked,” she said. “I don’t know why I’m different, but it’s like this: after you suck my clit and I climax, my pussy emits a jellylike substance and when you enter me a second time, like now, I can feel your dick sloshing around and I keep coming over and over until you stop. That’s when I’m completely vulnerable. It’s beyond hot. I’m at your mercy; we’re one. Our bodies and souls are merged. Tantra. I need you to get me there.”

Other guys, I thought, must have achieved what she’d just described. Now it was up to me, or else. I wasn’t sure I liked sex on a quota basis, but before I could question it, she started to moan and shake like a wild animal. A horse perhaps, trying to throw me, but like a rider who subdues his mount, I kept at it during wave after wave of her orgasms. When neither of us could take any more, I let myself go. She felt my orgasm and completed it with one of her own. Then, using her vaginal muscles, she squeezed out every last drop out of me and we flopped back on the bed.

“A-plus, darling,” said Ruth, still throbbing uncontrollably. “You keep doing me like that and you’ll be having multiple orgasms, too.”

She rolled over and kissed me. Locked together, we gyrated around the bed, finally winding up on the floor. I pinned her shoulders to the floor.

“Tell me you love me,” said Ruth. “Just for the moment, convince me. You can take it back later.”

“I didn’t think you’d ever stop coming.”

“Tell me you love me,” she insisted.

I picked her up, placed her body on the bed, and propped several pillows under her head. “You’ve done this with other men. What makes me any different? That I should tell you I love you when I’m still vulnerable, wondering if this is a one-time thing.”

“Sure, there’ve been other men,” she said.

“I wanted you the night we met, even before you sat down at the

piano,” I said. “My impulse is to say *I love you*. I hold back because I’ve said it to other women from time to time and look how that turned out. Probably, my fault.”

“Sexual revolution or not, people are still bound by Victorian morality. They avoid talking about sex, so when they get down to it, there’s a lot of hesitation and confusion. Most don’t know what gets them off. I tell you what I like, and I’ll demand it of you.”

Ruth started caressing herself, fingering in among her pubic hairs. Was she going to want more, I wondered?

“There’s nothing wrong with a man sucking another man’s cock. It’s because I have a large clit that it makes you feel like you’re sucking off a man, you pervert,” she teased.

I fondled the silky down of her forearms, moving my hands slowly over her shoulders to her breasts. She sighed and started to explore my body.

“So, how do you know you have a large clit? Measuring a dick is easy. Men take showers together; they can size up each other’s dicks. A clit’s on the inside; you gotta pry it open to see it. Even then, it’s not evident,” I said. “You’re not a lesbian, are you?”

“No, but I— Hey, don’t tell me you never had a three-way.”

“Once almost... with this Jewish girl I was engaged to in Paris. She said she wanted to get it out of her system before our marriage. She wondered what it would be like with a woman and trying it once would tell her if she was a lesbian.”

“And?”

“It never happened. She was murdered right before.”

The change of topic perked her interest. She stopped caressing herself. “You serious?”

“She died in a terrorist attack,” I said.

“Whew, not a nice way to go, that.”

“Hey,” I said, “you want to rehearse some tunes?”

“Later,” she replied. “Now, I want you to know how I know I have a large clit.”

“Really. Girls talk about this?”

“My last three-way was with a saxophone player in LA—a white guy and his Black girlfriend with a .45-caliber clit.”

“A big one?”

“Very big. Sucking it made me fantasize I was giving a man a blow job,” she said. “I’ve had other threesomes; this one was special.”

“I don’t know if I could do a threesome with another man in it. It would have to be two women,” I said. “You went down on her? The Black chick?”

“That’s the whole point of it, dummy. A three-way means you do it three ways, go down on each other, and everything else, until—” said Ruth. “Anyway, she told me chicks come in three clit sizes: .45-caliber, .38, and .22. I’m a .38 special, she said, big for a skinny white girl.”

“Now you’ll have me wondering about the women I’ve slept with.”

“No different than men coming in all different sizes.”

“Do they, now? I never noticed.”

“Yup. Cap pistol to howitzer. Don’t worry, you’re a bazooka,” said Ruth, fondling my knob. “What about your Chinese girlfriend—.45 caliber or a .22? I’m curious.”

“She’s like, proper. Respectable. I doubt—”

“She’s proper and I’m some kind of slutty sex fiend? You bastard.” She spanked my knob then went down on it. When I started to harden, she stopped.

“Don’t stop.”

“All in good time,” she continued. “First tell me one thing you don’t like about it with her—sexually, that is. Be honest. There’s always something. Eventually, with me, there’ll be something. If there isn’t, you’re not very imaginative.”

“Come to think of it, she always refused to give me a blow job,” I said, “until recently when I was in the hospital.”

Ruth launched into an explanation, insisting it wasn’t shyness, but indoctrination. Nice girls are taught in boarding school that it’s a perversion. They still want to do it, but it takes a while to overcome their programming.

“She didn’t want to blow you,” said Ruth, “but she likes it when you do her, right?”

“Yeah, even the sloppy dog.”

“That proves she’s fascinated by the whole idea, enough to overcome her brainwashing, which she did with you in the hospital. What do you

think she'd do if you told her I sucked your cock and swallowed a mouthful of your jizz?"

"She's very competitive. Old-fashioned, but a threesome; I doubt it."

"Wanna bet? She's a woman, isn't she? She may love you to the grave, but sex and love are two different things. Women are more sensual than men, sex is our medium of expression. She'd not only like it; she'd love it. So would I."

"Hmm, I never thought of her that way."

"But you have pictured yourself in—"

"So has every man that ever lived; it's called the Sultan complex."

"Sultan complex?"

"I dunno. Just made it up. Harem idea and all," I said. "How would you go about it?"

"Easy, there are two ways. One, you discover me in bed with her; we invite you in. Two, she discovers me in bed with you; you invite her in. The first one is better, in most cases."

"You, seduce her? Don't make me laugh," I said.

"Oh yeah, we'd share a drink. I'd tell her you said she's dynamite in bed. Whether she'd admit it or not, she'd feel appreciated. Then, maybe I'd get up and walk around her. I'd find a way to touch her without offending her. From there, I'd tell her how much you miss her, that you are always talking about her. I was only a part-time diversion. We might even get to where I'd ask her to show me her tits. We'd kiss. Bingo!"

"That is real sick," I couldn't help laughing, "and devious."

"It's direct," said Ruth. "Tell me. How do you think she likes living here with you and your crazy vow? Does she masturbate?"

"Yeah," I said. "There's another thing: she has to smoke a joint before fucking."

"What does that have to do with masturbation?" she asked.

"Only that she told me masturbating was the only time she didn't smoke a joint before doing it."

"Peculiar, because that's when I like to smoke a joint, before climbing into a warm bath and getting myself off," said Ruth. "Oh well, that's what makes life interesting."

"Have you ever seduced a woman?" I asked.

“I’m not into women, but if I was, I’d probably target a girl like her, knowing that she likes you, knowing she’d be very sensual.”

“Sensual? What about Virginia?” I asked, “Her sensuality was like combat.”

“Virginia, the poor dear, is flirting with alcoholism. She needs big-time care.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be dissing her under the circumstances.”

“I still think she’ll turn up,” said Ruth.

“I do, too,” I said, fully aware that Virginia was lying at the bottom of Black Pond, and aware that I should continue to heed Lil’s cautionary instead of widening the circle. Discretion was one thing I could count on Lil for. As much as I’d enjoyed my romp with Ruth, it was too early for declaring love and for sharing confidences.

Just then, we heard noises from down below, a thud and a cry. I went to the window and stood there for a minute before looking out and seeing nothing and returning to bed.

“Nothing, nobody there,” I said to reassure Ruth.

“The Chinese are sex experts. In pleasing a man, they go way back, centuries,” said Ruth. “She’d do it to please you.”

“You make it sound like a game,” I said. “If she’s against it, we’d stop—”

“On second thought, it’d be better if she caught us in bed. You could appeal to her love for you,” said Ruth. “Hey, I’m not a witch. I’m not doing it to find out whose clit is larger. Like your Jewess, she’d be learning about her sexuality, from which she’d either recoil or become a devotee. It is the sexual revolution after all. The inexorable march of the tinkertoy.”

“Inexorable? Oral sex is still problematic for most women.”

“Now maybe, but someday. I don’t know when,” said Ruth, “the ordinary frump of a wife will have mastered the art of sucking cock. Don’t hold your breath; it may take years, but the genie’s out of the bottle.”

I looked over at the clock. “Wow, do you realize we’ve been talking about sex for two hours?”

“Who knows? This time tomorrow we may be into something else entirely. What tune do you want to do?”

“What about ‘Just One of Those Things?’”



SKIPPER WAS ANGRY. THE OFFHANDED WAY ROSCOE SCHINDLER HAD dismissed her timetable made her furious.

She called Ruth as soon as she got back to DC. Unable to reach her, she decided to drive over to her apartment and vent her wrath in person. She let herself into her sister's apartment around 8:00 p.m. No Ruth, only a notepad by the telephone with Gus's telephone number. Probably rehearsing, she reasoned, better not interfere. And yet, why not confront him? She was mad enough. She'd make him acknowledge that he was behind the delays. It had to be Gus and that two-faced Roscoe Schindler, who, at the very least, let himself be swayed. It had to be Gus; he was the only person who knew enough about her to turn Schindler against her, not that her debut had been canceled altogether, just put on hold. At first, Gus was her biggest supporter. Now, for some reason, he was trying to stop her. She wasn't about to let that happen.

She dialed Gideon Rath-Peabody's number. He answered with an unconvincing hello as if any caller without an engraved introduction was an intrusion; he perked up, however, when he heard Skipper's voice.

"Gideon, it's Miriam Sanchez. I need to talk to someone; thought you might be a good listener."

"Yes, Miriam, what is it?"

Skipper, preferring the name Miriam as her on-air public persona, wasted little time in confiding the details of her humiliation to Rath-Peabody. Each outrage, real or imagined, was leavened with a heavy dose of paranoia, feverishly disgorged for his consideration.

After a pause, Rath-Peabody began expounding in his usual foppish manner. "Thank you, Miriam dear, for confiding in me. I can think of a few approaches. Some are more easily managed than others. One option comes immediately to mind."

"I know there's been some bad blood between us. I'd like to apologize; I wasn't considering your feelings."

"That's water under the bridge, my dear," said Rath-Peabody. "What you must do now, Miriam, is seek redress for the injustices you've suffered. Here's one thing you might consider, along with breach of

contract, although they've probably protected themselves against legal remedies."

"Yes, my contract is revocable at their discretion."

"So, now you go to war in the media, perhaps you might consider a scenario like this: All networks are gearing up for the debuts of women correspondents in the coming year. It's a big media event as well as a breakthrough for women. Get them behind you, Miriam, in a movement and, with a little well-coordinated media effort, you could make Roscoe Schindler and Gus Mazur squirm. Might even get the WBN board to act. Television jobs are tenuous. A mere trifle, a word misplaced, an insult imputed, and it's off to the breadline—subject, of course, to intense media pressure, which your humble servant can supply. And who knows—what people think today can be made into something entirely different for tomorrow."

"I've made friends with women at all the networks and newspapers. They're militant when it concerns employment."

"Good. That's something we can control and shape, dear Miriam. Remember, the sweeps are coming up in February; management will be vigilant. Let's meet soon, and talk a little more."

When Skipper hung up the phone, she found herself staring at the notepad with Gus's name and number on it. A touch relieved now and feeling more confident, she decided to pay Gus an impromptu visit, convinced he'd given himself away as the mastermind behind her demotion, which, if true, would be even more satisfying if it lowered him in Ruth's eyes.

When Skipper got to the corner of Eighteenth and Columbia Road, she hesitated, thinking: *What if the Chinese bitch is there and not Ruthie?* She walked around the back of the building to check out the cars. No sign of Ruth's car or the Chrysler. That made her shift her attention to the adjacent building with the flat roof about ten feet below Gus's bedroom windows. Someone athletically gifted, she reasoned, could shinny up the metal fence to the flat roof, from where she could hear what was going on. If she heard Ruth, she'd go to the front door and press the buzzer. It was only 8:30 p.m. If she heard other voices, the Chinese girl's, for instance, she'd go home.

Imagine her surprise when she got to the flat roof after a concerted

effort and heard not only voices but the sighs and moans of passionate lovemaking. Not the China girl's voice, but her sister Ruth's voice—moments of tender cooing alternating with the noises of bodies slapping together.

Skipper stood it as long as possible until she almost screamed. Mercifully, she subdued her rage and backtracked, taking this new humiliation with her as she descended. After lots of gymnastics, she got to where she was swinging from the fence with the ground three feet below her. She'd have to drop. In this instance, dropping three feet to the ground, her right foot landed half on a flat surface and half on air, causing her ankle to buckle inward with a cracking sound. The noise of her yelp and the thud of her body's awkward touchdown had her crawling to the wall just as the sounds from Gus's apartment ceased. Thinking Gus would be looking out the window, Skipper flattened herself against the wall of the building. In silence, she recalled how she'd occasionally wondered if their rehearsals were not rehearsals, but something more intimate.

At that moment, all she could think about was Ruth O'Malley, the sister who'd betrayed her. Memories of early childhood and Ruth's slightly superior attitude, even as a teenager, came flooding back. Ruth was the stable one, always sympathetic and ready to help—a highly educated social worker and an outwardly secure woman. Okay, she had an unconventional side, playing jazz piano and horseback riding. That she seemed to prefer horses to humans was another thing Skipper found repugnant. She'd heard rumors that girls who loved horses were into kinky sex. Fact or fiction, she didn't know. Just that someone so superficially congenial could be hiding a secret existence, which led her to reflect on Ruth's body. Physically, she was pretty, even sexy, with her black hair cut short. Not drop-dead beautiful like Virginia. Long and lithe, her figure stood out even though her tits were not as fully developed as those of her two sisters. As a teenager, she'd worn a padded bra to compensate and joked about it with her sisters. But she was sensitive and defensive, a chink in the image of what she would like the outside world to see of her. Skipper wondered if that was why she was so secretive as if she had an alternative persona that she kept hidden. When kidded about it by her sisters, Ruth replied, "When I produce two or three children, my tits will fill in naturally from babies suckling."



As she limped to her car, Skipper was accompanied by the opening strains of Cole Porter's masterpiece.



DETECTIVE MARVA TREE DROVE TO OCCOQUAN TO EFFECT CLORIS Tucker's release and bring her back to DC, resuming the cat and mouse game that had shaped their previous dealings. The buddy-buddy approach of cop and suspect hardly ever worked, but Cloris was different—even Sergeant Linehan had to admit it. Most hookers, part-time or other, don't attend Ivy League universities. They don't rise out of impoverished Rhode Island circumstances. They don't graduate cum laude from Brown University, and they don't work for influential political organizations. And now, it surprised her to see how quickly things changed once the investigation began, thus giving rise to the realization that she'd been but a token to the rich.

In contrast, Miriam Sanchez came from a prestigious family. An Olympic-level hockey player and an up-and-coming media personality, she was not about to lose standing.

By the time they crossed the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, Marva Tree had exhausted every gambit in the police playbook to convince her charge that she was alone. Had Miriam visited her at Occoquan? No! Could Detective Linehan expunge all traces of criminality from her record? Yes! Could they fix it so she could resume her job? Yes!

Still, Cloris demurred. Even after they were dancing at The Place, Cloris kept repeating that she knew nothing. That's when Marva whirled her around and Cloris came face-to-face with Skipper not six feet away, dancing with a young Peruvian girl.

"What the fuck—?" screamed Cloris, disengaging herself from Marva. "While I'm rotting in the joint for you, you're with this shepherd girl? Where's your flute, bitch?" demanded Cloris. "Is that all you can do? Look at me like the startled sheep you are?"

"And what about you, romancing a cop?" asked the startled Skipper.

In the semi-darkness it was easy for Marva to slip away while the frightened Peruvian was getting an earful from Cloris, causing her to flee, leaving Cloris and Skipper to exchange insults until they'd

exhausted the drama and ended up sharing a drink before walking home arm in arm.

Having slipped out of the club unnoticed, Marva drove halfway down the block and pulled over. What Cloris didn't know was the police had sewn a tiny all-in-one mic and transmitter into the lining of her purse. It wasn't the best solution. No one takes a purse to bed, which is exactly where the two of them ended up once they got over their mutual indignation and they were lovers again.

By then, all Marva Tree was able to record were a few protestations of love and a few inquiries from Skipper as to Cloris's treatment in prison. Skipper had not yet deluged her lover with an account of the indignities heaped upon her by Roscoe Schindler and Gus Mazur as well as the police. Cloris, too, refrained from disclosing the details of her incarceration. That was reserved for later when the purse and its hidden mic were two rooms away from their bed. The recordings were useless, but planting an undercover officer, masquerading as a Peruvian, to lure Skipper to The Place worked like a charm.

I SLEPT VERY LITTLE DURING A NIGHT THAT FEATURED A LONG SESSION of automatic writing. *Alice better. Hospital. Be there.* Once back in bed, I slept until 8:30 a.m. It was a fitful sleep; I missed Lil's comforting. Winding me down was her specialty—soothing me like no other woman ever had, melting away my frustrations—a combination of softly spoken encouragements and tender hands. But Lil was in New York. That left Ruth.

After our steamy encounter, I called her the following morning, eager for more, but unable to reach her. That day and each day after that for a week. When she finally answered, she was cold and indifferent, fending off my attempts at intimacy. What was I supposed to do, I wondered, beg? Something, thanks to Charles Dickens, I wasn't about to do.

I put thoughts of womankind aside and focused on the opportunity I'd been given by making *Charles Dickens* the best documentary WBN had ever produced, a trade-off I had no trouble making once I got started. Instead of sex fantasies spinning around in my head, Charles Dickens occupied that space. Not that I didn't think of Lil, Ruth, and

even Skipper and their effect on my life, I did. But by working on a long-form documentary from a producer's perspective, I felt immediately comfortable, as if I'd been doing it all my life: writing, producing, directing, and editing all rolled into one. Creativity and responsibility, the twin spirits of Dickens's fertile imagination, had descended upon me from the ether, forming a single-mindedness that had me recalling a section of the book Ming Lo had given me.

---

“The hen can hatch her eggs because her heart is always listening.’ This is an important magic spell. The way a hen gives life to an egg is by giving it warm energy; warm energy can only warm the shell but cannot penetrate the inside. Therefore, she conducts this energy inward with her heart. This is the act of listening with single-minded attention. When attention penetrates, the energy enters, and the warm energy brings life to the egg.”

---

These words aren't easily assimilated, but since the incident in Chicago and its aftereffects, I'd become aware of the immaterial, the certainty that something beyond the physical world existed. Behaviors kept popping up. Automatic writing, unexpected abilities, momentary visions, temporary or fleeting, bursts of energy, and moments of exhaustion now affected me in strange ways. A sudden rush of commitment: becoming a man and putting away childish things. An epiphany.

I wasn't through with Ruth; I didn't know if she was through with me. I decided to wait, fearing the worst, that she had no real interest in a relationship.

I learned Ruth wasn't one to be pressured. More Diana than Aphrodite, she was a huntress not a romantic. When we finally did talk, she monopolized the conversation, steering it to a congressional study she was leading on a vexing issue that haunted social workers: Was it better to remove children from extremely difficult, even dangerous, family situations, or should they remain with their families, supported by the full array of provider services that states and counties have at their disposal? The back-and-forth of this debate—the oscillations between

the two methodologies—followed the phases of the moon as much as anything else, she explained. Start with the general mood in Washington (liberal or conservative). Add a dash of the prevailing attitudes of the time. For or against removing children? Ruth swore this study would reveal the truth, funded as it was by the federal government. She was a believer, an advocate of the right way. Which way that was she hadn't quite figured out. Everything, she said, was ass-backward: in times when the public wanted stricter controls, the prevailing wisdom favored leniency; in more forgiving times, it sought more control. Such are the ways of a federalist government, she insisted, and she was the one to unsnarl them.

The day before we recorded Dirk Bogarde's narration (the session had been put off when Herb died), I woke with the memory of an assignment but without any specifics. I brushed my teeth, pausing to look at myself in the mirror when I finished as if my reflection might jog my memory. To no avail.

After showering, I dressed and left for WBN, halting by the door to my office for no specific reason. And yet, by being there in time and space, I remembered getting up in the middle of the night. There, staring back at me from my desk on the top page of my scribbles, was the mnemonic: *Aunt Alice is about to revive*. I'd seen it in my dream states, visualized it, written it down, and forgotten about it. Now I remembered it. I needed to be there because she needed a familiar face, my face. I'd visited her every day, including the previous day, without any signs of recovery. As usual, the doctors offered little consolation. I sensed they'd more or less given up. I'd be there to make sure that would not happen.

I chained the BMW to a railing and walked into George Washington Hospital. A Doctor Susan greeted me on the way to my aunt's room. (*S-U-S-A-N* were the only clear characters on her tag, the rest of the letters were smudged: Paine, Pane, Blaine, Bane. I gave up trying to read it).

"Where's the other doctor?" I asked, trying to contain my delight at having this tall, friendly blond person assigned to my aunt's case.

"You're Gus Mazur, right? I recognize you," she said. "The hospital reckons your aunt might need a change."

"That's what I've been calling them about. According to your, what-

do-you-call-it, mission statement, all doctors are good. You don't admit that some are better than others."

"Some are, for some things, but not for others. Yes," she said.

"Typical circle the wagons rationalization."

"Great, we're on the same page," she said. "Shall we look in on your aunt?"

"I had the strangest presentiment last night and this morning that something's going to happen," I said. "Do you believe in presentiments?"

"Can you be more specific?" asked Dr. Susan.

"That I'd witness her complete revival," I continued.

"I heard about your ordeal. How are you feeling now?" she asked.

"Ninety-two percent," I said as we ducked into Alice's private room.

Almost immediately, there came a stirring, as if Alice sensed something, a presence. Sporadic coughing to clear the throat, a change in breathing cadence, a rolling twisting of the shoulders.

It was awful (full of awe); a benign wonderment had gripped the room. It was contagious. Both of us sensed it. Dr. Susan looked at me. "Your hair's standing on end."

"She's just getting started. Look."

Alice's eyes began to flutter. "My God," exclaimed the doctor, immediately applying her stethoscope, next barking out medicines and dosages on the phone.

"You gonna fill her full of drugs?" I asked. "Wouldn't it be better to wait and watch what happens?" I asked.

"Just want to be ready, in case."

More coughing up than coughing, as if expelling private terrors. Suddenly, her eyes opened. The doctor shook her head, looked at me, and started to say something that never materialized

"Auntie—"

"I must have dozed off. Now I have a headache," declared Aunt Alice. "Who are you?"

The doctor and I exchanged glances.

"This is doctor—" I said. "What is your name?"

"Bane, Susan," said the doctor, as she continued to apply her stethoscope to various locations on Alice's torso.

At a loss for words, I could only look on as the doctor examined Alice: her pulse, her eyes, her throat: the rest of her.

“Why the tears, dear boy? Is something the matter?”

“You recognize me?” I asked.

“Why, of course,” said Alice, pausing for a moment to survey the situation. “Where—I’m—in the hospital, I gather. Whatever for?”

“You’ve been in the hospital for almost two months.”

“Two months!”

“Well,” said the doctor, “you’re awake and apparently in good form.”

“That’s good news, Auntie,” I said. “A lot has happened since you’ve been here.”

“Better she gets her bearings,” whispered Doctor Bane, “before submerging her in details.”

“Nonsense, I’m perfectly lucid. Details, nephew, details.”



SINCE MY RECENT EPIPHANY, A GRADUAL, ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE, change in my circadian rhythm occurred. I’d been offered an assignment that required devoting more waking hours than my metabolism was used to, a fully functioning ten to twelve hours on an average day. Although this effort induced a kind of euphoria, I neglected the meditation Ming Lo had prescribed.

Bolstered by the gradual disappearance of the hematoma that had covered my face, I began to feel invincible, taking on additional tasks from time to time. Like the time Carlotta needed an interview with Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL) for the China Lobby story. I arranged it on short notice.

As he was prone to do with young reporters, the senator had taken me under his wing, so to speak. That Carlotta was a favorite of his didn’t hurt. The interview kicked off with a summary of my Chicago misfortunes, after which he regaled us with a brief account of his career in the newspaper business, meant to underline his sympathy with working reporters.

“Senator Dirksen, we know the president has the NSA listening into Nixon’s phone conversations,” said Carlotta. “What we don’t know is

why he won't bring what he's heard to the attention of the American people, even though he calls it treason privately."

"Who told you this?" asked the senator, once he understood where the exchange was headed and we would not be deterred. I could see him struggling to decide whether to cut the interview short or let it continue to find out how much we knew.

"We know RN," continued Carlotta, "is sending Anna Chennault to Vietnam to convince President Diem he'll get a better peace deal with Nixon than with a democrat, even though the negotiations in Paris are now largely agreed upon; the treaty could be signed today, this instant, but for her interference."

"We also know the president says this is treason, but he doesn't want to release this information, even though its release would probably tip the election to Humphrey and save the lives of American soldiers still fighting there," I said. "Why is that?"

"You'd have to ask the president, now, wouldn't you?" replied Dirksen.

"That might be difficult to do, sir," continued Carlotta, smiling to offset Dirksen's growing annoyance.

"I dare say it would," replied Dirksen.

"Senator," I began, "we don't want to take up your valuable time. One last question: If it was proven that someone (RN, for example) is responsible, that he is behind Kissinger's and Chennault's efforts to delay and undermine the peace talks, would you agree with President Johnson that this interference is treasonous?"

Before he could consider the question, Senator Dirksen found himself answering impulsively, "Yes, I would."

Walking westward along Constitution Avenue from the Senate office building to the Chrysler parked on the mall, I amused Carlotta with a tale about my GW days, working on the roof of the National Museum of American History as we passed that venerable building. "I oversaw the air-conditioning unit, an immense self-contained erector set consisting of thousands of small pieces of California redwood that we had to assemble. Anyway, this Black guy who was working with me bet he could throw a baseball from the roof of our building across Constitution Avenue to the roof of the building across the street. It looked doable, but high off-the-

ground distances are deceiving. Finally, me and another guy took his bet for a hundred dollars each.”

“A lotta money in those days,” said Carlotta, “for a laborer. What happened?”

“I made a hundred dollars.”

“And the ball?”

“It didn’t even make it to the curb on our side of Constitution Avenue.”

“Is there a moral to your story?” asked Carlotta.

“Yeah, there just may be one.”

“Which is?”

“When you get ahead of yourself and take on too much, and things are going good, you can persuade yourself that you can do anything, and you bite off too much. I gave the money back, by the way.”

Once settled in the car, Carlotta and I discussed the interview that might never see the light of day. Dirksen’s slip of the tongue had revealed his true feelings. Now, we had two priorities: finding out why President Johnson refused to reveal Nixon’s treachery and obtaining proof that RN himself was behind the plot to delay signing the peace treaty—an illegal scheme resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Americans each day the war continued. This, we agreed, was not only news; it was a criminal plot that needed a hands-on FBI investigation. Had an ordinary citizen done this, he would already be behind bars, charged with violation of federal law.

We arrived at WBN eager to compare notes with the team in New York as to the network’s resolve to carry the story. It was almost too politically charged, but we didn’t expect that to deter LBJ.

Tales of foreign intrigue, private individuals sabotaging diplomatic initiatives, wiretapping, Mata Hari operatives— If it were to get out, it would add to the public distrust of government. Neither party was immune; both, according to the polls, were distrusted. And yet, failure to release this story meant not only the probable demise of Hubert Humphrey’s election prospects, but it also threatened the nation’s future. Do the American people want a Machiavellian conspirator running the country without laws restricting his activities?

We conferenced via the trunk line with New York. Roscoe Schindler



insisted there was no reason to doubt WBN's commitment to uncovering the plot. WBN wanted the story, and they would air it as soon as proof of RN's involvement was obtained. "Not only are we going to air this story, no matter what—it's a priority. Don't let us down," said Schindler.

Feeling we'd crossed the final hurdles, barring the unforeseen, we called Lil and the others to finalize things. Before the conversation got going, before the hellos were over, I heard the Wolff's anxious voice cry out, "Gus, Lil's disappeared."

"What? When?" asked Carlotta.

"She told us she was supposed to meet someone at a mutual friend's house," said Reggie, "and then drift into another part of the house to snoop around China Lobby offices."

"She went in, but she never came back out. It's been a day, now. We didn't want to panic," said the Wolff. "We thought she might have spent the night."

"I got her into this," I said, "it's up to me to get her out. I'll catch the next plane."

"We never did have a backup plan, in case something went wrong," said Carlotta. "We're going to need one now. Are you sure you're not making this too personal, Gus? Trying to throw a baseball across Constitution Avenue, are you?"

"Apples and oranges," I said. "Don, why don't you come back here, and follow up with Carlotta? Reggie and I will get Lil."

Carlotta and Don tried to discourage me, saying I was still not a hundred percent and they'd handle things.

"Reggie, I'll meet you at her house in the Mews when I get there, about four thirty," I said.

"She had the keys," replied Reggie.

"Don't worry, I have a key," I said. "Whatever happens, I need to be there."



AS MY TAXI APPROACHED THE WASHINGTON MEWS, I TOLD THE driver to let me out at the beginning of the block, just before the gate to

the Mews. It was then that I saw Reggie Blaze standing discreetly in the shadows away from the streetlight.

Good man, I thought, we should probably talk plans before going in blazing, marine-style. Figuratively, not literally, of course. Neither of us had a gun. You could get in real trouble carrying a gun without a license in the Big Apple. That much I knew.

As soon as the taxi drove off, I moved into in the shadows alongside Reggie, who filled me in on Lil. As Reggie spoke, I realized I didn't know all that much about her. Nothing about her friends and not all that much about her parents; I'd met neither.

Lil told me she was studying for a real estate license in DC. What that had to do with the present situation, if anything, I couldn't imagine. Lil, a person I'd been intimate with for a year, was for all intents a woman of mystery!

"You're the leader, my man," said Reggie, "What's first?"

"I'm thinking we move into Lil's house undetected. No lights," I replied, "while we look things over. The house across the street is a good place to start."

"Sit in the dark and think, eh?" echoed Reggie.

"'They also serve who only stand and wait...'" I said. "The woman who lives across the street is Chinese. I have a feeling if we remain inconspicuous, something's going to happen that will clear this up."

"Okay, let's go."

It was dark when we entered Lil's house. I took out a small flashlight and we walked through the house room by room until we ended up on the second floor in the living room that looked out on the Mews.

Motioning for Reggie to stay back, I approached the window, standing off to the side so I couldn't be seen while I studied the street. I could feel Reggie's impatience, his heavy nasal breathing. As if coming out of a trance, I found my attention fixated on the house in front. A name came to me. *Evelyn*. A real person with an actual role in Lil's life. Her landlady lived in that house. She was older than Lil by ten to twelve years. I told Reggie about our long-ago, madcap first night together. The cops, Evelyn's coming to the rescue, Lil playing the piano, the drunken Coop.

"What are we waiting for?" asked Reggie.

“I don’t know, Reggie,” I said. “Like you, my first impulse is to burst in, confront her. Then I’m thinking, we have no proof she’s involved; it may be better to watch. Someone is in there; it’s all lit up. There’s sure to be some comings and goings.”

“We don’t have that much time,” advised Reggie. “Only five days till the election and, once we get the story, we’ll need time to finish putting it together. At least three days.”

“Right. It’s just that I have this feeling,” I said. “Did Lil mention the house across the street to you?”

“Yes, she did,” replied Reggie, then adding somewhat skeptically. “A feeling. I have a feeling we should notify the police.”

“Tell you what,” I said, “we watch the house across the street until eight a.m. tomorrow—four hours on, four off—Marine Corps-style. If nothing by then, we go over the top. Who knows? They may be eager to help. I’ll take the first watch.”

“Why don’t we turn on a light downstairs,” suggested Reggie. “That way, while we’re watching, if we see someone and they notice the light, it may shake them up if they’ve been watching the house...”

“...and tell us that they’re up to something,” I said. “Great idea, man.”

When his watch was over, Reggie regaled me with everything he’d done to keep his mind off cuddling up to Carlotta. Once he let himself snuggle up to her in his dream state, he’d be done for, he said.

“Sleeping on guard duty was the worst offense a marine can commit,” he said. “I’m not used to it anymore.”

The cold had him on the verge of giving up. He said it reminded him of NATO, a stint as aide-de-camp to Colonel Reynald, the Marine Corps observer, shivering in the mountains during NATO maneuvers somewhere in Finland; it was that cold. Freezing his ass off—

*His ass off... Wake up!* He’d been inside a dream, dreaming he was telling me about a dream he’d once had—

And with that, he woke in time to see a delivery van pull up in front of the house across the street.

I heard Reggie scuttle across the room. “Hey, man,” he said, shaking me. I was already awake. I gathered up my shoes and tiptoed over to the window.

“It just pulled up—that van.”

“What’s that writing on it?” I asked as I put on my shoes. “Can you read it?”

“Looks like ‘Tao of Transport.’”

“*Tao of Transport!* That Lil’s father’s company. Tao is her last name,” I said.

A man exited the vehicle, walking slowly to the back of the van.

“Now what?” asked Reggie.

“Okay, Mazur, think fast, you son of a bitch,” I said, grinding out the words under my breath.

The man took out a key, unlocked the double doors in the back of the van, and started to step up into the van. One leg up, he halted. Reggie and I watched him hesitate, then withdraw his leg from the bumper, stand back and look around, stopping when something caught his attention. Hurriedly, he closed the doors without locking them and headed toward the front door of the house, where he paused to look back at Lil’s house again. Judging from the man’s reaction, Reggie’s ploy had worked.

“Let’s go,” shouted Reggie.

“Not so loud, Lieutenant, sir,” I said as we bounded downstairs and up to the front door. “Here’s the deal: if she’s in the van, I’ll grab her; you hide on this side of the street in case more than one asshole comes out the door, you provide reinforcements if they jump me.”

“Are you sure you’re up to it? Full strength, and all?”

“Full strength! I could pick that girl up and carry her in my arms in a marathon around Central Park if there was one.”

“Okay, my man,” said Reggie. “I figure we have about three minutes, at most.”

“I’ll be back in half that time,” I said. “I bet the bastards have her wrapped up and ready to barbecue.”

I darted across the narrow street to the van, opened the door, and looked in. I turned to signal Reggie, who signaled back, then I jumped into the van and picked up a large mummy-shaped bundle wrapped in a mover’s padded blanket and tied up with heavy bungee cords. Quickly, I crossed the street, with the bundle in my arms, accompanied by an assortment of noises from within the bundle.

I deposited it with Reggie and returned to the van. Reggie whisked

his charge into the house, leaving her kicking and grumbling, while he returned to the van.

He found me rolling up some small sacks and boxes and wrapping them up in a similar blanket, whereupon I secured the lot with bungee cords. We placed this dummy in the spot vacated by the previous package and scurried back to the house.

Lil continued to thrash about as she tried to wiggle her way free from her wrappings. I carried her upstairs. “If they do try something, we call the police and they’ll be vacationing on Rikers for the next two weeks as WBN lawyers have their asses on charges of kidnapping and assault. Let the bastards come over. We’re ready for them.”

While Reggie watched the street, I unwrapped the package, head first. I was about to remove the tape over her mouth when I noticed a bandana tied around her eyes. I cut the ropes binding her legs and arms and peeled off the tape covering her mouth as gently as possible. “Ouch!” she screeched. Finally, I removed the bandana.

“Wait till my friends catch up with you. They know where I am. That’ll be it for you. Let me go.” She was repeating similar warnings in Chinese when her eyes adjusted to the light and she realized she was safe; Reggie and I had grabbed her.

“You guys, you guys, she said, throwing herself into my arms.

“They’re coming out. One guy’s looking in the back, seems to think everything is okay. He’s closing the doors. They’re leaving,” said Reggie. “Wait till they get where they’re going!”

As Reggie and I watched the spectacle, Lil worked the rest of her free. Mussed up, groggy, and blinking a lot, I thought she was going to cry—finding out, instead, that I was the one crying.

“Shush...” she whispered.

“I was so worried, baby.”

“Oh, Gus. Darling. You found me. How did you find me, by the way?” She looked around her. “And my own house. How’d you get— That’s right. You have a key.”

“Your house? I thought you rented.”

“I did. I got my parents to buy it for me—my father’s quite rich, you know. They were worried about me and my China Lobby snooping. So, I

promised to drop it if they bought us the house for a wedding present,” said Lil.

“Oh, Lil. You’re amazing,” I said. “But how did you know I was going to marry you?”

“You’re the only one that didn’t know it. Men!”

“Do they know some of their employees are working for the Lobby, using his delivery truck?” asked Reggie.

“No.” Lil shook her head. “I lied about dropping it. They’ll be angry for a while... at least until the piece airs, and it will. I got the proof. It’s in the camera I tossed into the bushes just before I was caught.”

“Across the street in those bushes?” asked Reggie.

“Is that a problem?” asked Lil.

“Oh no. Piece of cake.”

“What do you say I go downstairs and turn out that light,” said Reggie, “then on this floor I turn on this light here, to hopefully confuse them even more, you know, while you two get reacquainted.”

“Fine idea, *mon lieutenant*. We’ll have to wait to go across.”

Forty-five minutes later Reggie was watching Evelyn’s house when the van returned. Two men got out. “It’s the same two guys,” he said. “They’re trying to decide. Uh-oh, one’s heading for Evelyn’s. He’s in; the other can’t make up his mind. He’s coming this way. Come here, Lil.”

“Hold on,” said Lil, who had just finished flipping pancakes onto a platter I was holding.

“Quick, Gus.”

“I’m coming.”

“The first one’s coming back from the house with a woman. The others crossed the street halfway. Do you know them?” I asked.

“Never got a good look at my kidnappers,” replied Lil. “The woman is Evelyn.”

“She’s coming to our door. The two men are standing in the middle of the street. Get ready to call 911, Reggie,” I said. “Wait, she’s stopped. She’s turning back. They’re all going back.”

“Now’s the time to grab the camera,” said Lil. “I’d like to do it.”

“Whoa, you’ll do no such thing,” I said. “I don’t want my wife doing crazy shit.”

“Oh, darling. I’ll be the greatest—”

“Hush.”

With that, Reggie opened the door and sped across the street. He poked around looking left and right until he spotted something. He leaned over to grab it just as the door opened again.

Lil and I felt our hearts in our throats as we watched Reggie scurry behind a bush. “I’m calling 911,” I said.

“Wait,” said Lil, “He’s only tossing a cigarette.”

It took Reggie four bounds to cross the street. We heard the door open and close. In a matter of seconds, he was at the top of the stairs doubled over.

“I figured this was one time,” he said, “my skin color gave me an advantage; they couldn’t see me in the dark. Don’t tell Carlotta I said that.”

Finally, after shaking Reggie’s hand, I released a loud, “Whew.”

“Whew is right,” yawned Lil. “Let’s eat.”

“HOW DO YOU FEEL? DON’T SAY REFRESHED,” LIL SAID THE NEXT morning. “It wouldn’t do justice to the way you just did me.”

I rolled her over laughing, “So true, little kitten.”

I kissed her. “Let’s pack up.”

After coffee and my Earl Grey tea, Reggie went out to hail a cab. Lil and I waited behind the front door, ready to jump into the cab when Reggie returned.

“Have you changed your mind?” asked Lil, somewhat sheepishly. “I want you to declare yourself once and for all. If you demur again—well, I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“People usually don’t,” I said, “except to imagine the closing of a mantrap with visions of backyards with swings and laughing children chasing each other around. Phew, how did I ever get so fucked up as to treat you like shit? Yes, I love you. Looking into your eyes, I love you. Whispering in your ear, I love you.”

As we entered the Eastern Air Line shuttle lineup, Lil asked, “What do you think WBN will do with Evelyn’s bunch? Have them arrested?”

“All I know,” I said, “is I’m keeping you close to me from now on. No more counterspy, girl.”

“By the way,” asked Lil, “how much of this was you having some kind of vision?”

“Let’s say I had a feeling about Evelyn and the house across the street once we got into your house,” I replied. “Reggie was skeptical.”

“Won’t bullshit you. I thought we were on a mission impossible,” said Reggie. “Get you back in little pieces, we would. But no, you turned out to be a star reporter. Pulitzer, anyone?”



“TELL ME, DEARIE, ONCE AND FOR— NO ONE TELLS ME ANYTHING around here. They ask a lot of questions, but no one tells me— They won’t answer me. It’s always, ‘Lay back and rest.’ ‘It’s time for your medication.’ Or ‘I’ll talk to someone who knows.’ But no one ever comes. I can’t read the newspaper because I can’t focus. My eyes. So, I tell them: Have someone read it to me.”

“Which newspaper do you want, Auntie?” I asked.

“I have them all,” said Alice. “I just can’t read them.”

“When did this happen, your eyes?”

“Don’t change the subject, Nephew. The election. When is it?”

“It’s tomorrow, Auntie, Tuesday, the fifth of November,” I replied, tossing my arms in frustration.

“Tomorrow? The last thing I remember, it was summer, I think. Was it August when I—?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it. August— I was sure.” Alice glanced wistfully at me. My aunt—the terror who brooked no rival in anything, not among friends or enemies; the mistress of the moment—now barely holding back tears. Talk about trading places; I was now the parent to both my father and my aunt. Perhaps, it had always been that way without me ever realizing it. Nah...

“Well, let’s see,” I said, snatching several newspapers from the sliding table, “what we have here? Ah—”

“Oh, dear boy, you have exceeded all—”

“The *Post* and the *Times*. Enticing headlines, ‘Late Spurt by Humphrey Turns Pennsylvania into Horse Race but May Be Too Late,’ by Leroy



Aarons, *Washington Post* staff writer. No, you wouldn't want that, wouldn't want you to excite yourself."

"Noooo, dear boy. Don't tease me. Read that, please."

"Don't you want to hear more headlines? We have time."

"Might as well."

"Here goes: 'Humphrey Prods Thieu to Join Parley: Johnson at Humphrey's Side.' That's the *New York Times*, R. W. Apple Jr. special to the *New York Times*. And the winner is... Stop the presses: 'Pledge Repeated in Call to Johnson: "Would Never Have Agreed": Unconcerned by Polls Nixon Would Go to Paris.' Wow, they sure crammed a lot of words into those headlines."

"Nixon! What's that scurrilous dog, that cake-eater been up to? Read the article."

"What's a 'cake-eater,' Aunt Alice? You never did tell me," I teased.

"A person who tries to— Oh, you know," said Alice. "Just read, Nephew, please."

"'Don Oberdorfer, *Washington Post* staff writer. Los Angeles, November 3. Brimming with confidence in victory and speaking already of his plans as president-elect, Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon volunteered today to fly to Paris or Saigon after the election to move the peace talks off dead center.'" I sighed, adding my commentary: "Which is exactly where he put them. But WBN HQ wouldn't let us run the story and it's too late now anyway, the election in the bag for Tricky Dick. He wouldn't have to fly anywhere; all he'd need to do is have his flunky Kissinger call Thieu and tell him to start the talks again."

"He did that? How dare he?"

"That part of the story you'll now get from the horse's mouth," I said nodding toward the young woman in the doorway whose Chanel perfume proceeded her. "This is Lil, Auntie, my girl, Lil."

"I know my eyes aren't what they used to be, but from where I'm sitting, your girl looks Chinese. Do you have that impression, Nephew?"

"Not only is your impression accurate, Aunt Alice, your vision is also improved. Lil, this is aunt Alice. You may decide among yourselves what you want to call each other. I have suitable names for you both in case you can't come up—"

"Sushi, nephew."

"I'm so glad to finally meet you, Alice."

"What a darling girl! I love the name Lil, dearie."

"And I like the name, Alice."

"Say, you are looking sharp today," I remarked, as I looked Lil over. "What's the occasion?"

"Dinner at Duke Zeibert's, remember? My reward for overcoming the forces of mammon—"

"The forties look. I love it. A black-and-white vintage dress with shoulder pads, set off by a pearl choker, broad-brimmed hat, and red heels. Doesn't she look great, Auntie?" I asked. "Perhaps even original, a never-to-be-seen-again, a revelation."

Aunt Alice nodded her agreement. She wanted to hear more about Nixon.

"And what about your Roscoe Schindler-inspired double-breasted suit, my dear?" asked Lil. "No trouble with the reservations this time. You're famous, partner."

"It's the only way to live in a capitalist society: have your money or your fame working for you," I said, savoring the irony. "Now, where were we?"

"You were—" said Alice, "Lil was about to tell us about Nixon and the peace talks."

"Oh, yes. Well," began Lil, "Gus's friends at WBN got wind that Nixon was using Anna Chennault as an emissary whose mission it was to persuade Thieu to walk away from the negotiations right when they were all but settled, telling him he'd get a much better deal—more troops, more money—once Nixon was elected president, which would surely happen if the talks collapsed."

"Sounds like RN revealing himself as a traitor—" said Alice.

"Traitor, yes, if we could prove that Nixon himself had given the order," I said. "And that's what Lil did. She has a house in the Washington Mews—"

"I love the Mews. They're so... so colonial," said Alice.

"That they are, Auntie," I said, impatiently. "Anyway, across the street from Lil's house lives a woman, once a friend and landlord of hers, who turned out to be a member of the China Lobby."

“Intrigue, I love it,” said Alice. “I knew Anna Chennault... during the war, very tenacious. Digs in like a pit bull, won’t let go.”

“Well, this bit of intrigue will cost at least a hundred American lives, perhaps, even more, every day the Vietnam War drags on, all because the South Vietnamese left the talks. What did Nixon and his gang care if Americans and Vietnamese are dying?” I asked. “Anyway, Lil snuck into the house across the street, found the paper trail implicating Nixon, photographed it, then tossed the camera out the window into the bushes, just before she was caught. The hardest part was retrieving the camera.”

“Luckily, Gus and his friend were following events from my house across the street. They got me out when my captors weren’t looking. I don’t know what would have happened otherwise,” said Lil.

“You poor dear,” said my aunt.

“The fact that our exposé never aired,” I said, “well, you can thank your friend LBJ for that one.”

“I’m hated by my own people,” said Lil. “They say, ‘Artists like you think you’re superior, that you don’t need your people,’ and I say they’re right. I spent fifteen years trying to escape their conformity.”

“It’s the same for all artists, my dear,” said Alice. “My husband, Gus’s uncle, struggled against convention his whole life. The right path is somewhere in between.”

“Why, Auntie,” I said, “that’s a Buddhist pronouncement. Very inclusive.”

“Stick with him, he’s a good man,” said Alice, motioning toward me. “He’ll protect you. I’m sure.”



THE ROOM WAS DARK, THE FLICKER OF JERRY CUGGINI’S MOVIOLA screen the only clue as to what was taking place. From time to time, I made suggestions to Jerry on changes to the rough cut we were screening. Now and then, I hit the clutch and we discussed a particular cut or sequence in detail.

“What about those scenes from Metro?” I asked. “Have they sent them over? The 1935 film stuff? And the Rank Organization footage—the 1958 version with our man Dirk Bogarde as Sydney Carton. It’s

almost too coincidental. So, we have the Dickens character riding the train, piecing together the ending of *A Tale of Two Cities* in his mind, and right where I stopped it, we go inside his head and insert the dungeon scene, the one between Ronald Coleman and the little seamstress as they're waiting to be led to the guillotine. It's him visualizing a very emotional scene, both for him and for our ending."

"It's black and white," said Jerry. "Both the 1935 and the 1958 versions are."

"Yeah, you're right and that's a turnoff for younger viewers. We can use it as a convention: every time we go inside Dickens's head, we do it in black and white. The narration dips in and out as we ride with the prisoners in the tumbrel on their way to the guillotine—as Dickens probably did, emotionally, at least, putting himself in Sydney Carton's place as he wrote. And, boing, we come back to our Dickens on the train, to that wistful close-up shot of his face," I said.

"I have them both. Which one?" said Jerry, pointing at the barrel holding the clips.

"The 1935 version is better. Better pacing, better direction, sad to say better acting, much as I respect Dirk Bogarde," I said. "Anyway, now that we have an actor for the reenactment—"

"Want to wait while I put it in?"

"Nah, you don't want me pacing. Take your time; get it right."

"Righto."

The door opened slightly; the hallway light came through the crack. "Anybody home?" I recognized the voice of Roscoe Schindler.

"The light switch is on the left, Roscoe." I spun my stool around and waited for Schindler to make his way across the room. The tall man smiled, nodding to Jerry as he shook my hand. "Still in the dark, I see."

"Can't get away from it. You know Jerry Cugini, our editor?" The two men shook hands.

"We're putting the finishing touches on *Dickens*. Want to take a peek?" I asked.

"I'd love to. Sadly, no. The distributors' meeting went long," said Schindler. "Shall we talk for a minute? The others are gathered upstairs."

"Let's go, then. See you tomorrow, Jer."

Roscoe Schindler led the way, leaving me to wonder why the brisk pace.

“Conference room,” said Schindler, his casual smile turning to rough-hewn granite, stony and unpolished—every crease in his face a portent of impending conflict.

“Tell me, Gus, are you thinking about returning to *H-B*?”

“They seem to be doing fine without me... and I like the long form. Why?”

“I was afraid you’d ask.”

“Oh?”

“Now that Goodstein has Gannon Crisp’s ear, I have a feeling Crisp intends to let him have his way. Nothing outright. Hints like asking me about the budget overruns for *Dickens* every time he sees me. Add to that, his constant mention of how profitable game shows and reruns are. Other times, it’s: ‘We don’t need prestige vehicles like *Dickens*. WBN is an international concern—a Fortune 500 company, and that’s prestige enough.’”

“It’s hard to argue the contrary. Between opinions and facts, opinion often wins when it shouldn’t. The public trusts the media even less than they trust our two political parties,” I replied, “We have to make the subject matter more relevant.”

“The question is how relevant?” said Schindler. “I can give you two weeks to come up with some bright ideas for our next doc in case we get approval. That is, if I’m still around,” a statement that brought a worried look to my face.

Roscoe Schindler calmed me down enough so as not to unnerve Carlotta Fanning and the fully reinstated Don Wolff, who were already seated in the conference room. I took a seat as Schindler opened with, “The China piece is great work. The reenactment of the kidnapping, superb. Your Chinese friend, Gus. Award-worthy reporting, almost front-line Vietnam powerful. Tell her thanks from everyone at the network, stellar job. We’re sending a check for five figures. Oh, and I almost forgot; there have already been some arrests.”

Schindler’s upbeat intro had us puffing out our chests for an instant, only to deflate them when he added. “As for release, we shall see what we shall see.”

“An expression that usually bodes no good,” said Don Wolff.

“I’m not too fond of it either,” said Carlotta.

“It seems that Johnson is afraid that no one will like the fact that he bugged Nixon’s phone. He doesn’t want to release the story. Flat out, he doesn’t want to end up any less popular than he already is.”

“Do we give a shit what he wants?” asked Carlotta.

“I’d love to run it,” said Schindler. “I met with Clark Clifford yesterday, ran the piece for him. He loved it, but when he showed it to Johnson, the president asked what happens when everyone realizes he ordered the tap on Nixon’s phone. According to Clifford, he’d love to help Hubert. But, treason or not, he doesn’t believe he can do it.”

“It doesn’t run, we’re out of here,” said Carlotta.

“The show’s a Pulitzer if I ever saw one,” said Schindler, “but—uh, we can’t defy LBJ. Crisp is expecting a call for comment from the White House any moment now. There’s still a chance.”

“They’ve seen it?” asked the Wolff.

Schindler nodded.

“There it is—television! Work your ass off—”

“That’s not the only threat,” said Schindler. “While we’re at it, you should know that Goodstein is out to annihilate the documentary as we’ve known it...”

“...in favor of reruns and game shows,” I added.

“Hah! Which is worse—allowing a traitor to become president or tapping said traitor’s phone to expose him?” asked Carlotta.

“Dead as our Pulitzer piece is, probably,” said Schindler, “dead as I may be after the election if Goodstein has his way. We can scream, yell, call one another names—”

“But it boils down to,” I said, “one of two things: either you go along or you go away. Resigning in protest or copping out.”

“Reggie and I didn’t come back from Indonesia for this crap. I know I sound inflexible. I know all that, but if it doesn’t—”

“If you’re looking for truth, Carlotta, you won’t find it here. Television’s at its best when it’s a real-time story like Army-McCarthy—when the story’s out in front of its *handlers*. Producers and money men. The cameras are on, and nobody knows what’s coming next. You can feel the excitement in the air when you’re covering a story like Liberty City... as

opposed to screening *Charles Dickens* for a phalanx of lawyers looking to expose a writer who's been dead for a hundred years. That maybe, just maybe, he was friends with Karl Marx, and we wouldn't want viewers to get the wrong idea."

"Which is why we're probably headed for Vietnam."

NOVEMBER

**T**he election came and went. No surprises; an anticlimax. If anything, it was the immensity of Nixon's Electoral College victory that astonished the people who'd voted against him in 1960, those who, at the time, were assured by the conventional wisdom that he was a political dead duck.

Lil and I had witnessed the shadowy dealings that most voters would never be privy to, never know that hundreds of Americans and Vietnamese would perish thanks to Nixon's cynical scheme to secure their votes.

I met Sergeant Linehan at the hospital the following day. Aunt Alice's condition hadn't changed. She was still asking questions while providing no answers. The fact was, she just didn't know, or if she did, it was hidden in her subconscious. An argument of sorts ensued: Linehan wanted to put Skipper and Cloris in a room with Aunt Alice. I took him aside. "Not until, one, she's out of here and, two, she's recovered her memory."

"Which may never happen," replied the cop.

By accompanying Linehan back to the L Street station, I had a chance to talk but, thanks to Lil's urgings, I mostly listened.

"You said initially that you allow Miriam Sanchez to use your Chrysler while you're away. Is that correct?"

"That's correct."



“Just wondering if you’d be okay with the police lab boys taking a look at it.”

“Fine, Sergeant. By the way, I always take down the mileage when I leave and return.”

“We need those if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “When I left, the odometer read 42,434. When I returned, it was 42,497. That’s sixty-three miles, but remember, I was absent for an extended time. She could have taken a trip, or just racked up the miles around town.”

“Don’t you find it peculiar that you have those figures on the tip of your tongue?” said the sergeant.

“I’m good with numbers.”

“Was it usual for her to use your car instead of her own?”

“I know she likes the Chrysler for carrying stuff.”

“Stuff? You mean like a body?”

I looked at the sergeant without saying a word as he reflected. “Let’s see. If she took a day trip, that means a certain radius in any direction, out and back. In the west that’s Herndon and back, in the north Gaithersburg and back, the east to Bowie, and the south to somewhere past Mount Vernon, Indian Head, or Quantico. One way and back, with twenty miles left over for errands.”

We were mulling over distances in a private room when Marva changed the subject, “If you had to come up with the name of one person connected to Virginia’s disappearance, could you do it? Among the people you know, that is.”

“Singling out someone? I wasn’t here.”

“We know that, sir,” said Marva. “You don’t need to repeat it.”

“You make it sound like you don’t believe me,” I replied, giving Marva an injured look.

“We don’t know what to believe, sir,” said Linehan. “Can I call you, Gus?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe I’m wrong, Gus,” said Linehan, “but I feel you have something on your chest, but you’re staying mum.”

“What could I possibly be concealing?” I said. “As much as the next person, I want to know what happened to Virginia.”

“Well, this case is not only about Virginia; it’s about your aunt, too. She’s the real victim here. If the two girls hadn’t been there that night, would your aunt be like she is? These various events seem to be connected. I can’t see your aunt sitting home and suddenly having a stroke at the same moment a girl disappears and you are waylaid. More than a coincidence.”

“You may be right, Sergeant.”

“It’s a challenging case. We don’t even know if a crime’s been committed. And yet, you disappear in Chicago. Your car is driven by Miss Sanchez, Virginia’s bicycle turns up in Georgetown. There’s the boyfriend, Delmas, who was in jail at the time. A seeming penny-ante car thief, but recently he’s branched out, hanging out with a thug, this Bruce fellow, who threatened Miriam and Cloris. There’s your aunt’s stroke while the girls were present and there’s their less than candid accounts.

“We’ve been pretty hard on Cloris,” said Linehan. “A curious sort. I mean, honors graduate of Brown University and a high-priced call girl working out of the Four Seasons.”

“Really, you know that for sure?”

Linehan nodded, “Uh-huh. She has a record in Mass.”

“Damn. Does Miriam know?”

Linehan looked at Marva.

“We don’t think so,” she said. “Cloris seemed anxious to conceal it when we confronted her.”

“She’s ashamed, you mean.”

Marva Tree nodded.

“She’s attractive and very shrewd. She’s worked her way up. So far, so good, but they’re hiding something,” Detective Linehan continued. “What do you know about Delmas and his compadre, Bruce?”

“They’re scary, I mean Bruce is, according to Virginia. I never met him,” I said. “I never would have believed Delmas capable of orchestrating a media campaign against me.”

“Without the help of Gideon Rath-Peabody, he never would have,” said Marva. “Does it bother you?”

“Not really. I’m too busy,” I said. “Delmas is not stupid. Rath-Peabody attacking me has given him credibility and an audience. He

knows I was in Chicago, and he also knows that the public loses interest as time goes on.

“So when you solve it, Sarge, it will all go away: Delmas, Bruce, Skipper, Cloris, myself, my aunt, and Virginia Hubbard, wherever she is. Gone! The whole Agatha Christie cast of characters,” I said. “Vanished, like it never happened. We’re counting on you.”



FROM THE MOMENT WE ENTERED THE RESTAURANT, LIL AND I WERE received as royalty by Duke Zeibert. The clientele whispered and twisted their necks to gawk. Largely due to my reclusive behavior, the buzz surrounding me and my exploits in Chicago had not died down. No one had seen me, neither on TV nor in person. Lil teased me, citing vanity as the motive behind my refusal to appear deformed in public. I was not amused. “Who, among us, isn’t a little vain about his face?” I asked.

“I like your face just as it is.”

“It’s like when I was learning French,” I said, “I didn’t try speaking it before I’d mastered it, didn’t want people becoming impatient while I struggled. So, I waited until I could speak it, and then, not before— Not before I understood the fastest speaker I knew, Emma’s mother. Trying to follow her gave me a headache. One day we were eating at her home and suddenly I was able to get every word. That night, I launched myself into it completely. No half measures. The same with this hematoma thing. Now that it’s almost completely disappeared, I’m cool with going out.”

“I can see you at the table with a bunch of French people, turning your head from one to another, getting more and more pissed until you get up and leave,” said Lil.

“Amazingly enough, that’s what I did once. Stalked out in the middle of dinner.”

“What happened? Did they shun you?”

“No, as a matter of fact, that’s the funny part. Afterward, Emma told me that when I walked out, the conversation paused for maybe five seconds, they looked at one another, then started talking all at once

about whatever it was they were shouting about before I left, never once mentioning my departure.”

As the waiter approached, Lil asked, “What are we eating, darling?”

“Crab cakes and London broil,” I said, stabbing at the menu. “What about you, babe?”

“The same,” replied Lil.

When the waiter disappeared, Lil quietly remarked, “You forgot the wine.”

“I’ll wave him down,” I said, twisting around to locate a waiter. Duke came over and took the order, made a bit of small talk that amounted to wheedling information about Lil out of me. I mumbled something about a friend of the family.

The dinner was served; we concentrated on eating until Lil interrupted, asking, “Your aunt, do you think she likes me?”

“Look around, babe. People are looking at you, not me. Five minutes after we sat down, they were finished with me. It’s you they want to know more about,” I said. “In other words, everyone likes you. How could it be otherwise? Look at yourself.”

“Stop, you’re making me blush.”

“Chinese, blush?” I gulped, almost swallowing a piece of my steak *de travers*, as the French say.

“I so want her to like me,” said Lil, slapping me on the back. “Better?”

“Yes,” I said clearing my throat. “Well, it didn’t hurt, your reading those newspaper articles to her.”

“That was nothing. The real baptism by fire was when she asked me about Miriam.”

“She asked you about Skipper? When was that?”

“When you left to talk to the doctor,” replied Lil.

“She shouldn’t have; she should have asked me.”

“That’s what I told her,” said Lil. “She seemed peeved because I refused, tried to stare me down. I didn’t budge.”

“She was worried about her work and what Skipper and Cloris have been doing since—I’m going to call that detective again. Find out where they’re at.”

“Don’t get involved, darling. You talk too much. I know you want to

make everything right, but this is the kind of thing that's better left alone."

When it came to life skills, Lil was— I don't know the right word. I sensed it but was never able to give it a name. It was a kind of invisible shield she threw over us. The sisters had no such talents. It wasn't about selfishness or anything like that. What they did, they did sincerely. Lil, on the other hand, acted out of single-minded attention to our couple, ready to parry any threat. She was like the mother hen that listened even when she was away from the nest. I didn't know whether this was good or bad, whether over time she would suffocate me.

After Duke's, we walked down M Street, past the Astor Restaurant, wishing we could walk the whole way home and then collapse in each other's arms at the end of a long day, knowing that tomorrow, with its endless election updates, would be even longer.

"Tell me about Ruth," said Lil once we'd secured our seat belts. "The truth. I won't get mad."

At first, I demurred, only to surrender when it became obvious Lil was making it a federal case. Nicely, of course. That was her specialty—making the unpleasant, if not pleasant, palatable. But should I describe Ruth's meticulous plans for a threesome and her machinations on how to accomplish it?

If my recitation hurt her or got under her skin in any way, she didn't show it. She even giggled when I got to the part about comparing the dimensions of a clitoris to a round of ammunition. The more I got into my monologue, the more I "remembered" myself. It was something I learned during my visit with Ming Lo: being aware of self and other at the same time, watching the knower as he performs the various roles he plays during the day.

The details of my fornicating with Ruth were delivered with proximate authenticity. But were they? I observed the various expressions and postures my first-person actor, my "I," used to project honesty, finding them, if not entirely true, self-justifying.

My confession complete, I watched myself congratulate my ego on my performance—the truth as I remembered it, with lots of little wrinkles sprinkled in.

At work one day, while working on the Dickens voice-over script, I

remembered my father telling me that a man never confesses his infidelities to a woman, not if he's in his right mind. Someday the woman would exact payback. When or where you never knew. Only that it was inevitable.

I kept coming back to the question Lil kept asking: "What size am I?"

"Why, you're a .45 caliber, amazingly enough. How a petite like you got a big one proves the exception to the rule."

"I should thank her, you know, our sex is a hundred times sexier since. All the new techniques you couldn't wait to try with me," Lil replied, pausing for a moment before adding, "That's how I know something happened between you two while I was in New York, risking my ass. So, don't ever lie to me."

At that moment, I was struck by the strangest of thoughts. What if Lil's with someone else? It could happen. After all, I don't know what she does all day. She says she paints, but how do I know? I decided to go home in the middle of the day, something I'd never done.

I walked out of my office with a hurried, "I'll be back," mounted the BMW parked behind the building, headed down Wisconsin Avenue, turning left onto Woodley Road, merging into Klinge Road, then into Rock Creek Park, where, speeding along on Beach Drive

Was this thought an aberration, a perverse fantasy, a distortion of the visions I'd been having—a sick by-product of my imagination? I was about to find out.

It started to rain. I twisted the throttle—75 mph, 80 as I turned onto Adams Mill Road. In less than a minute I parked the motorcycle in the garage. A few more steps and I was at the front door of my apartment, picturing Lil getting humped by some anonymous nobody. Man or woman, I wondered? That's the trouble with these jive-assed spiritual conditions; there are times when they border on schizophrenia.

I put the key in the door, fumbling with it for an instant until it opened. The strains of Billie Holiday's *Lady in Satin* filled the corridor, striking me as the perfect accompaniment for an indiscretion. The melancholy lyric of "I'm a Fool to Want You" followed me into the living room—Billie's voice at its most plaintive.

“I thought I heard the door,” said Lil, putting down her easel and brush and staring at me. “Gave me the jitters.”

I continued to stare, aware that my grimace was alarming Lil.

“What’s the matter, darling?”

I said nothing. My ghastly contorted expression spoke for me.

“You look like you’ve just killed someone,” said Lil. “Have you?”

Silently, I covered the space between us, took her in my arms, brushing back her hair, the look of horror still affixed to my face. Once, twice, thrice I brushed her hair back.

“Tell me,” demanded Lil. “What’s bothering you?”

My words came out all at once, accompanied by overwrought gestures as if I was about to sing an aria, “I had this vision of you being attacked. I came back to check.”

“You shouldn’t scare me like this, darling,” she said. “You’re all wet. You drove the BMW in the rain?”

“It’s not raining that hard.”

“It is now. You better take the Chrysler when you leave,” cautioned Lil. “Still, it was nice of you to worry. Makes me feel... Well...”

“Can’t be too careful— Shit. That’s a lie. I was horny, pathologically horny. I got mixed up. Was I having a vision? Or an attack of excess hormones? When I was going through the park, I began thinking, what if you were here fucking some man?”

“Is that why you’re here?” she asked. “Okay, let’s walk through the apartment together, see if someone’s hiding.”

“Don’t be silly. I can see there’s no one here,” I said. “Have you been smoking pot?”

“I never smoke when I’m painting. After, when I’m finished, that’s a different story. Gives me another perspective,” said Lil. “I guess I should be angry that you think I’d consort with other men. It’s just too absurd. You’re mine. That’s all there is to it, but I do think you should call Ming Lo to see if you can’t find someone local to help with the meditation. That, or a psych.”

“I hate psychs, a psych would laugh if I mentioned telepathy, precognition, or clairvoyance. Besides, my so-called psychic gifts seem to be fading away at the same rate the hematoma has faded.”

After we finished in the bedroom, the heavy rain had me rethinking

the afternoon. "I think I'll work on the script here. There's no gas in the Chrysler anyway and I don't feel like standing in the rain to fill it up. No sense in going back to work."

"What do you want to do after?"

"It's too shitty outside to go to a movie or restaurant," I said, walking to the window. "Look, it's snowing now. I think I'll take a nap first."

"I'll have dinner when you wake. You need the rest," said Lil.

"I love you, Lil."

"And I love you, darling. Maybe you did receive a warning, after all, that something was amiss and that's why you came home."

"What are you talking about?"

Lil picked up a paper from her bedside table and handed it to me, who, seeing the large Chinese characters, passed it back to her.

"It's a death threat."

"I figured," I said. "Why didn't you show it to me before?"

"I'm not worried," said Lil, "I'll speak to my parents."

The ratings for campaign and election coverage had not met WBN's expectations. Certain forces began undermining Roscoe Schindler's reign as head of WBN News. President and Chairman of the board Gannon Crisp, preoccupied with feelers from large industrial corporations wanting to diversify, couldn't decide if selling out to a Westinghouse or a General Electric was a good idea or not. His assistant, Noah Goodstein, being a numbers cruncher, urged him to pursue those discussions, using the unsatisfactory News Division results to convince the board that changes must be made. If they wanted to complete the full-fledged overhaul of network programming planned for 1969, a cash infusion was needed. A virile industrialist would gladly lavish funds on a maiden in distress.

Roscoe Schindler did not believe WBN was a once-proud maiden past her prime. He argued that WBN would lose its autonomy, that these industrial giants were only looking for the business equivalent of a trophy wife—something to add luster to their less than glamorous public images. They, he urged, would only play with WBN, reshuffling divisions and interfering with news and programming, ultimately discarding the network like a child does a toy.

To make themselves more attractive to a suitor, Goodstein counseled



replacing Schindler and jazzing up the News Department with women and opinion shows. Eventually, armed with financial projections for reorganizing the News, Entertainment, and Sports divisions, he was able to convince Crisp, and Crisp the board, that changes were warranted.

Reluctantly, Gannon Crisp dismissed Roscoe Schindler, replacing him with the very person who had done the most to undermine him, Noah Goodstein. In turn, Goodstein, the new vice president and head of WBN News appointed Don Wolff as executive producer of *Hartley-Brentley*. The way I figured it, Goodstein might not be qualified, but he wasn't stupid. He realized that Schindler's firing would disrupt morale both in New York and Washington. Wolff's appointment would assure continuity and maintain morale. It would also bind Don Wolff to him.

To hasten the plans for introducing women, Goodstein set up a kind of competition. He installed a woman as lead anchor for the citywide five o'clock local newscast in both NYC and DC, selecting as New York anchor none other than Miriam Sanchez, who'd just finished training in Baltimore. Granted these weren't network anchor roles, but if these gals made it on the local side, it was only a short jump from the minors to the majors.

On his first DC visit after his promotion, Goodstein checked up on all projects, installing unit managers loyal to him, instructing them to send weekly reports to both himself and to Pegler. He left *Charles Dickens* for last, Friday afternoon after a particularly busy week for me. The show was complete except for the mix that would take place later in the month in New York. I sat next to Goodstein in the screening room, waiting for him to tear it apart, but he said nothing until we were out in the hall marching toward Pegler's office when he turned to me and announced, "Your ass is going back to *H-B*, Mazur, once this piece runs. We're dimming the lights on documentaries. Too expensive. You can produce and sub for Brentley on occasion. Don't know why, but audiences seem to like you. Actually, that may not be the whole truth. I should say you have high favorables and high unfavorables. Minorities like you, and we want them," finalized Goodstein. "Is that clear?"

"Very clear, Goody," I replied.

"And don't call me Goody."

For a month, everything went smoothly. Don Wolff had *H-B* purring.

I was on the road repeatedly, reporting on the effects of Nixon's southern strategy. On two occasions, I subbed for Brentley. Audience letters exhibited a generous amount of racist invective, but also curiosity, viewers wondering about me, my origins, and if I was being groomed as a Brentley replacement. I hated anchoring. Even if I happened to be appointed by some stretch of the imagination, I wouldn't accept. The job's an albatross.

The handwriting was on the wall: The reign of nightly news barons—Chet Huntley, Walter Cronkite, Douglas Brentley, et al.—was over. Yes, there would be women and minorities in the future, perhaps, even shortly, but I wouldn't be part of it. It was time to think about life after WBN. Don Wolff was too conditioned to ever leave WBN of his own accord; he'd stick. Even after suffering the humiliation of being fired and rehired, he'd stick. He was back where he belonged—on top of the thing he loved most, the best nightly newscast in the nation. A company man. I felt no such loyalty.

What Goodstein hadn't banked on in his lightning round of firings and reorgs was the resignation of *H-B's* eponymous New York anchor, the venerable Chazz Hartley, who was eager to retire and had plenty set aside to ensure a comfortable fade-out. Goodstein, however, was on a roll: the board trusted him to come up with a viable replacement.

Not that the News Division was making a profit, it wasn't, although it wasn't losing as much. Goodstein had amassed a certain amount of goodwill, which earned him a free hand in appointing Miriam Sanchez as the New York anchor of the newly named *Today's News Tonight with Doug and Miriam*. Very domestic sounding, families clustered around the tube.

Sitting in Brentley's office with the Wolff, Martha Jeffries, and Gerry Witkowski during the show's maiden voyage, I tried to imagine what Brentley was thinking as he introduced Skipper to the nationwide audience. *What happened to Chazz Hartley, my partner of twelve years? Gone and forgotten. Replaced by this school teacher who became an anchor on the nightly news overnight. The young lady who once burst into my office, demanding that we air her goddamn hockey piece?*

After the broadcast, Douglas Brentley called Goodstein in New York to inform him he'd also be leaving on January 20, 1969. He chose the day of Richard Nixon's inauguration for no special reason. That it marked

the end of two eras, his run as respected anchorman and his country's most recent phase of progressive leadership, was coincidental. Things were certainly changing and Brentley, like his New York counterpart, wanted no part of it.

Reggie and Carlotta had already demurred. They were given a choice: the madness of Vietnam or the reshuffling and politics at WBN-DC. Carlotta chose to hold down WBN's Vietnam desk as reporter slash bureau chief with her cameraman slash husband. To get a grip on the overall situation, they chose to become embedded with an infantry unit, content to live dangerously, away from soul-crushing Stateside politics.



DELMAS WAS IN HIS APARTMENT ON SEVENTEENTH AND Q STREETS waiting for Bruce, thinking about the money they'd make from selling the hash wheel he'd inherited by the most fortuitous twist of fate.

The thing was eleven inches in diameter and five inches thick. The size of a wheel on a child's tricycle—two thousand dollars worth of prime North African hashish, twenty times that amount when divided up. The Tunisian who gave it to Delmas to safeguard was starting a one-year stretch. Lacking a safe place or trustworthy relative to confide it to, he thought of Delmas and Bruce, two guys he'd been in Lorton with. Lorton... You didn't go to Lorton for penny-ante misdemeanor stuff. *Two guys I can trust*, he thought. Two guys who are familiar with his bullet-ridden resume. Two guys who knew better than to cross him. He could trust them to sell it and take only 15 percent, which they'd do, assured Delmas, who, while they were discussing the deal, couldn't stop thinking there was nothing to prevent him from smoking his fill once sales got underway. Sell it off and put the money in the bank. When the Tunisian got out of Lorton, they'd divvy up earnings. It was something he'd need Bruce for—protection. But what an opportunity!

When he'd explained the deal to Bruce, Delmas wasn't ready for the response Bruce offered. Normally, Bruce went along with Delmas's schemes; this time he hesitated.

"Fifteen percent? Man, you don't know—it's like buying stock on

margin. What if you lose it or it gets stolen? It's double jeopardy. You get nothing and you have to pay the Tunisian, or get your throat cut."

"That's not about to happen, man. Neither here in Dupont Circle or Georgetown? Not a chance. Not like we'd be selling it in Anacostia or Northeast. Hippies and suits, that's our customers. Like the hippie couple next door."

"Next door? You told the people next door?" asked Bruce.

Delmas hesitated just long enough to...

"Wait. You fucking smoked it with them. Uncool."

Delmas went hangdog and started to pace. "So what? They're harmless." Upset to find himself on the defensive, he paced all azimuths in every direction, trying to recover his sangfroid.

"You better move, right now," insisted Bruce. "Pack your shit and let's get out of here."

"You must be kidding. I have this place for two more months and I have a chick coming over this evening. I'm not worried about some hippies."

"Not all hippies are harmless. Some fake hippies prey on real hippies. Something like this—people don't keep to themselves. Even if they're cool, they've spread it around by now. No doubt."

"Wait, why don't I give it to you? That way, we're cool," said Delmas, thinking he'd hit upon the perfect solution. "You take it. Tomorrow, we decide how, when, who, and where to sell it. Maybe we can sell it all at once."

"In pieces, it's worth more, but more trouble, you dig," said Bruce.

So it was that Bruce left with the wheel of hash in a plastic bag. Two days later, after Bruce failed to show up, Delmas started searching for him in his regular hangouts after smoking the remainder of the small chunk he'd appropriated for his personal use, all the while worrying how he was going to explain the situation to the Tunisian, when the harmless tandem from next door, the so-called hippie couple, burst in waving matching .45-caliber automatics. Delmas survived a pistol-whipping, but only after the supposed flower child had questioned him severely while the distaff member of the couple searched the apartment. Convinced Delmas was telling the truth, his neighbors apologized and extended an offer of help in the hunt for Bruce. Delmas agreed they'd start looking

together for Bruce on the morrow. Instead, he vacated the premises during the night, moving in with his mother.

Figuring that Bruce had probably left town (he had no family or school connections in DC), Delmas made a systematic search of the train and bus departures. From what he knew of Bruce's past, he'd come from Minneapolis, operating there before hooking up with him.

Delmas took the bus to Minneapolis. He spent a month looking for Bruce. Hell, he wasn't even sure that Bruce was his real name. After coming up empty, he returned to DC. A hot tip came in from a friend who said he'd seen Bruce walking toward Georgetown on Q Street after an antiwar rally at the P Street Beach. Nothing came of it.

Trouble is, in what remained of his life, Delmas never saw Bruce again. Neither did the Tunisian, who, once released from prison after serving nine months of his one-year sentence, placed little credence in Delmas's convoluted tale of hippie neighbors, .45 automatics, best friend betrayals, bus trips to Minneapolis, or, he stressed in French, *déménagements à quatre heures du matin*. He wanted his hash wheel or the cash equivalent and when the two-month grace period the Tunisian granted Delmas was up, Delmas joined his lover, not in the icy waters of Black Pond, but in the Potomac River out near Great Falls.



*CHARLES DICKENS*, THE DOCUMENTARY, PREMIERED ON THE SUNDAY after Thanksgiving to decent reviews and less than flattering ratings. Aside from the usual awards buzz that new programs stir up, nothing to brag about. In my home state of Oklahoma, the Nielsen ratings were nowhere near those of the many quiz shows or wrestling matches that WBN offered.

Goodstein did call, however, to congratulate me and my team and tell me that New York, and not he, Noah Goodstein specifically, was pleased. Coming from him, it was specific enough.

Lil was more specific. Somehow, she channeled Herb's notion that I resembled Sydney Carton in many ways, teasing that I had yet to find the cause to make the final sacrifice à la the hero of Dickens's book. She said I was an interior person like Carton. My self-awareness was a good omen

as far as becoming the being I was meant to be. This comment puzzled me. Did I project a vibe of someone who believed his life pointless enough to warrant the supreme sacrifice? Or was her comment the equivalent of my automatic writing, a remark made in passing that only sinks in slowly, an unconscious utterance? In every life, at some point, there is a reckoning with creatures like Macbeth's witches, phantasms foretelling an unexpected destiny.

A while back, I'd promised to meet her parents, but I had always managed to come up with a work-related excuse every time the subject was raised. It had dragged on long enough, she said.

We decided not to fly or drive to New York. That left the train.

Lil was tidying up after the scrumptious meal served in our private compartment when I swiveled my chair around to look out the window, my shoeless feet reposing on the windowsill. The train was loping along through the backyards of Philadelphia at no more than ten mph—the wheels making the *k-plop, k-plop, k-plop* sound distinctive to slow-moving coaches. The squalor directly in front of me was no more than ten feet from where I was sitting, so close I could almost reach out and touch the young girl waving to me with her right hand while she held her younger brother close to her apron with her left. With a death rattle, the train came to a stop.

It was like being stuck in a museum exhibition where the intimate lives of cave dwellers or the inhabitants of a futuristic civilization are on display. We had front-row seats. I waved back.

"How old is she?"

Lil turned her chair parallel to mine and passed me the joint she was enjoying. "About eleven, I'd say," she said. "Why're you crying, darling?"

"It's just so—I don't know..." I said. "For all we know she's a future—a budding Lorraine Hansberry. Will she ever get the chance?"

"She is beautiful. I'd like to paint this scene. Where's your camera?" she asked.

"That's the problem: I can write a script, produce a doc, and you can paint her, imbuing her with all sorts of qualities, but she remains an enigma. We can never get at the truth."

"You can't change karma, hon."

"I can't change karma, but I can rage against it."

“A life dedicated to fighting unfairness?”

“Is not wasted.”

“At least they have a place to sleep tonight,” said Lil.

“That’s something,” I conceded. “My first act of defiance is going to be my resignation from WBN, as of this time next January. In fact, why not the same time as Douglas Brentley?”

“Before the wedding? Are you sure?”

“Worried about money?”

“Not if you aren’t. In fact, let me take over finances. I’m good at accounting. Tax time, too.”

“I’m not worried. That’s one thing Roscoe Schindler took care of before leaving. Stock options,” I said. “They should miss him, but I doubt they will. They’re so into this new thing of profit and polemics. Public service is a thing of the past.”

“We’ll take that trip if you resign,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to see Turkey.”

“Start researching it. Leave plenty of room for improvising.”

“Okay, Chief,” said Lil with a playful salute. “What about Macomb Street?”

“Why not sell it?” I asked.

“Not with the housing boom.”

“What boom?”

“It hasn’t happened yet, but the prices will double, even triple in DC. Just you wait,” insisted Lil.

“Okay, if you say so. How long?”

“In ten years, threefold.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Not to Chinese people; we’re long-term planners,” continued Lil, as the train suddenly sped up. We waved goodbye to the children.

Later on, in Scarsdale at Lil’s parent’s house, I readied myself for a week of misunderstandings. No matter how outwardly polite they might act, disapproval was, as they say, plastered on their faces. I resolved not to embarrass Lil.

The house was a lordly manor with far more rooms than were needed for comfortable living. Did any positive vibe emanate from the surroundings? What is not spiritually comforting is uncomfortable. All sorts of

minor ailments and discomforts visited me. Rashes, constipation, a wheezing cough, insomnia.

Resolving to prevent the wedding ceremony from being a hullabaloo, I resisted its being conducted at her parents' house. Even Lil laughed when I suggested a civil service at our Eighteenth and Columbia Road apartment. I was outnumbered. It was during times like this that my aunt knew what to do. The best I could do was to get them to agree to a truce so I could turn the whole thing over to my aunt.

"It's not like our friends would fill even half this room. Not that we have that many," I said.

"Oh, come now. Mitch showed me his tinkertoy diagram. You've been a pretty popular lad."

"Exactly my point," I said. "It's comprised of people I wouldn't invite to my wedding."

"So they're okay to fuck, but—"

"Besides," I butted in, "my aunt is getting on and she made me promise that I'd let her plan my wedding. It's the one last thing she counted on."

I got the idea that Lil's parents believed I'd invite a panoply of TV personalities and it would be an occasion to impress their friends. I told Lil I couldn't agree to anything without my aunt being involved.

That's when Lil's mother started to talk to her daughter in Chinese, leaving me to look from one to the other in a hopeless quest to understand what was being discussed. Lil's father took me aside, to show me the various bric-a-brac in rooms that served no purpose, spiritual or otherwise, large rooms stuffed with junk, rooms filled with unused furniture and other discarded objects strewn around. Objects were purchased just because money was available to be spent. Materialism on a spree to beat all sprees. Unable to get the Philadelphia backyard scene out of my mind, I cut the tour short and politely returned to Lil, who was still arguing with her mother.

"Mother," Lil said, "It's rude to leave someone out of the conversation. Speak English, please."

"As I was saying, young lady, Chinese friends of ours are still mad at you."



“Because of the peace talks?” Lil wondered out loud. “Oh, please. That piece never ran. No one ever saw it.”

“Yes,” continued her mother, “but it took President Johnson to stop it.”

“Shows we did a good job. Lil certainly did,” I added, launching, somewhat misguidedly, into a defense of the liberal principles her parents disagreed with. Lil flashed me a look.

“No harm, really,” I continued, “your daughter only did what was asked. Blame me.”



DESPITE HIS DOUBTS, DOUGLAS BRENTLEY HAD TO ADMIT THE GIRL was a success. Those who awaited an on-the-air implosion were disappointed. Skipper was professional and deferential. The crew liked her and so, according to the ratings, did the audience. Since her ascension, WBN topped the news hour ratings for all rival networks.

Part of Skipper’s success stemmed from her physical presence. The camera seemed to bring out that transcendent glowing face Gus knew so well. Not occasionally, as it was when making love, but permanently. Watching her, Gus wasn’t surprised by the glamour she radiated, a glamour uniquely hers. That, plus a sense of entitlement—she belonged where she was, and she knew it. Viewers agreed.

The epitome of modern womanhood is what they believed her to be. Beautiful like Virginia, she would have been a threat to women. Looks alone are never enough for people to tune in for. There has to be something else. Confidence, tenacity, and dynamism. She had those in spades. It was a leader-follower thing that women and men alike sensed in her. Men saw her as a female Jackie Robinson, women as a trailblazer like Amelia Earhart. WBN’s marketing division poured thousands into promoting her, tens of thousands on wardrobe alone to soften her powerful shoulders. The media—print, radio, and TV—did the rest.

Was Brentley about to withdraw his resignation? The thought never crossed his mind. Douglas Brentley had had a glorious run. It was time for the “sweet sorrows” that accompany all partings, in this case, a lavish farewell special.

WBN had chosen a new direction. He greeted the new leaf he was about to turn with open arms. He'd already had several offers from suitors wanting him to headline a magazine show, one of them from a network eager to unite him with Gus as producer. Another offer came from the new public television local station, WETA.

Behind the scenes, things were more frantic. Don Wolff told Gus about a rumored Skipper and Goodstein sighting. More than one. A public hand-holding sighting. And why not? When Skipper heard that Delmas had disappeared because of some deal he'd mismanaged and was running for his life, she felt a release, the freedom to customize her dreams—the only remaining encumbrance to her ascent, the detectives who were still hassling Cloris.

News of that situation reached her through periodic phone calls with Cloris, who got her information from Q&As with Marva Tree. The periods were becoming more and more invasive and the calls more insistent. Cloris didn't like the fact that Skipper arranged for WBN to pay off the lease on her DC apartment, leaving Cloris with no place to live. Returning from the Four Seasons one day, she found her possessions out on the street and everything Skipper owned shipped to New York. Cloris didn't like it at all, but she didn't know what to do about it. Of a sudden, Skipper seemed so remote, so protected, so immune. It was as if she, Cloris, no longer existed.

Skipper was rewriting her life story; Cloris was no longer a part of it. Skipper had changed directions. That she didn't seem to care what Cloris thought was an oversight on her part. Sooner or later, thanks to Marva Tree's constant prodding, Cloris would figure it out. At least, that's what Marva kept telling Linehan.

"There's been a tipping point. It's not just her anger at being forced back on the street," said Marva. "It's her pride: she got Sanchez her job with the DNC and she helped make Virginia disappear. Now she's on her back again and not liking it one bit."

"Let's turn up the heat," said Linehan. "Make sure she sees these photos with Goodstein at the Stork Club and the latest Drew Pearson gossip—"

"And this," announced Lieutenant Martin Welch, waving a copy of *the New York Times* and reading from it. "East Hampton, Long Island, New

York. November 23, 1968. In a private ceremony, board member and vice president of WBN, Noah Goodstein, today married popular anchorwoman Miriam Sanchez. The couple..."

"Holy shit," exclaimed Linehan.

"That oughta do it," agreed Marva Tree.

"That's it. We got 'em."

"If you guys can't get an airtight confession from this," said the lieutenant, "what good are you?"

"She'll be wearing a wire before the sun sets, LT," said Linehan.

AT FIRST, THE COPS THOUGHT RECORDING A TELEPHONE CALL—CLORIS to Skipper—would be all they needed. The lieutenant thought it better to record a face-to-face meeting, so Linehan contacted the NYPD, who agreed to facilitate the contact. Marva and Linehan drove Cloris to New York, on the way, prepping her on the type of evidence needed and the points to raise.

It was a gray morning when they got to the Chrysler Building. A Saturday. Not much traffic at the early hour. Minimal WBN personnel to worry about.

Cloris got out of the car, looked up at the tall building, and sighed. Marva wondered if the girl was having second thoughts. So far, she'd been unshakable.

Skipper agreed to meet near the tower in a Lexington Avenue coffee shop. After, she regretted the whole idea, wishing that Cloris would somehow suffer a fatal accident, a car, or a plane crash.

Skipper waited for Cloris to break the ice. "Go ahead, marry some schlemiel," said Cloris finally, tapping her teaspoon against her coffee cup, "for all I care. I'm not going to make a fuss. I'm not angry. Just disappointed."

"Let's cut the bullshit, Cloris. What do you want?" asked Skipper, as she surveyed the activity around her. For the time being, she avoided eye contact with Cloris. "Look at these people! Who are they? Cops, I'll bet. I hope you haven't told anyone about this meeting. It has all the earmarks of a setup."

"Don't like it? You choose the time and place."

“No, let’s settle things, but not here,” said Skipper. “Let’s go next door where nobody’s listening in.”

“Afraid? Fine with me. I’m in no hurry, honey,” scoffed Cloris.

Linehan was prepared for just such a maneuver, suggesting they wire the place next door in case Skipper balked. That’s why Cloris’s reaction surprised Skipper. She expected a slight case of panic. Maybe Cloris’s smirk was for real, and she didn’t have anything up her sleeve. Anyway, once seated in the adjoining hash house, Skipper looked around, satisfied.

“I think I’ll stick around,” continued Cloris, “call you at work, drop hints. Maybe I’ll make some WBN exec’s day. Pick him up by the newsstand in your building, on his way to Grand Central. Do you think he’d rather screw me or wifey waiting patiently in Chappaqua for the passenger who never gets off the train? From the lobby of the Chrysler Building to a bed in the Paramount Hotel. What a laugh!”

“Amuse yourself,” began Skipper, scanning the menu, “just don’t try blackmail. I’ll deny everything. So, smarty pants, eat up. I’m paying.”

“You’re the smart one, so smart. Have you told hubby about me? About your other female lovers? He knows about Gus, eh? That must gall him. You always said you enjoyed fucking Gus,” said Cloris. “No, I’ll bet you haven’t told him about anything, certainly not about how we wrapped your sister’s body in chains and sent it down, down, down to the bottom of the lake? Did you tell him about that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Something you ought to know: someone at the school found the body. They’re keeping it quiet for the moment. However, the police have identified it and they intend to arrest you. I’ll be arrested too, of course, but I’m used to jail.”

“I don’t believe they found the body; Black Pond’s too deep,” said Skipper.

“I haven’t said anything yet, of course,” said Cloris, “and won’t if you pay, say, three hundred a week.”

“You’re crazy.”

“By the way, there’s more. The police are checking Gus’s Chrysler for evidence, also canvassing the neighborhood for witnesses. It’d be a pity

to destroy all you've built up. Those detectives are busy little bees. Of course, they haven't got anything out of me... yet."

"Blackmail is a crime, in case you didn't know," rejoined Skipper meekly.

"The police know you did it. They promise to be lenient if you confess."

"Why should I confess to something I don't know anything about?" asked Skipper.

"If you didn't do it, dearie, how did you know the body is in Black Pond?" asked Cloris, adding oh so softly. "I never mentioned it."

## DECEMBER

**A**unt Alice had been home for a week when news of Cloris's and Skipper's arrest reached DC. By that time, the protean finger of guilt had apportioned culpability according to the karmic forces that turn the wheels of justice—the New York DA's office, the DC district attorney, the Metropolitan Police, and several attorneys for WBN.

The prime mover, however, was Noah Goodstein. Once he'd understood the issues, the wheels turned quickly, expedited by the fact that one of the customers in the coffee shop where Skipper and Cloris met happened to be a reporter for the *Daily News*. While the cops were handcuffing both women, he was already on the payphone, eliciting a comment from Goodstein, who was playing golf at the Westchester Country Club in Rye with three of the company's six lawyers. In a rage, Goodstein and his phalanx of lawyers took off for Hogan Place by helicopter.

Whether what transpired passed for equal justice under the law is problematic; Goodstein made sure his bride was happy with the outcome. Everyone was happy—everyone except Cloris Tucker and Detectives Linehan and Tree. Though they protested mightily, the outcome was taken out of the case officers' hands. By late Saturday evening, Goodstein and his lawyers were more or less running the inves-

tigation. Although the arresting officers insisted that Cloris's cooperation was instrumental in getting at the truth, WBN lawyers, at Goodstein's urging, pushed the cops aside and dealt directly with the DA. By nightfall, they succeeded in getting the assistant DA in charge to agree to an alternate version of the facts, a version more palatable to WBN and more seductive to the press. Soapy sensationalist stuff with a fairy-tale ending. To wit: Skipper and Cloris were dining with Alice Randall when the former's half-sister burst in demanding money. Cloris confronted her. They struggled, causing her accidental death. During the commotion, Alice suffered a stroke. After attending to her, Skipper raised the phone to call the police but was threatened by Cloris brandishing a large kitchen knife. Cloris, it seems, was a known bad actor with a record, who'd recently been confined to Occoquan while detectives investigated. At risk to her life, Skipper finally came forward with the truth and she was released.

That story was given to the press. Cloris Tucker remained in custody while the popular Miriam Sanchez was back in front of her microphone the following Monday. All charges against her were dropped. No mention was made of the wire Cloris had worn or the tape she'd recorded.

SUNDAY EVENING LINEHAN DROVE THE CHRYSLER TO MY APARTMENT, using its return as an excuse to go over the case with me. Lil let him in. "Come on in, officer," invited Lil, "we were watching football and drinking beer. Let me take your coat."

"Oh, Abel. What's happening?"

Linehan undid his peacoat and handed it to Lil. "Make yourself at home. Drink? Beer, wine, something stronger?"

"Your keys, ma'am," said the detective, daintily placing the car keys on the table by the door. "A beer with you, perhaps."

"You got the news?" asked the detective.

"We heard," I said, eager to learn more. "I told my aunt two stories, first, the one you guys made up for public consumption—Miriam's version. And a second one—Cloris's version. All I did was switch protagonists. Which one do you think elicited a reaction, even though she still doesn't remember a thing? Well, her subconscious does!"

“Don’t blame Marva and me. Our account is closer to the one Ms. Tucker told us before she agreed to wear a wire. We tried to persuade the DA, but they won’t listen.”

“A guy I know, an engineer, a scientist really, is working on a device— It checks galvanic skin response, sort of like a lie detector, but different so he says. We wired Alice to it; both Cloris’s and Miriam’s versions of what happened to Virginia were read to her. The meter went nuts during the second version, Miriam’s. Alice was sweating and her eyes were flickering. The only problem is: she still doesn’t remember a thing, but her subconscious couldn’t suppress the truth,” I said. “The second version moved the needle. According to the creator, that reading shows up when the person hears something they believe is false.”

“All very interesting, but probably inadmissible. Besides, the DA wants to throw the book at Cloris,” said Linehan, waiting a second before inquiring. “Who won?”

“The Skins lost by three,” said Lil. “Sonny had two touchdown passes.”

“And two interceptions...” I said, prompting a frown from Lil. “She’s got me watching pro football.”

“A man needs a respite, especially one who works in television,” said Lil.

“Well, one more game and that’s it for the year,” said Linehan, as he slipped his coat back on.

“The Deadskins!” I said, pausing before adding. “Look, I’ll see if something can be done— Find her a lawyer.”

“Don’t stick your neck out too far,” said Linehan. “These boys mean business.”

“I agree,” said Lil.

“There you have it, brother,” said Linehan, nodding to Lil and shaking hands with me. “Stay cool.”

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE PHONE RANG. LIL PICKED UP, HESITATING a moment for the caller to announce him or herself, “It’s Ruth O’Malley.”

“Hello, Ruth,” said Lil, “you’re probably not calling to chat. Here’s Gus.”



“So much to talk about; such a bad time to do it,” said Ruth, breathlessly.

“Do you mind if I listen in?” asked Lil.

“I don’t mind, but I’m going to tell her you’re on the line. It’s only fair.”

“Fine.”

“Hello, Ruth. We’re fine, hope you are fine, too. Lil’s going to listen in.”

“Cool,” said Ruth. “Anyway, I’m at my parent’s. Something fishy’s going on. This thing is just too pat. I passed Cloris at the hospital once. She’s no Bonnie Parker or Ma Barker. No way that wispy little thing could intimidate Skipper.”

“You’re right about that.”

“When Skipper and her husband arrived here, they were welcomed with open arms. The family has closed ranks around them, hugging and commiserating,”

“Only normal,” I replied.

“They are so completely tuned into Skipper’s tale of victimhood. Anyway, I backed my way into the kitchen to call you guys and say I’m not buying it.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said. “But this is not the time, nor the place to talk about it. You’re part of that family. You’re under pressure to go along. Your parents have, no?”

“It’s total solidarity at the house,” said Ruth. “I feel like a traitor just calling you.”

“Give it a rest for now, until you get your family situation figured out. Whether you— Look, the press is having a field day. You may not want to get involved.”

“I just wanted to let you know how I feel. I mean, she has thousands buying in. And the media: print, radio, and TV accounts. The silent majority (what a term!). All this indignation about Skipper’s mistreatment. People who know nothing about it”

“Real considerate, but it is what it is, for now at least,” I said. “Right, Lil?”

“Just one question,” said Lil. “What made you think to call us? I mean we’re not part of your family.”

“I thought of Gus immediately, that he must be flabbergasted,” said Ruth. “Someone who respects the truth. And I know my sister. She’s become a different person with this television thing, and that husband of hers—looks at everyone with contempt.”

“You don’t have to tell me about Goody, Ruth,” I said.”

“Well,” said Ruth, “I’m going to look into this further and I know you will, too, because the truth is important. And, by the way, the son of bitch came on to me, at their wedding no less. Flat out told me Skipper was cool, but not much of a turn-on. Said he spotted me staring at him across the room, a sign, he said, that I was wet with lust for him. I almost got sick.”

“What do you think?” I asked Lil once we’d rung off.

“I kind’uv like her, the way she refused to swallow the party line, strange.”

The next day what was left of Virginia Hubbard was recovered from Black Pond. I forced myself to visit the morgue. Lil recalled how she’d questioned my extrasensory acuities. “Got to hand it to you,” she said. “Your premonitions, spot on.”

IT WAS DURING THE TIME WE SPENT WITH AUNT ALICE, HELPING HER get her life in order, that Lil and I became aware that Alice was not altogether mentally aware. I received a call from the local postmaster who told me Alice had “donated,” i.e., written a check for a thousand dollars payable to the United States Post Office, writing in the memo space at the bottom of the check: “Excellent service.” A second call came a few days later, from Larimer’s, announcing that they’d also been donated to.

I collected the checks and together with Lil we sat Alice down in her studio for a chat. Alice looked over the checks. “Yes, those are my checks; I wrote them.”

“Auntie, you don’t ‘donate’ to the post office.”

“Why not? They’re very nice to me, especially Walter.”

“We understand and I agree; they should probably be better paid.”

Alarmed, I was able to get her physician and friend, Dr. Emmet Fitch, on the telephone, who agreed to come over immediately.

After a cursory examination, Dr. Fitch took me aside. “There were no

signs of anything like this before leaving the hospital, but these things can pop up suddenly. I'm going to have a neurologist examine her. Right now, it's not serious. She's ninety-nine percent functional, however, should it get worse, you might not be able to handle things, what with your wedding plans and your work."

"Too bad Hattie went back to New York," said Lil. "Why not try to find someone who could stay here with her? It's a large house. Someone who wouldn't get in her way."



LINEHAN SECURED A PRIVATE PASS FOR A ONE-ON-ONE VISIT WITH Cloris at DC Jail where she was being held. Linehan reasoned that a visit from someone who didn't know the girl all that well might succeed in coaxing out new information, at the very least filling in some blank spots and providing moral support. He'd informed her that I would be recording the conversation. Keeping a record of her communications might help in her defense as the case moved forward.

The slightly frazzled, but coolheaded Cloris who had visited me at George Washington Hospital with Skipper was no more. Her spiritual imprint—the identity she'd established for herself on Earth had disappeared. Shrunken to a now wretched state, epitomized outwardly by the forlorn state of her clothing, her appearance, her body language, it was as if she'd been whisked away by SS guards to a place where hope did not exist.

"There's a tape of Skipper," she exclaimed before we exchanged greetings. "It's disappeared. I risked my life to record it. And now Marva tells me it's been misplaced. Sure, she's looking for it. I believe her and I believe Linehan, but that DA, he's out to get me. No one believes me."

"Believe you? I believe you, Cloris."

The way I pronounced the words appeared to comfort her. She relaxed, slumping back in her chair before suddenly crying out, "Dammit!" Words blurted out, expressing a woe-is-me commentary on her situation and life in general. Frustration, obstructionism, indifference. Cloris Tucker, a victim of the orthodoxies pitted against her—conformity, racism, politics, money, religion. Events that happened one

way had been replaced by illusions that never really happened at all. “Dammit...” she repeated, tilting her eyes upward as if tuning into her mind’s eye, a fleeting procession of their times together: their initial meeting at the DNC, their first touches, their ecstasies, the debacle at Alice’s, her time in prison, their abrupt falling out. At no time, even during the most trying moments of their relationship, had Cloris ever had the least notion that things might turn out the way they had.

Sensing her despair, I kept quiet as she invoked the Book of Job and several other Kafkaesque literary references.

“It looks like you are going to be charged,” I said when she’d finished venting. “Possibly a trial.”

“Anything’s better than this.”

“The first thing is getting you a lawyer,” I declared. “I know one. She’s no big name, but she’s what you need.”

“A lawyer, even a good one, what good is it when they’ve turned everything inside out? And all to justify Skipper, make her more relevant.”

“Meanwhile,” I said, “I’m going after press support.”

Gideon Rath-Peabody was ready for that. He picked up on my attempts to garner favorable press, getting to Goodstein with the names of potential dissenters, thereby becoming a leader in the crusade to condemn Cloris—before I even got started.

I was ultra-cautious, talking only to trusted friends. Still, Gideon Rath-Peabody found out and blocked my every move. The networks adopted a protectionist stance, even Don Wolff had his doubts about Cloris. His doubts, of course, were influenced by his position as executive producer of a newscast featuring Miriam Sanchez. He couldn’t do any checking, he told me, without Goodstein, Rath-Peabody, or one of their spies finding out.

At least, the Wolff had heard Cloris’s version. Goodstein did such a good job of suppressing her version that hardly anyone else got to hear what she had to say. The public topped the list.

Everyone I approached claimed they’d love to help but their boss/editor/producer couldn’t afford a confrontation with WBN, meaning, of course, Noah Goodstein had gotten to them. I was unable to call in one single chip for owed favors I’d done others. Print outlets were no better; the official version seemed so airtight—Skipper so credible that the

clique of usually inquisitive investigative reporters gave up before starting.

I came home with the taste of bile in my mouth, unloading my frustration on Lil. Someone, I told her, was tipping off Rath-Peabody, who was persuading old friends to stonewall me.

"He's a blackmailer, the kind of guy who has something on everybody," she said. "Anyway, guess who called?"

"To think I might be a target for blackmail," I said, feeling pretty low at the prospect. "What a wasted life!"

"Your friend Goodstein wants you to call him back at this number," she replied.

"Goodstein, huh?" My hand reached out to take the note she was holding, grasping it slowly, very slowly, almost like a zoetrope with its illusion of movement. Any slower, it would have been spasmodic and jerky, slow enough to create a time warp and reset the universe.

Lil felt it too for an instant, before snapping to and heading for the kitchen.

"Wait, Lil. I want you to witness this."

I dialed the number. "Hello, Goody," I said when the other end picked up. "I got your message. What's up?"

For once, Goodstein didn't object to my use of the overly familiar moniker. "You want me to replace Douglas Brentley?"

"You know I don't like anchoring," I said. Lil began gesticulating wildly, miming the word *yes*, and nodding her head.

"Just a minute," I said, covering the receiver with my hand.

"Take it, do. I have a feeling," Lil insisted. "On the inside, you'll be able to help others like Cloris. On the outside, it's you and Linehan against the world."

"I do hate it. On the other hand, what if you are right?" I replied.

Raising the phone to my ear again, I asked Goodstein, "Why me? We haven't been exactly cordial lately. I turned in my resignation not long ago."

Lil started to mime again. I waved her off.

"It's Miriam's idea?" I repeated Goodstein's words for Lil's sake.

"It's like Satchel Paige's first game in the bigs: everyone wants to see something different. Besides, Miriam likes the chemistry," said Good-

stein, “and the two times you anchored the show together, the ratings were excellent.”

“Imagine that!” I exclaimed, exaggerating. “After only two times.”

Lil motioned me to hang up. “Tell him you’ll answer tomorrow,” she whispered directly into my ear. “And don’t call him Goody.”

“I’ll think it over tonight, Noah, and let you know tomorrow, okay?”

Goodstein satisfied, I placed the receiver in its cradle.

“Whew,” said Lil, “that is a surprise. They’re playing the game we should be playing: keep your enemy close to you, only we have neither friends nor enemies.”

I supposed I should have hated Goodstein, but I didn’t. I didn’t feel much of anything, neither about the job offer nor about Goodstein. *I should hate him*, I mumbled to myself.

“If it doesn’t work out,” I said. “I can always resign again—although resigning is getting monotonous, and we’ll probably be Paris-bound.” Soothing words for Lil, who was skeptical about my ability to resist becoming involved with WBN again.

“I can almost taste the escargot,” she said.

“Speaking of escargot, let’s go to New York while I’m still treading water, job-wise,” I proposed. “While you do Bonwit’s and Saks, I’ll meet with Ming Lo. Afterward, we can meet up for dinner and Slugs’. I think Cecil Taylor is there.”

We left before the rush, giving me ample time to unburden myself to Ming Lo. “If I do come back in another body, I want to keep a journal, write down the things I do every day of my life as soon as I’m able to write. Three, four years old. I think Jung did that.”

“Jung was a dabbler,” insisted Ming Lo.

“Well, I liked his book *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, but not his commentary in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. It has nothing to do with meditation. As for coming back,” I continued, “I want good handwriting. This go-around, hell, I can’t read half the stuff I write. It may seem minor, but it’s very frustrating for a writer.”

“Petty issues like that, whether in jest or not, and you may not come back, at least not in human form,” chided Ming Lo. “Complaining is a good way to become relegated to the world of plants and stones. Medi-

tate and you come back perfect; minor concerns fall away of their own accord.”

“Do you think a wish like that, however banal, something so strongly wished for, can carry over to the next life? If it’s the last thought I have before dying?”

“Such pedestrian aspirations,” said Ming Lo, smiling as he placed a pen in my hand. “Write!” he commanded.

I started to write. Letters fashioned not by me or my bidding. A force beyond my control was guiding my hand, making beautiful letters. Fonts, script and cursive, unfurled as my fingertips moved left to right.

After a moment, still writing, I looked up at Ming Lo, who spoke to me gently. “Anything is possible if you meditate. Finding yourself flying over buildings, over mountains is not impossible. Even calligraphy for previously asymmetrical beings lacking in inner proportion.”

I looked at my hand, at the collection of symbols and characters written while my attention was fixed on Ming Lo. Handing the pen back to Ming Lo, I studied the paper for a full thirty seconds before commenting.

“Okay, I get it. All talents are within our beings if we perfect the means of revealing them,” I said. “Then why do the visions I’ve been having seem to clash with the meditation?”

Ming Lo lit a stick of something. At first, it seemed like incense as the tip gave off a wisp of smoke before beginning to glow. As he rubbed the stick back and forth between his hands, a small flame emerged, forming a tight circle of intense light. The more I watched, the more the circle spewed sparks that arranged themselves into a series of miniature live-action tableaux. I watched my motorcycle lean to the left as I raced around a curve in Rock Creek Park, just as I’d lived it:

I park the motorcycle, walk into my apartment, and confront Lil. We discuss the daydream I concocted about her being with another man, Lil laughs, and we walk to the bedroom. Other tableaux followed. I see myself in various states and realize the ones that radiate manifest the greatest degree of moral courage, allowing me to appreciate the difference between actions undertaken for ego enrichment and those that reflect a sense of self-sacrifice. I linger in each for what strikes me as an

exceedingly long interval. I feel the presence of an unseen being. I'm in a prison cell with Cloris, reading the charges against her aloud.

In a final tableau, I watch myself in my living room sitting in a lotus position, meditating. It's a Sunday morning around 11:00 a.m. when the light pouring through the big bay window is at its brightest. Sparks, like the ones spun out from the stick Ming Lo was twirling, now burst forth from my miniature head.

The tinkling bell over the front door of Ming Lo's shop sounds, breaking the spell and snapping me back from my reverie. Lil is reporting in from her shopping spree. We stop at a French restaurant on the tree-lined portion of Fifth Avenue just before it enters Washington Square.

"Know what you want, hon?" I ask.

"I can't decide between the escargot and the *moules*."

"If I take the job, they may be the last escargot you have for quite a while."

"We could go to Paris right now; we still have weeks before you'd start the anchor job."

"A trip like that before starting a new job? I'd be anxious," I say.

"You're right."

"It's not that I wouldn't like to, I would. Only, there are rehearsals and planning sessions. And you forgot about Cloris. I can't go until her defense is set."

"Okay, all right. We'll wait."

"I'm not known for standing up for a cause. Never have," I say. "Condemning injustice from the safety of my desk is one thing. I've never marched; I've never spoken out. I might as well make sure the wrong person is not held accountable."

"Well, in that case, I'll take the escargot."



BEFORE BOARDING THE PLANE FOR DC, I CALLED GOODSTEIN TO accept his anchor desk offer. When I rang off, I recalled the conversation I'd had with Herb Hecht one year earlier. So much had transpired since and yet the elapsed time was a mere twelve months. Some of what Herb had predicted, but not all of it, had come true.



One thing Herb and I did not concur on concerned my eventual appearance on network television with a beard. They'd shaved me in the hospital, and it hadn't grown back. I still had time to grow one before January 20—seemingly a small thing now that beards were gaining acceptance beyond the hippie culture, but for some reason important to me.

On Goodstein's part, it was a gamble. He'd convinced the board that his interpretation of the tea leaves—the demographics and stats—warranted the radical programming changes he'd pushed through. One female and one dark-skinned male host was already a load to swallow. Adding a beard to the mix spelled trouble—nothing short of sacrilege in a world that still associated beards with beatniks and hippies, antiestablishment types—writers and musicians. Go for a mainstream job with a beard—Wall Street, construction, Madison Avenue, government—and the long hand of conventional wisdom, so deeply entrenched in Middle America, would seek you out and smother your prospects—typical of Nixon's silent majority, the ones who don't speak out, but harbor deep resentments. Turns out, they weren't a real majority, but as long as the electoral college had something to say about it, this minority remained relative.

I paused a moment, recalling a firsthand example of silent majority racism that, taken by itself, defied all attempts at understanding: Carlotta's father, a Bronx super who sat in front of his TV chanting n••••r over and over as soon as a Black face appeared on the screen.

He was a German immigrant by the name of Felgenhauer, a name Carlotta had trouble pronouncing when she was young. So she changed it to Fanning, not only because she was embarrassed in front of her schoolmates, but also because, as a young girl growing up in her father's adopted land, she felt it essential to disassociate herself from inherited stereotypes at odds with her true self. Then again, her father was no stereotype; he was flesh and blood and limited consciousness and although she loved the old man, she was ashamed. Was this the reason she preferred men of color, a kind of subliminal compensation for her father's racism?

I'd posed the question after she shared the story with me.

"I never understood why my father was stuck on that one-word mantra," confessing she didn't know of any deeply held grievances that

had twisted him beyond repair. He seemed to get along with people. Senile and dyspeptic, like a forgotten soldier from a long-ago war, he shuffled around his apartment in slippers, sliding his feet instead of lifting them. Without looking at the clock, he somehow found himself in front of the TV every evening for the nightly news at the correct hour.

I'd met other individuals like Carlotta's father: the embittered farmer who worked twelve-hour days yet could not make ends meet; the plumber inching his way through crawl spaces to pay for a family vacation; the short-order cook who owed back taxes—all silently cursing people on welfare as well as the politicians who invented programs for them. Free Money programs. Jobless programs. These, I acknowledged, were stereotypes, the stuff of sociology textbooks. Except for Carlotta's father, I'd known very few in this vast demographic. So, what gave me the right to think I could get at the essence of the silent majority if I proposed the topic for a documentary?

If only a goodly portion of the population hadn't arrived in slave ships or been sent here to work as indentured servants, things might be different.

I listened *ad infinitum* to the arguments, and I concluded that confrontation now ruled the American psyche. People thrived on confrontation, nurtured it, got better at hating for no reason, intensifying their anger until, like a hurricane tide, it gobbled up everything in its way—breakwaters, jetties, beaches, seawalls, houses, and finally whole villages.

Once it was something you only heard about, faint rumblings and domestic quarrels; now it was palpable, burning torches and militia groups. The increase in willful confrontations was an indicator that no two people could agree on any one subject for more than a few days before dissolving into separate factions. Tolerance was a thing of the past. It was going to get worse before it got better.

In the Federalist Papers, the Founders had argued about the Republic going forward, raising doubts it could survive without “goodwill towards men.”

What was it James Madison said about the ideas taught in my history class; I remembered only a fragment: “We do not depend on their virtue,

or put confidence in our rulers, but in the people who are to choose them.”

A tall order for an ever-increasing materialist society. How in hell, the Founders wondered, could men be persuaded to sacrifice their perceived welfare for the welfare of another when every man in the country insisted he had the right to do anything he pleased any time he wanted to? Self-sacrifice had worked long enough to drive the British out. After they were expelled, came a sigh of relief as the floodgates of avarice opened. Men forgot the nice words of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, except when it came time to shake a fist at an adversary and yell, “I know my rights; it’s a free country.”

I remembered a philosophy of consciousness class at GW, entitled From Plato to Lao Tse, a class whose precepts I had never been able to entirely comprehend. I recalled, too, the cryptic watchword and its attribution writ large in chalky letters, staring down at the class from the blackboard during each meeting: “‘Consciousness is the ruler of man’s nature.’ —*The Secret of the Golden Flower*.”

Now, because of the visions I’d been having and my work with Ming Lo, I was gradually able to correlate the professor’s ideas on consciousness with my ramblings on government. The Founders were talking about the necessity of a permanent change in human nature to safeguard the nation’s future. Practically, according to my professor, no amount of free university education, housing subsidies, paid vacations, free child-care, or universal health care could change human nature without a change in consciousness. The professor kept hammering away at the notion that mankind is not sufficiently evolved to effect such a change. Not by prayer, not by good works, not by psychology, education, philosophy, law, medicine, science, politics is human nature changed, he insisted. If education were the answer, evolution would have already changed our nature for the better, in a simple phrase, we would have *learned to get along*. Same for science, law, politics, and religion. If any of those orthodoxies could change human nature, it would have happened long ago. The elements of ideal human conduct had long since been codified: in religion (the Golden Rule), in philosophy, in law, science, education, and tolerance.

Anyway, it was moot since the documentary unit was all but shut down.

With a sudden drop in altitude, Lil awakened. “Almost there?” she asked, motioning with her head to the stewardess scurrying around the cabin.

“Something the matter?” I asked.

“I need an aspirin,” she said, turning to me. “Hey, what’s the matter with you?” she asked. “You look like you’ve been torturing yourself.”

“I have,” I said. “I was reflecting on human nature, how Madison, Jefferson, and Hamilton believed the country would implode without people sacrificing themselves in their everyday relations with their fellow countrymen.”

“They have been sacrificing,” replied Lil, “for naught. Look no further than Vietnam. A senseless slaughter if there ever was one.”

I looked at Lil, kind of astonished to hear my usually apolitical fiancée tell it like it is. She caught me looking at her.

“What?” she said, a bit peeved at my bemusement.

“Nothing,” I said. “Finish your thought.”

“At the same time, the silent majority believe they’re paying for other people—people they deem inferior,” she continued, “and it only makes them angrier.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll buzz for an aspirin,” I said, “we’re coming in.”

“Good topic for a doc, though,” Lil added.

“It’s been done before,” I said.

“And you don’t think a woman could find a new way of presenting it,” said Lil. “That’s part of what I’m saying.”

“Hey, no, I don’t mean it that way. Sure, a woman could do it.”

“We could do it together.”

The hostess arrived with the aspirin, handing it to me in a tiny paper cup, standing there suspended as if transfixed by Lil.

In my mind, I had her questioning why a young oriental-looking lady was sitting next to a dusky young man while she, equally young and attractive, waited on us. All because of the way her lip curled, forming, it seemed, a false smile.

Was I reading her telepathically? Had I suddenly acquired this ability? I wasn’t sure.

“Can I get you anything else, sir?”

I shook my head; the hostess disappeared down the aisle. Extraordinary powers could be deceiving, according to Ming Lo. The cure? Staying in the moment.

“Losing control is an American thing,” I said once the hostess had departed. “The French, despite all the derogatory things said about them, show patience. They act out verbally, but not physically. Maybe because they’re always lining up for something and, through the centuries, they’ve learned the futility of acting out in public. Reminds me of a movie about a talented writer who can’t control his temper. He loses friends and work. *In a Lonely Place*, stars Humphrey Bogart.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Just as well.”

“If people could only take one little pill,” sighed Lil, pausing before plucking the aspirin and placing it on her tongue, “like my aspirin, and be done with it.” She made a performance bit out of swallowing and washing it down.

“The magic pill fallacy? A solution that’s been none too effective. You’ve heard of the lotus eaters?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Its real name is addiction,” I said.

“I’m thinking maybe we should give up pot,” said Lil, with a sudden seriousness that half alarmed me. “Before we become addicted—psychologically, I mean.”

“Uh... You’re kidding, right?” I said.

“Sure,” replied Lil, her playful manner tinged with sarcasm, “only kidding.”

Ever since *Charles Dickens* aired, I found myself with nothing much to do but think of the future. I’d turned in my resignation, after which, according to accepted practice, I cut short my office hours. No sense in sticking around waiting while others got the assignments. I surveyed the remnants of Goodstein’s purge. The wisest were already well into their next job. My situation was different; I’d quit and then reversed course.

This period of inactivity ended the Monday I showed up for a planning session and a practice run-through of *Today’s News Tonight with Doug and Miriam*, newly relabeled *Today’s News Tonight with Miriam and Gus*.

Once again, everything speeded up. I had to hand it to Skipper. She was never once less than professional.

She could make people disappear from memory. In her sister's case, it was like Virginia had never existed.

She was back to being the Skipper of old—aggressive, yes, but polite to everyone and very professional. Goodstein hovered over everything, moving between the set and the control room looking over shoulders and making everyone nervous. Skipper motioned to Goodstein with her head, as if telling me, *You and I, we know better; we know what an asshole he is*. Somehow, she'd convinced the crew, technicians and newsmen alike, that she was on their side and Goodstein was an enemy to be reckoned with, a task she was up to—the Amelia Earhart of the airwaves.

After a run-through on three consecutive days, we scheduled a day of planning to prepare for a Friday dress rehearsal in front of sample live audiences in New York, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Miami, and Washington, complete with graphics, the new set, and remote feeds. During the lunch break, I took off for Maggie's, briefly joining Eddie and his editor buddies, Connie Gochis and Bobby Mole, who were gobbling down meatball sandwiches and drinking martinis. Skipper walked in alone, seating herself in a booth at the back, motioning to me. I moseyed over to her booth.

"Aren't you too important to frequent us riffraff types?" I asked.

"Sit down, lover," she said. "Still miss those editing days? Those two-hour lunches?"

I sat. Immediately, one of Skipper's hands started its subterranean crawl up my pant leg. "Um, I'd like to get some of that. You can't know what it is to be married to a wimp."

"If he's such a wimp, why is everyone so scared of him?"

"There's more than one way of being a wimp, you know."

"Remove your hand, Skip."

"You mean, we're just going to sit on the set, across from each other with smiles frozen on our faces?"

"You act like you're tired of news already," I said. "What are we going to try next, politics?"

"Good idea, I just might."

In the feedback session, after the Friday dress rehearsal, we listened

as the audience cards were analyzed. Positives were Miriam's appearance and smile. My beard appealed to the 18–35s. The set and the graphics got high marks. The friendly interplay between Miriam and me was convincing. My rhythmical movements and relaxed delivery were deemed original. Most of the marriage proposals were directed at Miriam.

Negatives were my beard displeased the 35–70s, the same group did not like teaming a woman and an ethnic person; they wanted to see “real Americans” anchoring the show, but they did consider our pairing professional.

Perhaps, the most convincing was the audience applause in all five locations once the run-through was over. Once again, Goodstein's gamble on an entirely new approach to nightly news had been vindicated. Gannon Crisp lauded his planning and marketing abilities and the network looked forward to the show's initial airing on Monday, January 20, 1969.

Douglas Brentley and Chazz Hartley praised the show and congratulated Goodstein and Gannon Crisp. Secretly, they bet each other fifty dollars that this unlikely partnership wouldn't last three months.



MARSHA WARREN, MITCH WARREN'S SISTER, AGREED TO REPRESENT Cloris. A criminal attorney more in theory than practice, she'd been unable to catch on with a firm of standing, slipping through the cracks because, as she made clear, she'd attended George Washington University Law School instead of Georgetown Law. She was a woman in a man's bailiwick, and she had not been able to clerk at any significant level because of pregnancy. A few distinguished lawyers, who'd taken the time to watch her in court, considered her a diamond in the rough, piling up hours and experience as a public defender. She was on the cusp; a big case would guarantee, if not her future, a clear path to one. After an hour-long meeting, Cloris selected Marsha over a host of big names. I agreed to start a fund to pay her attorney's fees; Marsha agreed to keep them reasonable. Lil and I were the first to contribute. Lil took charge of raising the rest, eventually amassing more than twenty grand.

The first thing her new advocate did was to petition the court for

bail, which was granted. While meeting with her client the next day, Marsha received a phone call, informing her that Cloris would be charged with second-degree manslaughter at the arraignment.

“That DA has a bug up his ass,” said Marsha. “Even setting aside the strong case you have, this is excessive. I’ll work on getting it down.”

“Like I told Gus,” said Cloris, “an intimate friend putting me in this position never crossed my mind.”

“It’s class warfare. Indigent defendants pitted against big money and influence,” said Marsha. “Don’t worry, dear. We’ll chop them down to size.”

That afternoon, while attending the *Today’s News Tonight with Doug and Miriam* prep session, I received a call from a Hollywood production company based on the Paramount lot. I put the call on hold and excused myself. Confidentiality dictated that I take the call in my office, which turned out to be a prudent decision for the call contained an offer of employment.

I learned that Passageway Pictures, an independent producer with a Paramount deal, had received a 16mm copy of the China Lobby piece from an anonymous source.

“We like what you’ve been doing. We want you to write and direct a live-action version of it,” said executive producer Claude Durgo. “The whole schmeer, you dig. At the end of January, we’ll install you in one of those offices on the lot that Bill Holden and Nancy Olsen used in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*.”

“Sounds interesting,” I said, “if you’re not worried about retaliation.”

“You’ve been in Washington too long, my friend.”

“Have you ever seen a web so thick the spiders themselves get caught in it? That’s Washington politics,” I said.

“Out here, it’s the same thing but with beaches, suntans, and beautiful women. Passageway is not afraid of the ghost of Joe McCarthy,” said Durgo.

“One thing you should know, Claude, my fiancée—we’re getting married this week—is my writing partner. She’s the one who was kidnapped by the China Lobby, that we went commando to rescue. She’ll be coming with me.”



“Great. Story gets more real as we speak. I’ll send a contract for each of you. Sign it and we’re set.”

I arrived home while Lil was putting the finishing touches on a Chinese dinner: handmade egg rolls, satay pork, shrimp and broccoli in lobster sauce. Before she could recite the menu, I picked her up and whirled her around.

“We’re getting married this week, ASAP. Right here, in this room. Something good’s gotta come from this cursed year. It’s going to be us.”

“Oh yes, darling, I love you so much it hurts. I’ll marry you,” said Lil. “I’ll protect you; I’ll light the way in darkness.”

“We’ll start a trend, turning bad karma into good. If our families want to attend, so be it. If not, we’ll go it alone.”

“Rather a lot in such a short time, isn’t it?” said Lil.

“I read my late-night scribblings this morning. Found stuff about these visions becoming a crutch, and my insisting that life on the material plane must be faced head-on. No waiting for paranormal powers, like in the quote from *The Secret of the Golden Flower* that decrees occupations must not be neglected. Paranormal powers are transient, undependable.”

“You got that book from Ming Lo?”

I nodded. “Yup! The two keys to life: stability and self-control,” I said, ad-libbing a summary of American bootstrap philosophy. I paused for a moment, realizing I was perilously close to ultracrepidarianism. At least, I knew what the word meant; I’d learned it studying *Roget’s Thesaurus* at boarding school when I first began to understand the importance of words. Ten words a day through prep school and college.

“Oh—almost forgot,” I said. “That’s not all... we’re traveling. After the ceremony, we’re flying to France for our honeymoon. Only a week, but—”

Lil locked her arms and started to do a Russian squat-and-kick dance, circling her astounded husband. Laughing and clapping, we ended up in each other’s arms.

“C’mere you,” I said.

“Phew,” said Lil, falling into my arms. “Wait! How is that possible with your new job beginning?”

“We’re going to Hollywood when we come back, right into the belly of the beast.”

“Whoa... when did this come up?” asked Lil, somewhat skeptically. “Anyway, I’ll concentrate on the wedding. You did say we’re getting married, yes? Like in getting married no matter what, even if your deal falls through.”

“Why you little bunny rabbit, you’re afraid I’ll back out. They’re sending us contracts and tickets. It’s a done deal.”

We stood by the big bay window watching the traffic on Columbia Road, rocking slowly back and forth, me cradling Lil in my arms.

“It’s... like a gambler’s lucky streak. Too good to be true,” she said.

“Nonsense,” I said. “Hey, I know that lyric.”

I took Lil in my arms, imitating the airy buoyancy of Fred Astaire’s voice, as I fox-trotted her around the room, like Fred had Ginger Rogers in their 1935 Irving Berlin musical, romanticizing the lyrics and holding her to me:

---

Heaven, I’m in heaven

And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak

And I seem to find the happiness I seek

When we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek

Yes, heaven, I’m in heaven

And the cares that hung around me through the week

Seem to vanish like a gambler’s lucky streak

When we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek

Oh, I’d love to climb a mountain

And reach the highest peak

But it doesn’t thrill me half as much

As dancing cheek to cheek

Dance with me. I want my arms about you...

---

I was just getting warmed up when Lil said. “Bet you don’t know this one,” she sang the first line: “A week in Paris might ease the bite of it.”

“Oh, yes I do. ‘Lush Life.’ Billy Strayhorn. C’mon,” I said.

This go-around, Lil sat down at the piano and chorded an eloquent intro, allowing me time to inch my way into the lyrics:

A week in Paris might ease the bite of it  
 All I care is to smile in spite of it  
 I'll forget you I will  
 While yet you are still  
 Burning inside my brain.

---

We repeated the chorus together with such delight, it seemed as if we were already onboard our transatlantic Air flight.

“The food!” she exclaimed. “Oh gosh...” She closed the keyboard and sprinted to the kitchen to check on the meal underway. I followed. Chinese food—it wasn’t the first time she’d told me—can’t be left to simmer by itself. It’s a hands-on process.

Not prone to euphoria, but loving the moment just the same, Lil experienced a sudden tremor of doubt, as if the moment had caught up to her as she tossed pork and vegetable bits into the wok and listened to them sizzle.

“Hollywood? Where’d that come from?”

“A producer called me, wants me to come to California to write and direct a live-action version of the China Lobby story. Just when we thought it was dead, bingo, up from the grave.”

“Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? Is it a hundred percent?”

“I told you. They’re sending us contracts, one for you, one for me,” I said. “Tickets to LA.”

“Aren’t we running away?”

“I’m going to write and direct. You’re going to write, too. And help produce. What more could we ask for?”

“But the anchor job?”

“I—”

“You don’t want to do it, do you? Not really.”

“See me working with Skipper? Girl’s one large ulterior motive.”

“Take the Hollywood job, darling,” said Lil. “It’s taken you a long time to find what you want, much less have a chance to do it.”

“Have you ever been to California?”

“No.”

“Neither have I, except for work, which doesn’t count ’cause work travel is as superficial—”

“As three sisters we know...”

IN THE EARLY MORNING BEFORE THE WEDDING CEREMONY, LIL AND I played tennis, returning home by 8:30 a.m. Shocked and exasperated at our casual attire, Lil’s mother was waiting by the door with a handful of hangers, checking her watch when we appeared. She favored me with a sidelong glance and a forced smile and was about to light into Lil when her daughter preempted her, “Been waiting long, Mother?” she asked. “I told you we were playing tennis early.” She appended a rare irony, one whose import her mother took to be an impertinence, but whose literal meaning she missed altogether. “Thanks for asking, we had a ball.”

While Lil and her mother continued jousting verbally in Chinese, I caught a tiny bit of seam jutting out below the shroud covering Lil’s wedding dress. Red, must be the traditional color of a Chinese woman’s wedding attire. I could hardly wait to see the rest of it. That would have to wait. Forbidden to enter the apartment during the preparations, I was shooed away by my soon-to-be mother-in-law as Lil looked on, enjoying my dismay.

Bowing to tradition, I retired to the home of best man Mitch Warren, where the two of us got stoned in the basement, waxing philosophical about life in general, marriage in particular, and Lil specifically. “She’s perfect,” I insisted, “...with one exception: no one could love me as much as she does.”

“As much as you love yourself,” joshed Mitch.

“Wrong! I’m just not that lovable.”

“You’ll find out, pal,” said Mitch. “May take years, but you’ll find out the hard way.”

“I thought you were a walking endorsement for marriage.”

“That’s a good one. Got so we don’t bother with excuses when we disappear for days,” said Mitch. “Okay for you; you’re not married.”

“Yet.”

“Wait till you start pretending in front of the kids.”

“Never happen.”

“Easy to say now... before you’ve lived with someone for ten or twenty years.”

“You and Isabella? Pretending. Wow, you cover it up well.”

“The problem is,” said Mitch, “we’re not friends, never were. It only works when you can remain friends. Now we have an arrangement.”

“Hey, man. This is my wedding day. Not so negative, dig? Talk like this gets amplified when you’re high.”

“Sorry, man. Really shouldn’t drag my shit into to your day,” said Mitch. “You’re smooth now anyhow. No more rough edges, like with Ginny.”

“Please don’t mention that name on this day of fulfillment,” I pleaded before musing, “Why do people love people? I mean what dictates that I love her as much as she loves me? I’m trying to figure out when it was that I felt this almost mystical feeling around her. Not just sex: it was something else.”

“It’s friends; I’m telling you.”

“I feel so very comfortable around her, want to see her when I’m away from her. I don’t know, but there was a moment when I knew it was her. Now that I’ve found her, I’m going into it one hundred percent.”

“That’s what they all say; it’s natural to look at other women.”

“Natural? Of course, it’s natural. As natural as biting your fingernails, but biting them until they bleed, that’s another story.”

HEEDLESS OF THE CONFUSION AROUND HER, LIL STOOD IN THE MIDST of the fray, calmly meting out instructions to helpers and welcoming guests. By three o’clock, the wedding company had assembled: Lil’s parents, Aunt Alice, Lil’s and my friends, Dave Katz and Joe from the One Step, the Heath Brothers, who’d signed on for entertainment, Ray-Ray and Gloria. Not a single invitee from WBN and none of Lil’s disgruntled relatives.

She fussed with the floral arrangements, checked on the kitchen, supervised the moving of furniture, helped the Heath Brothers set up, and greeted the bearded individual I called the hippie minister. Lil and her mother had retired to the bedroom, putting the finishing touches on

her attire when Isabella and Mitch, and his sister, Marsha, snuck in with me in tow.

I changed quickly in my office, donning my rented tails. Mitch stuck a white carnation in my buttonhole.

I was standing nervously, whispering to the minister, reaffirming our desire to limit the religious content of the ceremony, when Lil emerged. She was escorted by her father, and I saw her for the first time in the red dress. Red tasseled earrings, a full-length sleeveless dress with colorful Chinese embroidery, narrow at the waist, flared at the bottom: she resembled one of the deities from the tapestries that hung in our bedroom. For an instant, I recalled her in the tennis clothes she'd worn that morning, so alive and effervescent. Now, seeing her radiantly attired, I could hardly breathe. The words of the ceremony seemed to flutter past me like the flapping of a bird's wings. When we turned to look at each other, to express our devotion, I found myself repeating words of little import next to the out-of-body sensation I experienced from looking into Lil's eyes.

After the ceremony, the guests feasted on Chinese soul food. The drinking took its toll. The ebullient vibe that had infused the ceremony mellowed. People debated whether or not to leave, half hoping, as party-goers are prone to do, that something unexpected would keep the festivities going.

Not wanting the moment to end on a blue note, Lil spoke to Jimmy Heath, who, after rounding up his brothers, tuned his tenor off middle B-flat on the piano. Lil began experimenting with the chords of a well-known tune. The bass and drums kept it going. I perked up. Excusing myself to Gloria and Pop, I walked over next to Lil at the piano bench and launched into the lyrics of "Falling in Love with Love." The music cut through the talk, leaving little more than muted whispers. I surveyed the expressions on the listeners' faces, reckoning Lil had found the perfect remedy for people who drink too much. I looked down at her, watching her hands, hands that had the two of us blending competently with professionals. Next came a lusty version of "From This Moment On," and finally a rendition of "A Prelude to a Kiss."

"That was nasty," said Tootie Heath, "but you gotta find your own thing, man. You can't go on feeling Frank. You're close, very close."

“You’re right, man,” I answered, “I do Frank on “Falling in Love” and Sarah Vaughan on “Prelude.” I’m finding it with some tunes.”

“Don’t get me wrong, man. It’s all good,” said Tootie, “even better when it’s not borrowed.”

At lunch with Aunt Alice the next day, Lil and I were complimented by no less than my father who’d previously had difficulty praising anything I had ever done.

“Those music lessons,” he said. “Got to hand it to you, Sis. Saw something in him I never did.” He paused, then added, “I apologize for that, Sonny.”

“And the Hollywood offer. So cool.” Gloria looked at her husband, who loved speaking in groups, checking to see if her conversing annoyed him. She was never sure how he’d act when people were present. “This is delicious, Alice,” she said, pointing to her plate. “You gotta get me Tony Curtis’s autograph, Gus. Don’t tell me; it’s potatoes and carrots, mashed, right?”

“White potatoes, sweet potatoes, leeks mashed together, with a carrot,” said Aunt Alice. “Doctors told me to cut down on carbohydrates. I will say I’m feeling better, thank you.”

“Sweetheart, it seems to me,” said Lil, “your father gets some credit for sending you East to get educated.”

I raised my glass for a toast. “Sent me to Alice not to be educated, but because you couldn’t wait to get rid of me.”

“You joke, mister, but sending you East was the hardest decision your mother and I ever had to make.”

“I know, Pop.”

“Got the basics out of the way before you left. Coming back for summers... made it all worthwhile.”

Sanding up, I launched into a paean dedicated to my bride. After I’d finished, Lil rose. An expectant air in the way she took a deep breath before starting to effuse. “I have some news,” she announced, pausing a moment to let the guests wonder what would follow. A cautious smile framed my concern...

“I’m pregnant,” said Lil. Going straight to the pith was her MO. No beating around the bush. “That’s my news.”

“My,” said Aunt Alice. “That was quick, dear boy.”

When the reception was over, we puttered around in silence, until, finally, Lil urged me to square things with WBN, which meant resigning. Again. Making that chore easier was the arrival of the Paramount contracts in the mail, which, after we signed and mailed them back, Lil felt a lot better about the thought of facing the unknown.



TWO THINGS TO DO. CHECK ON AUNT ALICE AND FOLLOW THROUGH on Cloris Tucker. To that end, Lil invited Mitch, Marsha, and Isabella to dinner, but not before I mentioned Mitch and Isabella's open marriage. Why I don't know since I profess to loathe gossip. Guess it had to do with my qualms about the tinkertoy, not letting Mitch get his paws on Cloris, figuratively speaking, of course.

"Why tell me this?" asked Lil. "Our baby is listening. It hears every word we say. Not only the words we speak, it also understands how we say things to each other. Do you think it wants to hear about open marriages?" It's not that Lil blew her top, she didn't. Fact is, her low-key manner had more effect on me than had she screamed.

She walked over to me. "You don't mind me telling you how I feel?"

"Be my guest," I said. "People I'm around—parents and family—hide their feelings. Emotion is frowned on."

Lil had no time to answer. The Warren clan was at the door.

After dinner, we got down to cases—Cloris Tucker's. Marsha was pessimistic; I was convinced right would triumph. I had a plan, a long shot, maybe, but worth exploring.

"This Turkish guy I know, a master mechanic, a famous engineer in his own country. He's been developing a device that records stress. It could be wheeled into a courtroom. The visuals are terrific. Big dial that registers galvanic skin response, and other activity. Suppose we hooked Alice up to the machine and recited the two different versions of the incident, Cloris's and Skipper's, while capturing the readout.

"Why not give her a give her Sodium Pentothal? It's just as crazy," said Lil.

"I'm no— Maybe my science is weak, completely crazy, but, dammit, Alice is a witness. Both sides agree she was there. Now, because she has



no conscious memory of the incident, she's unable to testify in the usual manner. If we could use this device, it would be her subconscious testifying, much realer than verbal testimony that can be untruthful. The subconscious doesn't lie."

"Won't work," said Marsha. "For one thing, besides its craziness, it's the same technology as a lie detector, and everyone knows it's inadmissible."

"So, I get a film crew. We record a session with Alice," I said. "The judge might at least agree to watch our film. You could get her to do that, right?"

"She's liberal," said Marsha, "but most judges are conservative when it comes to so-called innovative scientific techniques. One thing to remember, trials are theater. It wouldn't be the most outrageous presentation ever viewed in a courtroom or a judge's chambers."

"If we could only get it on the air," I said.

"With Goodstein controlling all the outlets?" said Lil.

"What about local access?" I asked. "I know... the last resort."

"Limited viewership, too much of a sideshow," said Marsha. "Nevertheless."

"It might change public perceptions," said Lil, "if you got it on the air."

"A huge blow to Mrs. Goodstein, if we could," I said.

"And even if the judge rules against her," said Lil, "it would perhaps sway her to rule in our favor on other points. You know, like in baseball when the umpire makes a bad call, realizes it, and then gifts the batter on a later call."

I raised my hands, palms up, grinning. "Have I got a genius for a wife and mother, or what?"



THE NEXT MORNING, EARLY, THE TELEPHONE RANG. LIL ANSWERED. "Nice pajamas," I said as she handed me the receiver. I was surprised to hear Schindler's voice on the other end. Kinda the last person I'd hear from.

"Not you, Roscoe—the empress's new pajamas."

“Oh. Well... Anyway, I know about your Hollywood venture,” he said for openers. “Surprised?”

“Not really,” I said.

“I’ll tell you how, but first, did you take the offer?”

“Yes, I did. I’m going to WBN for my second and final resignation.”

“Good.”

“You said it.”

“By the way, it was Goodstein who sent the reel to Paramount. Pure old-fashioned jealousy, doesn’t want you around his wife.”

“Wha’d’ya know? Goodstein, huh?”

“I got it from Don Wolff who got it from Eddie. One of his assistants put in the print order to Capitol,” said Schindler. “The higher you get, the bloodier the combat: getting rid of you at the same time he offers you a job. Don’t worry about Paramount. Their people don’t know who sent it; their offer is genuine.”

“How is Don?”

“He’s under a lot of stress, working for a dynamic duo like the Goodsteins. He thinks he’s too old to get a job elsewhere and he’s worried about his pension. Or getting fired.”

“Shame,” I said. “And you?”

“I’m headed to PBS, startup public TV. Going to produce a news show with the gal who worked for NBC a while back, Charlayne Hunter.”

“PBS, huh? Might have some very interesting material for you, sensational, put-you-on-the-map stuff.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“Keeping it under wraps for now,” I said. “It’s dynamite. Let you know soon. By the way, I became a reporter thanks to you and Don. Thanks for letting me learn from my mistakes. Good luck at PBS, Roscoe.”

“Old network newsmen never die; they end up at PBS, it seems,” said Schindler. “Oh, and if Hollywood doesn’t work out, Gus... you know where to reach me.”

Roscoe Schindler, the last of the righteous. Now, according to Don Wolff, with cable television coming, it’ll get worse. Once networks begin to proliferate and there won’t be enough virtuous men and women like

Walter Cronkite, Diane Sawyer, and Doug Brentley, to go around, factional bickering will push the country into chaos, or another civil war. I thought about Miami and Chicago—the violence I’d witnessed. How events, previously conducted peaceably, will be turned into echo chambers for resentful zealots. Amplified by TV, they have all the makings of bloody confrontations, ongoing and fanatical.

One obligation remained before boarding the Icelandic Air flight to Europe: corralling Alice, Marsha Warren, Cloris, a camera crew, and Ahmet and his device, which was now, according to Ahmet, ready to parse Alice’s testimony. When informed by Lil in a joking manner about Sodium Pentothal, Alice agreed to risk it, insisting her doctor administered a safe dose.

We used two cameras synced together, one on Alice’s face, the other on the instrumentation that displayed galvanic skin reading.

“Reminds me, Nephew, of the preparations before taking off on a mission behind German lines,” said Alice.

The filming went off amazingly well, without a hitch. Cloris read her version of the story off a teleprompter. Marsha Warren read Skipper’s version. The emotional coloring of the two voices was neutral, never exaggerated, or false. When we finished, the crew was smiling.

All hands were devoutly in Cloris’s corner. They had donated their time to her cause. While Lil and I were in France, Martha Jeffries and Jerry created a split screen version from the two cameras, one showing the galvanic readings, the other showing Alice’s reactions—side by side synced in real-time.

When I returned, Lil greeted me with an impatient glance at her watch. It was time to get to the shuttle. One night in New York, then off to Paris.

“How’d it go?” asked Lil, once our taxi was headed to National.

“So far, great. It should be ready when we get back,” I said.

According to Marsha, the trick was to show it to the judge at the very least. That would motivate Skipper’s lawyer, we hoped, to object that we were being unfair because we were using Cloris’s voice for her version. Marsha would then dare the prosecution to let Skipper record her version of events. And watch them balk when they realized her reading

would elicit a different, perhaps even incriminating reaction, leaving them no choice but to refuse.

“I think I got it,” said Lil.

“It’s easier when you see it.”

The following morning, Lil awakened in the Mews with me alongside her, flailing wildly.

“Gus, you’re having a nightmare. Boy, do you hit hard. I think my jaw’s out of whack.” Lil shook me forcefully, just as I was about to punch in her direction again.

“What happened?” I said, slowly gaining consciousness.

“You must’ve been fighting in your nightmare.”

“I— I’m sorry. I was trying to cross a river on the top of a covered bridge, trying to get to you. Some people were grabbing at me. They wanted to stop me and get to you. I was fighting them off.”

“Get me a glass of water, will you?” she asked.

“Are you all right, hon?” I asked, on my way to the kitchen to fill a glass and start the kettle boiling.

“I feel better, just thinking... by tomorrow, we’ll be well out of DC and New York. In a different country.”

“It hasn’t been a good year for progressives.”



IT TOOK US A DAY OR SO TO SHAKE OFF THE REMNANTS OF THE LAST two weeks, the stress and the second-guessing. We traveled light—one medium suitcase apiece, perfect for what we’d planned.

I looked around the plane anxiously as if some trivial detail in the form of a malicious imp had stowed away in an overhead compartment determined to spoil our holiday, and I should be looking for the offender. Such was the hold the daily grind of appointments, screenings, and meetings had on me until the change of environment kicked in. I was still going over unfinished business when we landed in Luxembourg, and the bus was on the way to Paris. The farmlands, the green fields, and stone barns along the way were enough to put those annoying worries to rest.

“I’ve never seen anything quite as green,” said Lil.

It was early morning when we arrived at Reggie's apartment building on the rue de l'Université. I rang for the concierge, who remembered me from March, collecting the keys to Reggie's *chambre de bonne*, the tiny pied-à-terre that Reggie left unrented for his friends' visits to the City of Light.

We stashed our bags and took off walking toward ground zero—the heart of Paris for tourists, the Fifth arrondissement—the St. Michel district—determined to stay ahead of the jet lag that would surely overtake us if we rested. Youthful enthusiasm kept us upright, alert and strolling up the boulevard Saint-Michel, stopping every so often to browse the sidewalk bins of jazz records or examine the menus of the various restaurants, eschewing, despite the temptation, the carryout windows vending Tunisian sandwiches: crispy buns stuffed with oily tuna, hard-boiled eggs, potatoes, olives, and harissa. While describing their mouthwatering succulence, I warned against their soporific qualities at the same time. Lil was barely able to resist.

"We'll come back, hon," I said. "Eat one of those now and you'd be sleepwalking."

When we turned into the boulevard Saint-Germaine, walking briskly west, I suggested checking out the events at the American Center. We caught the Metro at Odéon, exiting at boulevard Raspail.

The center was fully roused—people of all nationalities heading to rehearsals, dance and art classes, writers' groups, and to the practice rooms in the basement. Lil was amazed by the breadth of activities, by the people waiting to meet friends, and by those who were just hanging out. I thought I recognized a few faces, but none I was able to attach a name to. I checked the notices. One event, sure to be well attended, caught my eye immediately: a concert by the Art Ensemble of Chicago that very night. A must, we decided.

"What to do in the meantime?" asked Lil. "That is the question."

"Yeah."

"Shopping?" said Lil, somewhat embarrassed to have suggested it.

"Shopping on the first day?" I said, shaking my head. "A nonstarter. But resting is worse; sleep and we'd miss the concert for sure."

"What about riding around?"

"It's cheap to ride the bus lines and a good idea for killing a couple of

hours. Ride to the end of the line, then catch another line back to Saint-Michel. Anything to stave off jet lag.”

“Where’s the café you’re always talking about, the Select?” asked Lil.

“Montparnasse. The ninety-two bus stops there.”

“Let’s get off there on the way back. Sit out front and listen to people speaking French until I realize I’m actually here. Even though I won’t understand a word...”

“Listen long enough and one day it slows down, and you’ve caught up. Suddenly, you understand what they’re saying, just by immersion.”

“Listening to people speak another language,” said Lil, “is exhausting.”

“Don’t I know it!”

As we readied to leave the center, I was convinced some sort of wild adventure was just around the corner.

“Hey,” Lil reacted to a tap on the shoulder. Thinking it was me, she spun around, amused by such a puerile gesture, only to find it wasn’t me; it was Carlotta.

“Don’t want to miss it. The concert, *n’est-ce pas?*” said a smiling Reggie.

“Reggie... Carlotta!” exclaimed Lil with handshakes and hugs. “Where’d you come from?”

“We just got here. We’re in the apartment,” said Reggie, “gonna stay there until the baby’s born next month.”

“As much as we love it, Vietnam’s a little too much Wild West when it comes prenatal care,” insisted Carlotta.

“The concierge told us someone had picked up the keys,” said Reggie. “From her description, it sounded like y’all. You don’t have to stay in the maid’s room. Move your stuff into the other bedroom.”

“I don’t know,” I said, “Lil’s kinda attached to that little room. She’d miss climbing the six flights up.”

Reggie and Carlotta laughed. “Oh you, mister funny man, I would not,” said Lil. “Thank you kindly, we’ll move downstairs.”

“By the way, Lil’s pregnant, too,” I said.

“Just barely, but I’m starting to feel things here,” she said, pointing to her belly.

“All I can say is,” said Reggie ironically, “I’m a-hankering to see what these babies gonna look like. Aren’t you, man?”

Having agreed on a tour of the city, we adjourned to Reggie's rented Peugeot 204, boys in front, girls in the back, for a whirlwind trip through every one of the city's twenty arrondissements, which turned out to be as much fun for Reggie and me who knew the city well, as it was for Carlotta, the infrequent visitor, and Lil, the neophyte. At the same time, we exchanged short- and long-term plans—me filling my friends in on my departure from WBN, our move to California, the Cloris affair, and all things concerning the Goodsteins.

Besides their moving to Paris for the baby, Reggie and Carlotta enthused about the profitable stringer work they'd secured from French and American networks as well as the column for the *Herald Tribune* that Carlotta had started writing in Vietnam and was invited to continue—byline Paris. Enough work, said Reggie, to maintain a decent lifestyle.

No longer able to resist scarfing down Tunisian sandwiches, we found a place serving them nearby. After, Reggie parked the car on a side street off Montparnasse so Lil could sit in Le Select and attempt to pick out a few words in the conversations taking place around us, which she was able to do from time to time, proudly repeating the word aloud for Reggie and me to confirm. Over time, the French people around us started to realize that Lil was up to something, but that didn't stop them from expressing their thoughts and feelings with even more urgency and volume. Had they been Americans and not French, realizing people were listening to them, they would probably have grown belligerent and started a fight.

When we'd tired of the Select, which was easy for me to do since I hated to gawk, Reggie suggested: "What about hitting the American Center for the tea service in the big room? It starts at four o'clock."

"Very stately," I agreed. "Aristocrats only."

"We're royalty," said Carlotta, "if there still is such a thing. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to believe the amazing life I've had."

"Amen," echoed Lil, with a squeeze of my hand.

That's when I mentioned our cross-country skiing excursion. "Today's Thursday. Tomorrow we'll take our royal asses to the Juras for a weekend of cross-country and great food—a place I have fond memories of."

"Translation: he once took a woman there. They had a swell time, right dear?" said Lil.

“Don’t be so jaded, love. If I know Gus,” said Carlotta, “Well—”

“Too much nervous energy,” said Lil.

“Never too exhausted for— Ahem,” said Reggie.

“By the way, Carlotta,” said Lil, “how is lovemaking while pregnant?”

Carlotta put her thumb and index finger to her lips and blew a kiss. “Mmm, *merveilleux*.”

“Wait! *L’amour*, I heard the word *l’amour*, that woman said it,” declared Lil, raising her arms to celebrate her newfound ability.

“Don’t brag,” said Reggie, “the French use that word in every other sentence.”

“That, and *dégueulasse*,” I said. “Well, Lil, honey, immerse yourself. French speakers all around you, better than the Alliance Française.”



THE CEILING IN THE LARGE ROOM OF THE AMERICAN CENTER ROSE TO at least twenty feet above the floor with fifteen-foot windows to match—the result of building arts from a long-ago time when labor and materials were less expensive, more Promethean. The late-afternoon shafts of sunlight streaming through the high windows revealed dust motes rising off the rugs, giving the room an Edward Hopper sense of isolation. Words were swallowed up, almost before they left the speaker’s mouth. During my first visits to the center, back when I was with Emma, writers like Samuel Beckett and jazzmen like Johnny Griffin were regulars. By now, the center had become a favorite haunt for artists, musicians, expatriates, draft dodgers, deserters fleeing Vietnam, Black musicians seeking refuge from the racism in America, and writers of all nationalities.

Not much was known about the lady who served tea from an ornate samovar, neither her name nor her age, which appeared to be somewhere near the mean, only that she appeared every day at 4:00 p.m., wearing the type of clothes worn by Queen Elizabeth II on similar occasions. To me, these surroundings held strong memories; I felt transported to an earlier time in my life. As if by magic, Lil began to pick out French words and phrases. The tea service conjured up images of the tea service at Buckingham Palace—the same sort of somber, yet respectful ceremony.

In the 1930s decor of the room, the clothes worn by the tea drinkers



—men in bell-bottoms, women in miniskirts—looked out of place, almost as if the generations of man had become all scrambled up. Black, white, Asian, and other ethnic faces now replaced faces that had once only been white. The dreamlike mood induced a harmonizing calm, relieving, briefly, the anxieties of its occupants. Movements seemed to slow in deference to tradition.

“Well,” said Reggie, after we had our fill of tea and contemplation, “there’s still a lot of time till the concert. We’re heading home so Carlotta can rest up. See you back here for the concert.”

Although I had laid out the arguments about the horrors of jet lag, how our week’s vacation could be ruined if we were unable to last until 11:00 p.m. the first night out, Lil’s motor was still revving. She was into everything Paris had to offer while I found myself lagging to keep up. The concert would revive me, I told myself.

Leaving the center, we cut across the Montparnasse Cemetery to the rue Raymond Losserand. I was alarmed by the topographical changes in the arrondissement—the Fourteenth—that had once housed the apartment of my fiancée, Emma Salazar. Landmarks changed quickly in Paris. The street had not only lost or replaced many of its shops and restaurants, it had also undergone a widening and rerouting of traffic. The building where I’d spent nights with Emma now featured a laundromat on the ground floor and luxury apartments from there on up. Still, it was the most authentic quarter on the Left Bank, the least affected by modernization.

Before we realized how far we’d walked, it was time to head back to the center, arriving in time to claim the seats Reggie saved for us. I overheard chatter about the concert, that the Art Ensemble was debuting a new piece entitled “People in Sorrow.” I spotted several acclaimed French musicians and critics in the crowd, both jazz and classical. Everyone respected the Art Ensemble, their explorations, and their originality.

Because listeners raised their eyebrows when I brought up my visions or prescient moments, I learned not to raise the topics in public. People, even friends, with few exceptions, were conditioned to accept information only perceivable to the five senses. For some reason, automatic writing was acceptable, but any topics of a so-called sixth-sense nature

mentioned around people of news-gathering persuasion, like Carlotta and Reggie, triggered sighs and rolling of the eyes. They were, after all, in the business of applying Lockean filters to every material thing, event, or phenomenon they saw, felt, touched, smelled, or heard. As part of her heritage, Lil, although not a practitioner herself, believed in a higher consciousness that could be attained or perceived through meditation or other spiritual practices. In other words, she believed in the unseen but was not interested in exploring its frontiers.

All those materialist preconceptions went out the window as soon as the “People in Sorrow” theme, a musical lament for Black suffering, was tapped out, faintly, at first, on bells, then louder on chimes and bass.

So captivating was the music—a continual rephrasing of the theme with different instruments at different levels of intensity—that people (Reggie and Carlotta among them) were soon teary-eyed. It was as if the composer, all four musicians in this instance, had discovered the perfect assortment of notes to describe human suffering, notes that went beyond any one race of men to encapsulate the tragedy of oppression and the still greater tragedy of its acceptance.

“Man,” said Reggie afterward, “talk about spiritual (up to that point, no one had). It had me in touch with a part of me I never knew existed.”

“Me, too,” said Carlotta, drying her eyes with a hankie.

All the talk. The tears. Suddenly I realized I was in a time warp and none of this had happened the way I described it. The concert, yes. But the weeping and the emotion were a projection as if I had been part of a mass hypnosis and was only now emerging from some sort of ethereal anesthesia, a now familiar suspension of cognitive exertion that characterizes a dream within a dream.

“Me too, *me too*...” I heard Carlotta’s voice somewhere in the distance. Words like the flutterings of birds’ wings: I was returning to the here and now.

“Some people say it’s not jazz,” said Lil, smiling at me. “What do you think, darling?”

“I’ll be humming it to myself for a month,” said Reggie.

“How’s it go again?” asked Carlotta.

I hummed: “Da-da-daa-DA-da di-de da.”

“That’s it.”

We finished the evening at *La Coupole* without anyone commenting on my reverie. By that time, Lil was a little less lively, although she was able to make an *assiette de fruits de mer* disappear.

“Well, we made it to midnight,” she said, throwing down her napkin. “Trying to pick out French words is exhausting. Probably the reason I’m tired.”

“Yeah, Lil. It’s not like you weren’t yawning after the concert,” said Carlotta.

“Big, whole-body yawns,” I said. “Come clean, you’re as tired as the rest of us.”

“I am rather tired,” she said, trying to suppress a big yawn, then realizing the futility of dissembling and bursting into infectious laughter. “Take us home, Jeeves.”



DURING THE BUS RIDE SOUTH, LIL SNUGGLED UP TO ME, PESTERING ME with questions, first if I’d ever made it with Carlotta and then about Emma. It was all very innocuous and low-key, the better to make it seem like she wasn’t prying.

“*Lamour*, what a word! It reminds me of a big, sloppy wet kiss,” said Lil.

“What made you think of that?”

“I was just thinking about why Carlotta was so enthusiastic about making love while pregnant. Whether she was a good kisser?”

“I dunno,” I said. “People think we were an item, but we never were. Anyway, other women are history. Now it’s time with my hausfrau, Lilian. Lilian, the woman who never passes up a free stinger, who keeps strange things in her freezer, a dead bat or a rabbit?”

“Bats. Didn’t you know Chinese people consider them a great delicacy,” said Lil. “I’m just curious, like when I came into to your life, you had several balls in the air. Virginia, Skipper, *the sisters*. Then that interloper, Lil. Yes, Lil. She preceded the final *sister*, by a nose. Photo finish, no? Any others. Going once, going twice!”

“I’m a one hausfrau man. And see what I get for it. Scorn and ridicule.”

“Am I wrong to want to know about my husband’s peccadillos? Hey, *husband*. That’s the first time I used that word.”

The bus slowed down. I wiped the window with my hand. Lil took a paper towel out of her purse and handed it to me. “That’s better,” I said, pausing to admire the falling snow. “If it keeps up like this, it’s going to be great skiing. There’s already a good base.”

Extending as far as the eye could see, punctuated only by an occasional stone farmhouse, the inherent calming effect of untrodden snow had Lil taking my hand. We smiled at each other, then continued watching the landscape pass by. The traffic slowed down as conditions worsened.

“We’re almost there, honey. You’ll love the food, real country fare. The opposite of La Coupole. Bœuf bourguignon, coq au vin, ratatouille, *petit salé aux lentilles*, raclette, cassoulet.

The bus turned off the autoroute. Before long Lil and I were deposited at the entrance of the makeshift resort, a cross-country ski venture in winter, and a farm during the summer. Vague outlines of the buildings became less vague as we drew near. The barn that housed the farming equipment was dark. The smells emanating from the main house and the two barking dogs had us headed in the right direction. By the time we stashed our bags and freshened up, we had familiarized ourselves with the layout: the kitchen, the large common room, a dining room, and guest rooms. By then, the dogs had taken to dancing around me, especially a houndish bitch named Fifi, who kept wiggling and licking my hand. She knew a soft touch when she smelled one.

A half-hour later, with Lil and me in the two remaining chairs, dinner was served at the long table. Fifi came up on my right, burrowing her muzzle under my hand and then flipping it into the air with her snout so that it landed on her head and I found myself petting her. Her eyes swiveled upward into direct contact with mine. As our eyes met, Fifi told a story of canine woe as old as the hills. I was a believer. I waited till Lil was distracted, then fed her a piece of pork from my plate.

The other guests, most of them French, prattled on as if their lives depended on it, heedless of my seduction by my new best friend, or the delicious cassoulet being served. Once introduced by the hostess, we were ignored, as the French, though they smiled deferentially, assumed

Lil and I didn't understand a word. In the case of the other American couple seated across the table from us, this assumption was accurate.

The couple, the Doctor Joseph Tillmans, her American, him a Brit, launched into immediate conversation with Lil and me that had the French guests pausing for an instant and turning their heads like a family of African ground squirrels. When they'd computed that this motley minority of Americans were, at present, of little interest, they returned to their urgent conversations.

This meant that the French guests had missed Doc Tillman's and his wife Eunice's rather fawning reaction to my presence—by failing to recognize that among the guests was a celebrity from American television.

"Gus Mazur, yes?" said Eunice, "I recognized you immediately, poked my husband. I'm afraid we were staring."

"That's all right. I'm Lil. We're on our honeymoon."

"First vacation I've had in five years," I said.

"We watch WBN most of the time," said Joe Tillman, showing off his posh Brit accent to go along with his natural reserve. "Last thing I heard you were anchoring the nightly news with the Sanchez girl, but they changed their mind, or you resigned at the last moment."

"Hope I'm not being too nosy, but what are you going to do now?" asked Eunice.

"Something quite different. We're moving to LA. I'm going to write and direct."

"LA, that's where we live, well, Laguna Beach really. In the hills up above. Great place to live. You'd love it."

"It's our first real time in California, for both of us," said Lil. "How far is Laguna Beach from Hollywood?"

"In LA, distance isn't measured in miles; it's measured in time. Everything's far apart. You could be looking at an hour and a half. Other times only forty-five minutes. Depends on the traffic," said Joe. "That's why Sandy Koufax used to come to the stadium in a helicopter."

"Probably need to stay close to the studio, to begin with, right hon?" said Lil.

The French hubbub had died down; they were eating finally. Lil and I had polished off firsts and seconds and she had just put down her wine

glass. Unbeknownst to her, every time she set her wine glass on the table, the Frenchman to her right filled it without her us noticing. French people hate when a diner's glass starts emptying. At that point, she was feeling no pain so she just kept sipping.

"They seem quite amiable," she said in a loud voice, followed by a giggle. "Oops, I think I'm a little— I've only had one glass."

At the very moment, the three of us were listening to Lil, the Frenchman refilled her glass again, smiling as he did so. All of us, including Lil, began laughing, much to the Frenchman's surprise. Not quite understanding why we were laughing, he nevertheless thought whatever it was must be funny, so he started laughing too.

"They're sneaky. If you don't want your glass refilled, leave an inch or so," said Joe. "During meals, they ignore us, but— well, I'm a psych. I should know these behavioral things, but they have me buffaloed. Alone, they're friendly. There's one chap who speaks English. It's only in a group that they're kind of robotic. I think they're a shy lot."

I was looking forward to a walk in the snow. The moon was up, defusing a kind of light seen in films noir. That changed when the Tillmans mentioned after-dinner activities.

"There's amateur hour now, really fun," said Eunice. "Joe plays the harmonica. Everyone gets comfortable. Others, actually six actors from the Comédie-Française did a scene from *Cyrano*. That young couple there," Eunice pointed them out, "does jitterbug dancing."

"Gus sings the American songbook, knows all the tunes. I accompany him."

"Great," said Joe, "I play jazz harmonica, chromatic harmonica. Toots Thielemans style. You want to try one together?"

"Sure. How about 'Time after Time' or 'Moonlight in Vermont'? For an encore, 'It's Only a Paper Moon'... if they ask?"

"Cool, I know them," said Joe.

Amateur hour was a success, the actors' group performed a scene from Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* with such comic intensity, Lil needed no command of French to understand the slapstick. They were followed by the dancers, who were followed by Lil, Joe Tillman, and myself.

. . .

LIL, ALWAYS IN EXCELLENT SHAPE, CAUGHT ONTO CROSS-COUNTRY skiing quickly. We devoured an early breakfast and took off down the trails. We didn't say much along the way, only an occasional comment on the pristine beauty of our surroundings. It's that way with cross-country, I said, you get so into the rhythm, it's difficult to stop moving forward, breathing like a machine if machines could breathe, regular and steady. We returned in time for lunch: vegetable soup, charcuterie, *pain de campagne*, *rillettes de porc* and other patés, a salad, and *vin d'Alsace*.

After lunch, Lil learned why Carlotta raved about sex while pregnant. "That was amazing," she said. "Relaxing. I got to enjoy your face the whole time, watching your eyes tell me how much you love me. Do you think the baby felt that?"

"Maybe, but not in any cognitive way, like 'Mommy's getting fucked,' but surely the brain must produce waves of pleasure or contentment, signals that the baby feels."

"What do you think of the Tillmans, hon?" asked Lil when my catnap was finished.

"Do you mean, should we accept their invitation to check out Orange County?"

"Why not?"

"That Eunice is one strikingly beautiful forty-three-year-old. Long porcelain Nefertiti neckline. Cheeks have hollowed a bit with age, like what happened with Jean Simmons. Gives her a king's mistress look."

"She's a Smith girl..." said Lil. "That's American aristocracy."

"She seems amenable."

"Amenable to what?"

"How should I know?"

"No premonition?"

"She has the power to cloud men's minds."

"Like the Shadow, said Lil. "You'd like to fuck her, huh?"

That came out of nowhere. I scanned her face for clues.

"If I was into women," said Lil. "I don't know why, but I get the impression, just the way she looked at you, and me—"

"I don't know," I said. "She's—I don't know—elegant."

For the next two days, it was more of the same, never boring, always magical. If the food or the small talk got too much, we took to the trails.

When we returned to Paris, Carlotta was in the throes of a five-hour the-baby-could-come-at-any-moment *session, hospitalized for the time being. Lil and I shopped at BHV and La Samaritaine.* We dined at the bouillabaisse restaurant in the Fifteenth, seated on long benches while the fare was set on two long tables in a community free-for-all. Toss in a few Parisian galleries and we'd had enough to hold us over until the trip to Turkey, planned for whenever our film commitments ended.



## PART III: 1969 -

“We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail.”

— *SISTER CARRIE*, THEODORE DREISER



## BEYOND THE TINKERTOY

**T**he judge in the Cloris Tucker case agreed to hear Marsha Warren’s motion to allow the evidence we’d put together. It was clear; it was concise; it would probably not be admitted.

Crowded into Judge Rita Murphy’s chambers were Assistant DA Peter Feller, Cloris and her lawyer, Skipper and her lawyer, Noah Goodstein, and finally, me, as the person qualified to run the equipment—even though the judge considered me an interloper and prohibited me from speaking. “You’re here, Mr. Mazur, only as a technical advisor, to speak when spoken to.”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“Now, Ms. Warren,” said the judge, “let’s find out if your little scheme has any merit. It is highly irregular. We’ll watch without interruption. That’s a warning to both sides: save the comments for after it runs.”

“Your Honor,” said Marsha, “both sides concede that Mrs. Randall was present during the altercation that caused Virginia Hubbard’s demise. That she’s a witness is not in question. Normally, a witness gives verbal testimony. In certain cases, testimony can also be nonverbal—shaking one’s head, nodding, acting out, sign language, and certain gestures. Testimony can also be written, smelled, and tasted.”

“Get to the point, Counselor.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Marsha motioned to me with her head, “Gus, can you get us started...”

I then described what they were going to see, how the piece was made, and what to look for. “Don’t worry, it’s not long. As soon as I kick it off, you’ll get the gist.”

“I object,” said Skipper’s lawyer after the film had run its course.

“I’ll bet you do,” said the judge.

“This is prejudicial. Nothing happened,” said Skipper’s lawyer. “I don’t know what it proves, but it implies that, were my client to undergo the same silly experiment, the result would prejudice the jury against her. An experiment she has no intention of attempting.”

“That’s exactly the point, Your Honor,” said Marsha. “We stipulate that the results would not be the same. We dare Mrs. Goodstein to show the court how their client would fare in this, uh, comparison.”

“It’s the same technology as the lie detector, Your Honor,” said Skipper’s attorney, “which everyone knows is unreliable, and therefore not admissible.”

“On the contrary, Your Honor,” added Marsha, “a lie detector is administered to a conscious person. In our procedure, a person with no memory of the incident except what is locked away in her subconscious was the subject of the procedure, which, by the way also measures other bodily functions like blood pressure and heart rate, from which it calculates a comprehensive formulation. And the subconscious doesn’t lie.”

Before the hearing of witnesses began the following day, Judge Rita Murphy sequestered the jury to announce her ruling on Marsha Warren’s motion to allow Alice Randall’s mute testimony and Marsha’s second motion requiring Miriam Sanchez to recite her account for Ahmet’s apparatus.

“The court finds against these motions: one, the court cannot force someone to take a lie detector test, and this technology, though it might differ in some ways, appears to be similar to lie detectors, whose results are not admissible in any court; and two, certain people trained in yoga and other practices, who have learned how to control their body temperature, might also be able to control their galvanic skin response, the very basis of this device.”

As part of his opening statement, the DA illustrated the events of the

case on a meticulous timeline, marking in blue the events all parties agreed upon and in red the events whose facts were still not established. During this session, the witnesses testified only to the known facts (the blue events in the DA's timeline): the dinner at Alice Randall's house, its participants, the exhuming of Virginia Hubbard's body from Black Pond, and its condition.

I sat with Lil and my aunt, exchanging looks as, more and more, the various testimonies reinforced the district attorney's theory of the case. "Things look mighty grim for that poor girl, Peter," said Aunt Alice. "I was hoping the judge would allow your experiment."

"It was never the basis of the case, only a delaying tactic, although I think the judge liked it. I could tell. But that's beside—"

"Even if she escapes jail," said Lil, "her future is grim."

"A prostitute, would you believe it," said Alice. "She fooled me. What a play or movie this would make. I can just see it—written and directed by Peter Randall."

"You betcha. Right after the Nixon story."

"You two are being ghoulish," said Lil. "The trial's not over and you have her in a prison drama already."

"You're right," said Alice. "Thoughtless of me. Well, it's time to end this nonsense and testify."

"Testify? Who? To what? That you had dinner with the two girls, but can't remember what happened after or whether Virginia even showed up?"

"Why no, Peter dear, tell everyone in court that Virginia burst into my house shouting and screaming. It was Virginia who attacked Cloris, and it was Miriam who came to her defense, pushing Virginia, who fell over and cracked her skull. It was Miriam who panicked. She orchestrated the cover-up and had Cloris move the bike, and then drove me to the hospital. I remember it all now. I was only waiting till the judge ruled on your experiment."

"You're dangerous, Auntie. You should have told Marsha immediately."

"Well, Nephew, I only did it so you'd get the credit. I got my memory back after your experiment—the Sodium Pentothal and all—restored it."

“Well, that’s something, Auntie, but you should have told us right away.”



THE TRIAL WAS OVER BEFORE IT STARTED.

After we informed Marsha that Alice was ready and able to testify, Marsha requested a recess wherein she interviewed Alice Randall, listening patiently, and watching her eye movements for signs of dissemblance or debility. It was a wholly credible account that included bits of information that had never come to light. Like the full story on how Virginia’s bike ended up in Sally Smith’s N Street front yard. When Alice repeated her story to Judge Murphy, the judge began picturing oysters and imperial crab at Crisfield’s in Silver Spring and a weekend of sailing on Chesapeake Bay, in that order.

The judge dismissed the case. A court date was set to hear the changes leveled against Skipper, who, seeing she was boxed in, changed her plea to guilty. She explained that she had come to Cloris’s aid after Virginia attacked her, that she’d panicked after Virginia became unresponsive after she had cracked her head on the stone floor. She described the ordeal of the cover-up, admitting Cloris had only helped.

It was then that the bargaining took over outside the courthouse, and the judge found herself in a sort of auction with Goodstein bringing enormous pressure on the DA to agree to a suspended sentence and community service. Oh, they were an elegant couple, Skipper and Noah Goodstein, sitting together, holding hands. After all, it was an accident. Goodstein had started to say, “only an accident,” but he’d sucked back the words before they had a chance to escape his lips. Goodstein had the DA wavering. Marsha knew the jig was up, that Cloris, though she might escape jail time, was finished in any kind of legitimate future, one involving references and a track record. She would, instead, most likely be limited to what she could do on her back.

So it was that Skipper was sentenced to two years in prison for lying to the police and illegally disposing of a body, sentence suspended. Her only punishment: two years of community service to be served in DC’s inner city elementary schools. She’d be back in the role she’d just escaped

from, that of the third-grade teacher. And back as WBN anchorwoman the following Monday.

As I explained to my wife, “One irony, and that’s about it. For two years, she’ll be back in the role she was so determined to escape from.”

The next morning, the movers arrived.

Putting everything in storage and forgetting about it was the plan. Lil wanted to choose our new residence, not leave it to some agent, even though the studio offered us a specialist experienced in matching people with houses and moving them in and out.

“No need to rush. We have time,” said Lil.

“At least talk to the studio agent,” I said.

“Oh sure, but I want to learn the area,” said Lil. “By the way, what do you have in mind for Aunt Alice? Put her in storage with the rest of the things we’re abandoning?”

“I can just see her writing a thousand-dollar check to Judge Murphy.”

“What about Cloris,” Lil asked, “as a companion?”

“Wow, that is a stretch.” I thought for a moment. “It might just work out... temporarily. Why don’t you talk to her, woman to woman?”

I loved the idea of a Hollywood courtyard apartment, waxing nostalgic about the one featured in the Humphrey Bogart and Gloria Graham classic, *In a Lonely Place*. That one and a host of others were used as locations in midcentury Hollywood flicks. Lil telephoned the studio’s real estate agent to ask her about the possibilities, only to have the agent discourage her.

“There are some places, like the Normandie, that still rent,” the agent told Lil, “but the majority were commissioned in the twenties by big stars. Chaplin and Cecil B. DeMille. The pipes leak, the heat doesn’t heat, et cetera. People move in, then move out quickly. Have you thought about Venice? It’s right next to Santa Monica. There are some great not-too-expensive bungalows along the canal. About thirty minutes from the studio, on the Ten.”



I LOADED UP THE CHRYSLER WITH ESSENTIALS FOR THE MOVE TO California, selecting Route 66, made famous by Nat King Cole as the

fastest, most scenic route for motoring West. Remnants of the old landmarks still existed, although the remaining sections of 66 were gradually being replaced by the new Interstate 40. It wouldn't be Kerouac or Kesey, but it was enough to satisfy my nostalgia jones.

In Oklahoma, we spent a night with my parents, then on to Oklahoma City, where, on a tip from Gloria, we dined in a steak house that, according to their menu, featured the tastiest steak tartare in the whole world. Salad, baked potato with sour cream, and raw meat made for furious lovemaking afterward.

When we got back to the Habana Inn, Lil was boasting a 'Can this be true?' smile that quickly changed into a 'Shouldn't you be doing the thing you promised to do' expression as soon as I started reading the Washington Post.

"All right already, I'll call Aunt Alice," I said. "Keep your fingers crossed that Cloris hasn't driven the Jaguar off a cliff."

"Please, darling. Before you settle into the paper—"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, picking up the receiver. "Long distance. Charge it to the room, please."

During the time it took to complete the connection, I was treated to a variety of electromechanical switching noises—the clicks, burps, beeps of modern telephony and a total of five rings before Cloris answered, "Randall residence."

"Cloris? It's Gus. How you are folks making out?"

"We're getting along fine. Here, I'll fetch your aunt."

"Hold it a minute, Cloris," I said. "Before you put her on, how's her health?"

"I'm no expert, but she seems fine stress-wise, now that the case is settled," replied Cloris. "By the way, thank you for arranging this. I'm very grateful."

"It was Lil's doing. I'll let..." I started to pass the receiver over to Lil, who waved me off frantically. "I'll thank her for you," I said.

"Something else. Your aunt connected me to a great job through her publisher. I'm a reader. They send me plays and books. I read and write a review. Just got the first one," said Cloris. "I have a master's in creative writing, you know. So, with the generous stipend she's giving me, I'm set for the moment. Better yet, I'm unconfused."



“No schemes...”

No response, quick or otherwise, just the sound of Cloris exhaling through her nose. Even without Lil’s gesticulating, I realized I’d been insensitive, “I’m sorry, Cloris; I didn’t mean it that way. I— Sounds like things are fine.”

“I’ll fetch your aunt.”

“Hello, Auntie,” I said after the receiver changed hands. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel fine, dear boy. Cloris is a big help. She’s a good girl; I always said so.”

“Not too bored?”

“I still have my committees. Cloris is an excellent chauffeur, takes me everywhere. Shopping, meetings,” said Alice. “I hope you like it out there, dearie. I’m an Easterner.”

In Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, 66 surprised us with its ten-dollar-a-night motels and homespun hash joints. Not sleazy by any means, these establishments were well cared for. Lil dubbed the trip a second honeymoon. During the day, sandwiches while driving. At night, lured by enormous neon signs flashing defiantly, we dined at the remaining eateries that had not yet succumbed to a fast-food competitor. Tacos, steaks, and ribs, crossing the USA, making love in classic motels, three hundred to four hundred miles a day. At best, a 1969 imitation of the iconic forties road trip. Never was so much romance attached to the dreary desert stretches of “Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino.”



WHILE LIL AND THE REAL ESTATE AGENT LOOKED AT BUNGALOWS IN Venice, the studio lodged us at the Hollywood Hotel on Melrose, an easy walk to work. On our first morning in LA, we met Marlin Stryker, the producer assigned to our project. When he learned we had driven cross-country, he asked us if we were up to touring the lot, which we eagerly agreed to.

Stryker then told us to take the rest of the day off. “We’ll meet with Claude Durgo and the rest of the team tomorrow.”

“Just wondering, Marlin, do you have a production that I could sit in

on and take some director's notes?"

"Good idea. Let's see, we have Henry Hathaway, an old hand. He's working on a John Wayne western, True Grit. Experienced guy. There's also Larry Peerce with Goodbye, Columbus, the Philip Roth novel," said Stryker. "I'll fix you up for a look-in on both of them."

"Peerce. We saw his hostage flic, the two guys that terrorize people in the New York subway."

"A bit too stylized, method acting, you know," said Stryker. "Hasn't dampened the tourist trade in the Big Apple, as far as I know. Well received, for the most part."

While checking out our new office, Stryker started fussing with some papers, a signal that useful business was over with, but he had something else to discuss.

"I think we'll head out. We're tired," said Lil.

Stryker made no move toward the door. Something delicate to discuss, it seemed. Money business, perhaps. I poked around the desk, checking the typewriter keys, smiling, and waiting for Stryker to say something. "Nice office," I said, throwaway words to cover the silence.

"You might think Hollywood has plenty of Asian American actors. We never do," said Stryker finally, looking from me to Lil, then directing the rest of his remarks to her. "That goes for this project, unfortunately. We don't have a female lead. Have you done any acting, Lil? Frankly, you'd be perfect. Playing yourself is a role you ought to excel at. We let screen tests decide these things, but I have a hunch. You're very lovely."

"Thank you," she said. "I was curious about acting when I was younger, but there were no parts for Chinese in the plays they did at the schools I went to."

"Can I arrange a screen test for you, say, tomorrow, ten a.m.?"

IT WAS NOONTIME WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THE HOTEL. GUS WAS suddenly fatigued, suggesting they nap. Lil lay down next to her husband but felt refreshed after only a short repose. Actress. Movie star. Why not, she mused. A long way from piano tuning. Not that she'd done a lot of that since hooking up with Gus. Something she could go back to if necessary.

She took off her clothes in the bathroom and jumped in the shower. She wanted to explore LA. And there might not be a better time if the screen test worked out. According to Gus, moviemaking could be exhausting. No time like the present, while he rested. He had done most of the driving after all, and it was catching up to him.

After drying herself, she tossed the wet towel over the shower curtain rod and stood before the mirror. True, she was lovely.. but surprised at being surprised by something she'd always known to be true. Something she'd ignored until Stryker said it to her face. Her mysterious almond eyes, her full breasts, ready to burst forth with life-giving milk. It wasn't so much the man as the moment. The fact that she'd been caught off guard by his remark. A moment later, she turned to look at Gus, a tender calm on his face, like there was no limit to his love.

She ran her fingers through her still damp pubic hairs, brushing them up and down. Then pulling up her panties and tucking her breasts into a clean brassiere, she wrapped a miniskirt around her waist. Turtleneck sweater and red suede jacket and she was out the door and into the Chrysler, backing it up.

When she pulled onto Melrose Avenue, Lil had vague thoughts about seeking out the Piano Technicians Guild. Quickly dispelled when, after driving in circles and getting nowhere, she spotted a sign on a building for the LA Free Press. There's a place that knows more about LA than any road map, she thought, a lot more than who's tuning Jane Fonda's piano. She pulled over and parked the Chrysler.



WHEN I AWOKE, IT WAS 3:30 P.M. NOT FINDING LIL OR A NOTE, I checked the lot. No Chrysler. Probably shopping, getting her bearings. I took out a pad and jotted down some notes. A list of characters. A raw outline. Putting down my pen, I wondered about the team Stryker mentioned. Was I up to competing with Hollywood regulars, much less making useful contributions? I'd heard the horror stories about scripts being rewritten, over and over by many different writers. Script doctors. Punched up for laughs—a project that starts as a drama and ends up as a comedy. I had a lot to learn, and no time to study.

The phone rang at 4:30 p.m. Probably Lil. Not Lil. It was long lost, long-ago Vicki. Anyway, someone, anything to take my mind off Lil. I pitched my voice, making it less tenuous, more like a lyric, a light opera libretto, Gilbert and Sullivan, as if there was nothing on my mind but frivolities. “Vicki, what a surprise!”

“I called the DC number you gave me. Talked to someone. A Don or Donald, I think. He gave me this number; said you’d moved to LA.”

“Only been here two days, Vicki. Got married, just before.”

“I was about to forget the whole thing until he told me you’d moved. Sooo, I decided to call,” she said, “because I’m moving to LA in February. Doing a doctorate in economics at UCLA.”

“That’s big-time. Congratulations.”

“Anyway, I thought—what the hell—he probably doesn’t know a lot of people there. I surely don’t. But now—”

“No, it’s all good. I’m married. Doesn’t mean we’re like lepers. Call when you get here.”

“Well, okay,” she purred. On the phone, her voice sounded as soft and as comforting as it did in person.

“Here, I’ll give you my office number at Paramount; we’ll be leaving this hotel soon enough. Moving to Venice Beach.”

“Paramount, Venice Beach! Just the way you drop those illustrious names gives me goosebumps.”

“Yeah, guess maybe I was dropping names, unconsciously.”

“I can feel the sun already.”

“It’s a killer here, especially for light-skinned people.”



LIL RETURNED TO THE HOTEL AT 7:30 P.M. HAVING VISITED SANTA MONICA and Venice, she was as upbeat as Gus was moody.

“I’m hungry. Can we get something to eat?” he asked, impatiently, “Now.”

“Sure thing. Where do you want to go.”

Ah-ha, just like him, starting with something mundane, Lil decided. Next, he’ll zero in on what’s really bothering him. Better deal with it now and not spoil dinner. Then again, is he moody because he’s hungry? Or

because of her? A misperception on his part that would gradually spill out into the open. A bit at a time until it all came flooding out, engulfing them.

Getting him to talk about it might not be easy she realized; it usually wasn't with men. Pride and all. Like refusing to ask for directions. Something a meal on its own couldn't cure.

The first thing that popped into her mind was the screen test. She'd caught a fraction of his response, a slight change of expression, enough to know that he felt proud that she'd been asked, but there was also a glint of something else. Gus set the schedules, made all the plans, and did all the driving. Now, thanks to the impending screen test, she sensed a restive anxiety in him, like the roles he'd assumed—the badges of virility—were about to be impinged upon.

The screen test had given her a sense of initiative, setting the bar higher than she'd ever imagined. Because she had never felt this way, she wasn't prepared for it. She was sure that Gus picked up on it. He wouldn't be overbearing; it wasn't that. Even during his most domineering moments, he always made her feel a part of things.

It seemed to her he'd suffered a loss of authority without actually losing it. A slight loss of the upper hand. Had she usurped him in some small way? Would he admit to feeling it? The whole thing was ridiculous. If she could only get him to talk it through, put it on a rational basis without making him feel any loss of importance.

Without a word, trying hard to ignore one another, they dressed with their backs to each other, directing furtive glances at one another from time to time. Stone-faced, Gus pulled up his trousers, slipping on his WBN sweater over a clean undershirt, covering it all with his Burberry trench coat. Lil replaced her miniskirt with jeans and put on a heavier sweater.

“Canter's?” he said.

“I've had enough corned beef to last a lifetime, but if you want to...”

“No, I want you to enjoy it,” he said with special emphasis on the word *enjoy*.

“It's not important as long as you get what you want,” she said.

“What about Chinese then?” he said.

“We don't know a good one here. What if it's bad? I'd feel just awful.”

"I'll call your friend Stryker, ask him."

"Don't call him."

"Choose then."

"No, you choose."

"This is getting ridiculous."

"I'll say."

"Okay, rock, paper, scissors."

"But I don't want to win," said Lil.

"Okay, the winner loses."

"I'd gladly drive us back to Oklahoma City nonstop for steak tartare."

"And I'd gladly eat lasagna off your belly button," he said. "That aside, let's ask at the desk."



FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, ENSCONCED IN THE BAMBOO INN ON Seventh Street next to MacArthur Park, amused by how we wound up there, I was polishing off a shrimp with lobster sauce and Lil, beef with broccoli.

"You're not miffed about the screen test. I saw your face when he asked me."

"And I saw your face. I thought Chinese didn't blush."

"I don't know; I usually don't give anything away."

"You did when he said you were striking. You blushed."

Lil shook her head. "Lovely was the word he used."

"Yeah, lovely... Just like *A Star Is Born*."

"Which version? Janet Gaynor or Judy Garland?"

"Take your pick; it's the same tear-jerker fantasy shit Hollywood loves."

"Stars do marry their directors," said Lil.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, they do."

"*Dans le temps, oui...*"

"They still do."

On the drive back to the hotel, silence bespoke our inability to clear the air. I was the first to speak.

“At least we have a script for your screen test. I’ll type it up. Our recent exchange on choosing a restaurant. It’s writ large on my brain.”

“I have a feeling about the test,” said Lil after a short pause, during which I drove one block north to Wilshire, turned west through the park, all lit up under clear skies, continuing to Vermont where I turned north.

“So do— Okay, I was jealous, a little.”

“You silly boy, I’m part of you; I belong to you. You’re my king, my lord and master. I’d never do anything to hurt you. Where you go, there’s life, excitement. All else is emptiness.”

I pulled the car over to the curb on Vermont. “I felt like tearing his head off. I love you so much,” I said, “I don’t want anyone telling you you’re beautiful, or striking, or lovely except me.”

“Darling, as long as we stay friends, our marriage is safe.” We kissed. “By the way, I’m going to tell them tomorrow that I’m pregnant so they don’t find out when I start ballooning.”

“That’s easy to solve; we do all your scenes first,” I said, as I nudged the car out into the busy street.

“One last thing: Stryker’s not my friend; he’s our sort of boss, I think.”

“Durgo makes all the decisions. Stryker is his office boy. Oh, he’ll work his way up, probably, but not at our expense.”



FROM THE MOMENT WE ENTERED THE PARAMOUNT LOT, LIL AND I were treated to an informal crash course in the movie business.

In the initial meeting, Claude Durgo introduced us to Boris Charles, the writer we’d be working with.

“You know,” said Durgo, after talking in generalities about treatments and scripts, “a five pager with an overview of what the audience sees and how it’s being presented to them. Even more important now is how you see the action unfolding and from whose POV.”

“Maybe you could rattle off a few ideas,” said Stryker. “Nothing final, just off the top of your head.”

“It’s an intricate story,” I said. “Lot of characters and lots of scenes.

I'd place no limits on the number of scenes or characters, not at first. It's easier to eliminate than it is to add later on. Action and storyline with datelines for each change of scene and location, character slug lines. No narration. We must come up with an airtight timeline as the reference point for action.

"I'd use actors to portray public figures like Averell Harriman, Anna Chen Chennault, Henry Kissinger, LBJ, Dean Rusk, and Clark Clifford, every principal except Nixon, keeping him pulling strings in the background, the *éminence grise* whose name nobody dares to mention. Intercutting the action on the home front (the 1968 presidential campaign), the peace talks in Paris, the battlefield, the White House, a news-like documentary. No narration, just datelines, for each new location. Character-driven, timeline-driven."

"That's a lot," said Marlin Stryker.

"A lot, and intricately interwoven," I said.

"Who are the principal characters?" asked Durgo.

I used my fingers to count off. "Well, there's Kissinger—the real villain. The black widow, Anna Chennault. LBJ, a major presence in a minor role, and finally Harriman. The kidnapping and the kidnapers. The run-up and the election. Minor characters: Dean Rusk, Clark Clifford, Richard Allen, a Kissinger ally. Lê Đức Thọ, 'the hammer,' the real North Vietnamese power at the peace talks, South Vietnamese president Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Finally, the real heroes, the GIs who have to fight to stay alive as a result of the talks being sabotaged."

"I like using actors for the public figures, allows the audience to understand the character's place in the story," said Lil. "Did Gus mention the WBN reporters? They're like relentless private eyes. It's their point of view."

"It's like the audience is looking over the shoulders of the persons trying to unravel the mess," I said.

"Bravo," said Durgo. "I like it."

"Now, if you'll excuse me," said Lil. "I have a screen test."

As Lil rose, gathering her papers, the men around her stood, slightly in awe, as if by merely thinking of herself as an actress, she'd accomplished a transformation.

. . .



TWO DAYS LATER, I SUBMITTED A TREATMENT AND TIMELINE TO BORIS Charles, who suggested changes. I expected it. Durgo liked the treatment. Boris and I wrote the first complete version of the script in one week.

I sat in as an observer on Larry Peerce and Henry Hathaway. I talked with them, gleaning tips and insights where possible, paying close attention to setups, blocking scenes, camera placement, and the various approaches to working with actors. All good, I realized, but useless. Eventually, I'd have to come up with my way of working, based on my personality, just as I'd done when jumping from assistant film editor to full editor to producer. Herb Hecht had taught me moneymen and producers have no idea what they want; they just want to be convinced. The ability to persuade, I learned, was the most important element in making films.

From the moment I watched Hathaway and Peerce, at work, I knew I could do it. It was like coming into my own.

Aside from Lil, my closest allies would be the DP (director of photography) and the AD (assistant director). I resolved to get their support.

In a fortuitous encounter reminiscent of my first meeting with Don Wolff, I shared a table in the commissary with an assistant director, Mike Minnick. Like the Wolff, Mike was the resident cynic.

"Actors. They're a dime a dozen," said Minnick. "Gotta get the upper hand from the get-go. They're actually the stupidest people you'll ever meet. And paranoid to a fault. Who's got what part, how they aced the test but didn't get the part because so-and-so was fucking the producer, how they got cheated on an investment, how someone broke a promise. Shoptalk is all they know.

"Never confuse an actor with Bertrand Russell just because he plays the role of the philosopher.

"Only thing is, the camera loves them, and they have the uncanny ability to find the right expression—eyes, face, posture—at the crucial moment. Qualities so unique it smacks of autism. Did I forget to mention beauty? You can't take your eyes off them. They're not like other people."

I nodded. Best to listen.

"S'all it takes— Your wife, for instance. She's got it. I saw the test.

Hell, they brought in Joel fucking McCrea to read with her. Didn't faze her," said Mike Minnick. "You do know I'm your AD."

I nodded again.

"Never quarrel with your AD. He's there to save your ass," said Minnick.

Lil spent mornings with a dialogue coach, learning how to project, discovering the value of less is more, practicing eyelines and emotions in the mirror.

"Let the camera find you," said the coach. "And listen. You can always tell when an actor isn't listening. If you listen, you'll find the right expression."

Afternoons, I practiced blocking scenes and camera setups with Lil and other available actors. Each time a revised script became available, I presided over the read-through, listening to suggestions along the way. Things were coming together. Mike Minnick said so. Those in the know listened to Mike.

One night after rehearsing, I joked that our late hours had earned us some tennis. Mike Minnick overheard and mentioned our interest to Stryker. A tennis junkie, he invited us to the Hillcrest Country Club on Pico. It was the kind of place where members tolerated clubhouse jesting and veiled slurs. Nothing happened that first night, but I could tell we'd better play like Evonne Goolagong and Arthur Ashe if we had any hope of being accepted.

Fitting in was something Lil did better than I did. It made me bristle at the same time it prompted some of my best tennis. We dominated the six sets of mixed doubles we played, destroying Stryker and his girlfriend and one other couple. After, Stryker proposed swapping partners. Lil refused. Seems everyone wanted a piece of Lil. I thought it strange that the ultraliberal Stryker was so totally accepted.

"They know the liberal films you make?" I asked.

"Hollywood is interesting," Stryker replied, "how money and politics mix when it comes to the film business. Kinda like, 'Leave your shit at the door.'"

Other times, the stuffiness of the club had us demurring, so we drove to one of LA's many public courts for pickup games. If no doubles were available, we rallied with each other. Soon, the word got around, and

highly competitive mixed doubles partners started showing up. Informal tournaments on the weekends sprang up. No one wore a mask.

A few more weeks of script repair and it was time to get it blessed by Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman. Showing it to a Republican was a waste. It would be leaked and then savaged. Up to that point, Durgo had maintained a strict silence. Crew members were heavily vetted; no one was allowed on the set without his permission.

Because we knew the Washington power hierarchy, Lil and I were elected to act as makeshift lobbyists.

“Someone suggested I should play Madame Chennault,” said Lil, when the plane leveled off at cruising altitude. “At first, I thought he was crazy, but it is a meatier part. What do you think?”

It wasn’t hard to guess who’d suggested it. “Your admirer, Stryker, no doubt,” I said. “You could handle it, although you’d be too young for the part. That wouldn’t matter. Makeup could age you. The public doesn’t know her. Anna Chennault is hardly a household name. Then again, you’re too beautiful. Might make her more sympathetic.”

“I could make her a real bitch.”

“No doubt,” I replied. “Has this been explored with anyone else?”

“No...”

“Good. We’ll try a few scenes with you as the spider lady while we’re here.”

Three minutes of silence, before Lil took a new tack. “I never told you about the *LA Free Press*, did I? The guy I met there, Art Kunkin.”

“The avuncular Art Kunkin. I met him in Chicago, at the convention. Quite a pedigree. Quite a dude!”

“There were some Chinese people there talking about the student demonstrations in Berkeley. Could be interesting for a next project.”

That night we ate dinner with Mitch and Isabella at a Mandarin restaurant in Chevy-Chase, allowing Lil to show off her mastery of that dialect, Cantonese being her native language. At their house after dinner, Mitch informed us he was getting ready to abandon the tinkertoy; he’d already removed any trace of Lil. I was surprised to see an entry for Pam Wyatt, knowing that she’d been murdered a while back in a case heretofore unsolved. Her entry did not include a link to me, meaning Mitch did not know about us. It was then that he mentioned the police had heard

about it and wanted to see it. He'd received a subpoena that Marsha was fighting for reasons of confidentiality. The cops had promised to concentrate only on the Wyatt case.

"To think it might help solve the case," he said. "Wow."

"Would be ironic, that's for sure."

SCHINDLER AGREED TO VET THE PROJECT IMMEDIATELY. THE QUESTION with Stuart Schulberg was not would he help, but what could I offer him in return, quid pro quo-wise. Fortunately, that issue became moot after he was offered the job of producer for NBC's *Today Show*. Schulberg had worked on German reconstruction films after the war with Jules Kaitz and Herb Hecht. And he was acquainted with both Clark Clifford and Averell Harriman.

After reading the treatment, Schulberg suggested concentrating on Harriman who, although he'd done a great job negotiating, had been made to look like a kind of stooge by Nixon's conniving. He might be eager for payback, said Schulberg. Mostly, however, the two esteemed statesmen were curious about the choice of actors to portray them on the screen.

That was the principal topic for discussion when I met with Harriman, although he did go off at length on Nixon and Kissinger. "They're both traitors," he said when we met at the Lehi Grill on Wisconsin. "The devil and his accomplice. Lucifer and Satan. Master and disciple. Beelzebub. The way they rank them in hell."

"Is there any way of preventing this from happening again?" I asked.

"First, the public has to find what's happening in Paris. How Kissinger went from excoriating Nixon to becoming his willing tool, a double agent in the talks, to undermining every advance we made with the North Vietnamese. Lê Đức Thọ was the real power, not Xuan Thuy, the nominal head. As head of the American delegation, I concentrated on Thọ. Establishing a relationship.

"The only way to reign them in is by exposing them." For emphasis, he waved the treatment at me, saying, "This is good work, but incomplete. I'll fill in the blanks and send them to you. Needs careful thought."

"If I remember, Kissinger even wrote to you, criticizing Nixon."

“When he showed up in September 1968, as a consultant, I found out he was leaking secret information to the Nixon campaign. I was a fool to trust him.”

“Do you blame Johnson and Humphrey for not releasing the story before the election?”

“Yes, I do. I’ll get back to you on all of it.” Harriman put the treatment in a briefcase and drew out a sheaf of papers. “Vietnamese Studies. A gift from Xuan when I was replaced by Nixon’s republican appointee,” he said. “Good work, young man. You have some excellent work here. I’ll review it with Clark. Don’t worry.”

I closed my black leather briefcase, a gift Lil had bought me in Paris, and took off down Wisconsin, reflecting on the facts while they were still fresh in my mind. There had been enough skullduggery out of sight and beyond the ken of Averell Harriman and the official American delegation—by the Nixon-Kissinger unofficial delegation—to sabotage Harriman’s efforts at building trust with the North Vietnamese, thereby assuring Nixon’s election. Tho had been ready to sign in October 1968: an event which, when coupled with knowledge of Nixon’s role, had it been made public by Vice President Humphrey, might have resulted in his election. And a war that might have ended in October continued until January 1973. Not that it changed things for the troops on either side; they just kept dying.

Schindler and Schulberg had tried inviting themselves into my talks with Harriman, a gambit I nixed. They’d signed nondisclosures, but once a story, even a fragment of a story, gets out, it’s too late. I couldn’t jeopardize information vital to our project. You never know, I told Lil, one of our go-betweens might be tempted to share crucial elements.

While I was meeting with Harriman, Lil spent the morning eliciting tidbits from Alice and Cloris without getting too personal. On the surface, all was well, she told me later. Nothing awry. Nothing out of place. It seemed as if Alice had taken off twenty years.

Only one little thing. Alice kept asking Lil “Do you think Peter?” questions. Like she was afraid I would not approve of something, God knows what. Writing more checks, perhaps.

But no, said Lil. That was all over.

Nevertheless, there were worried expressions on Alice’s and Cloris’s

faces when I joined them at Martin's Tavern, down the road from the Lehi Grill.

Once seated, I revealed a bittersweet memory of the place: I'd been eating lunch there when a voice on the tube announced that President Kennedy had been shot.

"It reminds me of Keen's English Chophouse," said Lil.

"I love having a companion," said Aunt Alice, suddenly, as if she were channeling the Alice of a previous incarnation. "She drives me to Larimer's. We went to a Redskins game. Imagine me a fan now, watching games on the television. That Sonny Jurgensen!"

"And you," I said, turning to Cloris. "Bored?"

"Not at all. I'm doing a master's in social work at Howard. Alice has agreed to split the cost. I hope that's okay with you."

These were two emotional people. I didn't want to be a bringdown. Not that I thought Cloris was taking advantage. I didn't. It wasn't that the proposal set off a synaptic frenzy. I weighed the benefits of Alice's robust appearance against the cost of the master's program, it was a no-brainer if Cloris didn't backslide.

"Alice has agreed," said Lil, eager to move things along, "no more checks without her lawyer cosigning. The lawyer will send us monthly reports."

"I now have everything an elderly person needs to stay young, a youthful companion and a dog," said Alice.

"Just keep looking great," I said. "Hope I have a companion and a dog when the time comes."

Lil glanced at me crossly. She didn't approve of expressions of sentimentality, meant to arouse concern.

"You mean we can keep Peter?" asked Cloris.

Later, I called the studio, informing Durgo that the treatment was being worked on by Harriman. He suggested crediting Clifford and Harriman as technical advisors.

"Look, Gus," said Durgo after a brief pause. "We're in, what we like to call, moviemaking hell."

"Oh."

"It happens in every production," he said. "You see, we have to package everything before Paramount funds us. The packaging, uh,

process: that's us. We have to— We've paid for everything up to now. The big things, the little things. They're fine with what we've done so far: script, check; number two lead, check, they love Lil; director, check; crew, cameraman, editor, all check.

“One more big item and they'll fund us—the whole budget. However, the money we raised to pay for everything up to now is almost gone. We have enough to pay you and Lil what we owe you, but we need to put you on hiatus while we finalize the package. Then, once everyone's finished with their current obligations, we'll start shooting. Probably June.”

A pause before I asked, “What's the one item?”

“Number one lead. Male star.”

That made it easy to tell Cloris to keep Peter.



ACCORDING TO JOE TILLMAN, THE VOLLEYBALLERS WERE BACK AT Laguna Beach on sunny days. That, he explained, was the inspiration for his call and the invitation to Orange County. He suggested that Lil and I might find this sport the perfect way to unwind. I wasn't so sure we could spare the time, due to the uncertainties of being on hiatus.

Every production is different. Nevertheless, there's always a sense of time being lost or wasted; a feeling that makes movie people so good at their jobs. They must be. The schedules make it that way. There is always more than one schedule, especially for the director. Dates and obligations are dependent on other dates and obligations. Threads timed to the minute, interweaving, separating, coming back together like elaborate electric trains, something, as a child, I showed no interest in after Pop bought one for me.

Doesn't mean they don't get some projects wrong; they do. Just that they put the same amount of effort and know-how into the fuckups as they do in the triumphs. So far, I'd learned one thing: I'd better be on the ball, better save the hijinks for the occasional lavish beach party.

“Nothing happening at the studio; we're ahead of schedule,” I said as if being on hiatus was tantamount to unemployment, something one should never reveal. Quickly, I realized the error of hesitating. You never knew who might say what.

I told Joe Friday would be good for us. We'd love to, I said.

On the way to Laguna Beach, I asked Lil about my second thoughts on revealing we were on hiatus. "Don't worry, darling," she replied.

"I'm a bit paranoid about this whole hiatus thing. What if this project collapses? What if Passageway never gets funded? We're screwed."

"Let's enjoy the weekend, it's all we can do."

After we found our way through the hilly recesses above Laguna Beach and settled into the Tillmans' guest bedroom, Joe suggested we drive by the volleyball courts before lunch. It was only 10:30 a.m. The four of us piled into the Tillmans' Volvo station wagon. We had to park on a side street and walk to the sands where the courts were. We sat down among the small group of bystanders.

"What about it, hon? Think we could contend?"

"This is a whole different order of magnitude."

Lil was already glowing, a smiling Cheshire cat eager for the challenge.

"Would it be too much for the baby?" I asked.

Lil shook her head. I wasn't so sure, but I demurred: Lil knew her limits.

"I was on the team at Columbia. I haven't played in a while, but I'd like to try."

"It's a whole different kind of energy than tennis," I said. "Lots of quick stops and starts."

"Like tennis."

"Yeah, but we don't play tennis in the sand."

The Tillmans were mildly surprised when Lil started peeling off her clothes telling them she was wearing a bathing suit underneath, but I wasn't.

"You look as good in a swimsuit as you do in a ski outfit," Eunice told Lil. "There's a store down the street where you can— I'll show you."

We walked to the store, to a warm greeting from the proprietor, Eunice's cousin, she said. I picked out a bathing suit and retired to the dressing room. After I'd folded my clothes and set them on the bench, I heard a rustling. The curtain parted and there was Eunice, admiring my nudity. I stood there frozen—must have been about 15 seconds—until



the bell over the door to the shop tinkled. A customer had entered; only then did Eunice close the curtain.

On the way back to the beach, I couldn't get the incident out of my mind, namely, what might have happened had the customer not interrupted us. Not until I caught sight of Lil turning to look for us was I able to clear my mind.

"Don't look so guilty, you. Smile," said Eunice.

Lil looked me up and down, smiling and reaching out to take my clothes, stashing them with hers. She took my hand. It felt like a hot poker, the torment of burning flesh, a pang of guilt I had no reason to be feeling. Nothing happened.

I remembered Lil's sensing something about the Tillmans while we were in France, the hypothetical questions she'd raised. I knew now we were in for something. What, I didn't know. For the moment, however, it was volleyball.

"Maybe you better not acknowledge us. I haven't played in a long time," I said, "we might disgrace you in your hometown."

"Don't be so negative, husband. We're going to—"

"Kick ass. I know," I said.

After watching twenty minutes of action, I went over to a young man, very likely a player waiting for a game, most of those in bathing suits were. The man's surprised expression seemed to indicate that he'd recognized me from TV.

Two matches finished simultaneously; the winners would take on two pairs of waiting contenders. The players soon congregated around me, one young man shaking my hand. Lil watched the goings-on for a few minutes before joining me for more discussion and handshakes. Two players deferred to the new arrivals. Lil and I took the court.

There's some specialization in beach volleyball, but it's not like learning to throw a slider. You can either play or you can't. The big hurdle was the level of play. These were college students, couples who probably played for local universities, of which there were many. You didn't just show up and wait in line. If you did dare to show up, you had to look the part. You had to be halfway decent.

We lost all three games, only the second game was close, a two-point defeat. Oh, we had our moral victories on some points: I could leap

pretty high and smash with ferocity and Lil could retrieve more nimbly than our competition. But the young were faster and more tactically experienced.

“What a life,” exclaimed Lil afterward. “Are you sure you don’t want to live down here, darling?”

“We just finished signing papers for a fabulous house near the studios,” I said, a mite peeved, as we walked back to the car. “You’re kidding, right?”

Everyone snickered at my indignation.

“Yes, dear, yes. But it is lovely.”

“That it is,” I agreed.

“We think so,” said Eunice, putting her arm around Lil. “You almost showed them.”

“Great workout,” said Joe.

We followed our seafood lunch with a seafood dinner—lobster and soft-shelled crab at a restaurant on Forest Avenue.

“By the way, Fridays after dinner, we invite someone in for a brief spiritual— I call it a spiritual infusion,” said Joe. “Sign of the times. Usually, someone who’s traveled, or is part of an offbeat spiritual movement. No Scientologists or Hari Krishnas. Sometimes, it’s a dud, but usually worthwhile one way or another.”

“Is that what they are, Hari Krishnas?” asked Lil. “I saw them at the beach today, thought I heard them singing ‘Hari’... something.”

“They’re always there, recruiting,” said Eunice.

“This guy is an Indian fellow,” said Joe, “who teaches a meditation method folks say is unique. He’s going to talk about and demonstrate it.”

“Wow, I’m down,” I said, exchanging looks with Lil. “Lil introduced me to a Chinese mystic, I guess you’d call him that, in New York, a spiritualist really, been helping me, uh, understand, uh, some experiences I had last year.”

“There should be about eight of us all told,” said Joe. “This guest is supposedly very open-minded. Says his work is fact-based, not faith-based. We’ve had a few guests who tried selling us a line, dogma, and cult stuff.”

“They don’t find much favor here,” said Eunice. “By the way, Saturday,

I cook. Italian. My mother. A descendent of Catherine de Medici, so she claimed. Very traditional—the meal and my mother.”

“My mother’s half Italian,” I said.

“Paisan,” shouted Eunice.

“Paisan,” I repeated. “But from much humbler bloodlines.”

“Pizza Margherita, from scratch.”

Back at the ranch house, I helped Joe set up the large living room with tables and chairs. I remarked on how the houses nestled so tightly on the hill still afforded privacy from neighboring houses because of the perennial greenery.

“The hobbits on the hill, we call ourselves,” said Joe. “We won’t set out snacks and drinks except for water. It’s disrespectful to the speaker. We’ll make sure no one’s too squiffed, hide the bottles before the guest gets here.”

Two couples, one young and one older arrived about a half hour after we’d finished setting up. The younger pair were volleyballers Lil and I had competed against. Faire la bise, all around—a European habit I detested, now sweeping the country. The laughter and chatter of small talk. Getting-to-know-you handshakes and hugs. Joe and Eunice regaling the new arrivals with tales of their meeting the Mazurs in the snowy reaches of the Juras. Oohs and aahs. Sound bites rehearsed in the car, gossip.

A knock at the door. Joe ushered in the visitor—Mr. Patel, as he introduced himself, bore one of India’s most common surnames. No matter: he was genuine. I felt it from the get-go, a galvanic skin response upon shaking his hand. Quite the mischievous-looking fellow whose white hair and white eyebrows appeared to sum him up as an itinerant storyteller at most, but whose whole being glowed with prana, a concept Ming Lo introduced me to, something to do with the energy we absorb from air, water, breath, and pure food. Chi, he called it, another word for the life force.

“I am not a guru; I am not looking for disciples,” he said for openers. A slight show of appreciation (ums and ahs) followed this announcement: his audience wasn’t in the mood to be preached to. “I come from Kashmir, in the north of India, with a method of meditation I learned from a very wise man.

“Rather than hear myself talk, I suggest we get into the method to show how it works.

“Simple first step is lying on the floor, next to your chair. On your back, easy. Legs stretched out, relaxing.”

I was the first to lie down; the others followed. It was a small enough group. The excessive shuffling common to larger groups was avoided.

“Now, breathe through the nose only. Pay attention to your breath. Where does it go? The chest, the lungs? Can you feel your breath as it flows through you? Your nostrils. Can you feel your diaphragm? Is it moving? Standing still?

“Let’s see if this helps you locate your breath. Clasp your hands over your head then stretch them as far as you can away from your head. Back and forth like a bellows.”

He reached in his bag, withdrawing eight individual two-pound weights.

“Relax your hands at your sides. I’m putting a two-pound weight on your lower stomach. Gently. Don’t be startled.”

One by one, he placed a weight on each guest’s lower belly. “Now, see if you can move the weight with your breath. Don’t force. Through the nose, breathe in. The nose, not the mouth.

“Even if you don’t meditate, you benefit from breathing through the nose with your diaphragm. The airways and nasal passages are like the jets of an airplane engine. The diaphragm pulls the air in, and it rushes through the airways, through the forehead spreading to the lungs to the whole body. The brain...

“Feel the breath lifting and lowering the weight as you breathe. Raise your head to watch it. You can feel the diaphragm at work when you stretch your hands over your head.

“Respiratory conditions are multiplying in First World nations: asthma, influenza, the deviated septum, emphysema, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, pneumonia and tuberculosis, sinus infections, allergies, even lung cancer, and anatomical irregularities like malocclusion. All in some ways connected to bad breathing habits.

“If you’re not used to breathing with the diaphragm, it may sting a little. Do you feel it?”

I had never considered breath as an instrument of health; I just

breathed like everyone else, without thinking about it. Lying prone alongside strangers, the slight burn I felt as the weight move up and down, made the situation seem less odd. Mr. Patel's bag of tricks was well thought out. As he walked around the room, squatting over each participant in turn, encouraging and adjusting, I fell into a quasi-hypnotic state. The room seemed to be breathing me, its confines moving in and out like a bellows.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Patel gathered up the weights and asked us to sit on the floor next to our chairs.

"Fine," he said, "any observations?"

It took a moment for someone to comment. Several participants averred they'd felt nothing. It was always like that. In any self-improvement activity I'd ever attended, encounter groups and such, I was always the one most taken in, not as a victim of deception, but as someone fully invested, an enthusiast. Why? Because I enjoyed learning, I guess, and because I'd always been searching, keeping an open mind.

"I felt the burn," said Eunice. Two of the others concurred.

"Does that mean I've been breathing wrong?" she asked.

"It could. Time will tell you... if you continue," said Mr. Patel. "Now we sit in the lotus position, half-lotus if you find the lotus difficult. I demonstrate."

The chairs had become a hindrance. Mr. Patel waved his hand at them. The men pushed them back against the wall.

"This is beginning to look like real meditation class," he said. "Everyone on the floor watching the teacher. Do you need a teacher? Not really. I am but a little speck in a big movement, a drop in an ocean. This method is for the solitary student as well as for a group.

"Now, can you find the tip of your nose, with both eyes? Once you do, hold it. That's your center. Now, close your eyes halfway. Slowly roll them upward into your forehead, all the time retaining your center and breathing through the nose, as you did on the floor with the weight on your belly.

"Inhale. Count to yourself: one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Exhale, one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four."

He didn't say another word for ten minutes until a gong he'd set up surreptitiously sounded to end the session. Seems like everyone was on

the same page, or close to it. At least, that's the way I saw it. Mr. Patel had the gift of suggestion. If he'd suggested a stock to buy, Monday, each guest would have lavished hard-earned money on shares.

Questions were asked and answered. I lay back, trying to find a point of entry into the discussion, deciding, instead, to listen.

"Practice is most important," Mr. Patel said, "not theory. Westerners with your scientific method insist metaphysics is a waste of time and effort. There is nothing beyond the physical, you tell the rest of the world. You want to know what the end game is, what the profit margin is, return on investment is. What is meditation supposed to accomplish? So why meditate? What's the purpose? In the East, we don't ask questions; we practice.

"Our meditations have an evolutionary purpose. What is the engine that drives us toward that goal? In a word, sex. The profane is the key to the sacred.

"After three or four months of practice, the meditation distills men's and women's sexual fluids into an elixir and draws it up the spine to the brain, where it begins an evolutionary overhaul. But there's a trade-off; you must sublimate your normal sexual activities. Sublimate means directing the elixir, inward rather than outward as in intercourse. Most Westerners don't attempt the last step, sublimation, or redirecting. They stop with the breathing."

Joe raised his hand and asked without waiting for acknowledgment: "Okay, suppose I want to learn more about moving this elixir up the spine?"

"Ah," said Mr. Patel with an impish smile, "that is my little, I think the word is, gimmick. I don't ask money for my lectures, but these little books are three dollars apiece." He reached into his bag, pulling out a fistful of what seemed to me to be pamphlets. When the laughter subsided, Joe signaled every couple to buy two copies each.

After the program, I took Mr. Patel aside to describe my ordeal, my visions, the automatic writing, the changes that accompanied my condition—my reading of *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.

"There are cases where elixir is distilled and leaked to the brain. That's how genius occurs," said Mr. Patel. "Your immortal being was in peril, your body responded, distilling elixir and drawing it up the spine to

the brain, which, in addition, conferred those exceptional powers on you for a brief moment in time. Some might have died. You have a remarkable will to live,” said Mr. Patel. Then, in his most puckish Hindi-accented English, he began peppering me with questions, “What is the reason you survived? Why? According to the wheel of life, karma, there must be a reason, yes? Forswear squandering the seed energy? Will you discover your place in a greater consciousness? Only you know.”

“Getting caught up in some new age trend,” I said. “That’s not me. Either it sweeps down on me like the archangel Michael with the Holy Spirit in tow, or it doesn’t. It will find me; I won’t go looking for it.”

I felt a sudden dryness in my throat, excusing myself and heading to the kitchen for water. After drinking my fill, I stopped to survey the snacks. The shrimp and artichoke crackers looked inviting. So did the Roquefort on thin slices of baguette and the crabmeat and avocado on water biscuits. I noticed that I was vibrating. Ever so slightly, as if Mr. Patel had infused me with energy from the ether and I’d exhausted it. Now it needed nourishing. I wolfed down several hors d’oeuvres and was just about to head back to the living room when Lil appeared.

“Some day, eh, my darling!”

“Volleyball, good foods, a lecture. A day like this in February would be impossible in DC.”

“And it’s not over. They want to watch a movie, a Western with Burt Lancaster. You’ll want to watch it, I’m sure. I may read.”

“Go to sleep alone? Without me? I know you’re reading. Ten minutes and you’re fast asleep.”

“Okay, I’ll watch it with you,” said Lil.

When we returned to the living room, Mr. Patel had vanished. Joe was threading a sixteen-millimeter projector. One of the older guests, Constance her name, busied herself talking to Eunice while the guests were leaving.

“Look. Eunice and that woman,” said Lil. “Why the conspiratorial looks our way?”

“Women are always inventing conspiracies,” I said, brushing off her suspicions. “The two of them sure offer a contrast. The Smith girl and the Orange County bleached blond. No strawberries in her complexion.”

“She’s pretty,” said Lil.

“She might be without all that makeup.”

“Don’t start anything.”

Evidentially, Constance, by herself, was staying for the show, taking a seat on the far left of the long sofa. Next to her, Joe, then Eunice, me, and Lil, room enough for all five. Joe had set up a screen. Now he dimmed the lights, sat down, and over his shoulder flicked on the projector.

Cheers and easy chuckles as the MGM lion roars twice before two riders trot down a street in a large ciudad Mexicana. The flashy red letter titles drip beads of blood. A rolling preamble and a solitary horseman rides toward the camera, filling the screen. Gary Cooper dismounts and examines his horse’s left front leg... and that’s when the screen goes black for ten seconds before the SMPTE Universal Leader appears and starts to count down 5-4-3-2-beep, fading in on moving pictures of Joe fucking the hell out of Constance and Eunice, in turn, screwing some men.

“What happening?” I yelled as the lights went back on, revealing a hand, not my wife’s, caressing my penis.

Constance, who’d been giving Joe a blowjob during the credits, looked up bewildered by the lights. “Anything wrong?” she asked to lively laughter.

“You’ll have to forgive Constance,” said Eunice. “Doesn’t take much to get her started— Anyway, I was about to unzip you and suck your cock, certain Lil would find a way into what’s happening by herself.”

“My wife sort of predicted something like this back in France.”

“Something predatory,” said Lil.

“It’s not like we’re alone in this. There are several groups, just in Laguna. I’ll have you know we check out every participant, ten times over. We can’t afford weird behavior,” said Eunice. “So, let’s take our clothes off. It’s a good way to begin.”

“Hold on—I’m not sure...” said Lil, turning to me for support, me shrugging, a kind of semaphore for Let nature take its course. “I’ll do whatever he wants, but no sperm in me but my husband’s. It would offend our baby.”

“You’re not sure?” said Eunice incredulous, passive-aggressively. “What about your film, the one you’re making? It’s about the young generation defying the establishment, fighting against war and racism.



The French students, protests all over the country, the convention debacle, MLK, RFK. Don't you think we identify with these movements? Those events? Aren't you being a wee bit hypocritical? You're progressive, yet you would condemn us for being broad-minded about sex. Would you prefer Victorian norms? Aren't we all part of the same movement?"

"You equate this with protesting the war?" asked Lil. "Give me a break. I'm not squeamish or uptight about sex. I might like it. But do I need it? I have a right to protect my marriage, and this may be a threat, I dunno, not immediately, but sometime in the future."

"We're doing the same thing with sex as you're doing with movies. Do you need it? No. Is it fun? Yes! Here, I'll make you a bet..." Eunice said. "Watch the whole movie. If Gus's dick is still limp afterward, we forget the whole thing."

"Wait a second. I know my husband; he's very sensitive, easily stimulated. His dick will be hard as a broom handle. Doesn't mean it's good for us."

"If you don't want to do a group thing, you can watch. See if you get into it," said Eunice, forcefully persistent.

"I could describe all the details of our sex life," said Lil, "things Gus and I learned from others and each other. You could describe yours; we could demonstrate ours, some of which would probably shock even you. Every couple runs out of ways to do it. There are only so many ways you can fuck and suck and stimulate one another. There are no more holes in the body to stick it in. When all variations are exhausted, no matter how extensive the repertoire, you're only repeating what you've done a hundred times. You crave something new. But newness can only be found by engaging with new partners. So you search for new partners. How does that pan out at forty-seven, fifty-seven, sixty-seven years old? How does any marriage survive? I'm not sure ours would if we went to the lengths you do. Devoting so much time to finding new victims—uh, okay, participants. Making films to trick people. Do I take this, ahem, wayward path or the path of being my husband's best friend, his best wife, and lover?"

"I don't know, but I do know we're not part of some sinister cabal," said Eunice.

“Well, I want to be the best actress I can be. Gus, the best screenwriter and director. We don’t have time to search for new partners, right, my darling? And Constance, why is she here? Where’s her man? In ten years will any of us still be attractive? Where does it end for you?”

“It doesn’t end,” said Constance. “We keep on swinging. That’s the end.”

“How about we just give each other’s husband a blow job,” said Eunice, “to start with?”

The laughter had me realizing how foolish it was to equate blow jobs with the act of love. Biology is not love. Not that there’s something wrong with biology.

“By your silence, my darling, it seems you want to go along,” said Lil.

“A little while ago we had a lecture about conserving the seed,” I said. “Now, we’re going to spray it all over the place. Talk about the sacred and the profane. Except it’s supposed to be the other way around. We’re supposed to conserve the seed as a way of evolving.”

“All I know is, I want to suck your husband’s cock more than I’ve ever wanted to suck a cock,” said Eunice. “I want to suck it dry.”

“And suppose you do,” said Lil. “Then what? Each time it’s a little less of a thrill.”

“Once she gets going,” said Joe, “Eunice is single-minded, she loves orchestrating *partouze*; we draw the line— No more than eight or nine at a time.

“Look at Lil,” said Eunice. “She’s turning red. All this dirty talk is breaking down her defenses. If I touched your pussy, I bet you’d start gyrating.”

Eunice reached around Gus, plunging her hand into Lil’s shorts.

“Stop it, Eunice,” said Lil, laughing and moving to get away from Eunice.

“See, she likes it. Say you like it.”

“Okay, I like it. Now take your hand away,” said Lil, “You too, Gus. You big— Get away from me.”

“If you want to leave,” I said, “say the word.”

Constance, who’d been mostly silent throughout, surprised everyone by directly asking Lil: “Yeah, Lil. What would you like to do or have done to you, and by who? Anyone... not your husband.”

“Yeah, Lil, you little hottie,” said Eunice. “Pretend it’s make-believe.”

“You think I’m a prude, eh? Well, as long as it’s make-believe, I’d like to fuck, or do whatever women do with each other, with you,” Lil said to Eunice. “In all honesty, you’re the first woman I’ve ever been attracted to, maybe because you’re older. I don’t mean it as a reproach; you’re very sexy.”

“Every woman,” said Eunice, lovingly, almost mother-to-daughter-like, “should try it at least once.”

“No hesitation there, sweetheart,” I said. “Being honest.”

“You can’t wait to add a couple of branches to your tinkertoy, can you?”

“Tinkertoy?” said Joe.

“Later. It’s complicated,” said Lil.

“Move over, big boy,” said Eunice, pushing me to stand up.

“If I’m going to do this, I won’t hold anything back,” said Lil.

“That a girl.” Eunice was already pulling Lil to her. By the time I was upright, Eunice and Lil were locked in an epic kiss.

I put out a hand for Constance, almost dragging her toward the bathroom. Eunice pulled Lil up and was leading her to the bedroom when Lil announced, “As for orchestrating, here are my desires: When you’re finished with Constance, you can fuck Eunice while I fuck Joe. Constance can sit on my face while Joe’s doing me. I should be an expert at eating pussy by then.”

“You will be,” said Eunice.

And so it was. In the shower, I took a bar of exfoliating lavender soap to Constance, scraping off her makeup. After shampooing her hair, I hoisted her up by her haunches and entered her. When we finished kissing with the fury of starving beasts, her legs around my hips, we fucked under the warm water. I opened the door, carrying her out of the shower with my knob still inside her.

“There,” I said motioning toward the mirror, “isn’t that better? You look ten years younger. How old are you anyway?”

“Fifty.”

“I don’t believe it. You look like a famous nude picture: Marilyn Monroe without makeup.”

“Don’t tease.”

“I’m not.” I carried her back into the shower where we humped some more until I started breathing heavily.

“You’re about to come. I can tell. Let me suck your cock. I love to swallow.”

“I can’t. I’m saving it.”

“Who for?”

“My wife.”

“Aw, please. Just this once. You’ll have another load ready by the time you get to her,” she said. “You’re such a nice guy. I want to do this little thing for you. You made me feel young.”

“You are young... and beautiful,” I said. “Okay, go for it.”

When Constance and I emerged from the master bathroom, Lil was going down on Eunice. Both were writhing, caressing one another’s bodies, Lil working her mouth and fondling Eunice’s tits with her outstretched arms at the same time. I watched my wife go at it, wondering where her passion came from, all of a sudden seeing, not only her but everything on Earth in a different light. We’d always treated sex in an insular fashion like we were in some fairyland where hard-core craving was unknown. Not that we weren’t passionate. We were. Yet, here was Lil putting as much, if not more, into it as she’d ever done with me.

“I just swallowed a jarful of your husband’s jizz. Mmm. He’s a nice man and he’s almost hard again.”

“You can have him,” gasped Lil.

Eunice put out her hand. “I want him. Constance, you and Lil go do Joe. He’s sulking. I don’t like when he’s left all alone.”

As soon as the two women were gone, Eunice spoke, her voice mysteriously enticing, “It’s come to this. Cut the talk and show me what you have for me.”

She reached out for my penis, pulling me by it gently. By the time she took it in her mouth, it was hard.

Eunice was an expert on positions. She knew the Tantra, its ins and outs, backward and forward. During our moment together, she taught me a few of her favorites. Once more, I started to breathe with the urgency of a man about to spill his load.

“When you’re ready, you can come inside unless you want me to swallow.”

“I want to come into you.”

“I was hoping you would.”

“I was going to whether you wanted me to or not.”

“Take this, then, you naughty boy.” The moment I started to come, Eunice tightened her vaginal muscles, squeezing my penis so brutally I started barking and whining like a dog with his dick stuck. Welcome to Laguna Beach!

LIL WAS SURPRISED AT HER FERVOR. THAT GUS HAD SPENT FORTY minutes with Eunice didn’t faze her. She had just begun a leisurely cunnilingus on Constance, exploring her .45-caliber clitoris with her tongue when Joe came up behind her, ramming his big dick into her bung hole. It took her a moment to process the fact that she was getting fucked in the ass, something she’d never done or had done to her. At first, she tried to squirm away, anything to stop from being torn asunder. He held her tightly. There was something about being dominated. Something she ought to resist but couldn’t. He’d even asked her permission, sort of, whispering in her ear, “You like it, huh, bitch?” All she could do was pant, “Yes, yes,” as she braced herself for another driving thrust. The more he pounded, the more she focused on Constance to ward off the pain, bringing her to orgasm at the very moment Joe let loose his wad and she shivered to the throbbing penis inside her. Her mouth full of Constance’s cum, Lil turned back to wet kiss Joe. It was her first time, she whispered, it would be their little secret. No sperm had entered her vagina, she told herself. She hadn’t gone back on her resolution.

The whole thing served him right. Her husband, the bastard. He had done nothing to stop it before it started. He should have grabbed her hand and walked out. What followed, his failure to speak was as inevitable as the waves on Laguna Beach. He’d thrown it back to her because he reckoned that she’d go along as always. It just plain wasn’t manly. A husband has to take charge, to understand his wife’s boundaries.

The whole thing was unbelievable. She resolved to store it away and

use it when he was at his weakest. That much, she promised herself. Clobber him when he's defenseless.

I SENSED SOMETHING WAS OUT OF WHACK BUT DIDN'T HAVE A CLUE AS to what. I pretended that any ill feelings and/or negative emotions had been washed away in the reek of bodily fluids, mai tais, pot smoke, sweat, and stale urine. Joe, it seems, liked being pissed on and Constance obliged him. I watched Lil watching them, wondering if she'd ever imagined herself doing that, much less any of what had just transpired.

Lil and I slept meters apart on the guest room's waterbed that night. It wasn't much better on the trip back to LA the next morning. No words were exchanged until the oil derricks near Long Beach came into view.

"You're not to blame."

"No one's to blame. There is no blame," I said. "We don't live in a moral universe; we live in a Darwinian one. Yes, some things cannot be explained by science. I'm living proof of that.

"You have to take things like that in stride. Sounds impersonal and unfeeling, but nothing's changed. I'm still me; you're still you. I still love you as much as, even more than I did before.

"We allowed each other to do it. We did it together. Seems like you enjoyed it. So did I. Nothing I did was meant to hurt you. So I fucked two women and ate some pussy. Not behind your back. In plain view.

"Sure. That leaves some unanswered questions. Would either of us want to do it again? With the same people? Do we even want to see them again? Would it end up poisoning our marriage? Is it something we can't live without?"

For a moment, I wondered— Maybe it had all been a dream within a dream, like the Art Ensemble concert. We hadn't done those things. I looked over at Lil. Drying her tears, sniffing, told me it was real, and we could adjust to it.

The day was spent getting ready for the move to the house in Venice. We pattered around the hotel room, outwardly ignoring, or trying to ignore, each other. The desk called to relay a Friday message from Stryker, his invitation to meet with us at 9:30 a.m. Monday. That night

after pizza and salad at a local parlor, we watched a Lakers game on TV. Soon we were fast asleep. I woke to the noise of the television and turned it off. In the dim afterglow, I saw Lil beckoning to me, purring. I slid in alongside her back, clinging to her as if my life depended on it, enveloping her. When I tried to slip into her, she refused me.

“Mm-uh. No.”

I didn’t force it.

ALL DURING THE AFTERMATH, LIL CAUGHT HERSELF BEGINNING TO feel sorry for Gus. *The big fool*. Men. Stupid to think a man might refuse pussy because of some moral precept. Okay, she thought, he’s not entirely to blame. Just don’t give in without a reckoning. So, she began calling him *my darling* again. A caustic darling drenched with irony.

She let her thoughts run wild, embarrassed when she found herself comparing his dick with Joe’s, which was shorter but thicker. That’s why it hurt so much. Try as she might, couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Late into the night, something in a dream startled Gus and he awoke to find Lil crying softly. Somehow, she’d slipped away. He cuddled up to her back, feeling her body shake.

“I hated that,” she sobbed. “I feel so degraded. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“I can’t either.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Remember, in the car, when you asked me to name something I did that might degrade you?”

Gus felt his skin begin to crawl, “Yes.”

“Joe fucked me in the ass. He just came up behind me suddenly and rammed it in while I was going down on Constance. It hurt. I didn’t like it. I tried to squirm out of it. That made it worse. I was angry with you. I never did it, ever, before. I swear it, my darling.” There, she’d confessed. She could only hope that Gus would understand. She felt relief at having spoken. “It was so unexpected like I’d been stabbed.”



HEAD TO TOE, I FELT A FLUSHING SENSATION, LIFE FORCE DRAINING out of my body with a whoosh of a flushing toilet. The world's toilets flushing all together, and with them my marriage. It was as if my essence had been swallowed up by a sinkhole, leaving my body adrift. The air around me, too, felt heavy. The world staggering to hold its course. This my darling stuck in my craw as did the image of her being stabbed but not with a knife.

"In the ass, in the ass. You, you." I repeated, barely able to breathe. I clicked on the light. "Is that all of it, all there is?"

"Yes, yes. Please turn off the light."

"I want to watch your face while you tell me exactly what happened."

"I know I should have stopped, but he overpowered me."

"Well, that answers one question. We're not going back there, at least, I'm not. I've got a wife that likes it in the ass from strangers.

"I can just see them laughing. I'll bet they talked and laughed about it all night. Maybe they filmed it. Who knows? Imagine you make it as an actress, and this ends up in Hollywood!" I said.

I focused on the pit of my stomach, using it as a locus for reviving my essence, making an effort to control my anger. I watched her shiver and cry uncontrollably. I could almost feel her pain. She hadn't tried to hide it from me.

"Dammit," said Lil. "I feel degraded, tainted, and despoiled because I liked, not the act itself, but being dominated and forced against my will to take it in the most bestial of ways. There! I said it. Now kill me. I deserve it."

"Aaaah," I said. "All I know is I love you now and always."

"Am I alone or is every woman looking to dominate or be dominated, whether by a man or by a woman?"

"If it came to that, that I have to rape you so you could get your kicks, I doubt I could get a hard-on. Rape turns me off. Sounds conventional, but that's the way it is."

"And I love you for it. That you have limits. That you're reliable, you don't let things fall apart. I'm that way too, but I strayed, like the night we met. I had too much to drink. You took care of me."

"Fuckups are not yours alone. I've had my share."

"Would it be better for me to be the submissive little hausfrau who



never mentions things? It's not a question of what turns you or me on. It's—it's like Eunice insisted, it's an opening up, I dunno how to say it exactly, new frontiers of sex, changing roles, in politics, in society. In a way, it's about getting to know myself and my husband."

Still sobbing, she continued to think out loud. "Getting fucked in the ass by a dominating male made me feel like a woman, just as your going down on me does, only much more so because it's pleasurable, not painful, just as talking about it now with you makes me feel like a woman, just like having your baby makes me feel like a woman, and just like feelings and fantasies I've yet to experience, be they considered perversions by the establishment, might make me feel like a woman in the future. A woman is all things, like a book with a thousand plot points that change as soon as the reader thinks he knows where the story's going."

"I'm glad you didn't tell me down there. We'd both be in jail. Me for murder."

"There is one thing, however. Nonnegotiable. Call your friend and have him take my name off his stupid tinkertoy. I don't care what he says, I want it off. Yours, too, if you're smart."

"I'll take care of it."

We talked till 5:30 a.m., finally turning off the light and drifting in and out of sleep for a few hours before leaving for the studio.

The intern the studio loaned us arrived at 8:15 a.m. He was there to welcome the movers and supervise while Lil and I met with Stryker. We left the hotel shortly after his arrival, stopping at the commissary for breakfast. While devouring our bacon, scrambled eggs, and English muffins, we listened to the latest Mike Minnick gossip.

"A meeting with Durgo and Stryker, I take it?" asked Minnick. "You're in for it. No, no. In a good way. I won't spoil it. When you finish, let's do lunch here. I have some ideas for you to mull over."

SMILES AND HANDSHAKES IN THE PASSAGEWAY PICTURES OFFICE WHEN we entered.

"Well, you're looking fine," said Durgo. "Got to see the coast down south, eh?"

“Yes.”

“Laguna. Get in some tennis?”

“No tennis, volleyball, or parlor games.”

“Great place, though.”

“Great,” I said. “Still. It’s a long drive with the traffic.”

“You’re better off in Venice,” said Durgo, “for the moment.”

“The intern arrived on time this morning?” asked Stryker.

“Yes, thank you,” said Lil. “Like clockwork.”

“Make yourselves comfortable. There’s a lot to cover,” said Stryker.

I remembered the feel of the chairs, as I sunk into the one behind me, Lil seating herself on its ample armrest alongside me. My eyes loitered over the luxurious furnishings. Were they meant to impress visitors or did someone like them? Dark-stained mission-style wooden office furniture. Artificially lit by sconces that struggled to brighten the dark wood paneling. Lull you to sleep while you agree to their proposals.

“The good news. Today all news is good,” said Durgo. “We’ve signed a lead. We’re good to go, we’re getting funded by Paramount.”

“Who, if I might ask?”

“George Peppard. How do you like that?”

“I like George Peppard. He’s different,” I said.

“Yes, we think so. And so principal photography starts June first, the first time everyone is free. Just short of three months from now.”

“In the meantime,” said Stryker, “we’ve budgeted you for three days a week, both of you. Rehearsal with George. Script improvements. Researching locations.”

“Sounds great.”

“You’ll see. It will all work out,” said Durgo.

Durgo reached across his desk to shake my hand.

“Now, to kick things off,” said Durgo, addressing Lil mostly. “You want to get used to your costar, so we’re going to run one of his films if you don’t have any commitments.”

“No, no.”

“*The Carpetbaggers*,” said Stryker.

“*Breakfast at Tiffany’s* was one of his I saw. Real good,” I said, trying to sound positive.

Lil slipped off the armrest, settling her body into mine.

“There’s lots of room here on the big couch,” said Stryker.

“Thanks, I’m fine here, Mr. Stryker.”

“Call me, Marlin.”

“Yes, okay, as soon as I get used to it.”

“Roll it, Arturo,” said Durgo, waving to the projection booth. The lights were dimmed, the shades lowered; the projector’s beam filled up the screen with the Paramount logo.

MIKE MINNICK WAS ALREADY IN THE COMMISSARY WHEN LIL AND I sat down to our shrimp salads.

“What did you think of *The Carpetbaggers*?”

“Over the top, but it shows the way the poor believe the very rich live, I guess,” I said. “I dunno. It’s hard to imagine the daily life of a Howard Hughes.”

“But,” said Lil, “you don’t have to live that way if you’re rich and famous.”

“Or while you’re on the way up or the way down,” I said. “No other country exploits the rise and fall of the great man theme as much as we do. Orson Welles, *Mr. Arkadin* comes to mind.”

“Sure was a weird one,” said Minnick.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” I said to Lil.

“Forget the psychological mumbo jumbo in *The Carpetbaggers*,” said Minnick. “The thing is, can *you* act with him, and can *you* direct him?”

“You mean he’s difficult?” I asked.

“It’s been rumored,” said Mike Minnick, “although the bigger challenge might turn out to be your kissing scenes with him... from a what’s permitted standpoint. It’s okay when someone like Jennifer Jones is made up to be Chinese, and even that was deemed an outrage when it came out. But a gringo kissing a real Chinese or any other ethnic, that’s always been verboten.”

Mike went on to describe the ruckus around *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, when only fourteen years earlier the idea that William Holden had kissed an actress made up to be Chinese shocked some. “We’ll see what happens this go-around,” said Mike. “Hollywood hates to break precedents.”

“Do you think it’s worth bringing up?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t,” Mike replied. “It’ll come up or it won’t. Durgo and Stryker are cool. If it comes up, it’ll be from upstairs.”

“I’ve heard about acting classes, some of them quite good,” said Lil.

Mike rattled off the names of the acting and directing classes around town. UCLA, USC, and all manner of private classes.

As we stood up to leave, we were spotted by Durgo. “Just got word. George will be joining us next week for a read-through. Good way to get to know each other,” he said. “Oh, and next week, *All the King’s Men*.”

“Saw it. Good political drama,” I said.

“Yeah, good pacing, something our film’s got to have,” said Durgo, checking his wristwatch while smiling at Lil. “If you would, please tell the intern to come back to the office when you get home.”

On the way out, Mike took Lil aside while I finished talking to Durgo. I didn’t find out until much later that Mike told Lil they wanted her, not me, but felt it wise to include me if they wanted her. Lil never let on.

THE INTERN NEVER RETURNED TO THE OFFICE.

“YOU SEE THAT?” VOICES OF UNKNOWN PROVENANCE. FROM THE SIDE. All around me, voices. “I heard the tires screech when I turned around...” “What happened?” “A car ran the light.” “Plowed right into them. I saw it.”

Fragments emerging, replaying bits and pieces, bubbling up, percolating. A pipe. Everyone should smoke a pipe. The smoke shop. A blur, relapsing.

The next day, or was it the day after, I still hadn’t opened my eyes. Hushed exchanges, muffled discussions.

The pounding inside my head. The terrible fatigue, more sleep.

Nurses, men in white coats. A hospital. That much, I realized. The hospital again? Again, once again. Chicago again. No, no!

“That light!”

“Kill the light, will you,” said the voice.

“Is this Chicago?” I struggled to get up.

“Don’t excite yourself, Mr. Mazur. You have a concussion. And you’ve had another in the past year or so from what we can tell.”

“My wife. Where’s Lil?”

“I’m afraid she didn’t make it. We tried to keep her; we tried everything.” The voice looked at me solemnly. “You’re lucky to be alive. You were hit by a car that jumped the light, a hit-and-run.”

Hit-and-run. It was coming back. Not all the pieces, some.

“That’s enough for now; I’m going to relax you. You need to get well before anything else. The studio’s handling everything. You just sleep.” The needle takes effect. But not before I witness fragments in my mind’s eye.

We leave the studio. I’m walking down Melrose with Lil at my side. We cross the street so I can buy cigarette papers at the smoke shop. While I’m waiting for the clerk, Lil looks over the pipes. “Every director has a fetish to reinforce his singularity. A riding crop, a monocle, an eye patch, a swagger stick, a peculiar accent. Yours is a pipe.”

“It’s been done before, I’m sure,” I reply.

Lil buys the pipe. We get ready to leave, “Every time you’re not sure what to do, you bring out the pipe and jab it at someone. Bingo, they know what they must do to make the scene come off perfectly, the power of the pipe, my darling. The ultimate in persuasive measures.”

A wave of guilt crept over me. Dragging Lil into an orgy and now, God, she was gone. Many creative people never feel guilt. If they did, they wouldn’t be creative.

I tried focusing on our last minutes together, remembering the pipe, only to have my reverie cut short by the doctor injecting me.

Perhaps it was a dream, and Lil would be breezing in at any moment. Then again, I hated stories that take the old cop out, explaining supernatural events by telling the audience the character was dreaming. I felt sure the audience hated them, too. There would be no more Lil. I was sure of it.

## THE KNOWER REALIZED

**T**he power of the pipe, my darling. The power of the pipe. Lil's last words. I shuddered.

"Gus, my darling."

Not Lil's voice. Who then, I wondered? Opening my eyes, I was startled to see Carlotta's soft, understanding face smiling down at me, once again.

"Gus, darling, you are better, much better than yesterday. Does it hurt to move?"

"My pipe. What happened to it, Carlotta? Lil bought it for me."

"Gus, darling, Lil is gone. There's nothing anyone can do."

"I know it. I know," Carlotta took my hand, pulling on it slightly, causing me to look her in the eye.

"We're walking. She's making me laugh." I paused, savoring a vision of her in her wedding dress.

"The bystanders. Not one of them saw the whole thing," said Carlotta. "The police only have fragments."

"They give me medication. I wake up and she's there, for an instant. My head hurts so much I can't think straight. It had to happen. Being that happy, something's bound to happen. My mother speaking through me."

"Are you ready to talk with the police?"

“Yes, yes, I see the whole thing now. Probably why my head hurts so much... trying to reconstruct it.”

“Don’t overtax yourself.”

“We’re at the light on Melrose, waiting for it to turn green. Lil’s making me laugh about Stryker. How he likes to corner her around lunchtime, getting her to sign something or delivering a note.”

“‘He asks me to lunch, making it sound lavish,’ she says, ‘usually touches me on the arm or the shoulder and I have to brush by him to get away. He styles himself as someone to be reckoned with when he’s only a scared little boy with masturbation fantasies, not some kind of consummate flirt.’”

“We start to cross back over Melrose. One car doesn’t stop for the light. It plows straight ahead, aiming right for us. At the last moment, Lil shoves me aside, so— I’m grazed. She suffers the full impact, her body propelled ten to fifteen yards ahead. I stumble, losing my balance. The blow knocks me into another lane, lucky it’s only a glancing blow. I fall, cracking my head on the pavement. I get up, staggering to where she lies. I pick her up and carry her body to the studio side of the street. I prop her up against a building and look into her eyes. She’s unable to speak, but somehow, her eyes tell me that, beyond all rational notions of reality, she is still with me. ‘Lil, Lil. Look at me. Lil. You can’t—’ I feel a wrenching, a tearing as if I’m struggling with an invisible force to keep her.

“She manages a final giggle, kind of ironic, like Cyrano sensing the absurdity of being struck down by a ‘lackey with a log.’ Then, slowly, she retreats behind her eyes. Her lips form the words, ‘This time around I’m sacrificing for you, so you can excel.’”

“Did she say those words or did you sort of see it in her eyes?” Carlotta asks. “There must be something to it.”

“There is. I’m somewhere like Dumbarton Oaks. There’s a relay race. I watch the runners approach. It’s Lil. Another runner catches up to her. She takes the baton. Lil lets go of it. I can’t see the other runner’s face. It’s someone I know but I can’t— She runs on by.

“Lil is beside me. We’re holding hands. I feel her hand slip away. I turn around and she is gone. I can feel her, but she’s nowhere to be seen.

“The supreme sacrificed! Nothing to joke about, but we did, never thinking— And then... Nothing but the cry of sirens.”

. . .

I PAUSED A MOMENT WHILE CARLOTTA WAVED TO REGGIE STANDING AT the door with their baby in his arms. “There you have it,” I said, “as much as I remember.”

“We named him Gustave,” said Carlotta, taking the baby in her arms. “He’s your baby, too, your namesake. We want you to be his godfather.”

“I accept.”

“What are you going to tell the police?” asked Reggie.

“I’ll do what Lil would have done,” I said as Carlotta handed me the baby, who didn’t seem to mind being handed around. “When they check out the license plate, make, and model, they’ll assume I memorized them.”

“But you didn’t,” said Reggie, shaking his head. “It was a vision, you say, just like with Virginia, huh?”

“What’s wrong, Reggie?” asked Carlotta. “You don’t believe it? I do. If Gus said it happened that way, it happened that way. Period!”

“Anyway, it should be all the same to the police,” said Reggie. “You don’t even have to mention visions, do you, man?”

I shook my head slowly, ruefully conscious that tales of visions don’t get much traction in the so-called “real world.”

Still cradling the baby, I was acutely aware of both the irony and the pathos of the situation, that Lil’s baby—our baby—I was never to be its father. “I was looking forward to that baby.” I paused. “She saved my life; sacrificed hers. I hear a door open; I expect it to be her. My mind plays tricks.”

I showed my index finger to the baby, moving it around, watching the baby’s eyes follow it, his interest finally coming to rest on my face, both of us smiling.

The proud parents smiled at me, enjoying my interlude with the baby as much as they enjoyed young Gustave’s playful attentiveness.

Carlotta took her hand from my shoulder, grazing the side of my face as she did so. The galvanic contact of her fingers sparked a further memory: I remembered the faces in the car. One of the men from the Washington Mews rescue incident was the driver. It was a hit, it must’ve been, and Lil was the target, revenge for her efforts to expose the China



Lobby's role in the collapse of the peace talks. Whether they'd ever capture the perps and convict them, I was doubtful. They'd probably escaped to some hideaway country by now.

Carlotta took the baby from me. "We're not sticking around. First chance we get, we're setting up in France," said Carlotta. "It'll mean less money, less of everything, but after this debacle, the China Lobby suppression, Lil and all."

"I remember a time when WBN would have stood up to pressure," said Reggie, "In France, TV is in its infancy: programs don't even begin or end on the hour. What kind of shit is that?"

"Reggie thinks we can make a difference there. We're looking at buying a house in the country. Normandy."

"In between Bernay and Beaumont le Roger."

"I may be joining you."

"That's what friends are for," said Reggie

On the way out, they passed two detectives on the way in. With the information I gave them (I was mindful enough to tell them it came from memory, not from a vision) they were able to trace the car. It was stolen, but there were fingerprints and other forensic clues.

Lil's funeral took place two days later. The doctors recommended I attend in a wheelchair. I refused it and crutches as well. Something about crutches put a strain on my two broken ribs, a painful lifting effect. I left them in the car, grabbing a cane instead. I needed to let my body start healing. Little by little, my head stopped hurting when I moved abruptly. No tennis, no volleyball. No Tillmans.

That so many DC people attended surprised me. Aunt Alice with Cloris, of course; Carlotta and Reggie; Ruth O'Malley; the Warrens, Mitch and Isabella. Marsha Warren. Lil's parents, Roscoe Schindler, the Wolff, Ray-Ray and Gloria, the Paramount gang.

It was a simple service. No odes, no commemoratives. Just the tears I never shed, welling up but never flowing. I didn't need to be reminded of her qualities; I carried them in my heart. A few tears did flow while John Coltrane's "Every Time We Say Goodbye," the musical tribute I'd chosen, played. I endured the aftermath, listening to mourners paying their respects until I couldn't take it. I fought off the bitterness that gripped me momentarily. It wasn't difficult to mourn Lil. Graciousness

emanated from her every pore. Everyone seemed to have a particularly poignant memory they wanted to share with me, except her parents, whose looks of reproach and aloofness spelled out their feelings.

Funerals are always revealing, as much for what is avoided as for what and how it's expressed. Lil's parents had never been enchanted with me. They now accused me wordlessly of an uncouthness specific to barbarians, holding me responsible for their daughter's death. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps I am a barbarian. Perhaps, in their eyes, all Americans are. In terms of time and place and motive, her death was as much my fault as it was anyone else's. I was, after all, the reason we were at that location when the end came. Had she never met me, had I not chosen that moment to buy papers, she would not have been there.

If either of us felt the least resentment at the time of her death, I was not aware of it. We were best friends.

Although her parents were unable to express their feelings openly in proper English, they made up for it with meeching stares. After grunting their way through a series of uncomfortable goodbyes, they ordered a cab and took off. That the Washington Mews property reverted to me added to their resentments. When Claude Durgo took out a corporate insurance policy on our lives, he threw in the cost of a revocable trust, which we funded with our various assets and properties, naming one another as inheritors.

I took Aunt Alice aside to talk about Cloris, feeling that Alice was becoming too dependent on her. Where would she be if Cloris suddenly disappeared? Did she have a backup plan in case something happened? Despite my misgivings, I didn't want to alarm her, so I began the conversation with a bit of indirection. "It's great that you're back on the golf course. Everything's working out so well."

"I'm way ahead of you there, dear boy," said Alice. "You're wondering about Cloris."

"Someday, she's going to need more space. She may even believe you'll write her into your will, which is purely up to you. I'm not saying you shouldn't. But going from hooker to social worker is a helluva jump."

"Well, she's got it in her. I can tell by the way she carries herself with other people, be they my friends or the delivery boy."

"I know. The best thing that ever happened to her was working with

you at the DNC, and again with you now. You're a stabilizing force, Auntie."

"Putting up with my whims shows me she has it."

"I just don't want to see it fall apart and you get left in the lurch."

"That girl is no Ginny Hubbard. She has grit."

"Speaking of grit, Auntie, that reminds me. There's a new movie, *True Grit* in the works at Paramount that you have got to see. I know how much you like John Wayne."

"Pity's me I do like the Duke."

I talked with Roscoe Schindler and with the Wolff who mentioned he was used to dealing with Skipper by now. By his ironic phrasing of "used to," I sensed he meant *staying out of her way*.

"But she is successful, must give her that," said Schindler. "While we stood around with our thumbs up our asses, she swooped in and took over. And now she's a plastic saint to millions."

"She's a fucking gold mine for WBN," said Don Wolff.

"Not for you, Gus," said Schindler, "there'd be no Miriam Sanchez."

I laughed to myself at how surprised they appeared, as if clinging to the Edward R. Murrow paradigm of the dignified correspondent. Okay, I'd been surprised by Skipper; so had a lot of people. She got what she wanted, she'd want more in the future. The opposite of my ambitions. I wanted to live in a sane world where truth is valued, an illusion, I know, a chimera. The watchword going forward? 'Okay' was just the beginning: *Après moi, le deluge*. Television would be the very essence of mediocre; the world's lowest common denominator.

Her trajectory had been spectacular. Somehow, she'd established parasocial relationships with her viewers. Her eyes seemed to burn into their souls, they told her in letters. Letters overwhelmed the mail room. Letters asking for her shoe size, her deodorant, letters offering wardrobe hints. Letters asking for her blessing before being operated on. In a confession about being addicted to watching her, one viewer wrote he'd undergone electroshock to cure his addiction. Pictures of her, her house. Her family. Was she a dog or a cat person?

"The hockey story; that made her."

The Wolff was still expounding as Ruth O'Malley approached us and the conversation came to a full stop.

“We were talking about your sister,” I said. “Meet Miriam’s sister, Ruth O’Malley.”

“I gather you gentlemen are fans of my stepsister,” said Ruth. “And you, dear Gus... I wanted to catch you before leaving.”

“We were just finishing,” I said.

“I remember you,” said the Wolff. “You played piano for our friend here. At the One Step Down. Loved it.”

I introduced Ruth to Schindler, who smiled as he made an about-face, adding, “If I don’t see you, well...”

“I leave you in good hands, my man,” the Wolff said, nodding to Ruth. The huddle broke; the players went on to new formations.

Ruth and I began a walking tête-à-tête, me limping to keep up.

“Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“I’m okay. Make it a short one though.”

I could see some of the guests wondering about our apparent familiarity and wondering equally about which fashion magazine had inspired her wardrobe. She wore a half-sleeve, tightly-fitted black dress that broke just above the knee. It squared off over her shoulders and ran straight across the top of the bosom. A double string of white beads accentuated her neckline. Black heels and loop earrings completed her ensemble. A broad-brimmed Vietnamese peasant hat covered her glistening black hair that, tied in a barrette behind her, ran halfway down her back. A collection of garments not meant to be worn together that somehow end up as a dazzling ensemble.

Given her clothes, it was easy to read sexual undertones into her appearance. Sexy, yes, but well within the norms. But, as always with clothes, they told a story. To me, her attire underlined the fact that funerals are new beginnings, that she, Ruth, like Persephone, had on this occasion risen from the netherworlds to initiate the rites of spring. Sex figured into everything Ruth did. We passed behind a mausoleum. She pulled out a joint and offered it to me.

“Thought you might need moral support...”

I put out my hand, declining her offer. I felt a momentary flash: Lil wouldn’t like it.

“Just finished moving back to California; my work back East finished

early,” she said. “Had a yearning to see if you might like company, I dunno, while you’re getting acclimated?”

*Getting acclimated?* Not the expression I’d use to sum up my situation, but then what was the right way to phrase it? Get your live-in social worker, complete with weekly Thorazine injections when I, the subject, was caught staring off into space. Experimental cuisine, intermittent jazz vocals, occasional sex.

“Tell the truth, I have no idea what I’m going to do next. Sit in the living room and howl,” I said. “Mitch is driving me back to the house. After that, I don’t have a clue.”

“It’s this way: my place isn’t ready. Plumbing, electrical, and heating repairs.”

“Where is your place anyway?” I caught a whiff of her perfume mixed with pot smoke, a moment before reemerging on the other side of the tomb, ambling across the bright green lawn. She smelled great.

“Culver City, near my office, a studio, about eight hundred square feet. Place is a mess.”

“You’re certainly welcome to stay for a while. I haven’t made up my mind on what’s next.”

“Still have a piano?”

“Uh-huh,” I felt like adding *Nobody but Lil has ever played it*, but I didn’t.

“We could go to town. If you’re game,” she said.

“I’m game but give me a week to get my shit together,” I said, making sure she appreciated the caution in my voice.

Housing this woman, given her sexual eccentricities, might be inappropriate. Not that I had to adhere to some conventional definition of mourning. “Studio stuff, you know, the furniture, the writing projects I need to finish. Maybe I’ll make a plan. Oh, I forgot to mention. We’re eating out tonight, the WBN gang, Mitch and Marsha Warren. My aunt. You’re invited.”

“Think I’ll take a rain check. There’s a club I haven’t been to for quite a while.”

“A club.”

“Yeah.”

“A club?”

“Yes.”

Slowly, her words began to sink in. I felt like a klutz, “Ah, okay, I’m a little slow, it being a funeral... and all.”

“You know me,” whispered Ruth. “Whether you accept it or not, you’re monogamous; I’m not. It’s the way I am. I’m into different partners. I like it rough sometimes. Kinky stuff. But if I stayed with you, I’d never bring anyone back to your place.”

“I dig.”

“We could do things together. Maybe take your mind off—”

“I don’t know as I was thinking about sex,” I said.

“Look at them,” said Ruth. “There’s not a one of them who’s not thinking about sex— So, do we play music? And maybe somewhere along the line it happens. And why not?”

“Why not, indeed?”

“Meantime, if you want to start over, forget me and my freaky sisters. Find someone who doesn’t know about your tinkertoy.”

Talking about sex so openly at Lil’s funeral sounded disrespectful. Had I been ogling Ruth? I asked myself. I looked at the others. They certainly weren’t looking at me. Perhaps, by decking herself out so provocatively, Ruth had done me a favor. Our conversation? Could have been about the weather, or tennis. I wasn’t going to play the moralizer, but I was going to draw a line.

As we drifted back to the huddle, all eyes were on her, parsing her every movement—the turn of her ankle, the precise azimuth of her hips, how it all came together in a rhythmic flow.

Yes, she had done me a favor. I decided her staying with me wouldn’t work. It was only a feeling, but it stuck. She gave me a card with her number, which I stuffed in my side pocket, the one holding my pipe, the touch of which cleared my mind. I pictured her in my house, Lil’s house, the one she’d so carefully chosen. Awkward evenings, avoiding each other most of the time so sex wouldn’t come up.

It wouldn’t work and I needn’t feel bad about telling her so. After all, I would merely be following her advice about starting over with entirely new people. Play music together, perhaps; temptations, no.

With everyone engaged in parting handshakes, Claude Durgo

approached me with his right arm outstretched and the left arm wrapped around Alice Randall, both smiling self-consciously.

“You never told me you were related to Phillip Randall, that Alice Randall is your aunt,” said Durgo. “I go way back with the Randalls, produced two of their plays as films. They’re theater and cinema royalty. You must have watched some Broadway rehearsals growing up.”

“Well, I did when they let me. Don’t know as it had a lasting effect.”

Marlin Stryker inched his way over to listen, hovering respectfully.

“Nonsense,” said Durgo, “You might not think it hasn’t, but those experiences get in your blood. It’s what brought you here to us. I’ve been telling your aunt how quickly you picked things up. A great script in record time. I like to think it’s inherited.”

I looked from Durgo to my aunt. At last, I seemed to have hit my stride. In her eyes, at least. The proof would come with the pudding. “Drop by the office,” said Durgo, “when you’re ready.” He gestured; his hands outstretched to signify that *ready* meant when my grieving allowed it.

Alice and Durgo left me alone with Stryker, who seemed to be working himself up to his usual obsequious, out-to-make-points-with-the-boss passive-aggressive manner. Durgo was one thing, I respected him; Stryker, I merely tolerated, probably because he’d come onto Lil, sometimes right in front of me as if I hadn’t been present. “Hey Gus,” he shouted, “the young lady with your aunt? Who is she? I’d like to give her a screen test.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, I watched her. I can almost predict she’ll do well.”

“Her name is Cloris Tucker. I think she would be fine if she gets a real chance,” I said, emphasizing the words *real chance*, alerting Stryker that she was some kind of special case. “The best thing would be to talk to her with my aunt, then test her.”

“Cloris Tucker. I’ve heard that name.”

“That’s why I suggest talking with them. Better hurry. They’re leaving.”

. . .

I RODE ALONE WITH MITCH ON THE WAY TO THE RESTAURANT; HE wanted to tell me how the police had used the tinkertoy to solve the Wyatt case. “Seems they found some new leads off of it.”

I drifted into a conversation with Lil’s supernatural avatar telling me how surprised she was that something positive could be derived from such a juvenile activity. Presumptuous, stupid were a few of the words I remembered her using.

Typical of life, I replied. That out of the profane tumbles the sublime, the result of some celestial masterstroke. Shades of Mr. Patel telling us no one—no system, no act, or way of life—is perfect. Good comes from evil just as evil comes from good. In a kind of unpredictable, indefinable manner, enlightenment is the result of sexual energy—the symmetry that rules the universe.



I WAS FEELING BETTER AFTER DINNER. THE MILKY VAPORS THAT distorted my vision and clouded my mind had cleared. Headaches struck once or twice a day. No more constant pain from broken ribs—only when I laughed.

The next morning, I drove to the studio, my first venture downtown in the Chrysler since, well—my life fell apart.

I hadn’t banked on the sensations I felt once I was underway. Like I was coming down the mountain into California with Lil beside me, driving through a vast field of avocados, just as we had at the end of our cross-country trip. I looked over at my passenger. No one. Empty. It made me long for a miracle, pining over Lil as if she was somewhere, waiting to jump out and surprise me.

Thanks to my mother’s fatalism, I’d absorbed some of her native ways in the form of transcendental notions, that life continues despite everything the fates devise. Toss in a little Ming Lo and bingo... a new lease on life is established.

When I got to the office, the expression on the secretary’s face told me something was awry. Doing his best to minimize the bad news, Durgo led me into his office. Stryker was nowhere in sight. Durgo was hip to my aversion, so he sent him to the stage to test his latest discovery, Cloris



Tucker. Testing Cloris, it seems, wasn't Stryker's brainstorm; it was Durgo's.

"I'll give it to you straight, Gus. Paramount just killed the China Lobby project. Nothing I could do to persuade them. Too political, too dangerous at this time, they say. I tried to convince them otherwise, that a max number of eyes are following this story right now. They wouldn't listen. You know how afraid they are of House and Senate committees. Hell, Nixon's top aide, a guy named Ehrlichman, talked to the president of Paramount.

"There's also this criminal investigation that's dead-ended at the moment. It's what spooked them the most, the fact that someone might have been assassinated by professional killers."

I stood up to leave, my mind and eyes both glazing over.

"Wait," insisted Durgo. "That's not all. They want you back for another project. I told them you'd probably want some time to regroup. Six months, I told them, kinda what I sensed at the funeral."

"Sure, Claude. That's fine. Six is good. Thanks."

"And they agreed to pay you in the meantime. It's not a gift; it's in the budget, part of your contract."

"Yeah, Claude, the budget, my contract," I said, knowing that it was at least a partial gift and that Durgo had pulled some strings. "Fifty thousand. Thanks."

"For the time being, we'll keep the project out of turnaround. It could be there for you when you're ready. I might even convince them to give you an option, say, for twelve months."

I drove home thinking about the next six months, the arbitrary figure that Claude Durgo had pulled out of his hat. What to do with fifty thousand dollars and the rental incomes from the Washington Mews and the Macomb Street houses? I could sell them. Throw in the Venice house and I could almost finance the project myself. It would be risky, my being a first-time director. I knew I could do it. Take on the producer's role as well as the director's. Once again, a backhanded slap from the universe had presented me with a plan to work on.

Only not now. Not right away. I needed to clear my head. Most of all, I needed to get away from the sensationalist press—the camped-out

mobs at my front door. The phone, ringing off the hook! I canceled the so-called private-telephone number.

Even though I gave the license, make, and model of the car that hit Lil to the police, her assassins were never captured.

Sitting in the living room, having plowed through the assembled reporters in front of the garage, I was momentarily overcome by the ironies playing themselves out before my eyes. A kind of gnawing dread overtook me. An unlived-in house, chock-full of boxes, crates, and ill-assorted furniture. I was back where I started. Macomb Street, and *déjà vu* all over again.

I turned on the TV to witness Skipper deliver a maudlin tribute to Lil and a series of innuendos directed at me. How I had something to do with the tragic ends of my female partners. Very subtly done, of course. The gall!

I turned it off, woefully aware of how adept Skipper had become. She was the very essence of television, the once crusading RFK supporter now pimping for Nixon. Without Roscoe Schindler's guiding hand, WBN was gradually turning right.

THANKS TO HER SCREEN TEST, CLORIS STAYED IN LA. ALICE HAD NO companion. And needed none, she insisted. She could take care of herself; she was as energetic as ever; a companion was a luxury. She would show them, she said, the Catholic way, by an extraordinary demonstration of physical and spiritual pluck. I mentioned obliquely that she should move to Venice and share the house with me.

I wondered if she could step away from the head-of-household role she'd played my entire life. She was way ahead of me, insisting that sharing the house was not a good idea. There was a unit over the garage. We fixed it up, adding a small studio with a skylight and updating the kitchen and bathroom. The day Alice moved in, I'd never seen her so happy, so at peace with herself.

"Moving in here allows me to get rid of stuff. Something I promised myself. That when I die, I would own nothing; all would be disposed of beforehand. Besides, your overnight guests—and there may be many—will demand privacy. I don't need to know everything about

your life. Soon enough, you'll find a woman; it's the way life is, the way you are."

Sounded corny I admit, my uttering a stock phrase I'd always associated with emotional weakness, but the words slipped out somehow.

"I'm never going to marry again..."

"Oh yes, you will. There's a woman out there that needs you as much as you need her."

When I opened a bottle of Champagne to celebrate, we embraced. Peter took off on a run around, scampering up and down the hall, slipping and sliding on the wooden floor. Finally, jumping all over us. If a dog could show that much genuine emotion, I needed to get off my ass and start working my way back.

"Messages while you were out, dearie. Cloris called to thank you for the screen test opportunity. You know, someday that girl might be more of a celebrity than Miriam ever dreamed of being."

"Wouldn't that be— Wait, that reminds me. Durgo mentioned he was prepping a film with an ass-kicking black jiu-jitsu performer, like Bruce Lee, only a woman."

"Anyway," said my aunt, "if you need someone to take care of Peter, she's your girl. Second message from a Vicki who said she wanted to attend the funeral but didn't want to intrude."

"Vicki. We were at Woolley together. Her father was my math teacher."

"Nice voice. I could tell she's fond of you. Bit of an Aussie accent, not affected, more like she absorbed it from contact."

"The silly things we do at eighteen, plighting our troth, so to speak. As usual, things got in the way. She's an engineer now, finishing a Ph.D. in economics at UCLA."

"She broke down. I promised not to repeat what she said, but I think you should know how she feels. I'm sure she'd be okay with it."

"Gosh, I— We've been so circumspect."

"She sounded at her wit's end. 'We've been in and out of each other's lives for so long. I'd be good for him. I'm more— Responsible is the right word. I'm not afraid to tell him when he's wrong. We're real with each other. No games. I have a daughter. Maybe it makes him wary. I don't know.'"

I wondered. Were things coming full circle? In some fatalistic way? She was no Scottish princess and I wasn't a Moorish potentate. This was not Kismet. I'd had it with "while we make our mistakes with others." There were no ties, no troths, predestined or otherwise. I needed to work out a lot of things before considering— I refused to participate in a headlong rush to close the loop on what Vicki/Joanna once prophesied. Besides, we both knew why she'd called. If there was more than sex, we'd find it.

I remember her comment on the tinkertoy the last time we'd met, "Your tinkertoy is not a toy; it's a glorification of mistakes. Fucking for fuck's sake, meant to shock people who play slot machines and watch wrestling. Not to be snobbish but it's not for you or me."

There was a hint of Catholic devotion in her words, but they only affirmed her decency. I knew she loved me; I felt like rushing to her side. Then I remembered: all in good time.

By the time these thoughts had passed, I felt a presence over my shoulder, followed by a tickling of my ear and a slight electrical pulse that made my body vibrate, a sensation that recalled the Joy Buzzer, the toy you're familiar with but still surprises you every time someone uses it on you. I was about to pooh-pooh this whole self-interrogatory when I realized it was a breath of fresh air, the turning of a new leaf. In due time, the way would open; the universe would see to it. It was better to have no goals; that way I'd never be disappointed.

I went inside to empty my mind. After meditating, I drifted off for a moment, awakening contentedly to the thought of dying without owning things, imagining how complete it would make me feel.

# NOTES

## 12. APRIL

1. "King's Assassination: A Timeline" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/memphis-hunt/>

