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Books by Lantz Miller

Fiction

Beholt the Man

City Limit (as Lantzey Miller)

Non-Fiction

*Should We Perpetuate the Human
Tragedy? Values in Crisis*

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BEHOLT
THE MAN

A NOVEL

Lantz Miller

GRAND VIADUCT

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Exploring the nature of Civilization and Society

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I.

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1.

Unfortunately I suffered a fortune. That's my modest way of putting it, "fortune" as in *a fortune*. A pile. I say "unfortunately" as I lacked wherewithal for how to handle it. Let's say my plans unfolded with an intricate symphonic harmony. My website *Beholt the Man* formed the climax. It generated a good livelihood. Oh, beyond good. One day it soft-landed me in the lap of the Reynaldos. That's Reynaldo as in Reynaldo–Satrap–VincePaul, or RSVP, of onetime aerospace fame.

When the name dropped in my inbox, my mind didn't even register it. (I'm so naïve.)

Irina Reynaldo wrote me, as my site's followers are welcomed to do. Upon only five email-exchanges into our tendrill relationship, she sent an invite. "It's kind of a housewarming. Pre-Thanksgiving. For sages. If you style yourself that way. I don't mean to presume. But we live in the same city!"

Now, I am of humble origins, a believer in hard work, hardly looking for easy-ins. I have gotten email invites from "names": one E. Lauder in France, a P. Thiel in Silicon Valley. Too far to drive-by. But anyone who shared their city with a Reynaldo and had such an invite and, one Sunday, a moment's leisure, would drive by the location. We're all a little star-crazy.

So that brilliant afternoon, I steered down Thornton Expressway, over the river, the Trinity. Her Kessler Park

address did dampen my bets. South of the river, enclave among hovels, the neighborhood had been conceived and birthed to climb high. But only its trees had managed to mushroom; the north bank of the river won the real-estate race.

Irina Reynaldo's house—or was it my instinct?—made me park my car and walk and look. It was split-level, a bad sign: outmoded style. But it sat at such an askew angle to the 120° bend in the wandering lane, under such a tremendous burden of tree boughs, its eccentricity pierced through. It also appeared to be trying to turn its shoulders and hide from the graceful bend, and it succeeded since, as you drove, you paid more attention to the bend. I had taken this road a dozen times and never noted the little manor on two acres. Its upper windows just peeked over the white brick fence. Its flat slate bricks stacked in zigzaggy lines, in one early-1960s style. The gate was open; I left my car in the roadside and ventured up the two-rutted dirt drive. A gardener bagged leaves—another bad sign, displaying workers during a social function, and a Sunday at that. The bad sign only quickened my growing hunch this was a real Reynaldo.

A half-dozen cars were parked wherever they could thrust their noses among the oak trunks. Obviously this half-acre front lawn and its scanty over-shaded grass were not used to cars. Either Irina was new to society or was just emerging out of shade. Eerily, no sounds came from the house. Its windows were shut to the November warmth.

When the door opened, I divined that the woman standing there was Irina. She gaped, with inane surprise, as if I were intruding. She didn't come as high as my sternum, and I'm a mere six feet-minus-a-centimeter. But her neck bent back as if

gazing up a cliff. She exuded the same reined-in forwardness of her written self.

“Now you’re which one?” she said. Her voice, like her emails, was halting, unconfident but eager, high and scratchy. “Wait—I’m sure—!”

“Stuart Beholt.”

She maintained the gape, as if she had known my identity all along. And we both remained silent. Through my chest were shooting signals this was a real Reynaldo. She must have been late-thirties but still with the sparkling skin, eyes and smile of her teens. She had merely grown round at the hips in the way only one’s thirties can do. And by swathing these lines in a tight golden blue sari, she proudly showed them, as if she had not had so much to show before. She had such a strong chin that I didn’t note at first how round was her face. The effect spoke, well, of strength and roundness of character. But the amber-green eyes, so small, appeared like the last stars of the night before black clouds draw over. Though I had never seen a Reynaldo, this picture spoke to me.

I had to break the absurd silence. “But call me Sty.” I gave my pet nickname which I give nobody.

“You’re almost how I thought you’d look.”

“And you, too. You too indeed. Even your voice, Irina.”

She broke out of the moment with a flutter of eyelids, and this change, as if forced, killed half of the youth effect. “I was only making sure my hunch was right. I really don’t torture newcomers, Mr. Beholt”—and she tittered. She turned partway toward the interior as to go, but not a leg twitched. “It *is* remarkable. Come on in, come on in. There are plenty people here already. You should meet them. ‘Stu,’ you said?”

“As you wish.” I didn’t want to repeat my odd nickname yet.

She tittered again, stepping on, turning partway around as if my glance were now too much. “My *voice*, you said? You can’t look into my voice!” She stopped—so many starts and stops in this Irina. “Or can you?”

My heart made its beat felt. “I can do many things.”

“Can I call you Mr. Beholt for now? It seems more respectable. It’s how I think of you. Now, let’s don’t be shy,” she moved on, “people are mostly in the back.”

We were progressing through a dark entry, more cavernous and Byzantine than you’d expect from such a 60s-style split-level. There were heavy curved objects (vases?) on surfaces that just-glinted of marble in the dimness. The sheen of gilt frames on walls reflected in the light from far ahead. The place reeked pleasantly of, yes, a damp cave and of the same rotting sappy cottonwood leaves of the front lawn. An acrid, flowery incense, say patchouli, failed to dampen the charm of wetness. The voices far ahead sounded here only as whispers, as if officers in a boardroom were comparing charts before the meeting.

She halted yet again. “Everyone’s getting on really well.” She looked around at me again, although not gaping up-a-cliff this time, and for merely one second, before she shook her head. “It is remarkable. How you, your whole person, can come through, through space. Just emails.”

“I hope you are not unsettled.” Though she visibly was not.

She turned and hurried on. “We need to be, now and then. Oh, there you are again, Joe. Joe Mantranto. Do you know Stuart Beholt—?”

We had come into the brilliance, a huge room, two floors high with windows climbing to the ceiling, a veritable greenhouse. Sun glared through the giant panes, palm leaves drooped from the corners, and here arose the voices, audibly dampened by the greenery. They—the six or seven—were all male. The guest to whom Irina held one hand, while she held the other to me, was about her height but so upright and well-chiseled at the chest, besides baring his arms, he looked Olympian. All my workouts don’t do me such justice.

“I don’t believe I do,” he started to say.

“I thank Joe for this particular space.” Irina swept a hand to demonstrate the room. “He teaches us how plants generate negative ions, which are as valuable as oxygen. I about wind and air, you know -- but I’ll never get around to boating anytime soon. He learned it all from teaching sailing -- all call it the Ion Studio. Just breathe—” She inhaled, loudly, eyes shut. “See why we need no alcohol in here? We’ll continue my training here, won’t we. And Stu—” she placed a hand on my, well, less-impressive but sleeved bicep—“and I are pretty darn good friends, aren’t we. You know his website *Beholt the Man*.”

“I believe I do,” the man said, without looking to me.

“I have to run do one more thing, so if you two don’t mind—” And off Irina ran.

The muscular guest and I tried entertaining one another while I politely looked about. The room had been created by ripping out the ceiling between floors 1 and 2—and recently, as the odor of fresh wood attested. The east, west and south walls

soared with new royal planks of teak between their heavenward panes. By contrast, the north sector of the home sank back and grumbled in musty, ignored gloom. The guests all appeared between late-twenties and early-forties, and none stuck out as resembling her enough to be next-of-kin. So this “house-warming” was for *her* house, and specifically for this, the Ion Studio. And as this guest told me, he was her personal trainer. So today’s event was to celebrate and inaugurate—her next achievement in body sculpting?

“Irina is more concerned with harmonizing her body with her environment,” Mantranto filled in, guided by my thoughts without my unveiling them.

I nosed a little: “So one controls one’s environment by getting a new place?”

“She acquired it precisely for remodeling it.”

So he confirmed my intuition that she lived alone. And how many Reynaldos in town could be this worldly? My hunch that I had real Reynaldo was good as confirmed.

All I really knew about Irina came from those first two emails. In the initial, she introduced herself by a question about one of my site’s blogs, *EXtrahumanistEXtreme*: If she were to deploy all the technologies I’ve been setting forth, she wrote, could she become protean? Could she take on any identity she might imagine? And how long must she wait for all the techniques to be operative? I get dozens like this a day, certainly none grasping for proteanism, instead usually exuding the frantic lust for immortality—yet almost all with her level of impatience. Yes, this panting impatience dyes them all a tepid cerulean blue. I dashed off a note saying indeed she could

one day be as protean as she wished, but for now she must focus on my extrahumanist exercises for identity flexibility. (A download of the exercises is only \$75.) And I promptly forgot about this odd enquiry.

—For seventy minutes. Then the longest email I'd ever seen came in. And in my business I get some doozies. Subsequently, I printed it: 18 pages, single-spaced. I soon deduced that much of it was cut-and-pasted from similar hodgepodge she'd sent other sites. But the story was fetching, and I do give my followers their full purchase. She told of an affair frustrated by outside forces. She was obviously physically flummoxed by this love interest. She gave no names, and the figure remained as shadowy as cardboard shirt-liners lost in a closet. Still the details were quite delicious. Just reading it, I saw bright white flashes. But her family set out to wring the passion straight out of her. Not because the man was moneyless, which he was not. But because they sensed her profound physical joy, and they disdained both the physical and joy. They were profoundly *inversé*, as the French would say, inside-out, besides meddlesome, goalless, tortured. She went into a multi-page litany of their rampages since she was two years old: forcing her to sing in chorus when she had laryngitis, to sleep shirtless in subfreezing outdoors, to add all the numbers between 1 and 1000 before she might eat (she soon discovered the answer is 1001×500), and other such things as you read in these emails. But what hooked my curiosity was how their recent hounding of the love-interest had been executed through the services of one brother, as if they (and who exactly *was* "they") had forced *him* into this cold deed. Did he really want to do it, frighten her lover away? She'd never know.

She begged—for a page—to be like Proteus, be whatever she willed, and finally to live, right now.

I about wrote out a prescription for another of my downloadable exercises, when the surname finally sank in. Reynaldo. Hadn't *the* Reynaldos faded into the shades a number of years ago? I promptly turned and wrote a five-page reply, which I printed and filed with hers. A day later came the invite.

I asked Mantranto, “Does the training protocol Irina needs increase the body’s ecstatic potential?”

Mantranto, a pause-heavy responder, I’d noted, had to crunch on that one a while.

Across the room she carried on a hot and subdued discussion with a guest. They stood almost side-by-side. A near-relative, you might think by the hint of tension, except the man looked nothing like her and she would not invite such relations to a house-*warming*. He wore a gray pinstriped suit that struggled to circumnavigate his belly. The red tie kept curling up its end as he twisted to articulate another fine point. Perhaps the love-interest, but so chubby-red-faced?

“That issue,” Mantranto finally answered, and speaking slowly as ever, “is rather personal for me to indulge.”

“Isn’t this whole gathering rather personal, exposing all her spiritual advisors, strangers at that, to the christening of her personal workout chamber?”

“I’m not really a spiritual advisor. Purely a physical one.”

A curious guy, this Mantranto. I had guessed him Sinhalese by his narrow, almost crimson cinnamon face, though his accent was a deep and curvy West Texas.

I had to squeeze in one more word, “You can’t get more spiritual than the body”—whether or not I believed it.

Then Irina was coming at us before Mantranto’s ponderous brain could extrude a reply. “Mingle, mingle, mingle,” she said, again clawing my bicep and, more difficultly, Manranto’s, and tugging us. “Did you two find out what you had in common, or do I have to tell you? You both get right to the meat of the matter. You don’t shilly-shally. And that commands my attention.”

And so she introduced us around the room. We were her “point men,” because we make points. Interesting, the woman who writes 18-page emails admires parsimony. The man with whom she’d held tense converse was one Desi, who for a greeting bowed his head three inches, but never once laid an eye on me. She neglected giving my name or divulging his sage specialty, but given his girth I surmised him of either Buddhist or Protestant clergy. His tremendous chalk face projected a chipped-rock chin near-vertically. The chin lent a strange effect such that, even in rest position, he appeared to keep bowing when he spoke to you. His hair was the color and twist of pine bark, eyes the pointiness of chocolate drops behind white butter. With his great hesitation to speak or look, I got an odd shiver as though I would be dealing with this fellow soon enough. Another great man was Astarr Fix, undoubtedly a massaged name. He peddled in import clothing whose fabrics, he asserted, “transport oxygen from outside the skin, into the soul.” He kept his arms folded on his green-silked chest, with the defiance of Ali Baba and the height to back it up. “It works,” Irina said, swishing her sari left and right, and I did not argue. One Sam Barrett traded in African, Haitian and Papuan masks, “but only those that work *jobs*,” he said with

lift of eyebrow. Another fellow specialized in flower odors, another in Swedish foot therapy, or so I caught. By the time I got through the gamut, I was impressed with Irina: All these folk did solid business with real products and, I could tell, made good money. Not one astrologer; I so question New Age-iness.

Long after these rounds, Irina at one point swished me aside near the sliding garden door. “Could you come outside a minute? And here, wave goodbye to everyone, as if you’re going.”

She moved swiftly but with grace, leading the way out the door. I did turn to wave, though no one really noticed. She veered us into the north extreme of the backyard, toward a glass pagoda out of sight of the Ion Studio’s vast windows. The garden of at least an acre glimmered with borders of autumn mums and roses in the sun. Benches circled the trunks of oaks in the manicured lawn.

“You are so much exactly who you are in your emails,” she said, “that from the moment I opened the door I trusted you. Of course I trusted everything you wrote as well. But you know when you *just know*? I have more to tell.” She halted near the pagoda and made as if heading right back to the house. “I do, much more. But I have to return right away. Can you, please, if you have a moment, wait here a few minutes?”

The door to the glass hut was unlocked. I stepped in, and she rushed back to her party.

What a combination of stunning confidence and lack thereof.

The place reeked of humus, though the blond floor planks were newly sanded and the shelves bare. In a back corner,

among stacks of other brown debris obviously on the way out, was a framed photo of an RSVP fighter jet, the Screech Owl.

2.

Five years ago, I didn't, of course, just jump into *Beholt the Man* in my birthday suit.

Fresh from dropping out of grad school, I had started out in the consulting business. Yes, people are so desperate to buy an ear to which to air their griefs, they'll pay a consultant with no experience. I had been—still am—a highway concrete-pourer's kid, raised by a soft-drink machine repairwoman. Weaned on leftover Seven-Up and corned dogs, I still managed to crawl as high as UT Austin.

Okay, as a new consultant, I had had some experience, *this* much (thumb and forefinger held a centimeter apart): in interoffice employee-surveillance software, otherwise known as snoopware. A college buddy back in Austin, Alby Tolby, had written a smashing bit of code that underpriced everyone's. The user could not only view the employee's screen, but also (this part was my creation) a mock-up of the person's keyboard. You could have, let's say, double evidence of time-theft—and dangle your knowledge of the employee's passwords as enticement to confess. My experience, then, had been helping Alby design the thing. He set up my consulting business and referred me to his contacts so I could sell his—our—package. Thanks to people's gullibility, it got me rolling. I so much loved to talk, they listened, bought, referred, and snowballed me all across our torrid state.

The one challenge was assuaging potential buyers' guilt. They felt vile enough just policing screens. But learning peoples' *passwords*? What if that tempted them to—do unsavory and illegal things? I gently, politely pooh-poohed their naïve consciences and bootstrapped them up to the real, the twenty-first century world. First of all, employees should not be using sites where they must input their bank and credit-card codes. Second, if they would do something so dishonest with company time, you must have some power to arbitrate with them; and knowledge (of secrets) is power.

Shy as cats, customers lapped my milk hungrily. In two years, I branched into employee-relations consulting, with no more than a B.S. (in C.S.) behind my name. Word-of-mouth can breathe wings onto your back. I kept my feet on earth through two million shares of Alby's IPO and sat on his board of directors with other prominent community businessmen—who, seeing my blazing connection, hired my consultation. Astonishing how much a business card, a famous investiture, a smile across the table and a handshake at the door can write wisdom onto your face. With my insights gleaned from the snoopware, I consulted on how best to arrange workers and departments in physical space. Computer time-abusers should be visible to the honest; even the honest could not stay hidden—but everyone, like mice finishing their mazes, should get their rewards for good behavior. Soon I branched into my employee-mutual-awards system, PayPull[®], even patented it, whereby workers awarded each other for good works. Did that *ever* get everyone in the office competing—and clamped down on envy. I was flying as far as Vancouver and Auckland to set up my system. Then I swung into the seminars circuit, pulling some big names into my all-weekenders to hear

everything from optimal shoe dress-code to the top power-smiles. I knew psychology so well I could make people think they were learning psychology.

Then Alby's shares sunk, thanks to his company mismanagement, although he, through the miraculous machinations at which his type was so gifted, soared. I remained well above water, thanks to my jet-powered consults. But I wanted that warm gushy feeling again of toes grounded in earthly investment. So I spun some brain wheels and came up with *Beholt the Man*. At first it was designed just as a steady low-level cash-flow, like a conservative mutual fund, whose dividends I'd pour right into real mutual funds for my future self. But quickly it more than flew. It went interplanetary.

The site was exactly as it sounded: How to Open Yourself to the World. I, Stuart Beholt, was the unabashed example of self-exposure. For the site I tapped into my top employee-relations method: *Boss, let the whole firm see who you are, don't hide a thing, and by golly they'll follow you. Because fear is what keeps them trapped in smallness. You grow bigger the more you pull out the deep you within, till you grow bigger than life.*

And, as I reminded myself while eying the Screech Owl picture, no better way than at my screen for learning how to handle the individual in person.

Irina returned to the glass house so calmly, so differently from the manner in which she had fled, she stooped to sniff some blue autumn roses. It had taken her only forty minutes to dispose of her business in the Ion Studio. In the meantime, I had thumbed through much of the framed matters stacked in

their dusty corner, apparently on their way out. One had been a virgin photo of the just-completed Louis Quatorze mansion that Jeremy Reynaldo had built in the late 50s before he lost his first fortune. Someone had spray-painted much of the photo-frame's glass a deep black.

Irina entered with a spray of canary mums. "Let's brighten this place up," she said, as if the sun's spewing through the glasshouse's eight sides were wasted effort. She placed the flowers in a blue Sevres vase, the only object on a freshly sanded shelf. "I am so, so, so glad you stayed." Still across the room, she turned to me.

"How could I not stay?"

"You are such an angel. You must have a dozen things better to do on a Sunday than wait in a dusty room. I'll make sure it's worth it." She came forward, but only to dip into a pantry below the long shelf. Apparently it was a fridge, and out came some juice bottles. She asked my favorite flavor. Mango passion fruit. "This will be my other room here," she went on, handing me the juice. "Am I really how you pictured me? How?"

I helped her pull up the two chairs, both high-backed oak, also newly sanded, which might match a heavy oak table. I described how people convey a sound through their written word, and you feel their character, and their character exudes a form, so when you see the form, it tells you it's the person you heard. Did I actually see she had aquamarine eyes, long bushy coconut-shell hair bunched up in a top knot, and youthful upper arms? No. But when I saw these forms I knew they belonged to the same eloquence that had shared 18 pages of herself.

“You are so frank,” she said, nodding slowly, chewing her lower lip. “And here I gave you the chance to bullshit me. But I have to tell you, I saw that you had penetrating eyes, and a large smiling face, and are tallish and built solid as a door with strong wrists but not so muscular. Yes, I saw you don’t need muscles so much. No Mr. Mantranto, you. And on all of *Beholt the Man*—the epitome of self-exposure—not one photo of you!”

“And you see, for the properly sighted, photos are not needed.”

“But I saw you, so distinctly, Sty.” It grabbed me how she abruptly used the nickname I’d given. Unconscious of this backsliding correctness, she was gazing, sipping. “But I didn’t detain you here to go wow over our prescience.”

She shifted to upright in her chair, signaling a new direction, and said just above a whisper. “I will pay you whatever you ask.”

“My website and my consulting are my income. I’m not a shrink with an appointment book.”

“Can we pick up where we left off in our emails? I’ll start by telling you why I had to bring you outside here.”

But first she assured me that now I’d seen her little hiding place—meaning, I gathered, these whole two acres—I should see her life in all its four dimensions. The light, the ions, the open outdoor space, the trees and plants: she could finally breathe. Didn’t I see now how necessary it had been for her to move into this house, to *live*? Because, already—this shows how badly she had needed it—already “they” knew what she was up to. Because that man she had been “tiffing” with, inside—Desi, remember—“who never looked at you”?

“That’s my brother, the one who had put the ax to my lover. Somehow they knew I bought this house, had an open house today—and he walked through the open gate alongside an unsuspecting guest. That is why I asked you come out here.”

“Till the guests all left. Including him.”

We were a good five feet apart; and although, seated, she came to only a few inches shorter than me, her gaze again appeared to go straight upward into my inner cranium. Perhaps the large eyes did the trick, so large you saw the whites even above and below the irises. And now, thanks to the deepening afternoon sun, I saw that her baby full cheeks actually sank in a faint \cap about her mouth. That face’s only sign of late-30s. It painted not so much age as a constant shaming, such that even a 15-year-old might develop. Was this look beseeching me to some untoward method of removing the Desi menace? Yet we both knew the brother was no more willing an accomplice in this awkwardness than she.

“So, yeah, you read it all, don’t you?” she said. “And Desi’s not even the force, but I deplore his succumbing to it anyway. Do you know what this force is?”

“Family history of some sort.”

“Do you know—and I never told you,” she started, sounding like we were chums going way back, “anything about my family. They hardly had time to foster a history. I should tell you who they were. This is far from bragging.”

She rose and with the lightning strength of her body-training went right for the dusty stack. But she stopped. “You know RSVP?”

“What I sent you before arriving here.”

Her intensity glossed over the quip, of a sort she'd heard her whole life. "You know that in those four initials, that R is a 'Reynaldo.' Everybody knows this, of course you do. That Reynaldo was my father."

"Yes."

"Thank god I don't think everybody knows *that*. Of course you know the company built airplanes."

"Missiles, sporting goods..."

"That was my morning cereal. I'm so sorry to have to tell you. But you know me so well already, you must have sensed."

"I had a feeling, like I had a feeling of how you look. But I didn't want to dismiss you in advance, just because you might have had that family connection."

"Or you would have never RSVP'd!"

Now she lightened up, came forward, then strutted about the room. I saw that under the sari, plain sandals sometimes appeared, and she shared with me all her excitement about aeronautics as a kid. She spouted the wing aspect ratios of the Ocelot Sweep-back, the equations for lift force, the tensile strengths of titanium and Kevlar. In her teens she had dreamed she was being groomed to be her generation's vanguard engineer. She and her sibs, with live-in tutors, were drilled in abstract analysis, econometrics, quantum mechanics, history, German Expressionism, Sanskrit, Mandarin, genetics. They toured Africa, Brunei, the Antarctic, not to speak of top-secret American and NATO airbases.

And they kept waiting for it all to fall into place. She reached eighteen, nineteen, and still the tutors. Nothing about college. She had never stepped into a high school. Even when

they visited Africa, they viewed Soweto from a helicopter; they spotted the penguins of Tierra del Fuego from a toasty boat.

“Like Jeremy Reynaldo,” she said, “scattered intently across everything interesting, focused on nothing, separated from it all by a layer of glass.”

So she entered her twenty-first year, November 21 (celebrated again only yesterday!). The double 21s, which she had written many times on a yellow paper, pierced her like double-pronged forks with the fact she had suddenly reached adulthood. The End lurked around the corner, and yet she was nowhere. That very day, she ventured out, to the old Taylor’s bookstore on Northwest and, “it was like my nose knew where answer and fulfillment lay”: She landed upon the *Kama Sutra* by Vatsayana. “Within a matter of hours, I discovered my body. Oh yeah, I knew it was there. It had spoken, or tried to. Now I let it speak. And I gave it live companions.”

All right, I thought, neither do we know one another nor have you hired me as in-person therapist. Time we establish where we stand before you keep exposing yourself.

But she ignored my thought and kept exposing.

Even at 21 she was carefully watched, as if against such discovery. The tutor, a stout woman in her 40s, stayed at Irina’s side, supposedly to continue instruction. But Irina found ways to slough her off, in order to go “shopping.” Since she had no driver’s license, she was supposed to use a chauffeur, another spy, but she resorted to bicycle and Moped. Still, she occasionally spotted the tutor or chauffeur, sometimes both, in odd places, such as a White Rock Lake boat dock miles from home, or a dark basement of a downtown building.

She found lovers, deftly. The first, only days after her Vatsayana purchase, was a Pakistani who had converted to Hinduism and made Vatsayana a scripture. His family subsequently shed him. “It was like we had antenna for one another. We were sitting in the top of the Reunion Tower, only tables apart. The place was empty. He had come just for the seafood buffet, the shellfish, the forbidden shellfish. He had stacks of oyster shells, scallops, shrimp. I couldn’t help but notice, as I passed from the buffet. I had come for the same. Do you know how long it took before our talk turned to the book?

“We went downstairs, to the Hyatt. We stayed two days, nonstop.”

Miss Reynaldo, my brain said drumming fingers on the surface of my inner skull, it is time you refrain or sign a contract. You are really reaching now, beyond good breeding.

She kept reaching, at least confessionally.

Upon her return home from the Hyatt, she was grounded, at age 21. She swore to herself she would get a job, her own place. If only she had marketable skills. Yet, in months, her unexplained outing was forgotten, and she returned to him. Discreetly she and he stayed only six or eight hours together, in ceaseless love. So it went, over a year, until his family, outraged at his conversion, virtually chased him from town. “We were so much the same. I still love him. I haven’t heard from him since.”

She found others, but she was always selective in this certain way, and she went years alone. “I have to tell you—though we’re not strangers, and you have to know, to discover the solution. I have to face my lover,” and she faced

me, shoulders back and exactly parallel to mine, “like this; Do you understand?”

This finally is too much, Miss Reynaldo.

“And we have to look into each other,” and she looked into me so level I didn’t even sense our height difference, “like this, for hours. It’s a way of love, it’s the only way of love that is love. Because it is no longer about the sensuality. The touches, everything, are about getting into the other. It’s about minds. Bodies are the best way into minds. I know you understand.”

Frankly, I did not. Though I tried. I had encountered such notions. I am willing to assimilate any concepts for a client. But this one, only a foot away, was embarrassing me by functioning so closely to the border of professional protocol. My heartbeats were felt.

“Yes, I understand,” I said. And the professional distance stayed.

“They were good. All six. They were all honest. They all ended bittersweetly, sweetly on their part. Circumstances beyond control, like with Mahmud. Except this last time, like I wrote you, it was with Reda.”

Now I knew the guy’s name. (I have to add here, I must change everyone’s name for you, for my own safety, although the persons behind the name are unchanged. I may have a little fun in the renaming.) Of course I long knew “this last time” was not the ion-room guest who wouldn’t look at me, and it wasn’t Mantranto, or anyone at the party. So, apparently, “this last” one was long gone, too. But not bittersweetly.

And now that she had made this great step, this revelation of an identity, I expected her to break out of this trance whereby

I could smell her cherry-almond scent and other odors upon drifts of warmth. I expected her to brush her hands, step back and say, “So that’s it, Dr. Sty. Now what?” Yet as long as she sustained this gaze, I could hardly be the one to step back and so send the message my client was rude or repulsive.

“I’m afraid to find out what happened to Reda. Mr.—” she cleared her throat, in which I surmised “Desi”—“isn’t talking. This cannot happen again. I have no idea who I am. No, let’s put it this way. I know very well who I am, ever since I was 21. But *they* have never known, since I was born. So can’t I—take on any identity, elude them? *Beholt the Man* says so, you say so, in your site’s features. You say the technology is in our hands. But you don’t say exactly how. Where are our hands?”

We were in this position, standing, eying close, I don’t know how many minutes. But such intensity is rough on a body, and one thing I did see clearly was how she could sustain it hours through a night. But since she was saying no more, only gazing, I had the opportunity subtly to raise a hand, which still held the empty juice bottle. And without breaking the trance, I said, “More mango passion?”

She blinked, a hairline of a smile broke out, and finally she looked away. To the fridge. “I’d be glad,” she said with an exhilarated sigh. And she moved, with graceful curling of the sari about her, to the fridge.

I consulted my watch. The sun bore low and deep orange through the bare tree trunks. I spoke with all the orange honey I had, “I would so much love to stay longer. Sundays are sometimes my heaviest catch-up.”

Fridge door open at her knees, she held up the fresh bottle. “You can take it with you.” The hairline smile grew to a wide crack. “But I’ll need the bottle. There’s a deposit.”

“I couldn’t be so impolite as to chugalug and run.”

So I took two minutes to sip while we talked about the flower garden.

You would linger, too, my friend.

3.

Certainly I had dealt with a client—patient, customer, what have you—in person plenty times, but in very different circumstances. And very different clients.

First, you must see my house and work; they're snug as rubber and member. I do most of my work on *Beholt the Man* in a room of my house which was supposed to be a bedroom's walk-in closet. Most people who bother picturing how someone works such a website seem to paint a sharply lit space full of desktop computers and monitors and scanners and printers, somewhat like a spaceship flightdeck. I have one folding chair, folding table, homely lamp and laptop. I mean the laptop's a close-out, off-brand notebook snatched up for like 199. My lumpy fingertips scamper across that tiny hypersensitive keypad nimbly as acrobat mice. Still, I farm out most of the features to assistants who know my style—while I do “Etchy-Sketchy Homo,” “EXtrahumanism-EXtreme” and “Rubber Plant” myself, plenty work enough.

You have to have seen these features: a whole video-game's worth of drop-downs and knobs and hidden boxes to discover, they kept followers busy and buying. The most popular therapy from the start was “Etchy-Sketchy Homo.” Even the “homo” in the title didn't put off the more illiterate users. It consists of two knobs—you need a joystick—just like the old Etch-a-Sketches for kids. But here you use those stubborn, squarish-tending horizontals and verticals to draw

your self-portrait, and send it to me for analysis. Better than graphology.

That feature got me learning the human soul down to the last neuron. Nothing works better for the old psyche than for it to hear stories spun about itself, and so I spun for my dear buyers. The more grandiose the tale, the better and truer. Another popular feature is “Where Are You?” whereby you tell me, using everything from scientifically precise to touchingly poetic terms, where you are in this universe. I call this one “Tea Leaves” to myself as I analyze them, no two patterned in even the same universe. There’s a “Bosses” menu, a “Hard Workers,” a “Mamas and Papas,” a “Kiddie Caddie,” of course “EXtrahumanism-EXtreme.” Sixty-eight features so far, and all have their regulars, as does even the least-used, “Rubber Plant,” which asks you what those two words “*really*” mean. My every response to you, guaranteed empirical. No superstition. Never did I better learn how learning the human innards could be a blast.

The next room, master bedroom according to the blueprints, has a pompous cherrywood desk fronted by two overstuffed leather chairs, with paintings of Guadalupe Peak, the Chisos Mountains, a cougar with sleepy eyes. Venetian blinds and a shaded desk lamp keep the light soft. My townhouse is right off Cedar Springs near downtown, and this room conveniently opens directly onto the street. That door has the brass plate, “Beholt/Consulting/Inc.” In my primarily consulting days, I occasionally met clients in that big room. When I launched *Beholt the Man*, I added a table between the leather chairs. I could then sit in one, the table could offer snacks and professional distance, and informal comfort could

reign. After all, no “M.D.” trailed my name. When someone comes a-knocking, I close the closet door.

Not two weeks after the website first attracted followers, one wrote asking if I did in-person consults on the site’s topics. After all, many of my first followers were either former business-consulting clients or their referrals. I answered I could meet if the person had a particular issue to untangle. Disclaimers for in-person consulting that borders on the psychological/emotional—hell, it *is* the psychological/emotional—are harder to make than consults done over a website and offer more credibility in appearing professional. So I forewarned of the informality and gratuity of any such occasion. Only after more email exchanges confirming that the person wasn’t mad did I give my address and set a time. One must be careful about lawyers and one’s hard-won rep. So, I went through with the chore mainly for client relations—and a tickling curiosity.

My first BTM visitor was a woman, Betty Frays, an airline pilot. In fact, 90 percent of my in-person visits turned out to be women, pleasantly enough. Not yet a captain, Betty Frays had flown mainly as a copilot for thousands of hours and was up for promotion. But upon that juncture to such heights, she abruptly feared the effects of high-altitude radiation on her ova. She was hefty, with a wide face and strong jaws, attractive with penetrating blue-lagoon eyes. She loved Pepperidge Farms White Cheddar Tiny Fish. I emphasized I was no physician and could offer no such medical advice. But she insisted how accurate was every bit of technology and science on my site: the updates on quantum computing, projections on intelligence enhancement, details of nanotechnological advances. I insisted I had merely researched those well. But on her “Etchy-Sketchy

Homo” sketch, I, seeing a genderless “bfrays66@hotmail.com,” had interpreted the sketch as “too shy inside and out, so needs someone dependent upon you to bring out your best.” And, she declared, I had nailed her as no one ever had. And “dependent”—wouldn’t that be a child? So what about the high-altitude radiation?

The episode, more than any business consulting had ever done, turned into a game in which I felt that at every move, Betty was about to challenge me out of my very credibility as Beholt the Man. Despite her praise of my interpretations of her. She wanted me to solve the anxiety of life, yet she made sure that the solutions lay beyond my ken. And if I tried guessing beyond my ken, there would go my credibility. She came back eleven times. I got to where I dreaded the sound of her three-triplets pounding upon the door (never the buzzer!). But once she sat before me, I dreamed of being the one to donate that dependent someone. Once she left, I did pushups to work off the vertigo from her dodging of my every proffered solution. *See a fertility specialist to assay your ova.* Too scary! *Test with that captain you always meet up with in the Guam hotel.* Too irresponsible! *Change to helicopters and avoid high altitudes.* But I’ve loved fixed-wings since I was a girl!

The game-challenge persisted from one in-person client to the next. With most of them, I felt, upon my every utterance, that I might lose and have to close up shop. There was Ms. B— the housewife who looked like the young Madonna and longed to be, yes, a fighter-jet pilot. At my every suggestion that she bone up for military flight academy, she groaned she was too old; at every suggestion for how to accept “reality,” she snapped I didn’t know my job. Lela, a Baptist deacon, drilled me about nothing but the natural history and lives of

wild mammals. She recounted dreams of running on all fours in forest settings, so she must have been intended to be some furry creature. Didn't "EXtrahumanismEXtreme" promise we could fulfill our inner selves in reality? When I noted that the genetic engineering discoveries she desired were around the corner, she grew insolent and declared me a creation-tinkering heathen; but she returned. There was the Hawaiian who pined for ancient royal Hawaii but forced herself into Dallas-exile until the kingdom was restored. A food-processing executive picked my brain for how to become a simple checkout-girl, if only her whole life weren't intercalated with great expenses. All yearned for transformation, makeover, new identity, yes the main thrust of my website, how to pull the real self out of the box of trappings. So easy to solve through my tapping fingertips, but so trapping when faced in the paradox of the flesh.

In time, painfully, slowly, I adjusted. Learned how to glean the *underlying* quandary from the emails and anticipate. Anticipate what a client really wanted. I adjusted the website, ever so subtly, to promise that the great scientific change for personally designed change was almost upon us, yet not upon us. I assuaged the in-persons with these facts first thing we sat across the bowls of fruit and crackers. In time, I found I too had to let go, join in with their anxiety and ride their storm instead of resist. I reminded myself of all my secure mutual funds keeping me anchored to solid floor; so that *this* business wasn't so serious. And then, after two years, Betty Frays, after an eighteen-month hiatus, came back and declared she was going to be a single mom. The captain's seed in Guam hadn't worked. She had joined a group And Baby Makes Two, which provided legal advice and contract-boilerplates for members to hand

to their prospective gene-partners. She had decided I would make the perfect genetic half of her prospective offspring. “No obligation,” she said, showing me the contract.

And so my earlier professional resolution flew out the side window. After you break the rule once, and you remain not merely above water but soaring, other opportunities tap, ever so discreetly. After all, I have no license I must safeguard. I confess this new method for client relations did not in itself solve a client’s complaint. It merely expanded the possibilities for client relations. It formed part of an overall opening up of my too-austere self when dealing with an in-person person. It represented an expansion of my abilities to float and struggle with the client. Not one in five in-person callers from BTM ever hinted of this recourse, and not one in nine ever reached it. Never did I move one millimeter in that direction unless the client moved a meter, if not all the way. And never did I let such occasions unfold in the sanctity of the consulting chamber.

I also never heard the story on Betty Frays’s success, though we tried for months, until she abruptly moved to Guam. The Baptist deacon also came back after a hiatus, and we found what at least seemed to neutralize her mammalian cravings, though not perhaps fully extinguish them. I finally proposed to her, a first for me, and she accepted, but, also abruptly, broke it for a Chinese toymaker. Another, lasting a year, intense and touching, turned out to be instructive for how to handle Irina Reynaldo, making an excellent precedent. “I.T.” I called this last love of a client. Her initials said it all.

4.

Irina let a week elapse before contacting me again. The interval ensured me of her sanity.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving, despite the intervening “Black Friday,” is a lull of post-holiday blahs. Not for an automaton like me, who, before the morning sky disambiguated itself as gray or blue, was at my closeted folding-table. I had my usual Tyrolean stein of black espresso, while I pumped through a backlog of Rubber Plant “Rorschachs” as I called them. One was flummoxing me with its indefatigable associationism. “Rubbert Plant Lead/Rubberzeppelin Pliant-soft Animal-Plant-Your-Seed so gooey-yummy in-the-soil and harvest, eat and consume our Planet ye rubber Robber-barons of barren-soil you seedless sterile vegetables, you...” And so for 11 pages. Such drivel, thank god rare, is so dense and meaningless that interpreting it taxes your Association Cortex. You piddle your time concocting excuses for surcharges. I had, on coming from the kitchen and past the garden windows, noticed the day was dewy with that faint chill that would turn to warmth. Usually I ignore these bodily urges to go out and procrastinate. But the air kept drifting in with the autumnal balm and grassy harvest odor of last Sunday; my mind kept floating to a certain glass house. And the phone rang.

My controlled body jumped.

Upon handing Irina the empty Mango-Passion bottle last Sunday, I had also handed her my number, as consolation for my departure. I give my number to *very few*.

Answering the phone, I couldn't help the cliché, but modified it: "I was just thinking of—your greenhouse." I had to control my breath.

"I know. That's where I am."

We let the facts sink into us. All week, we had sent only brief emails of thanks.

She abruptly shifted tone to business. "You have to meet *them*. I mean witness them, observe them. I'm not yet sure exactly how."

I was luxuriating in the big puffy leather chair behind the leather desk, pushing back as far as it would go. I mulled over how not to reveal I savored her implications of meeting the family, while showing how I did not object. The mere sound of her high and halting voice, just sweet enough to endear, no longer scratchy, spoke of a balmy seachange ahead for us all. If she was "not sure exactly how" to introduce me to "them," it must be because they would immediately suspect I was yet another they would have to extirpate. Why not just disabuse them of that suspicion immediately? Because a lie wouldn't hold for long. She must then have wanted that something or other hold.

All of you would agree, last Sunday in the glass house could have been consummated then and there. I was as tempted as you must have been. But this was an extra-special client.

"You're still with me?" she said.

"That's a declaration and not a question."

"You see the difficulty?"

“Surely they throw big parties. I could be anonymous.”

“That’s the difficulty!” She laughed, heartily and friendly, the first such I heard in her. “I’m relieved, you knew nothing about the Reynaldos before we met. They don’t throw big parties. The Reynaldos, except Father, have done nothing. So they do nothing.”

Of course—damn—I should have deduced as much from her account of their childhoods’ promise never fulfilled. They do nothing. They haunt one another. To have a social life, you must do something. I must be careful: If before last Sunday I had “known nothing” about the Reynaldos, now I must always know everything, or appear to.

“So Thanksgiving was spent with just family,” I said.

“Precisely. ‘Just’ but unjust and more than we can handle but it’s all we’ve got. And boy does the family keep giving it.”

The holiday week explained her silence beyond the polite thank-you note and in my mind raised her level-headedness another notch. After last Sunday’s talk, too deep for strangers like us, someone who was too-desperate would have plagued me with words all week despite the holidays. Or because of them.

“Even I went up to the folks’ in Clay County, for the pig-out day,” I said.

“Of course *you* have to keep up appearances, Mr. Social Sage.”

Then we reached a pause. It was a juncture, a mountain pass with a view ahead and behind. But I saw in the pause she was winking: She had prompted the climb—made the call—and left us open to suggestions. Propriety gave the next step’s suggestion to me.

“So we and our bellies have reached the empty Sunday afterwards,” I said.

“I was officially released from the occasion yesterday evening.”

“You have the afternoon to yourself?”

“Even *they* are too bloated and exhausted to shadow me.”

The words came out before I could weigh them: “We’re blessed with a lovely day. What do you say we take a stroll in the Marsalis Zoo.”

This next pause sounded like the forces of flooded Lake Mead gathering behind Hoover Dam. For a moment I felt I had slipped and inserted Lela the animal-envying Baptist deacon into Irina’s place (when I.T. was to be my orienting guide here!). Irina then broke into—that laugh again, hearty and, I hoped, friendly. It pierced the ears. “What an idea! I’d love to. That’s the last place they’d look for me.”

The Marsalis Zoo, actually well-rated for its stock of flesh, has notoriety among North-Dallasites for being in the city’s most rundown district, Oak Cliff. The notoriety is so ruthless, city officials changed the park’s name to “Dallas Zoo,” to efface the stigma that “Marsalis Avenue” gave the place. We’re supposedly too ignorant to know that Mr. Marsalis was one of the city’s cofounders in the early 19th Century. Nevertheless, you can view the zoo as Oak Cliff’s twin haven to Irina’s own Kessler Park. As you drive south on Thornton Expressway past the river, you see a breathtakingly green sward on your left. In the winter the great trees are warmly green, in the summer coolly thick. For me, no tree-hugger, the green takes my breath, as it’s so deep, smack in the heart of

my huggy city, that I fear wild stuff may jump out of it. You exit at Marsalis Ave. which pulls you past collapsed wooden mechanics garages and annihilated motels turned warehouses, into a valley dark under the tree boughs. In this oasis of plantlife I don't feel safe until I spot the Olympian parking lot and the reassuringly civilized rails of the DART train.

I parked and hurried, lest a beast from the nearby Safari section grunted before I was out of earshot. The wheels throbbing along the high Marsalis Ave. viaduct above me helped shield the sound waves. When I used to stroll the park with Lela the Baptist deacon, I wore earplugs. The moans and snorts of animals are not so much anguished as pitiable, too pitiable. The plugs cut the edge. Lela would laugh at me, but then she knew me. I could not risk such oddities as earplugs this afternoon. Ion-room Irina might be an animal-hugger.

Irina was already waiting at the DART station. She had splashed her getup on even faster than I had: a knee-length green leather skirt with a slit up the thighs, no hose, a white silk top, sunglasses, flipflops.

"I just had to take the train, after all," she said. "Only a couple of stops. I love trains, the way the wheels catch the tracks. Besides, I know where to park free on Sundays and not pay the exorbitant fees here."

We held out hands to timid fingertip clasps. Outdoors, with so much of herself showing today, she did radiate, even with those eyes locked behind shades. But I was sinking ever so slightly though I need not: Had she sunk everything into the Kessler Park house, so that now she was scrimping? The Reynaldos were not one of those Sam Waltons who lugged

their brownbag lunches to work. They longed to live, I believed.

We agreed to start in the Main Section, where merely birds, I recalled, were the noisiest stock. (I don't mind bird racket, which strikes me like orchestras tuning up.) I had risked a short-sleeved top and shorts myself, so we strolled along like a match of minds. Plenty folk, out for the holiday and weather, jammed the arboreal avenues between exhibits, chewing away at their nefarious zoo treats of cotton candy and peanuts. But rich wafts of animal spoor were quickly blanketing the vanilla fumes of candied nuts and autumn's mat of leaf rot. Already the fingernail-scratchy screeching of the lemurs around the front-gate pool was giving way to the squeaky-door squeal of the spider monkeys and the slobbery gurgle of the cougars. I treated—rather, offered to treat—Irina to her pick of goodies. But beyond the entrance fee (a tiny gift she permitted only after my home-run thrust of cash at the cashier), she opted for a mere fruit juice. “You invited me last week,” I insisted, “I invited today. So indulge.”

“I don't indulge. Never knew how.”

Even her Vatsayana, I remembered, was controlled pleasure. But I felt she was continuing to scrimp, now for *my* wallet's sake.

As subtly as I could, I let her curiosity guide our way, and so I could observe her. She paused outside the bird exhibit, listening to the cackles and whistles. “I love that sound,” she said. “They're doing art, I know it, I don't care what the scientists say.”

“You should always care what the scientists say.”

“Except this once. They’ll come around to my way of thinking.”

Again, the great confidence, following upon extreme humility.

She listened moments longer, before moving on. “But I can’t watch birds enclosed. Or wild cats in cages, the psychotic way they pace. But dogs, they’re den animals. And antelope and all that, they’re okay in zoos.”

The ocelot had space to leap and walk, so Irina let herself spectate. From far down its throat came rumble as if saying the German hard “ch” in a purr. We watched the colobus monkeys hoot, almost like crows. The tamarins, in their caramel manes opulent as Louis Quinze wigs on shrunken old-men’s faces, chirped sweetly as sparrows. I kept waiting for her let loose the sigh and the stare that invariably happens, unconsciously to the client, upon sighting one’s favorite animals. This was the telling Rorschach. For Lela the Baptist deacon, any mammal worked that revelatory magic, the more humanlike the better. I believe I have clarified how mammals inspired the creature that lived in the deacon. As for I.T., you might have guessed that, with such a name, she would affiliate with the reptiles. No, it was the insects, “perfect, I mean perfect, robots,” especially the green-horned beetles. (And as for me, you must be wondering? Well, no animals drop the good doctor’s jaw. They evoke in me only pity, pity, pity. In their blank eyes I see only the missed chance to evolve into something nobler. For me they’re only Rorschachs, tools I would never harm.)

So then, Irina, is it the Galapagos turtle, Earth’s largest terrapin, with its desert-buried treasure-chest of a back? The rhinoceros iguana and its scabbard beak of a nose? Irina adores

every type of animal; she stands before each creature until its eyes have turned to her. Her spirit invades each one, and each one's invades hers. She has entranced the titi monkey with its huge movie star eyes in a flat cute face, gray bush on top thick as a marsh, red beard loopy as an accordion. "Gorgeous, I'd put you in a film if I could," she says. Her own little amber-green eyes appear to widen. Her strong chin strengthens, so focused that her round face narrows. She hypnotizes the saki monkey, a panda posing as a primate. Its white face drops a perfect black isosceles triangle from forehead to tiny mouth, the eyes so close they appear crossed. Irina's intentness crosses them more. "I can hear you thinking," she says, "of your forest in Brazil." She is beginning to frighten me. We enter the reptile house, and I shiver lest snakes prove to be her charm. She bends fascinated over each glass case. The boa, the anaconda—she will have *me* in a stranglehold, with all her slithering beauty. That anaconda, curled in tree branch, must, halfway along its body, be as wide as her at the hips, and as proud of it. But no, she's giving the serpents all the same rapture of wonder she poured into every creature's exhibit.

Then, we come to the Mexican axolotl, and she stops far before the glass case, and I feel the shift. No gape, no hypnotic wonder. But for the first time today, she remains nestled, lightly, against my side. I feel someone's heart beating, through my arm. Can a zoo walk be so—intoxicating?

"Oh, the poor precious things," she whispers. "The poor, poor, poor."

She then slowly steps forward (and I come nestled with her), as if she were approaching a gem after a years-long quest.

“Salamanders, newts, frogs,” she whispers. She halts, still feet away from the case. “Your poor frail, frail skins. And little axolotls, you’re losing your homes in the lakes of Mexico.” She turns to me. “Do you know what’s happening to amphibians, everywhere?”

I nodded, quietly as her voice.

She turned back to the salamander but remained far from it, her hands clutching one another. It rested, as if permanently comatose, in a shallow pool. Halfway along its verdigris back, its gills opened and shut. The fin of its green tail rose luxuriously as a classic Cadillac’s. “Amphibians should be able to go anywhere, land, water. But they barely exist in either anymore. Look at their skin, shiny and tender as exposed muscle. It’s like they’re being squeezed now to an ever narrower point between water and earth.”

With the same awed distance, she pecked on the cases of the tree frogs, the black-dotted electric-blue tropical frogs and red-eyed green tree frogs, all the amphibians. She stopped speaking. The tanks bubbled water in their green glows.

Beside a bench in the middle of the dark room, she faced me full, as she had in the brilliant glass house. She gave me the same hypnotic beam she had given the titi and saki. Her skin in the dark was glossy as the salamander’s. “Where will we go?” she whispered. “Transform me.”

As we strolled back down the outdoor paths, she gripped my arm. She feels, I deduced, as poor as those amphibians and may well be. Time to head home.

Then I noted a figure under an elm, a man, who had watched us two or three times before in the zoo.

She released the grip.

5.

At the DART station, she broke the ten-minute silence since the amphibian cages. “Do you have a little more time?”

“I have time for you.”

“Could you give me a lift? But first,” she nodded in the direction she had seen me walking from my car earlier, “if you’re parked over there, I’m going *this* direction.” She pointed ninety degrees from where I was parked. “I’ll go around the Safari section and come back. And if you’d be so kind as to drive a little, I’ll meet you over at those trees.”

I almost protested: Who knows what lurked in those woods outside the Safari section, and the loop could take her a quarter hour even jogging. But she gave such a cocky squint behind the sunglasses, I saw that mix of the naïve and intrepid that, last Sunday, had kindly asked me to await her in the greenhouse. (It had to be the same intrepidity that had kept her relatively levelheaded and in motion for years.)

“Then, I’ll hop in your car and we’ll move right along. Those trees there will help us. I know you understand.” Her smallish lips pulled into a sweet smile. “Just keep your car moving until you see me appear.”

She went off in her direction, and I watched that adorably fine cut of a woman stroll off without a care: the only pedestrian on this wooded road, in this slaughterhouse of a neighborhood. No one would guess such a person as her was

risking it. Anyone lurking in the woods who had the slightest superstitiousness would give her wide berth.

My car, hot as summer inside, reeked of melting car-plastic. It's a mini-van, the back windows curtained and the seats there cleared for a table and two easy chairs, much like the consulting room at home. Of course a fridge. Box for files and stationary. Laptop. Blankets—for laps. I sat at the wheel looking for whether anyone was coming my way along the long line of cars where I had just hurried. No one. I could have been mistaken about the figure eying us in the zoo; he could have been envious or curious. Her method of cutting through the woods could be routine, or spontaneous and over-reactive. Insane though it appeared, I had had no other intimation she was nuts. A truly screwed head could not keep both house and body tiptop. Maybe she nursed a small flask of drama. And was poor after all.

I was responsible for letting this woman fly off into the murkiest reach of the city.

Well, she was an adult. Let this be our toss of the dice, and see what comes up.

I started up and drove around as she requested, around the parking lot. Families, couples, loners with hands in pockets and boisterous piles of teens were swinging one direction or another across the macadam, ducking into back seats and trunks for baby strollers and picnic sacks, cameras and boots, everyone shouting at everyone. (All were oblivious of the mad scamper in those back woods occurring for—for me?)

She appeared at the designated tree only moments before I pulled up. She jumped right into the passenger seat and shut, panting and smelling thickly of body odor. Her upper teeth

clamped her lower lip, and she peeled off her shades. “We can go anywhere.”

Twenty miles southeast, I swerved the van off US 67 onto a track that wound among low cedars on a plain. The tall grasses had dried to a harvest crackle. The skinny road appeared to wriggle toward a fall-off in the Earth. We passed under an arched sign, “Mount Lebanon.” Abruptly ahead, the land broke off and you could see dozens of miles across the plains and low hills below.

The road also abruptly dropped, snaking into a valley where tall hardwoods crowded out the cedars.

With that whispery awe that, on roadtrips, seems as reverent as the silence it breaks, she broke her several minutes’ silence of gazing at the landscape: “We’re still in Dallas County? And it actually has pretty green hills and forests?”

Our region is better known for stark flatness and concrete, my preferred qualities.

The road bottomed out in a wide valley, with scattered wooden lodges hidden behind boughs and trunks. It was Mount Lebanon Encampment, a kind of rustic conference center run by the Baptists. Religious groups of only five or up to hundreds could rent one lodge or many, for a day or weeks, for retreats of the body or spirit. A spiritual footpath through the hundreds of acres of outback led to a summit, where the inspired, evenings, would trail together in quiet piety. On top they would blaze great campfires and toss in flaming sticks they called “fagots” to make personal life-resolutions to their deity. Lela the deacon had had a hand in Mt. Lebanon’s administration, as well as the keys to each of the oak-plank lodges. She had given me a

copy to one, one day when we were to meet there for a sort of exotic retreat of our own. The next morning, as we departed the lodge and I offered to return the key, she said, with a touching surprise, "I'm sure you want to come back." And we did come back.

Today I counted two lodges populated, out front, by automobiles, remnants of this holiday's opportunity for retreats. My cabin, Pine Heaven, whose key I kept on my chain, was one of the many free today. I parked in the dirt patch beside it.

The lodges, one-storied, resemble long ranch homes, each separated hundreds of feet, so you can imagine you are isolated. Pine Heaven sat on a low rise overlooking the encampment's valley and the road we'd come by. One reason I'd thought of coming was for that view, not the aesthetic but the strategic, so we could watch what followed us down that road, if anything did. From the doors at the lodge's midsection sprouted two long wings, housing bunk rooms the size of army barracks. On entering the lodge, you smell the dozens of pine bunks, even stronger than the mustiness and perennial coffee. The bunks must be over a half-century old, yet they have pine's forever resin-freshness.

"Do you—*own* this?" Irina said. She gazed about as if the country-log den were the entry in Versailles.

"Connections."

I led the way to the huge metal kitchen, which opened fully onto the den. At the kitchen's far wall was a long window where we could sit and keep our view on the valley and road. There was coffee, as always, and an ancient steel percolator brilliant as silver which I set at once to brewing. I could,

of course, have pulled the van into one of the Metropolitan Area's out-of-the-way corners. Or, hell, just taken us to my snug conference room. But then we would have had no outlook. I had to know as much as I could what I was getting into, by seeing what came in her train.

And Irina was happy with the view as well. She said, sitting on a stool at the window, "Good, we can see here."

Everything else being unspoken between us today, including the tactics since the zoo, I was happy we shared the same mental track. Impressive, for only our second meeting. The whole drive here, we had merely chattered about the zoo and the weather.

Still, I had to gauge my own security and learn some facts about this afternoon.

We sat face-to-face, seemingly her favorite position, the position of honesty that I, in turn, could handily assume. "So, Irina," I murmured. We kept to low tones as if anyone else could hear. "That little sprint around the Safari section. Do you really think it could have accomplished what you had hoped it would?"

Forever now, I had to let her feel, in my wording and tone, that I was a step ahead.

"I don't know if you noticed," she said, "a man at the zoo. Shortish. In a Texas Rangers baseball cap."

The man under the elm. First I gave a good laugh. "Out of the thousands at the park today! You don't mean the one roundish at the belt, red jeans, horizontal ears."

Her face from chin to forehead appeared to rise in illumination, as if she had recalled a fine memory. "Excellent."

She quickly regained control of herself. “Oh, Sty. Of course you see right into the whole rigamarole I went through.”

“When you and I split at the parking lot, you hoped he would go after you.”

“And I know he did because when I reached where the Safari section ends down the street, before I cut into the woods, I looked behind and he was hobbling along. Once I was out of his line of view, in the woods, I sprinted. He can’t really run.”

That was the point I was missing. I had never seen the man move, thus not how poorly he moved. “Yeah, he’s no Mantranto.”

“Then why do you question if I really think my rigamarole would work?”

“Irina, I’m being conversational. I thought it was brilliant.”

She pouted at my playing. “And my little idea for you to drive to the bushes to pick me up—the bushes would block us *in case* he suddenly were able to run and tracked me through the woods.”

(Aha.) “That was your crowning insight. What really creeps me is how you conceived the whole plan in two seconds.”

Irina is so honest, a blush appeared, and she shrugged. “Oh, when we were strolling back from the reptile house, I was already thinking of a plan. He’s easy. I’ve learned him. He’s just some cheap PI they hire.”

I gave another good laugh and hoped it didn’t reveal the nervous relief propelling it. “So he’s not the one who does the extirpating.”

“Oh, no! Not him!”

At her request I went for the coffee, which—luckily, for keeping my hands steady—was decaf. She doesn't unbalance her circadian rhythms with caffeine. When I returned she was staring out the window, as if she were not fully convinced her stratagem had worked.

“Beautiful, isn't it,” I said.

“I love red fall leaves among the lime-skin green of juniper. I could just roll in it.” She continued speaking to the window. “No, he doesn't do the extirpating. I don't know who does.” She put her coffee on the long table to our side and turned to me. “Transform me.” She whispered it exactly as she had when standing before the amphibians.

This, for sure, was my insurmountable task. The reward wasn't evident. But it was evident that, whatever the reward, she must be made to feel I have achieved the task.

“It will take at least some time,” I said, as a rough beginning, clueless as to where I was going.

“I realize that. But I want to start now. I want to know I am taking concrete steps toward it.”

Her chest, under the loose green tee shirt, was swelling and falling with breath, as though she were in fact taking steps on quite a mountainous hike.

I told of nanotech companies developing unimaginably tiny devices, even as we spoke, so that you may effect upon your body, cell by cell, the very magic you desired.

“So I have to wait for the results.”

“You can be a part of it now.”

“Good. If I'm in the process of transforming, I'll feel I am transforming. But I want to remain me, on the inside.”

“That's the whole point.”

“Then *how* can I be a part, now?”

Already, she was confirming my earlier hunch that I would have to use the same approach as I had with I.T.

“Let me go over some specific kinds of work being done.”

The most promising approach, I said (surmising what would appeal to Irina), was to construct extremely tiny machines, only a few atoms large, to trace the structure and connections of all your body’s cells. You have billions of cells, of all kinds—muscle cells, bone, skin, nerve. Now imagine one cell as if it is the size of a car. One of these machines would seem as small to the cell as a baby cockroach on a windshield. This nanomachine would have small legs or wheels, sensors and a transmitter. It—rather an army of billions of its clones—would creep across every bit of surface of every cell in your body. It would then transmit to a computer the data about the cells.

Now, all the neurons in your brain are mapped first. The computer reconstructs a virtual replication of your 100 millions of neurons and their trillions of interconnections. Then, as the theory goes, your consciousness will be replicated in that virtual brain. That virtual brain can continue to operate as the biological one had, even sending out new processes to neurons to keep making interconnections as we do when we learn things. Your entire awareness from moment-to-moment, your memories, plans, beliefs, urges, everything, will be active in the virtual brain.

Irina’s eyes were relaxing to slits, with the beatific look of the virgin in Giotto’s *Annunciation*. But she also had the air of overtaxed patience. “I know this,” she whispered. “I’ve read your blogs and links. Now be *my* link.”

“I’m getting there.”

She would have two big choices: She could continue existing virtually, even make hundreds, millions, of copies of her consciousness, so in case one is lost, she would have back-ups. In virtual existence, she could take on any form she wanted. Axolotl, for example. Or she could design her own kind of creature—or plant, or planet, even be a black hole if she desired. She could interact with others who had become virtual entities. But maybe not everyone she wished to deal with would opt for virtuality. Her other big choice would be to go back to the data that the nanomachines had recorded about the rest of her body. She could design, on computer, a reconfigured physique, in whatever form. Perhaps she could take on any of various animal shapes, so long as her brain’s neural connections would hook up properly with her new body’s. The new body could be reconstructed cell-by-cell, and she could present herself before people who had opted out of any transformations themselves.

The slit eyes of annunciation and patience widened to more Earthly contentment. “This is the part you don’t have in your blogs and links.”

“It’s more theoretically down the road than the mere virtual existence option.”

“I especially like this second option. The first is good.”

“You could mix the two.”

“Of course I will mix the two, the first for kicks, the second for—” She turned to the window. “For this reality.”

A few hundred yards across the valley plain, several cars were parked before some cedars that hid the next lodge. People were lumbering under luggage to their cars, apparently a last

conference for the holidays, now packing up for home. I felt we dwelled in a camouflaged panopticon, peering unbeknownst into tiny people's lives.

She turned back to me and spoke in almost a full voice. "You still haven't given me the link to action *now*."

I drew out the pause to heighten the impact of my simple offer. "Invest."

Her face remained so still, I detected the slow nod and smile she gave inside.

"Rubicon Industries, Tek-Techtron, Nanichaeen Enterprises, Protean Proteins, all are strong companies. Two in start-up. Two already making nanotech products such as titanium oxide for sunscreens. One even turning a profit. And two about to go IPO, as I know from a buddy. Who runs one?"

As she had upon our first meeting last Sunday, she was looking into me so level I felt that diminutive Irina on that stool was eye-to-eye with me. From her look she could have been awaiting the incantation that would keep her and her kind robust for all time. And in a way, she was awaiting.

"There are other companies. I've put a great deal into two I've mentioned which have already gone public. I highly, highly recommend you do the same."

If you can, I was thinking: if you indeed have the resources as I have feared you may not. But if all this strategizing and shaking off shadows implies anything, it implies you do—if, though, you have free access to these resources.

Maintaining the look into me, which I faithfully reciprocated, she slowly leaned forward. Confident—ever that confident Irina whom I was beginning to find as rash as her

timid side was overdone—she came within inches of me. She regarded my lips and then placed her own upon them. Her eyes shut, but I kept mine open, to watch that gumdrop of a nose, to indulge in that teen’s cake-icing skin up close, caramel where it shone through the licorice strands of hair.

You see how all you need do is expose yourself fully to the world, as I do in my website, and the world comes to you. Many people carry this Lothario image of a hand imperceptibly slipping across the back of the sofa. But the reality of enticement is more like a flower: It merely unfolds its pink petals, and the world comes, bees, eyes, and all.

We pulled back, gazing, I believe at our own surprise that the expected had actually happened. But now we held one another. “I don’t do that sort of thing,” she said. “Investing. Dad did all that.”

“You know you can’t stay that way. Not with what you’re aiming on.”

“No, I can’t do that. We’ll have to do something else.”

I feared she meant she was giving up our whole endeavor. But she leaned forward, through the few inches between us, and onto my lips.

Later, twisting around playfully, she said, “We’ve stayed in the kitchen all afternoon. Don’t you want to see the rest of your lodge?”

So we embarked. We veered toward the door on the left. It opened onto a hall that seemed as vast as one at the Smithsonian, if with lower ceiling. The twin rows of double bunk beds receded down either side of the aisle like two half-decks of cards posed ready for shuffling. I had not gained one clue what were the odds of being extirpated and exactly

what that entailed. But today at least, the view out the window looked clear.

“We have quite a choice,” she said. “You want to climb on top?”

Despite the summeriness of these daytimes, nights still chilled to true autumn, and you could feel the nip drifting through this huge room. I ducked out to the van for the blankets. And I did return inside—double-locking every door behind.

6.

Irina, that afternoon, had used almost the same words I.T. once had. That fact had made me return to the lodge from the car, against all horrid odds, and not leave her stranded.

Iphigena Tsarina. Last name of Sulk. Half-Greek, half-Russian, whose father had changed “Sulkovsky” to the much worse “Sulk.” He had encountered the word but not its meaning. Then he started learning English and, too late, the name had proliferated into all his acquaintances and official papers. Then he still considered himself clever. “‘Sulk,’ my Iffy, that’s a name that’ll keep you fightin’. In America, you can’t let anyone catch you sulking. You gotta stay on the bright side, you do.”

She waxed even more defiant than he. She ridded the impossible gibberish of her first two names and, by age eight, went solely by “I.T.” Sometimes she tried the whole slough of initials, “I.T.S.” or “Its” for short. But that never caught on, and “I.T.” stuck.

In my childhood neighborhood in Henderson, in Clay County, some neighbors seemed to be dead-set on living up to their names too literally. One Mr. Walker across the street, though elderly, took vigorous walks promptly at 4 every afternoon. If you passed him on the sidewalk, he would wave and plough on as if he had emergency ahead. One Hugh Forrest down the block not only sprouted a density of trees in his

front yard so dark you could not see his windows. He also took week-long excursions four times a year into the depths of obscure national parks such as Gates of the Arctic and Haleakala. I.T. was another in this nomino-pragmatic class.

She had determined since age eleven she would enter Information Technology. And enter she did. And she not only entered it as work, she entered it as life. Her apartment, in a former-factory loft in Deep Ellum, had no wood surfaces, only plaster and plastic, all white. The only furniture was vinyl and glass, the only decoration projections on the wall of monochrome, curling, folding, oily and plasticine designs she had skimmed off the internet. Even her company's name she had scouted for, for years: Interloper Technologies. Short of a legal change, she had erased her surname and its initial from any material where her moniker might appear. Sulking was not merely an emotion she eschewed; it was an emotion, period. She so prided in "itness," she overtly cultivated her favorite character, Cousin Itt, whom she discovered on YouTube: She grew her exceedingly thick blond hair exceedingly long, sometimes brushing it 360° around her so it covered her face and front to her bared belly, popped on the sunglasses over it, topped it off with a derby, then yammered at me in the giggly Cousin Itt gibberese. She got me howling so, I told her, "Isn't having fun an emotion?"

"Laughter is not!" she exclaimed between bits of gibberese. "It's a reflex!"

As diminutive as Cousin Itt and even moreso than Irina, I.T. was sugary wafer where Irina was muscular cake. She could not have weighed ninety pounds, and yet distinctly had hips and breasts, if all somewhat miniature like those hand-

sized painted portraits that people carried in previous eras: just enough to show she was human female, not goddess. She had the energy that required only 2.5 hours' sleep per night, from 1:30 to 4 precisely. And we never went to bed because she didn't. She slept upright in her vinyl chair. She disdained indulging in "sexuality" because "It's the part of our species we're shedding." And yet—I can't say we went to "bed"—she needed to be "re-electrified" several times a day, which she preferred doing standing up, facing away from me, in the entryway. "As long as we still live in these warm, wet bodies," she would murmur while she leaned back collapsed in my arms, "this shot of energy works well." We were well matched in this arena.

I.T. was one of my few in-person clients who did not ask to become in-person for any therapeutic purpose I could discern. She simply sent an email saying she had heard through informatics circles that Beholt the Man lived in Dallas, as she did, and she would be interested in comparing the warm, wet Beholt with the on-screen Man, as a kind of study of the sort she liked. My first impulse was to chuck this trash along with the dozens of mindless inscrutabilities I receive daily. But a couple things arrested my reflex. One was the dry oddness of the email. It was so genuine it was eccentric. (When I later told I.T. that its genuineness startled me, she pleaded innocent of such moral sentiments.) The other arresting matter was that she included a photo. It was full-length and fuzzy to the point of furriness, but the only piece of skin it revealed was that wedge of a face caroming out of the briar of hair. With wraps so baggy you couldn't tell if they were one piece or multiple, or there were eighty pounds of her underneath or one-eighty, the thing oozed with ittishness. But that wedge of a face, despite

its defiant jowl and chin, went right through my gills and to my gizzard. There was some powerful breeding in those eagle-like cheekbones.

I had never viewed anything so apparently unconquerable.

She added, as a last thought, “And I have another business direction for you, if you haven’t already.” And that’s how, later, I knew she’d had a plan all along.

Although she had claimed no previous use of my web site’s premium features, I checked my database. At least her current email URL didn’t show in my records. It seemed she didn’t care a jot about my present business’s services.

Our first date—and date it was, that sort where you want to bring the other party to its knees but you have not the least whit how, so your nerves punish your tongue—we simply strolled around Deep Ellum, commenting on the former factories. The conversation was completely forced and artificial. She even remarked, “I’m glad you’re not so loquacious and overbearing as on your web site.” That hurt. It *sounded* like it wanted to be a compliment. But I prided in my tendency to spill out the verbal juice, whether in person or through fingertips. And I felt she was spitting on the fact our visit was going so trippingly hobbled.

“That long flat building there, it was once a lighting-fixture outlet,” I tried, ever harder. “All huge plateglass and a thousand crystalline beams. They’ve bricked up the windows. It’s like an army barracks now. Can you imagine what the apartments would’ve been like if they’d kept the glass and the lights? I used to dream of living in such worlds.”

“I think I prefer the barracks. It’s more real.”

When we were a couple blocks from her apartment and she suggested looking at it, I discerned the offer as a chastisement for my having such pedestrian tastes. She would expose me to its perfection then turn me out for not being the Beholt the Man she had expected. Never had woman so belittled me.

Its all-white rectilinear lines did not surprise me, nor its starkness emphasized by high ceilings and diode silver-blue lighting. Its one transparent window looked out on a wall of austere brown brick; its other windows, all high, were warehouse translucent. Her front entrance was actually a double door, appearing chillingly fateful as, upon her touch of a remote control, the two halves shut and click-locked. She offered neither seat nor drink; we simply stood, a few feet from the barren bar, while I kept piling on futile comments and queries. “What would happen if you beamed diodes of each of the four primary colors from the four corners? Would the spot they formed blend into white?”

“You know better than to ask *that*, I hope.”

Not an hour in, she began dropping comments about a need to be “electrified.” They were out of nowhere; I dismissed them. But as they kept appearing, I started fearing she may be a sadist who liked to plug herself into live electric wires and would charge me with battery if I *didn't* do so. Finally, at the entryway, she somehow caught my eye, and said with impressive steadiness, “I do like to be electrified. Don't you?” She had not the least murmury, or smarmy, or seductive voice. It was as level-toned as all her comments, and that is how, with the steady eye upon me, it went right into my chest what she meant.

It was her second time that afternoon—evening now—when she leaned backward into my arms, catching her breath, when she said, “You know, I don’t invest. But it’s the sort of thing I should do.”

In time, in just a few days, I was to learn what inhibited her: simple fear of the complete, saturated, inexorable irrationality of the market. But her rationality said that market was the only way for her savings to increase beyond its pittance of a pace.

I had a flash of a worry and letdown she had contacted me for therapeutic purposes after all. I was to cure her investment inhibition. Did women, even this preciously rare *it* variety, always need you for some specific practical purpose, not just for you yourself? Or did they have at least to pretend this specific need of your capacities, to cover up in a type of innocence the deeper general animal need for your whole person? But she said nothing more on the matter. She re-tied her hair. We continued the business of our awkward visit with its start-and-stop two-sentence conversations. The thought must have merely been one of those dreamy free-associations you get in the after-shock of being electrified.

When I had to depart around 1 a.m., so she might sleep, I returned to the matter, now that I saw it was not her urgent reason for my existence. I was putting on my coat at the door. “You could try an investment service, such as Southwest Securities over on Main.”

“But I don’t know them. Savings is rather personal, like your toothbrush. By the way, you can always use mine.”

We lived only two miles apart, saw one another frequently, usually for strolls through the gray mists of her neighborhood. Never did she make physical contact outdoors; never did we swing by my place. Always did our friendship consist in no more than these strolls, jagged exchanges of words, and sudden brisk activity in her entryway. It seemed it was all that either of us had ever wanted out of a friendship, and this fact bonded us ever more. By definition, though, we then could not make it more.

A week to 10 days after our first visit, she mentioned again her fear and need of investment. We had just escaped the sun behind the high concrete-slab walls of the Kennedy Memorial Plaza. The place had always struck me as covertly irreverent to the man's memory, resembling as it did a series of high restroom stalls. One could only expect as much, from the city "that killed the President." In this delightfully chill January afternoon, I.T. had to leap out of the abrupt intrusion of solar rays and into these shadows. Her skin, over her entire body, was so pale as to be a faint yellow, and her face, the only part exposed now, went pink in the cold. Wind still ripped around the pointy edges of the cement stall walls. On this Saturday, all downtown streets stayed bare under the office towers, except for the odd, lost tourist. The rare tourists in Dallas, which had only the Kennedy assassination to draw them, always struck me as looking bedeviled like wayward dog packs. I.T. huddled up as close as she ever had to me in public, only inches away, with intermittent spasms of a shiver.

"I know I should invest," she said, "the thought practically pricks open my eyes every morning. But it would be like hurling one's body into a tumultuous arctic sea."

Her eyes under the sunlit sky showed the true yellow of their irises. I had never seen truly yellow eyes in a human, and these were truly that of a wild rabbit's caught by headlights at night. Hardly the yellow of jaundice, they glistened with a brilliance that didn't let you see what lay under.

I had to guess what her fear was asking. "You yourself don't want to invest, you don't want an agency to. And you don't want your sister to." Her sister was a disgustingly successful investment banker, perhaps not too surprisingly accounting for I.T.'s financial attitude. "What about a friend?"

"That's an idea."

"But then, you would just be taking the friend's suggestions, and it would still be you making the investments."

"That's true. That's a problem."

"Then what's a friend to do?"

I.T. rarely played coy, but with a wisp of a smile she gazed into me, saying "Which friend?" The look sliced deep like on the day she had finally sunk into me what she meant by "being electrified."

"This one," I said.

"I'm listening."

I looked away, so she would think I didn't yet have an idea. "Give me a few days."

I didn't want to mouth my solution too soon and look too eager. So I determined to wait until she asked me outright for it. Over the next week, she edged close to the subject. We were having a rare dinner together, sitting on her floor under the spots of the silver-blue diodes, with white boxes of take-out and flimsy white plastic forks. She ate only steamed Chinese vegetables and shrimp, because the stir-fry "grease"

gave her sheer skin pimples on the thighs. The concern was not for health, but the pimples made her itch all day at work, and scratching ruined hose and pants. I was having fried chicken and that cylindrical kind of artificial fries that resemble multi-finned sewer pipes. I adamantly disbelieve in persnickiteness about food and, most despicable, its forming the basis for “naturally” postponing death. My motto: Blunder we onward.

She said, “Do you invest in whatever giant owns KFC?”

“Never. Though global American junk-food markets are expanding robustly. I invest in what I believe. Nano, techno, cybero, genetico, cellular and cyborg. I invest in the future.”

She chewed thoughtfully, making the steamed broccoli not crunch too much. Father Sulk had well-reared his powerful breeding. “And how do the returns do now?”

“Well enough. You need patience. But not too much. The future is happening more and more rapidly. Once this one arrives, I’ll already be invested in the next.”

“Have you ever,” she said, ruminatingly, “considered being a broker as well?”

I said no and let matters rest, detecting, with some despondence, I had bumped up against her business plan for me. Here I could have laid on my solution at once, and so gotten that issue out of the way *and* possibly weeded out this plan of hers at its germination. But I held out, to boost my hinted solution’s mystery from its apparent inability to win her.

It took days before she could no longer restrain her eagerness to hear it. We were lugging boxes of new cable and lamps from my car to her elevator. She abruptly dropped her bundle onto the sidewalk, as if the weight were cracking her sinewy bones. She brought up out of nowhere—as she did any

topic—: “It’s been more than ‘a few days.’ It’s been weeks. You’re a friend, what can be done for a gamble-shy mouse?”

I waited till we got inside her double-doors. “Don’t you have suggestions?”

“You were supposed to have one.”

We gazed at one another, still with loads in hand, as in a game of emotional dare, as I surmised she had had a suggestion all along, too, and it might be exactly my own. But she was steel-willed.

“You were the one who promised to think,” she went on.

“Okay. What if,” I went slowly, “I invest for you. In my name.”

“That’s what I wanted you to say.”

“You transfer to my account.”

“Yes, that’s it. Then you transfer back.”

“Say, in six months.”

“Exactly. In the meantime you can study and get licensed as a broker. Then you can ease me into a normal account in my name, as my broker. If the six months go well.”

Her having gelled the same suggestion that I had thought up myself helped me proceed. Still, the going was precarious, because I did not know if she might sue, in case of a market bottom-out, despite our sharing electricity. But we transferred, in one fell bite, half her savings, one hundred grand. She wanted to hear nothing about it until the end. And after six months, when we had continued our usual jostling up against one another like two anchored dinghies under a dark glutinous cloud, I, acting alone, one July evening, transferred the results back into her account. I at once set off by foot, practically

skipping, to her place, unannounced for the first time. I had sufficient reason: six percent in six months. And the licensing was almost in place.

The doors opened a crack amidst a giggle I didn't understand. Still, I sang.

“I.T., hello, I love you, won't you look in your purse?”

I, agog, looked in her entryway as she let the doors swing open. I knew I should have never come unannounced, but I counted myself her lieutenant, at her side at any moment. I turned—my memory is little but planes of blinding light—and bounded down the cement staircase, footsteps echoing like gunshot. I had never been so betrayed.

7.

The next time Irina called, the first day of December, her wording came ever closer to I.T.'s: "Sty, do you think investing is the sort of thing *I* should do?"

As opposed to whom?—words I held back from my lips. A more important realization overrode. "It sounds like you want to talk."

"I have to, yes."

"But don't you think, if you believe they have a cheap P.I. on you, that your line may be tapped?"

"I know that. I'll email."

"That's equally tappable, with the proper connections." I knew well from snoopware and I.T.'s Interloper Technologies (in which I held stock).

"I'll do something," Irina said, with an audible smile of emphasis on "something." I decoded she meant something I would find out soon.

In minutes, in my site's private server's inbox, I found an email from one "KleeAndKandinsky@..." I opened it; it was from Irina. No one could tap into my private server, outside the government. I could not vouch for the security from her end, but as I read her message I trusted that, despite the cryptic name, she had at least created the URL for us. She wrote that one of the darling features of her home which had made her buy it was an obscure path to her back gate. Now, the home lay in an enormous half-moon that the road made around the front

fence. That is, her two acres were bordered in part by this half-circle that road made. Just beyond the base of that half-circle ran another street, the half-moon's line. The path ran from that street to her back gate. She in fact owned the path, though it was draped over with trees from neighbors' on both sides. As it was all private property, she doubted any micro-video cameras had been placed. I should be able to park on some back street beyond that street and soft-pad into her property without detection. She gave me the back gate's alarm code.

That evening, which was coming on early with the season, I drove. The steering wheel did not steady my shaking arms. I was fairly confident—or I had been—that she was not insane, which meant her concerns were real. If “they” were using micro-video cameras, then they had to be serious (though why was the P.I. “cheap”?). If they were that serious, they had to have something to protect. But if what they were protecting were hers, why go to such trouble, unless—they hoped it would become theirs? This visit, I must find out details about “extirpation,” no more allowing touching moments to sidetrack me as had happened at Mt. Lebanon. And I needed some shred of real evidence of what substantial was at stake. At some level, of course, one's life was worth it.

The path proved expressly *not* easy to find. Between the far-off glows of street lights at either end of the block, a black mess of growth frothed and waved in the breeze. It took me a few passes by foot until I finally tried batting my arms through the dark tangle. When my eyes adjusted, I made out a faint declivity through the undergrowth. If there were micro cameras in the limbs above, they would have had to have infrared to unveil my face in this black hole, and I would see the red glow. And if anybody really wanted to shadow her,

county records would show this path is her property. I was bunched over bent knees, inching along. Although the night air had the chill crackle that sends pins through your nostrils, a few diehard crickets were groaning their farewell clickers, summer's hangover. If she were laying for me a test-by-fire of the *Magic Flute* sort, she could not have laid a better one for this nature-deplorer. Dogs barked on either side.

I emerged upright at a steel gate, over head-high like the fence, with the civilized comfort of an infrared beam zipping across the threshold. Once I had carefully let the gate close without a snap, as she had instructed, I turned, and a small pile of blackness startled me. I groaned louder than a dying cricket, not a good response for Beholt the Man to exhibit. She whispered my name anyway, "Sty," confident, relieved, as if she could never hear *Sty* blunder. She took my hand, and we (since I, too, was dressed in black as instructed) stole across the garden to her completely darkened home.

We spoke not a word the whole trek. If she's taking such supreme precaution against observation, I figured, for all she knew they had doped her one night and implanted a micro-GPS system and transmitter in her body. She opened a low door on the side of the house opposite the glass pagoda. According to the odor of cut grass, 2-stroke oil and dirt-clodded onions, this first room served, or had served, as garden storage. The wood floor clunked as hollowly as a mere platform. Without a light, she strode us across it and inserted a key in another door. We entered the fresh-polished odor of home and groped up two flights of stairs. Not till she shut, without a creak, a door behind us did she halt and finally switch on a light. She was standing directly before me, both hands in mine, and indeed all in black.

“You have to meet them,” was her first word tonight, whispered, as if it were a romantic promise.

I had to smile that one away. My impulse was to get the details on extirpation right now, but I had to wait for my trembling to subside. “Meet them! If they’re like your brother Desi, they won’t meet *me*, no matter how I try to meet *them*.”

“He’s the only one like that. He never looked people in the eye, and got worse.”

For a moment, I feared she meant meet them now, as if they were waiting in that dark cherrywood armoire. Of course, that possibility could not have justified all this stealth-work she had undergone getting me into here.

The room lacked windows, and two walls were sliced diagonally by ceiling, as by a gable roof. A low bunk bed with a baby-boy-blue comforter spread perpendicularly from a desk and computer. Easily shed clothing such as sweater and wool socks spilled off chairs and throw-pillows. The lamp shade depicted Pinocchio sung to by Tinker Bell.

Irina sunk away from me and dropped into a limegreen feather bag as large as her. It immediately took on her form, like a snug recliner chair. “This is my holy of holies, where I can really be me.”

The room appeared remarkably mundane to be so precious, but I had to be careful. “But the Ion Studio has so much of you in it.”

“Oh, that is how I wished it to be. Sweetie. Can I call you ‘Sweetie’? I would like to say ‘Dearest,’ but that’s too much for us these days. We need things slangier.”

I took a very orange cushion on the floor beside her feather bag. “You’re quite the woman from another epoch.”

“Yeah, from far in the future, when people are in control of themselves. The Ion Studio and all its plant growth and high glass and sun is how the world should look, once I breathe myself into it. But all that glass—we aren’t in that future yet, and glass still offers too much exposure. But, here—” She reached up as if her hand could touch the sloping ceiling, which was still feet above. “The insulation, I had to grope far and wide to find it. It’s impenetrable to infrared. And no one can even sit in a van in the street and monitor my conversations by the vibrations off the wall.”

“Wouldn’t they, if so snoopy, have found out you had brought in such materials?”

“I wouldn’t care a flip.”

She cocked her chin low into her collarbone, with the languid slit-eyes of a smoker who has just taken a puff and exhaled above, to look down now and change thoughts. She even put two thoughtful fingers to her lips, and I wondered if the nasty habit had once possessed her. “These investments are really pestering me, Sty. That is, where they’ve been put. Because, you know why?” She sat up, wrists drooping over her thighs above crossed ankles. “They’re mindlessly childish. It’s like they were put there to be ‘safe’ for someone like me, who knew no better. And I don’t. But the statement this makes is unnecessarily humiliating. Look—”

She leaned forward until her knees landed on the bright parquet, and she crawled a few steps on them to the lower desk drawer. She turned to me. “Dad didn’t teach us anything about it because he didn’t really have an instinct for investing either. If a maniac swats his arms about every which way, he’s bound to swat against something good now and then.”

Irina unlocked and tugged at the large oaken drawer, made for files but so stacked with envelopes that to open it she had to push down the pile. “These things come, and I just toss them here, and this desk has been following me around a decade. Here, I’ll just pull one at random, I’ll show you, what an insult...”

She yanked the top envelope from where the stack was wedged in the drawer. “Really, I started shredding these things,” she grumbled. The envelope was long, of the sort clearing houses use for their regulation monthly account reports. She raggedly slit the envelope with index finger, glanced the paper then fingered it to me. “It’s a complete insult to my brain.”

It was a local investment firm’s statement, very recent, Nov. 29. The balance, in large figures in the rectangle near the top of the page, glowed like a student’s gold star: 1,146,788.17. Okay, that is not gigantic for a family like Reynaldo. Jeremy Reynaldo was rumored to have been worth about 14 bills at his death, and that was after a lifetime onslaught of failures and bankruptcies. But my entire personal worth, after a lifetime of scrimping, honest labor and paying off my whiny assistants, was little more than quadruple that gold star (despite my portfolio’s having quadrupled from its cost basis in a decade). But that she would thrust her personal numbers before my face, so early into our brief if deep friendship, made something more than love tingle my spine.

I am confident that absolutely anyone in my position would feel such a tingle.

“Look at the portfolio page, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“Yes, yes, I was just studying the pie chart,” which of course my blinding thoughts prevented me from seeing.

But I remained perfectly wooden on the outside as I paged through. So that figure on the first page was not the insult to her brain, was not insultingly low. Nor then would the insult be the possibility that this were the only account. And considering that stack had slightly different shapes and shades of envelopes, she had to have other accounts. Calculating, if that stack were a decade’s worth, that means about an inch and a half of envelopes per year. That could mean three or four accounts. If this account were the only, she might have, then, about five mill, still a bit modest for a Jeremy daughter (or she had spent extravagantly on this house and elsewhere). Too little for all this shadowing. Yet, something for a caring investor to work with.

“I would have these things come to me online so I wouldn’t have to look at their ugly faces,” she said. “But coming to my P.O. box, there’s no passwords to break.”

“These are all solid bonds,” I said woodenly objective, not to defend “them,” yet not to leap to judgments.

“Yeah, solid. But look at this.” Without a glance at the page I studied, she reached up and jabbed directly at the income summary as if she knew these statements well.

“Two to three percent annual, typical for tax-free.”

“That’s a couple thou a month, on such a principle as that?” Her voice tried to match my scientific tone. But her eyes were waving a crowd’s worth of arms. So wide open, their whiteness popped out from the black she had rubbed around them to accentuate further, I guessed, tonight’s outdoor camouflage of black.

They reminded me of what I had known for days now, weeks: I had to take a certain lead, as I had with I.T. “You deserve more,” I said.

“It’s not just the sum totals! It’s the incredible precaution. I don’t want such precaution associated with *me*. I want to break out of all this.”

“Exactly, you deserve more.”

“But it’s nothing to do with the totals. I don’t even care about those. This money’s cursed. I don’t know what he did to get it; even he probably couldn’t tell. But they know it’s cursed, and that’s why they’ve put it all in such incredibly mean little places. I’ve stared at this for years incredulous like someone who’s had mud slapped on her face. It’s time I wipe it off. I can’t be ‘Miss Dupe’ all my life.”

She had drooped back in the feather bag, studying me. Besides the black hose, the black skirt that now hiked up her thighs, she wore black ear hoops, as dull as charcoal but lighting up the smoothness of her jowls. The black that was deftly patted around the eyes left her glistening like a panther’s coat.

“In light of all that,” she said, “I figure *I* should be investing. But *should* I?”

The wording again stirring around so closely (eerily) to I.T.’s own, I almost burst out with the solution I had offered I.T. Why did both women so worry about what they *should* do? Should, should, should. Was this a motif Beholt the Man somehow evoked?

I said, “You know, I’m licensed as a broker.” She gave the expected look, chin down, eyes at the top of their sockets. I should know better, they were saying, and they knew I knew

better, they were saying. So why paw with the yarn when we had serious vestments to weave? Still I must only puff most lightly on those threads, so she would think she had guided me to the needle.

I added, "But I have not yet practiced on that license."

"Oh, Sty, I know you aren't saying you can't be of any help."

"I'm saying I've only 'practiced' on my own accounts."

"And I'm sure those accounts have performed quite precisely as you wanted." She was on her back on the feather bag, chin at the ceiling, tone disinterested.

Letting the needle stay in her hand, I rose to my knees and crawled to the desk's open laptop. "I can bring up some performance charts."

"Why would I want to see yours if I don't want to glimpse mine?" she reprimanded. Then calmly again, in even husky murmur, "You know that I know how well you can perform. You reek of it, from your website to your toes."

"All right. You seem to have something in mind. You may share it."

But her eyes, drooping, also appeared tired of the topic. "Why are you so far away?"

I walked on my knees, to her side. My hand went to her hair. Her coconut-shell strands flew every which way but were smooth, and on my every stroke they burst with aroma of coconut milk. I couldn't tell if it were perfume or her own luxurious essence.

"You see, we don't have to be so separate," she whispered.

"Not at all."

"How together do you want to be?"

“I’m sure as much as you do.”

“I’m only someone’s lost offspring. You’re more.”

“You’re more now, because of what you will be.”

“I know that. I know that with you.” She took my face, both cheeks. “You’re not even afraid.”

I surprised myself, how I could bring her to say that. But she could not see all the way inside. My nerves erupted with a well-timed chuckle. “I’m sure it will be all worthwhile until I’m ‘extirpated.’”

She repeated, “You are *not* even afraid.”

“Are there any particular methods of being extirpated? It may be interesting to hear.”

She looked off. I recalled the Irina of the day we met at her housewarming, who like her emails could, from sentence to sentence, leap from mood to mood. The heat of the moment before had abruptly been placed on pause. “The only method that was ever used,” she said, losing the whisper but not full-voiced, “at least that I ever heard about, was a good payoff, along with a signed assurance from the consenting party that he would move out of state and contact me no further.”

My lower lip fell.

“That signed assurance, by the way, came with the oral understanding that it could be enforced by much stronger means than mere partial repayment of the sum.”

I placed both palms at her temples, steadying my relief about the lighter nature of extirpation than I had expected. I whispered, “There’s no sum that could be equal to you.”

“Reda, my love from last year you remember, was bought off for five mill. That’s five times what they paid before. He

moved back to Brazil.” A sob in her throat briefly convulsed her.

My eyes closed and I laid my head beside her and nestled in her hair. “I can’t believe he would accept it.” I said.

It was a pity this woman, who seemed as innocuous as anyone I had met, could be so summarily distanced from anyone important in her life. At the same time—you know how the brain clanks away on its own—mine was saying, *Five mill? are you sure we don’t want to put this intimacy a little more on show?* Anyone’s brain would clank, let’s admit. You have to stop such ill thoughts.

Still recovering from the shakes, I whispered, “I won’t ever let them extirpate me.”

She pushed up, smiley, her hair wrapping around me. “Not for ten mill, even?”

“Not a hundred.”

“A bill?”

“Not a gillion googolplex mega-metroplex.”

She lay back. “So then we have no concern how we meet them, what sort of function. We should make it soon.”

“All right. But you don’t want to make *us* into just a ‘showing them up.’”

“Not at all. We’re more than that.”

“We’re much more. But do you want to flout that in *any* way?”

“They need to understand they can no longer extirpate. It’s a necessary step in our progress toward the future.”

“But we don’t want to grind into the dirt the fact that we’re ‘a thing’.”

“We needn’t grind. We needn’t make a peep. They have the noses of dogs.”

“Then they can sniff I’m not extirpable.”

She reached up behind my neck and clasped her fingers. “My God.”

Irina is the sort who prefers to lie about, humid, skin to skin. The chamber had heating muscular enough to press like an alpaca coverlet on the chest and mouth of a recently exercised body, and I always have a hundred next activities that make me sit up. She, on her belly, with ear resting on folded arms, looks up at me sleepily. For her the night’s main event is just beginning, but, you know, this fact means she can only silently beg for more, only look toward more in the ever-receding future. Witness how her Redas and Mahmuds, who through the wee hours kept her handily pleased till she was pickled, so handily took the family’s hand-offs—and how readily she, somewhere in her heart, accepted their disappearance. With them, there had been no future, receding or not: With them, it was the ever-existing, ever-swelling, ever-tumescient present. The saturating odors and sighs and grunts of “going on forever all night” left one satiated, I imagined, with nothing, no unmet desires, presently tying you with yearning to the future. At most, you might know, intellectually, that your depleted body may, over time, over days, slowly piece together its molecules of desire until, one big lump again, it sought its hours-long flagellation against the flesh of another. What a use of time.

“I know, you must have business to tend,” she said, drowsy, regretful, but also respectful. The sleepy eyes

expressed anything but tiredness: expressed invitation to come back into their dreamy languor, come now if you would, or whenever you can.

I rerouted my restlessness into a deep massage of her shoulders. What an odor sprang up from the dampness of her plump sinews; it truly invited me to linger. “My only real business anymore is you. It’s astonishing how quickly, despite all I have to do, you’ve channeled me into abiding by your side.”

She spoke with the throaty breathiness of one whose flesh is being kneaded. “It ‘quickly’ happened the moment I opened the door for you at my housewarming.”

“For both of us.”

“The moment I sent the first mail.”

“The moment I read it.”

“You realize this is the first time things’ve ever been instantaneous for me, I mean instantaneous, and mutually so?”

I kept kneading, letting the kneading be my answer, but slowing, slowing until I halted though kept the fingers there. “I *do* not want to leave you.”

She sighed. “Some day you won’t, or I won’t.”

“We will figure that out.”

“You’ll be right back soon. We’ll find a niche, somewhere.” Her body, still as a beached vessel till now, somewhere far inside abruptly shifted into a first gear. Muscles began gently undulating, and, she turned about, onto her back, with the impressive nimbleness of a dancer for such a minor movement. Then, in one graceful motion, she sat up. Her breasts took on a lovely maternal droop in that position. “In the

meantime, Sweetie. Dearest. I love that, ‘Dearest,’ can I say that? In the meantime, do something about this account.”

She leaned far, far over the end of the bed, arching till I thought she would collapse, till she landed a hand in the open desk drawer. She yanked out the next topmost envelope, then folded back smoothly as an accordion into sitting position beside me. Perhaps she was too intoxicated from hormones to notice the statement of “this account” that we had been discussing before was still crinkled on the floor.

But she kept the new letter in hand.

“We never decided exactly what I was to do with this account,” I said.

“That, I believe we decided, was for you to decide.”

I would have liked to say, I decided to transfer it into my account and work with it from there. But I was still at the point where we had left off earlier, when I had not yet gotten her to place the essential needle in my hand. I had to prompt, with the key word. “Well, we must do some kind of transfer.”

In confusion her eyes opened some from their intoxication. “Transfer? Where? Where to?”

“Well, to a place where we can work with it and you won’t feel it’s weighing on you.”

She looked about, obscurely, trying to catch butterflying thoughts. “Somewhere—where it’s not weighing on me? It’s been weighing on me forever. Where can you work with these funds and I wouldn’t have it weighing on me? Could I—would you mind—could you work with it in your account?”

I shook my head ever faintly, trying to communicate reluctance. I could just tolerate such a burden only for her, who

had so astounded me. ‘If that’s what it’s going to take, so you’ll feel relieved.’

“We could just try it.” Her voice grew ever feebler, as though she hated to burden me so with the accursed funds. “And see how you felt.”

I nodded at the envelope in her hand. “Which account? *That* one?”

Then, looking at her hand, she appeared to register that she indeed held a different envelope from the one she had opened earlier. It was of faintly different tint. “I don’t know,” she said, bewildered, almost asking me to decide. “It doesn’t matter.” I felt as if I had to decide between two sweepstakes doors, one of which I had opened.

I’m not sure why I took the gamble and put my hand toward hers holding the letter. Maybe just further curiosity, about the Reynaldos. “I guess this account is as good as any to start with.”

Giving not a glimmer that she noticed her actions, she placed the letter in my hand as softly as a tissue. My heart, worried about the figure, thumped away though I was telling myself we are one now, *this* door was not the only. I controlled my nerves by resting both arms firmly on my thighs, as I slit open the envelope with a finger, so gingerly that her eyes did not leave my face.

I glanced at the figure in the rectangle, and the diaphragm muscles under my lungs about collapsed. 53,174,839.14.

“Irina, in a way don’t know one another that well, even if we care so much already. Do you know what you’re doing -- have you ever done anything like this?”

“Of course I know what I'm doing, and of course I've never done this before. My instinct is always right, and I read you perfectly, and you read me perfectly. Besides,' she added, with a lift of the eyebrows, “if you were dishonest, you'd only be relieving me of an onus.”

But Beholt the Man proved to be Beholt the Iron Man. I folded the sheets and returned them to their envelope. She hardly flicked an eye at it. “All right,” I said, “I'll do as you ask.”

8.

Despite his surname, despite the children's names such as Desi, Irina, and Emilia (which his wife chose), Jeremy Reynaldo was about as gringo as you can find. His line had not held a full dose of Hispania for almost two centuries, since 1809. Even from that time, Sr. Jesús Reynaldo's blood was from Spain itself and then mixed with his Swiss-Italian wife's. The couple had fled debts in Europe and come to Texas to procure a modest land-grant, 640 acres, from the colonial government. Every generation, the sons married the local Scots-Irish and Anglo women, retaining only a modicum of Spanish pride by retaining the family name. Once the state was annexed to the U.S., the family even converted to Protestantism. But Jeremy's father, in the 1930's, notoriously reconverted to Catholicism (notoriously, because of one result, which I'll come to). A knife-edge defiance of custom, sensibility and peace was to sculpt Jeremy's character to his final days.

This branch of the Reynaldos had long lost any claim to the family's original land-grant properties in Central Texas and was living up in Chilicothe County, near the Red River. It's stark red-dirt and mesquite-scrub country, torn by winter gales and stomped by summer tornadoes. And it's not terribly far from my own home county. In every county in that long string of them, when you enter the merest hamlet, a modest rusty highway sign announces, "The [Blah-Blah Town] Church of Christ Welcomes You." For those hundreds of miles, drink is

not sold. Benton Clive Reynaldo, a railroad worker who did not like a damn creature in those plains except his kids and, secondly, his wife, decided one Saturday afternoon to revive “the *real* old-time religion. And let’s see anyone out here not let me.”

That evening following the declaration, he held mass in his defunct barn, with his seven family members, including child Jeremy. By Christmastime, his weekly mass included three Choctaw families from across the river. By Christmas following, that barn had thirty-seven worshippers, even if he were not a real priest. Then one Saturday morning, a coworker on the railroad, one Harry Cayman, called Benton Clive a “fucking Papist.” A fight ensued, in which Benton Clive killed the man.

He got off on self-defense, and the county ceased speaking to him or his family.

Jeremy moved to Dallas at age eighteen, just after the War and just before he could graduate from high school. He came by bus, with only what he wore: Stetson, Levis and snakeskin boots. Already his narrow pointed face looked creased by the Red River winds. He found work at once in a hardware store, where he lived day and night like his father repairing the rails. By the time Ike was elected, Jeremy had formed a plumbing supply and a holding company. He found just the right source of galvanized steel plumbing that undercut competition in the postwar building boom. While he bunked in the supply-yard’s back shack, his bank account rocketed. Those light blue eyes that revealed the depth of divine fire boosted the charismatic power that this twenty-four-year-old held over investors. Those eyes assured them he could put their money exactly where the

economy was about to break open new vistas. The fact that he had no business-schooling and only instinct, as he blatantly advertised, only brightened his allure. And through the Ike years, his hunches paid off. He sold stock in himself any which way that whim led him, peddling door to door to old ladies or to crusty farmers at his own State Fair booth, where he spoke their slow language. He built up companies as methodically as his father had done a barnhouse congregation.

By 1960, age 33, accent as hard and stiff as Red River maize, he leveraged his first aircraft company, the avionics manufacturer Vince Aeronautics, which held Navy contracts. A year later, he had his first crash, when he bought a grocery-store chain which literally foundered on a deal with rotten fish. His personal cycles of soar and nosedive began.

Every Saturday evening a week before Christmas since coming to Dallas, Jeremy celebrated his father's original masses, though Benton Clive Reynaldo had long since died. Through the late 1940s and the 50s, Jeremy had often celebrated the day alone, or with a family member or friend, if one were around. It was a celebration of his father and of that act by the railroad yard one morning. He lit candles and sung—including railroad songs. Jeremy exhibited in life no other beliefs except for those in himself, his father and that act. In the 1960s, when he built his first mansion, the Louis Quatorze, he also built on the grounds a replica of his father's barn, using it primarily for the annual party. The occasion marked the only where he and his family drank to a significant extent; in fact, the drink was a sacred part of the ritual, using the same brand of California red his father had served at the barn-house mass, Gallo, the cheapest Gallo, and only Gallo.

And when with the first collapse of RSVP in the 80's he lost the Louis Quatorze, and everything in his wallet except for a few thousand, he still held the annual Christmas blast. He was renting a four-bedroom in Highland Park, along with the five children still at home. They and the sixth child and first grandchild had to dampen their usual Christmas ululations during their plenteous Christmas toasts, including those to the Virgin of Guadalupe who had adorned Benton Clive's barn but now brightened the rental's garage among the gasoline fumes: They must not disturb their persnickety Highland Park neighbors, Presbyterians who for yuletide sipped, at most, mulled wine. With cousins and others, this hobbled fete to live in infamy, numbered only about twenty guests. Before the group, he upheld his golden goblet, the only item of value he had retained, to the Virgin and her child. "If our company, our family—and our family is the company—does anything again, the first thing it'll do when it can is to get back the Louis Quatorze."

Perhaps, as with many great words, it was their ambiguity, their vast multiple-interpretability, that fired the group so they would repeat some version of it every year. But in fact the family did *not* operate as a company. Jeremy alone, with that impenetrable five inches of fatty fluid space between his ears, was the only company that every member of the family would ever really have, and that company was intangible. Within four months, Jeremy Reynaldo was up and flying again, with enough backers to leverage the purchase of the "R" of the RSVP that had been rupturing in its new owners' hands.

Over the next two decades, a castaway on a raft pursuing the bizarre goal of piecing together a house of toothpicks in an endless storm, Jeremy re-patched RSVP, unit by unit, often

only to have a unit or two collapse or be exploded by a wave. But this lone man always started again, even if in the trough of the sea, and some years he reappeared at a foamy crest. The sixteen divisions of Satrap Industries, the twenty-seven of Vince-Paul, over the decades, in a feat of unparalleled business history, like the leaders of the movement to call back Israel's twelve scattered tribes to a modern state two thousand years after their diaspora in that unprecedented feat of world history, he finally managed to call back all, reuniting the forty-four units of RSVP. Some still existed in name only, some not even that but had to be re-formed from scratch. And as if he were his own God who had promised the Moses within him to see his land of plenty before his death, he had no sooner glimpsed it as from a mountaintop than, four weeks later, age 78, he sunk to the bottom in exhaustion.

His death capped his history of peaks and troughs with its highest upswing ever, upon the sale of a reconstituted RSVP. During those four weeks he managed that sale, of his sole possession of great value, and put the proceeds in bonds. Like those male spiders who expend all their life force upon squeezing their genetic material into the female, Jeremy Reynaldo, after this final extrusion of his life's mind-child, this corporate conglomerate, keeled over, spent.

If he had understood how he had not given one biological child of his a glimpse into his construction of toothpicks, he had not given one hint.

In the hands of its buyers, the Louis Quatorze remained out of Reynaldo's reach.

The children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren solemnly commemorated the Christmas ritual, their only familywide gathering, in a barn reconstructed on one of the children's property. It was to this year's event that Irina invited me to meet "them."

In those weeks leading up to the "bash," Irina and I visited every two or three days. Never again in her "holy of holies," we instead, at her unspoken insistence, aired ourselves in sunny daylight. She served me lunch of tapenade and goose in her greenhouse, rather a man in white jacket served, who for all I knew was a stooge of the "cheap" P.I. We strode, on a brilliant Sunday, right down her leaf-strewn lane, while she inserted the crook of her arm in mine and let her substantial hips pivot against me as powerfully as a gear on a drawbridge. Her abrupt self-confidence alarmed me (though I didn't mention it). After those shenanigans, dodging the man at the zoo, shuttling me through the back gate into the blackened house, this shift to swagger and defiance of fate assured me, in fact—for moments—that our little financial deed was kosher by everyone.

Amidst those heady days, that transaction occurred without ceremony in the privacy of my laptop closet. She had entrusted me with the account's passcode, along with her own laptop, since the investment bank's prize-winning security system, via cookies, would detect any alien computer tapping into her account and send out alarms (possibly to her dread family itself). I made the transfer during a pause in work, just one of those many chores to check off the day's list. I simply sold the shares, then transferred the cash to my account. Irina

had foreordained she would be ready for the bank's fervid phonecalls to her. I, of course, would have the specter of the IRS wondering why I had received such a large gift, although they'd be happy for the taxes they'd collect on it. For all I knew, that figure could be enough to make them tip off the SEC—and the FBI? Well, the fact of the legitimacy of my and my loved-one's intimate transaction only assured me of its perfection and righteousness, which qualities you, my dear friends, would apply to such transaction if you had carried it out.

Yet, throughout that day, this one chore, this transfer, often had me catching a kitchen countertop or anything to hold myself up. Just the thought of that figure, I mean the numerical one, and the buzzard shadows winging above it. What more could this current burst of joy and pride in her have in store, how much further would she risk me in alleviating that "cursed" burden?

She even came to my place, excitedly, to see my "outer soul," and she put two chairs on the narrow walk before my condo's front, where we sat, under hats, as if she were just waiting for the right eyes to pass down the street. Inside my own sacred space, the leathered consulting chamber, she halted before the shut window blind and, when I took her in arms, she snuck out a hand to open it, turning us into Christmas window-dressing.

That was when I finally let my swelling peeve spill. "You're exploiting us," I said, inserting a kind of rumble of a chuckle with my lips against her cheeks.

"Love is exploitation," she said, surprising me: to think she was exploiting me!

And I saw, or felt, the thrill of her point, there before my window, as my hand eased her collar down her shoulder. Everyone knows the spice of display, and that grows more piquant the higher the life-stakes.

If we paused under a park tree, or came out of theater matinee to lean against my car, or sat in a brunch's fern-draped corner where we could prop our chairs face-to-face, then I caught her eyes roaming above me. Was she searching the boughs for a micro-lens, the parking-lot attendant's shack for the "cheap" P.I., the sky for a surveillance aircraft? Eyes aloft, she kissed the more earthily.

Through those weeks I kept awaiting mention of that golden-star sum, of 53 whatnot. It was, of course, resting quite merrily in my name, a few grand budding daily. That was the largest number, by an order of magnitude, I had ever glimpsed affiliated with the words "Stuart Beholt." (I've not yet counted the seconds I've lived.) The thought returned many times day and night, or sometimes not even the thought, merely the associated rub upon my gut, ascending and descending like massaging fingers between my lungs' diaphragm muscles and my liver. When something is so intimately affiliated with your identity, you cannot help but assume, if subconsciously, it is yours. And she, my Irina, I kept awaiting the right pause in our talks to insert "So, about those investments?—" But her gaze at such times, now often fixed on an invisible far-off point as if she were searching for the next distraction from this rude unspoken fiscal reality between us, returned to me in childlike wide-open delight. "So, do you think you can stomach *them* for a six-hour stretch?" she said. "Tell me if you think of a better way." She appeared to have completely erased that account from her worries, exactly as planned. It was a fiscal reality

between us as assumed, as unspoken, as that between husband and wife.

“You mean better way to meet them all?” I answered. “I say do it in one fell blow. But, really, I’m sure this bash will be one of my most interesting experiences ever.”

She swiveled her eyes to the tops of their sockets, as if she were looking at me over the rims of spectacles. Strands of hair fell over her cheek. “Beholt the Man has a much more interesting life than that.”

“Interesting,” I said, placing a hand on her upper arm, “because *they* are yours.”

“*They* are not mine. That’s the problem.”

That topic, now—quite unlike the monetary issue—this upcoming festivity, despite her pooh-poohing and denigration, filled half her talk. She recounted the dramatis personae until I could practically direct them in this upcoming production. First personage: Moorea. “You know her already,” Irina prompted, to send me spinning through our mountain roads of memories together. She had introduced me to no females. “The P.I.?” I guessed. “He’s a she?”

“NO: Irina Moorea. You know her!”

The folks, it turns out, stick with Irina’s middle name. From the day she learned they had extirpated Mahmud, she snatched at the forgotten first name like a branch back to herself, the beginning of her protean life.

This warning revelation of her full name did carry a shock, if only because she hadn’t told me before.

“It only shows,” she said, “how little I think of what they think of me.”

Next: Emilia, her next-eldest sister (Irina being the next-to-youngest child), was “splendidly beautiful,” by Irina’s account. If a rival sister paints her elder as “splendidly beautiful,” you can only suspect the reality. She has red hair, the only in the family to, “I believe it’s the Red River influence,” Irina said. It still blazes all the way to her waist, ornamenting the flowing silken or satin red or purple robes that blaze all the way to her toes. Her skin is as tender and translucent as a bean sprout. Divorced, she is a frustrated politician. She got on the ballot only once, for Dallas city council, and garnered all of 89 votes. But she can quote Thomas Hobbes and Machiavelli. Beware: “She munches men like kids do crackers. Don’t even let her fingertips brush your skin. Bean sprouts, I hear, have digestive enzymes, and so may some fingers.”

The next eldest, Desi, I “met” already. He was the only of her siblings who, like her, had no children. Otherwise, she knew as good as nothing of his personal life. From her earliest memories of him, he had kept himself sequestered. “And in such a family, where we were all kept from the world, sequestering yourself could only be rewarded as a virtue.” Except their time in the Highland Park four-bedroom, he had always boasted a separate room, which he locked, even when he went on his lengthy walks. Besides turning aside from and never looking at someone who was speaking to him—as he had treated me at her housewarming—he rarely spoke back. His tutor had confessed that Desi had taken only to physics and the geography of modern Beijing, apparently deeply associating with The Forbidden City. Rumor pinned him spending much of that time in his room with discarded electronics parts, tinkering to re-piece them into a device of a power unknown to others.

“He may be autistic or Asperger’s syndrome for all I know. We never got psychologically examined because we were all perfect.” No wonder, she said, that *they* managed tacitly to recruit him as family watchdog and Irina’s sometime personal police agent and hitman, a job he neither seemed to mind nor to pursue with more than dim cognizance.

The other three, “normally named” children, Benton II, Rose and Clark, named by Jeremy, were all “happily, normally married—but I’ll let you judge that.” They all went to church, two had converted to the Protestantism of their spouses after Dad’s death, and all three did nothing in life. Yet, wearing the badge of nuclear family, for their churches’ and their own self-images, they made as if they did something with themselves. They wore suits on weekdays. The two brothers had offices, where they read the sports pages and played solitaire while their secretaries did crosswords. They had business cards. “Yet, those three, I swear, are the real masterminds of *them all*. Oh, their cheeks glow like summer peaches. But they have to keep those gardens growing. That’s where I and my ways get in the way. Don’t let me bias you, though. Judge the whole scene. Tell me.”

Cousins, aunts and great-nephews would attend the fest as well, and Mother, too, who’d had Alzheimer’s and the same nurse these past thirty years. The whole mass of them, I would have to assess. Irina went over and over the litany, starting with grandfather Benton’s founding the barnhouse church, up to Jeremy’s first post-Louis Quatorze speech and his final Christmas bash, in the same way the heavily pious might recount the Nativity story this time of year. You might believe Irina had a reverence for the family tradition, for Jeremy and his mysterious life and even for the way he had marooned his

six spawn, like a frog's eggs deposited in a nutrient-rich niche of a pond, with nothing but instinct for how to crawl out of the water. But I believe she recounted it to me much in the way she must have done to herself in private: seeking in it the hidden lever she might pull and give it meaning and jettison her out of her state of perpetual loss.

She carefully instructed me in the steps of the annual ritual, much like the steps to the cross. "The whole story's evolved over the years," Irina said, "Father actually developed most of the practices for Easter, which you'll see was a more appropriate holiday. Then he transferred most of it to around Christmastime when more people could come. When I was a child, the event was supposed to celebrate the family's release from Protestant hypocrisy. That edge of the story has recently been smoothed over, though, to lower hackles, for the sake of family unity, whatever of it we have left."

The yearly ritual begins early with a dinner at long tables, although originally, in Chilicothe County, at one long table. Homemade bread and dear old Gallo are passed around, and, in the old days, Jeremy pronounces to the group, "We'll do this every year, in memory of our father Benton Clive." Since Jeremy's death, Benton II presides. After the dinner, the group retires outside to the garden, for a moment of silence for Benton Clive—and now, of course, for Jeremy. The group repairs into the barn, where the leader, Benton II, recounts the trial of Benton Clive under his ruthless railroad-coworker Cayman, who had despised Benton Clive for years and finally, on this Saturday, found the chance to mock and revile this truth-seeker Reynaldo. The party next proceeds with the leader to another reach of the barn, commemorating how Benton Clive and Cayman went to their boss Mr. Pylon in his office,

requesting some kind of arbitration. But Mr. Pylon, busy with his toilet, shaving, only handed the men the bowl of cream and the lathering brush. “It’s not my business. You two go outside and deal with this civilized-like with a little shaving-cream fun.” (Can there be shaving-cream fights without *cans* of shaving cream?)

The party continues to the next step, in the same way as the men went outside and chanced upon the railroad’s district manager Tom Harrold. Benton Clive asked Harrold to command Cayman to apologize for his unfair torments. But Harrold said religious matters among coworkers lay beyond his reach. Only upon a sign from God would he presume to cast judgment. He held up his hands to the sky, and in a minute, upon no sign, dropped them and bade the men settle their dispute off company property.

The party proceeds to the barn gate, where another coworker, Sam, joins the growing cluster of men around the disputants. Sam swears he will take up Benton Clive’s side. That rash offer sets off the grass fire. The brawling men roil all the way down a barren hill, where the melee ensues—instigated, as trial witnesses bore out, by Cayman’s henchmen taunting Sam. The partygoers, as well, trail up a mound in the garden built on the grounds raised expressly for the annual commemoration. And there, of course, Benton Clive overwhelms his opponent and at once is crucified by the county.

And that is where the celebration really begins, and the Gallo pours.

“But Benton Clive is redeemed at the trial, of course, and he lives forever through us,” Irina said. “Though, as for us,”

she added on a grave note which I took as irony, “it’s actually father Jeremy who lives on in us.”

At this point in our conversation, during a December afternoon’s early snow—with the upcoming fete growing truly portentous, despite the 53 safe in my pocket—Irina and I had our first spat.

The sight of the man across the park lake certainly added to the rumbling in me.

The day hardly looked or felt like snow. Brisk white summer-like clouds swept patches of sun and brilliant blue into creamy whorls. And when the rays shot onto the deep green live oaks, fall appeared to be far from even begun. The lake, polished and rounded as a diner’s countertop, doubled the sight. There was even the August odor of fresh-cut grass. Snow tiny as sugar grains frittered around us, melting as it neared the heat of our bodies. Irina wore a summery cerulean skirt cut above the knees and darker blue hose of a rainbow-glistening fabric like a dragonfly’s wing. Her black cotton jacket, tight and smart as a sailor’s, was open at the top few buttons, reminding the world of her blessing in two kind swells. I would never guess that, beyond the candy clouds, the season’s end of flowers loomed.

“Lives on *in you*?” I said, repeating the words she had just spoken, with more sarcasm than I had intended. But hadn’t she intoned irony herself? The portentousness of this family ceremoniousness was starting to lock my gears. “Irina, Dearest—” still too much sarcasm, Sty!—“surely you don’t believe the spirit of Jeremy Reynaldo—your father—is living on in you six children.”

She responded with a demonstrative silence. I feared I had misread her tone, as well as the entirety of Irina Moorea Reynaldo. We were shuffling along the bankside trail, an asphalt path, having not even nubbed shoulders during her tale of the horrendous upcoming social spectacle. She slowly came to a halt. I dared not look and witness how far I may have just botched this rare gift, my own little Reynaldo. Then I chanced the swiftest glance leftward, and in my peripheral vision detected Irina staring across this arm of the lake. I, too, with minimal movement of head, glanced there, and flinched.

Across a hundred yards of liquid, that man I'd spied at the zoo faced us, as implanted as an ancient stump made by a logger. Also, in my peripheral vision, I detected Irina making the faintest of deliberate nods. A signal to him?

Was I to be extirpated now? Had that 53 been the payoff this time, and Irina had acted as payoff agent against her lover? Well though I may have done in the privacy of my web site, I was not trained for this kind of world.

I pretended not to see. "Irina, I know you, you're rational, you don't truck in harum-scarum. Everything we're working on now rests on what humans can make with their hands—"

"And of course what machines can make," she uttered mechanically, still staring.

Three weeks of jollies; now I pay.

I couldn't help also looking at the man, who remained rigid. "You've been implying, telling even, you find them completely at loggerheads with you, if not mad. And I'm to meet them only to know you better and where you come from."

“Not completely at loggerheads, not completely mad,” she said, still distantly. “And, yes, you do have to know them to know me truly. Unfortunately, they are me.”

I began wondering whether the man were a stump, say a sculpture. These past weeks, have I been subject of an odd experiment, of some oddballs’ scheme? Having money so easily fall into my hands, a near-total stranger’s, was too devilish to occur.

She turned, finally, but then stood that ground, her back to the goblin. As if I had now seen what she had seen and knew her plan, I put on a let’s-get-back-to-normal-tone, “So, you going to run around the lake *this* way, like you did around the zoo, and I pick you up in the car?”

She wetted her lips silently. Small flakes like bits of fresh magnesium tickled the eyes. “Look, there’s a lot of my father in me. Perhaps not enough, and that’s the thing.” And then she stepped along the path, the way we had just come.

I was irked. She was leaving me as disoriented and mud-headed as I’d been on that day, a couple years before I knew Irina, when a door had opened on a certain bewildering scene in an entryway. I caught up, to one step behind Irina. “So you’re offended I held up the mirror on your own disgust with them all.”

“Like, not *offended*, but I’m surprised you’re not more consoling.”

I cannot let myself be wrong in her eyes. But rage blinded me. “Humoring you is consoling you.”

“I grew up with them, played dolls, all that. Shared cats.”

I tried sympathy. “And to have them turn and send spies and buy off your loves...”

“But I see why they have to do all that. They’re as lost. They are protectiveness itself—gone haywire.”

“However, they’re vying for the Louis Quatorze. And you’d like to see it.” In my darkness, lost as any Reynaldo, I was making a wild stab.

She slowed and halted. Was I trap or bait? I snuck a glance around. The stump, further away now, was unmoved beside the lake bank.

She and I stood side by side. You and I.T., Irina: opposites in soul and body, same feminine presence. You demand a contract in blood. You repay honest efforts with garbled requests. Finally you have to triumph over utter chaos’s betrayal.

I have that wad in pocket. How much do I need? Go, while my heart still pumps!

In that entryway had been I.T. with, as anyone could guess, another person. In flagrante delicto. In I.T.’s favorite and sole orientation with an intimate other. For optimal energizing. She faced me. She had let the door swing all the way open so I might view the entire one-act. I thought I was viewing a bactrian, the double hump of two heads, and another big double-abdominal hump below. She smiled. The other hump of the two managed only a proud surprised glimpse.

She prompted her other half to continue the one-act for the fresh audience. “Michael, my ancient boy Sty. In hock signal winkies,” she gasped, I think referring to *In hoc signo vinces*. “Sty, Lieutenant Michael, of the Navy.”

He wore his cap.

I watched, four or five seconds. Who could gather their wits? But the sight had a beauty, gluing me. I.T. was incomparably lovely with her slender sinews and vulpine nipples. The sinews pulsed; the nipples didn't. I was seeing her as I, in that same place, had never gotten to. And I felt the beauty of the utter, searing blade of lightning slice from head through chest, cleave me in one instant from all those months of foolishness. I had known that a gourmet of energies must find copious available outlets. I had fooled myself that a mere one plug could supply sufficient current. And I had *just* poured that money back into her account, without a means to get it back. So trusting.

I turned. Sheer as the lightning, you vow to get back, whoever, however, whenever. Awful, awful. People simply can't do this to you.

“Yes, I want to see the Louis Quatorze again. But I won't put a dime into it.”

Irina came around in front of me on the path. She had to impose herself right in my field of view while I flailed inside for a fingerhold amid the madness she rained. She looked up into me, beseeching. And it was the smile that triggered me, a smile calculated to penetrate the fume of chaos just created, the smile I'd seen upon another fuming threshold.

I.T., hello! What forms you take!

I, agog, reached both hands to hers. “I saw our fellow across the water.”

“I know,” she whispered, “you're never afraid.”

“You're not mad anymore?”

“I never really was. Never with you.”

How many times the world gets revenge through surrogates. How wealthy the world grows recovering more than it needs. What a risk, to grow wealthy so.

Holding both hands in a graceful interlacing pattern, we shuffled through the glistening powder flakes.

That evening, in her holy of holies, without the least prompt from me, she reached across the bed, into the bottom drawer, and handed me an envelope. Was this for a good job, my handling our muffled spat today?

“Someday,” she said, muffled by the pillow she embraced, “you’ll teach me what part of Jeremy Reynaldo I’m missing.”

9.

I waited till I returned home in the morning to slit open the envelope. In this one's box, like blazing lights of Door Number Three, shone "67..."

My friend Alby had recently burst into the same monetary club in which Jeremy Reynaldo had died. For years I had felt so humbled in Alby's presence, our visits had tapered. Now, abruptly less humbled, I severely needed his club's wisdom about its members' means and mindsets. I hadn't joined them yet, but I, or rather my name— certainly I could hardly call those funds mine—had just hit nine figures.

Mornings Alby "worked-in," at home, and an old school buddy could always "pop by" his deceptively humble Spanish-style off Turtle Creek. Today I walked.

Alby was the one who had written the smashing bit of surveillance code that had launched him and me years ago. After that company had foundered from mismanagement, he had gone interstellar with another startup, YuPushMePull. This was more smashing than ever, being brilliantly worthless and a hit from day one. P.T. Barnum's famous dictum about customers' births inspired Alby. The scheme appealed to internet shoppers who either did not want their credit info spilled across the wires or who lacked credit anyway. At an egregious \$6.95 plus a prorated percentage of the purchase price, they could avoid credit card risks by buying his financial

middlemanship. A vast majority of customers actually were those too poor for credit. The scheme was a Spindletop of a wildcatter. “I provide the suckers a unique service, yass,” he said in his circusmaster voice. The scheme’s name was a play on his favorite childhood character, Pushmepullyu. It conveyed the sense that, monetarily, he and the customers were working together as if he were their buddy, to improve their lives. “Of course, *they* push. Are they ever pushing past their limits,” he said. “And that’s where I pull. And rake in the sucking results.”

YuPushMePull alone employed 190 people, and he dumped a sizable chunk of the proceeds into R&D for a dozen visionary projects, and still his own pocket was bulging. After he’d finished his undergraduate in C.S. alongside me at Austin, he had gone on to Harvard Law, where he’d pollinated contacts across the world, before settling back in good old hometown Big D. Those pollinations had sprouted into luscious fruit he could harvest from the comfort of his garden window easy chair. He had a hand on a Chinese rare-earths mine, fingers on a Singaporean neuropharmaceuticals maker, arms around a Chilean shipbuilder. They all fed into his one big future scheme. For years, he had been climbing through the nine figures of personal worth and early this year broke into the tenth. At his house, I felt like the poor relation, but he always pulled out a bowl of nuts.

Politely, I still buzz his cell before approaching his door. “Just in the neighborhood. Can you handle a wet-and-wild?” “Wet and wild” was our pejorative term, dating from college, for in-person visits, as opposed to the more respectable dry and civilized cyber realm.

“You *live* in the same neighborhood. What kind of excuse is that!”

Alby rarely answered the phone but had his own device do it for him. The program sampled his real voice, matched the sounds of the caller’s to a list and, if it was a just a friend, synthesized an attempt at a sarcastic Alby-style reply. If the caller were important, the program signaled Alby to pick up. He had once badly insulted an investor this way, but that hardly stopped him perfecting his device. He was out to win the Turing prize.

He lived down a twisting, pothole-ridden, overgrown lane no poor neighborhood could afford. Walls and gnarled vines on either side block views of their precious contents. Alby’s condo, actually a duplex, has its own gate, a heavy spiked grid-iron that looks like it can stop a cement truck. A sensor, another of his devices, a black bulb the size of a fingertip, detects who is at the gate. It holds stored templates of faces permissible for entry, and if yours matches it, the gate opens. The device means Alby is always re-taking your photo on visits. It once let in some teenagers who went on to spray-paint his motorcycle. They were later arrested, as the device retains your entry image.

The driveway winds you down among orange adobe walls. The three-story Santa Fe hacienda rises ahead, with its timber roof posts and walls stained where rainwater streams off its flat roof. High cedars, with the cedar shrubs in the terraces mounting up the three levels, emit odors of mountainous resin. His half of the building is cut off entirely from its symmetrical twin, which is approached by its own gate. I’m not sure why Alby bought a duplex, unless in defiance of what sort of abode his sort should get, or he were stating how, like these two

house-halves, all people are just glommed one onto the other at the cranium like a series of attached twins. The day had dawned warmer than yesterday's flurries, and that nudge of temperature stirred up the swampiness of the creek. Smells of the fallen boughs rotting in the water drifted up the lawn. In the stillness, frogs plopped.

Up the high stone steps, the wooden front door is of genuine Sangre de Christos piñon, so hardy that he left it unfinished. As I mounted, it, too, began opening. It must be one of his devices. No, in the gloom behind, was that Alby Tolby's elbow? Ah, the door swung fully open, and in the dim daylight from a window lurked his statuesque silhouette. Half a morning he dawdles on the telephone, and there was his cell tucked between shoulder and brain, his back turned partway to me. He held up one finger signaling wait one more moment. Alby, who shuns earplugs, keeps his cell thrust close to his cerebrum throughout the day, defying "luddite" research reports warning about cell microwaves and brain tumors. "Let my brains rot!" he would storm, "the more room'll be left in my skull for a new improved model." One of his R&Ds seeks a human brain made totally of chips. (His colleague Roy Cursewell chided him to take care of your "hot and soggy" unit *until* your miraculous "cool and arid" versions are ready for accepting your transported mind. Alby cryptically retorted that "My version will contain a lot more than silicon. So stop bowing to luddites, Roy.")

Alby punched off his telephone and looked down the steps where I had stopped halfway. From this angle he appeared twice as gigantic. "I take it you got a minute to spare in your precious workday," he said.

Always had to put me and my piddly little business in its place. He was merely envious it lent me such social presence as it did; if only he liked sex. “You know I’m just a shiftless lazybones.”

“We’ll swing by one of the labs in a moment. Didn’t I tell you, we’re about to launch into a breakthrough phase in an experiment.”

But instead of asking me inside before our departure, he pulled the door shut and started down the stairs. “First I need to sit outside a jiffy,” he said. “My pineal gland needs some solar-spectral stimulation for regulating histamine release.”

Wasn’t it a bit nippy out here to be lounging around even in the sun? His feet, trilling down the steps, passed me, and I turned and followed his bouncing ponytail. Well, I wasn’t missing much not going inside, which, in all that bare Santa Fe adobe, was about as chilly. Inside, the place boasted only a tubular graphite desk and chairs in the living room, for meeting with those bloody investors who demanded a wet-and-wild. And upstairs in one of the four bedrooms (the other three empty) was a pallet in which he, much like I.T., slept his four wasted hours a night. “Home is where the office is,” his motto. Nothing adorned his walls, as he found all humanity’s efforts till now misspent. He didn’t even care for the Santa Fe style, which so happened to be that of the building that fit his calculations for prime investment.

We passed through another stone wall’s gate to the yard. The St. Augustine, deep green year-round due to an under-sod heating pad, stretched to the wide stream. Turtle Creek here takes a luxurious bend, and the weeping willows all kneel to its majestic peacefulness. Alby led us to steel chairs on a patio

adjoining the house. At once, outdoor heating poured from a vent in the wall. In seconds, it felt springlike enough out here, I comfortably took a seat beside him. Sun actually seeped around the building from its low winter arc.

He clapped his hands twice, paused, clapped again louder, paused, clapped twice again thunderously. A small door in the wall opened, and out came a robot.

“I have to replace those cheap auditory sensors,” he mumbled.

I recognized the robot at once. It was a facsimile of the one on *The Jetsons*, the animated series his laptop was always playing and which I would watch while he took phone calls. He said the show was the only fine arts the species had ever produced worth his time.

“Nuts!” he yelled at the robot. The robot turned and rolled indoors. “What a life to have,” he said wistfully, looking to the departing pet. “Except that one’s still stupid.”

I continued searching my mind, as I had through my walk to Alby’s, for how to launch into my urgent issue. He’ll scoff if he sees it as a woman problem.

Alby filled in my silence. He abhorred vacuums, and he never soiled himself by volunteering to wallow in his guests’ perplexities. “That was my lab manager Greiful on the phone. The guy can really stick pins in your ear, and you can’t pin him down on it. ‘The team’s ready to go,’ he’ll say, ‘if you think we’re all legal.’ Of course we’re legal! I’m a lawyer! He just has to needle, to get to you. The guy’s a calculating sociopath. But that’s what makes him a fine manager. Sociopaths have to know the human heart better than anybody with a conscience does, if they want to get anywhere and not be found out. It’s

all so alien to them, they have to study it. It comes natural to sympathizing sorts who don't have to be cognizant of it. But then. his type cognizes *just* where to needle you."

The robot emerged, holding a bowl of nuts. It stopped right between us, then it swiveled toward Alby. He said, "Don't hand them to me first, I'm the host. Don't you have any ethics?"

The robot swiveled back to neutral position. Alby said, "Put it on the table, dork."

It hesitated, as if its feelings were hurt, then it extended its arms so that the bowl, actually a flat ramekin, slid onto the table. "Cashews, macadamias, Brazils, shelled pistachios," it said. "Dry roasted."

The robot returned inside, and the door shut. Alby shook his head after it.

The interlude gave my nerves a chance to forget themselves—from our first acquaintance in Austin I had always trembled before my friend, he so commanded himself—and I blurted, "I've met the Reynaldos recently."

He continued looking in the distance, as if still set on the robot or Greiful. Or he found it utterly uninteresting to hear tell of billionaires' existences for the mere fact of their billionaireess. Alby has a heavy jaw that appears to be pulled forward in equal and opposite reaction to his ponytail pulled behind him. That jaw makes every pause look ponderous. And then the small eyes behind the high flat cheeks only seem to peer ever more pinpointedly into faraway thoughts.

"So?" he said. "Why mention it? Think they're sociopaths?"

“Not at all. Wouldn’t know one if I saw one. But I believe these are deep-feeling people. Maybe too deep. I mean, unfathomably deep.”

“So what are you doing with them? I take it you mean the RSVP Reynaldos.” He still hadn’t shaken out of his daze, was just talking to wait for a better topic.

“That’s them, yep, they’re still around.”

Silence ensued. I was suffocating in that huff of heating. I was sweating underarms. Quick, before he shifts topics. He reached for a handful of salties. What say now? I’m milking one of the heirs and before proceeding further I need to know if I’d be socially ostracized? No, that’s far from true! I’m fatally infatuated, in loony-tunes love, and my angel is either making me the most maddening of donations or taking the most maddened trust. Hard rational me needs your harder rational perspective, Alby! But, with him, I must not emit one whiff of romance.

Bored, he filled in one more chink of silence. “Didn’t they all kind of fritter away the old man’s coffer?”

“Not at all. In fact it’s all sitting there idle.” Also unplanned and unadvised, I burst, “Maybe you’d like to meet them.”

“Oh? They’re hunting for somewhere to drop their load?”

What was I saying? I couldn’t have Alby in that scene, he’d siphon everything to his corner.

“I didn’t mean for the sake of your investment,” I said.

He reached for another scoop, chewed. “Robie’s roasting these too long.” The robot’s name was a play on his middle name Rodey. He glanced at me as he chewed, and in that millisecond he and his keen eyes upon the human heart must

have detected the lustaholic's perplexity that wrenched my face, for he wiped his hands and chided, "Don't tell me you're getting married!"

Under that gaze, who can keep dissimulating? "Nothing's been said about that."

"Sty! Sty! Sty! You and your nasty dick."

"You're not seeing what happened at all."

"For the future's sake, lop it off."

Now I'd fouled up. The bloody grand master. Now I was obligated to invite him to the Reynaldos' some time, and I didn't want him dipping into the finite investment pool or besmirching the eternal love pond. He was the world's proudest misogynist and would even convert women if he could talk to them. He hired that gender only to appear legal. My sole consolation here was that at any Reynaldo function where I may invite him, there would be enough women to make him turn tail. The guy could never admit he hailed from a buried ferocious century. Hadn't I known better than to come to him?

"We're getting way off-track," I said. "I had a couple of things I wanted to squeeze in here. One is that business has really soared recently, and I can't expand much further so am looking into outside opportunities, if you know of any IPOs or other ideas."

He sat up, folding hands into a big fist between his open knees. "About how much?"

I hesitated. He knew about how much *Beholt the Man* could pull in and he could be uncannily accurate. I had to cite at most half of what I could now put in. "Say fifty."

His tiny lights calculated. Even that figure was about ten times what my web site had netted, and he had to be spinning

through what was really happening in my life. He rose, big flat cheeks hiding something. “My pineal gland’s gotten its fill of solar spectra. Let’s go on to the lab. Maybe that’ll interest you.”

He clapped his hands. “Robie? Clean-up!”

I stood in place. “Another thing.”

“*Yass—?*”

Still I trembled before him. How cool I could look, but I couldn’t articulate my question though I knew exactly what it was. “Surely among the big-nine figures and tens and elevens you know, some didn’t, say, make it all themselves. Don’t you find a type of mindset, mentality, running through those, about how to handle—their lives, their worth, if you will—but you still got to remain on your guard with them in a special way?”

Thus I mutilated my puzzlement about protecting my interests from crazed love.

“Sty the Man! Certainly you’ve had your experience with little infidels.”

The robot accidentally knocked some spilled nuts off the table onto the patio. “Miserable menial!” he said.

He sped off to the gate.

So I was completely alone with Irina. Nonetheless, after a visit with Alby, I always felt more brilliant.

This particular research lab of Alby’s was housed in a warehouse in the great industrial flatlands of Industrial and Irving Boulevards. In the 1950s, the district had bloomed fast as bathtub mold, with its miles of luxurious brick warehouses and loading docks, and had as quickly dried up in the 1980s when the metroplex and its commerce tumorously swelled 30 and 40 miles north. A pioneer in inner city rebirth, Alby had

sniffed out the great shell of a former munitions manufacture: A blond-brick building of two acres, twenty feet high, windowless, priced far less than his townhouse and even less than mine. Then he sluiced a good hundred mill into refurbishing it to house medical research. In fact, taking most of ten years since his return from Harvard Law at age twenty-five, he created nothing less than a certified private hospital, “the surest way to get my kind of visions approved and continuing to look legit in future.” That plan demanded completely gutting and fumigating the place; putting in windows; installing a surgery suite, cantina, rooms. He procured medical equipment from a cut-rate Chinese supplier. Why not simply level the building and start over, and moreover buy a more sylvan plot for a hospital? “They don’t make bricks like that anymore,” he said. “Besides, the seedy style of the neighborhood, it’s how ignoramuses would view my work if they knew what I was up to.”

We parked in the vintage asphalt lot, still encircled by the very high galvanized steel chain-link fence. The fence had guarded not only munitions-plant employees’ cars, but also some tall racks in the back which Alby had also retained “for history’s sake.” He waved toward them as he hunted for an empty space. “They once stored half-ton payload air-to-land bombs,” he said. “Now that’ll set you to thinking.”

“Won’t that disturb some of your more delicately constituted patients?”

“My *patients*’ are all voluntary and are probably more hip to grisly truth than even their sponsor me.”

Those payloads had formed munitions for my dear Reynaldos’ own Screech Owl.

Before opening the car door, he reached into his pocket for a small box, shook white pills into a palm and threw back his head to engorge them like a kid does peanuts. "Ritalin," he said after a relaxed gulp. "Twenty mill, extended release, total four hundred mills a day"

"You still like it." He had since our Austin days.

"You oughtta, Chippie. It's part of the cause."

"I'm still too sensitive."

"Miracle cogitator, not one side effect, Chippie. Mornings I do my two hundred fifty vitamins-and-herbs. I'm lasting to see this universe go supernova. Then I'll move to the next one. Afternoons and evenings are Ritalin time, a lot funner."

"It's still morning."

"My whole day starts early. You know that." He pocketed the pillbox.

Unfolding his mammoth bones from inside the minuscule Smart Car required a moment of grace of his well-tuned muscles. He insisted on such a thumbnail of a vehicle not for fuel economy (he adored using energy), but out of "cheap chic." Similarly had Sam Walton toted bagged lunches on his walks to work.

Alby meditated a moment upon those powerful metal racks. As always, he sported a black and gray jumpsuit, of the sorts astronauts might leisure in, as if he were ready to launch when the call came. I had known the jumpsuit was handy for his motorcycle, which he took most everywhere. But now, him and his bomb racks, somehow it finally clicked why the jumpsuit formed his uniform.

"And how about those windows?" he said as we walked on. Along the whole long blond wall of the warehouse,

rectangles had had to be gouged out of the brick; and on either side of each were gorgeous white French shutters. I recalled I.T.'s homey loft building, black shutters on sooty red brick. "When I'm done with this unit in ten years, I'm selling it for ten times what I put in. That's what I call double investment: I get something huge out of it now. I get something huger out of it later."

The front entrance had a porch, heavy aluminum awning, and winter mums and dwarf cedars in planters like any hospital. You wouldn't guess that across the street sumac trees were growing out of an abandoned building. The doors opened with a breeze of sterilized air, and a receptionist appeared genuinely busy at her desk. Orderlies quickened the hall ahead. No one noticed the other as they dashed through their chores, until Alby began down the hall.

"In ten years," Alby added, "this neighborhood will be hopping."

I have to tell you about Alby's walk. You might believe that, big-boned graceful man like that, with sinews so genetic he eluded exercise, he, somewhat ironically, would walk with a ballerina's airy spring. Let me tell you, back in our Austin days, I would be at the university's Perry-Castañeda library reading, head bowed, far in the realm of mathematical figures. Like a sound penetrates your dreams, a distant *klom, klom, klom, klom* arose somewhere deep across the immense library carpet. And without my even rousing from mathematical reality, Alby's immense frame popped somewhere in my consciousness between $w(x \oplus y)$ and $= w(x \oplus \oplus z \oplus y)$, like the metallic Talos in *Jason and the Argonauts* straddling the riverstream. As I read on, that Talos clunked steadily toward me, *klon, klon,*

klon, klon, until I looked up, and there twenty feet away, the great monster pounded right for me. Graceful Alby had always loved heavy boots.

Up and down the shining white Kevlar lab floor, Alby's boots owned that hallway even more than they had the library carpet. They didn't just echo; they thunder-clapped. Orderlies halted; technicians peeked around doorways, phones even started ringing. No wonder he had had to appear in person rather than watch virtually the episode we were about to witness. Until all his workers' brains were spliced electronically into his, he had to come insert something of moment into their autonomic nervous systems.

In a darkened room lit only by monitor lights, we met Greiful. The man appeared like any floor manager at a microprocessor plant, sporting his lab whites and neck-strapped laptop. Round jaw continuous with the chin in a single great arc, double chin underneath from forever bowing the head, bald pate thrust outward, beady eyes wide apart, and both tiny bristle mustache and mouth closed in. I could not see why Alby had grumped about such a regular flunky. He spoke softly:

"Dr. Seinbergen's opened the skull. Four centimeters square. Associative cortex."

"Aha, as planned! Tell me something new, Greiful."

"I'm telling you the surgeon's just *waiting* for you."

"As planned! Now, who's the subject."

"As planned, sir. Number 42, male, age 19."

"Just checking you're not slipping any of the lassies in on me. So Number 42, Buster Javits, bright laddie in economics, math and philoso-*phy* at U.T.D., ready to get really brain-y."

“The chip is on the table, sir.”

Greiful trembled, he steadied both hands gripping his laptop, but it jiggled from the straps. I pitied the man, a squirrel caught by a bloodhound. Rarely had I witnessed Alby with his employees. But either these two had a special rapport that merely appeared horrific, or Alby ruled with heavy boots, which sometimes worked in business.

“And why are you waiting, Mr. Greiful?”

“Yes, Dr. Tolby.”

I neglected to mention, when Alby was working on his J.D., he simultaneously, in the same three years, took a Ph.D. in economics from the same institution, “for kicks.” Apparently in this lab’s doctorish environment, he allowed the honorific to come out.

Another man in the room, slender with gray tufts and youthful visage, was briefly introduced as Dr. Schnooring. He merely nodded once, from the comfort of folded arms on chest, and went on observing a blank wall.

Greiful reached to a monitor and flipped a switch. A curtain on that blank wall soundlessly and swiftly rose, revealing a gleaming surgery suite. A dozen personnel, whom I was not trained to identify by outfit, hovered over an operating table. The object on the table was covered in cloth, except for one exposed area, which was lying there thrust our way. A mirror cleverly placed above it reflected how the exposure was actually a few centimeters’ square of bloody red and brownish-gray matter. A giant-chested man in smock and face mask, with bloodshot eyes, was also turned to us. I deduced this was the neurosurgeon, apparently awaiting a signal.

Alby put his hand to his breast, nodding. But apparently the glass was one-way, and Greiful flipped a switch and the surgeon put his back to us. The knot of personnel also tightened as they proceeded with him.

“Unfortunately, Buster,” Alby said, his voice oddly growing faint, “you’ll have to wait until our offshore lab is complete for a unit you’d really like. It’ll really top this one. Sty, this is a BCI, a brain-computer interface. A while back the national neurological institute and some folks out West came up with a chip that goes into your motor cortex. It talks to your computer, so if you have a lesion there, from your laptop you can make yourself move. That set off the race, to the neurochip and others, and we’ve seen plenty development since. What you can see there on the table is the hottest number in the field, the TolbyChip-Sub-Four, ready for Buster.”

I took it that Alby meant the surgery table beside the supine patient, although, among the bustling techs, it showed only now and then. Upon the table, among dozens of brilliant metallic instruments, there appeared to be a small glass or plastic box, which I gathered housed the TolbyChip.

“It’s come out of liquid-nitrogen storage from its trip from Palo Alto and carefully brought to body temperature for insertion,” Alby continued. He put his hand to his brow, like a visor, as if trying to shield glare. “It follows on all the various models of the TolbyChips-Sub-Zero through Sub-Three, which have passed, finally with some true beauty, through Phase I clinical trials with rodents, canids, nonhuman primates. There’s a good Harvard gent, key post in the FDA, believes to no end in our vein of research. True risk-taker. We’re moving right on to Phase II without much publicity. But animal studies

leave us no doubt. Buster here, my bright laddie, had a lesion from a small stroke. He can think linearly just fine, but not horizontally, associatively, so well anymore. Tolby-Sub-Four should fill in the hole, as it has in our furry friends.”

A tech, only eye slits between mask and cap, took the box from the table, with a glance at our window and a brief pause, as if awaiting Alby’s nod. Alby, whom I expected to nod although the team could not see us, instead gripped the window’s lower rim. The tech turned and the box vanished.

“That’s Hiram Walter, top neurosurgeon in the Southwest and one of the top in the world. Boiling over with awards. Once he inserts the chip—” Alby was now leaning somewhat into the window, one hand still at his brow, voice growing lower and fainter, “using microscopy, he connects its electrodes to key axons in the lesioned area. Then he must run a battery of tests on the subject, psychological and physiological. You see, the subject is fully awake, his head held in a caliper-precision vise, so he cannot budge further than even one micrometer while the connections are made. Dr. Schnoorin, could you please take the observation room opposite, with your assistants. I believe you can get a better angle. Greiful, would you please accompany him?”

The gentlemanly older man departed, along with the team manager, shutting the door quietly behind.

“Sty, please, could you lock it?”

I did. In the surgery, in the mirror reflecting the incision, between needle-nosed grips a dot of gleam appeared, golden in the surgery lights. I noticed as well, though, Alby was missing the show, as his head was too far bowed.

“Schnoorin’g’s my project director,” Alby went on. He made a noble effort to stand tall and cover whatever was beguiling him. “Came all the way from Harvard Medical for this post. He’ll just have to watch the show with his colleagues. I knew I should have accustomed myself more when lower animals were being worked. Haven’t accustomed myself to innards, Sty. Saw one baboon getting plugged with a chip, but I thought, disgusting dirty creature, and those bloody stupid animal brains, *that’s* what can get you in the belly—”

Alby moved swiftly, crouching somewhat like a raiding simian himself, to the corner of the room, where a small metal trash can’s outline just showed in the electronics’ lights. There, he dropped onto his rear and bowed deep into the old-fashioned tin god.

After hours of meetings with his scientists, physicians, and staff; after painful debates over the meanings of the tests performed; after almost blasphemous declamations—blasphemous to Dr. Tolby—against the company leader’s decision to close the incision with the chip inside, my old pal and I were sitting in his car in the lot. December twilight was emitting cadmium-red and zinc-blue as relentlessly as a thunderstorm. In his drowsy hesitation to start the engine, I detected not so much exhaustion from the excoriating meetings or from his squeezing into this thimble of an automobile, but the same nausea that had flummoxed him in the observation suite. He, my dignified pal, had made me, a mere nine-figure man, carry the can down the hall to the restroom and wash it, while he hid, dignified, in the dark chamber.

“You didn’t just happen to come over today,” he said. “You came over because of the email I sent a while back telling I had a little momentous event today.”

“*Actually*—okay, I remember now, but I’d forgotten—*actually*, I’d come over because—” I still could not word my excuse for the visit, the woman problem. So I let his rationalization ride.

“And that, Sty my man, means you must be interested in this little project. You are not a dumb man. We’re planning for grosses in the high twelves, maybe hit thirteen. None of my income projections have failed. We’re looking for members, if you want to join. You can get your hands dirty right here with Buster-boy. The chip has a nanocomputer with a wifi and Windows Explorer. He signed a waiver stating he’d be glad to try internet “from the inside,” you might say. So wire up your play station. Send him *Beholt the Man* and see what he’ll buy. Think, we got a few billion customers out there who’ll go for this sort of get-up. They’d love to hear what you have to say. Keep them busy. I take it you have other places to go.”

He finally started the car. We rolled past the racks that once held the ghostly matériel for Irina’s Screech Owl.

Alby added, “But don’t think I’m begging.”

10.

Early morning of the Big Day—yes, our banal reference to it, throughout the two weeks beforehand—I stopped by Irina’s to pick her up. It was Saturday before Christmas, the set date for these Reynaldo fetes, and after a rare Friday that I did not spend with her. But I’d had to catch up on work lost by our shared life.

Although frost had whitened my car window during the drive, she answered her front door in Mediterranean-blue one-piece swimsuit. “We have an hour, really,” she said, leading me through the front rooms, which, dank and somber as a stone castle’s, never seemed lit. Then the Ion Room offered a blessing of glare and abrupt bath of heat. At once luscious plant aromas seeped so thickly, my skin seemed to smell them. They emitted both swamp and resin, flower and wood, fruit and moss. They seemed to pour from the potted ferns and palms, which rose to the high, all-glass portion of the walls and glass ceiling showing blue and white sky. They transported me, hallucinogenically, into a tropic woodland near an ocean, with pigmy hippos playing and rainbow parrots fluffing. I almost heard—or did hear—tree frogs squealing. I felt lighter and happier than in my winged night-dreams.

Two bamboo chaise longues stretched out beneath the fronds lazy as bathers. Irina took one, beside a woven grass table sporting a fruit smoothie bottle and straw. “An hour here

is a well-spent lifetime,” she said. “And our nerves’ll be steeled for a lifetime’s family gatherings.”

Both her arms flopped out, palms outward, as if absorbing rays of fragrance. She appeared not to notice that the compulsory formal attire for today’s occasion encumbered me: jeans (I had chosen black), blue-denim shirt, snakeskin or armadillo-hide boots (I had chosen the cheery mammal). It was Jeremy Reynaldo’s daily uniform. My heavy black wool greatcoat bundled it all. This room had to be 90i,° Fahrenheit.

On the other chaise longue was a man’s bathing suit.

I changed, draping my duds on a woven-straw rack, apparently made for such changes, then stretched out.

“This is beyond aromatherapy,” she said, eyes closed, face to the trees. “Dearest.”

One day, it’s Alby splayed before the rays; today it’s Irina under the odors.

She had gotten the idea for them years ago upon visiting the Bronx Zoo’s Asian Jungle World. It’s indoors, climate-controlled year-round. When you enter each sector of Asian Jungle World, you fall at once into another biota, with its trees, flowers, smells, animals and their scents, moistness, cries and wails and raindrops. When Irina had entered Indonesian Rainforest, with its langurs and gibbons and tapirs, its mangrove humid and thick “like love at night,” she felt “beyond happiness,” the calm assurance upon coming to a true home. As a preteen, she had toured an actual Borneo jungle.

As Mantranto had advised her, upon constructing the room, she had installed options to change not just the fragrance and climate, but the entire biota. By a switch’s flip, and by switching plants in and out of storage, she could choose

Kalimantan Orangutan, Bright-Eye Molokai, Guyane Zeit-Guise, Congolese Breeze.

“This is Java,” she said. “That word says enough.” She took in large slow breaths quietly. I tried to close my eyes and do the same, but I kept peeking at her forever-swelling torso. “Odors are the deepest evocateurs. They dig into your remotest patches and wriggle up the oddest twists of tintinnabulations, little screws of memory—from one flash of green leaves at age four, one delight of touching your cheek at age six, to one splash in a waterfall pool age nineteen. All interflowing. They are the quickest pointers to the truth that you can’t speak. And that is only what a single hyacinth or honeysuckle may tell you. Here we have, not only the orchestra of scents, but the soft touch of perfect temperature, the sift of oxygen through leaves, the pore opener of water-droplet air. And the best thing, we’re saturated with negative ions, cleansed, cleansed, not a shard of positive ion to soil our spirits.”

How that hesitant, stammering Irina whom I had met at her door weeks ago had changed and grown confident, as if while I watched her here! I had to admit to myself, the atmosphere startlingly refreshed and soothed. But her talk, the attitude displayed, sent the tiniest twisting screws of disturbance. She sounded too far gone into the biological, a mystic of lumpy carbon life. These weeks, I had been nudging her to that next level she had coveted, her protean dream. Yes, immersing herself in this chlorophyll-stuffed room, in her adoration of these druggy-effects, conveyed a bit of the protean. But she was sinking it into the primordial, the swamp basin and its frightful carboniferous gyres where forms steer mind, not raising it into the golden rectilinear where mind informs shape.

“You see, Sty, you feel it. It effects us the same way, Java does, the more silently we lie here. Because we’re all cells, we’re only neurons absorbing, you and I. So in here, we become as identical as we’ll ever get, even more than when we screw. Someday, Dearest, we should screw in here. After an hour absorbing. We’ll be identical, united. But not now. Now, we just become of the same mind, so we’ll be steeled. Steeled, for them.”

She faded off as though sleeping, although the radiance of her face told she was fully conscious. It was ethically incumbent upon me to insert my wedge of our rightful program and lever her back on course:

I tried to sound as woozy and matter-of-fact as the mood ordered: “I found a rare opportunity, through a best friend. This is the catapult. Dearest. To Proteus. I witnessed it.” (If only, at the show’s climax, I had not been cleaning up after Alby!) “It’s arrived. As I promised, you can both be a part and be a partner. They’ll be seeking, about one bill.”

Her eyes did not even flutter under her lids. But she remained stock-still conscious as she muttered. “Stu. Sty. Stuart Beholt. My Sty. Dearest. That’s all yours to deal with. You know that by now.”

I didn’t know what happened to the hour, if I slept or dreamed. At once we were standing and dressing.

Benton II’s home, the solemn festival’s site, was in University Park, on Thackery just south of Lovers Lane. A northern portion of the same Turtle Creek that flattered Alby’s digs lapped on low banks nearby, under dense trees. Hefty stone-and-brick homes which resembled stubborn kings on

squat thrones fronted the bending avenue. Benton's was just one ecru house amid the dull-colored set, with lofty winter-gray branches behind like stilled fans for his highness. There had to be a good arbor back there to hide these family goings-on from the other little princes on the street, especially with a replica *barn* enshrining it all. (Imagine Benton Reynaldo II's zoning feuds in court.)

I had to roll quite a ways along this sleepy residential lane to find parking space.

"*Everyone* has come out for this one," Irina said, "I think because the weather's been so mild and they can suffer the outdoor ritual. But I'm steeled. Let 'em fly."

In my rearview, the gray-green BMW that had become a regular rearview pal on our outings had pulled over, blocking a driveway, awaiting our emergence. It seemed a bit officious of him to go so far as to track us all the way into the event.

"I think, that you and I," Irina said, in her former, hesitant style, "have finally succeeded—in eluding them. In ending their infamous history of hogtying my love life.

"But, just watch out for Emilia," Irina added without a tinge of jealousy, with only dry warning, as if the sister were of greater threat to lives than either hitman or spy. "She's not your type, but she's a subtle bloodsucker. She's so subtle I'm the only one who knows her trick. They trail me and my relatively meager love life as if I'm some great sinner, while she's the Siren. I mean the bodies are awash about her ankles."

I pictured a scarlet-lipped vixen off a supermarket tabloid. Maybe her munching keeps threats to the collective family pocketbook at bay.

We sauntered along the sidewalk in the noon sun. Irina uttered, as to herself, “Nutting. Nutting,” or so it sounded, which must have been, “Nothing. Nothing.”

“But,” she went on, “don’t worry about Desi. Our cheap lazy PI stays on the job only because he was hired long ago. And Desi, too, I think, they’ve put on idle. They may fear your website’s renown and don’t know how Desi should approach you. He’s a harmless puppy when he’s not sniffing out a bite. Benton’s the one eying you today, I’m sure. He doesn’t move his face; only his pupils slink around. Big sis Rose is the chief Inquisitor of my sins, who puts the fires under Benton. But she’ll barely give you a hello, as if you’ve done nothing at all, good or bad. Clark, fully in their camp, is their know-nothing rubber stamp. He’ll talk to you or anyone about Colorado ghost mines. And remember I’m Moorea.”

Moorea pressed the doorbell. It sounded as if through a maze of sunny chambers, a bright silvery dinging of chimes. A man answered, I thought at first a butler, all in black. But I discerned a blue denim shirt under the jacket. He had worn black jeans like me. His snakeskin boots were blackened.

It was Benton Reynaldo II. While he shook my hand, his other cupped my elbow strongly. He spoke just above a whisper. “Good to make your acquaintance, Stuart. Welcome, welcome.”

In his small face, the eyes pushed close together and the brown mustache was just as furtive. And indeed the face stayed frozen while the eyes darted about. A maid took our coats, and Benton silently held out a palm for Moorea and me to proceed.

The front rooms were as sunlit and cheery as Irina’s were dank and neglected. All in aquamarine: fluffy carpet, puffy

armchairs. Oak-sided glass cases displayed Venetian glass and Tyrolean plates. A few guests scattered about, drinkless and snackless, on the edge of the divan or childishly draped at an askew angle on an easy chair as though merely awaiting transition to the next stage. The men, indeed, sported versions of the same ritual costume as I did, motley combinations of jeans, denim shirt and the boots. The women wore flowing loose dresses—much as Irina had originally described as Emilia’s perpetual attire—but in fact was, in basics, what Benton I’s wife had donned for the first-annual occasion. Some bared their shoulders; some had sleeves; many a red carnation. Amidst this scenery, and with over a hundred Reynaldo mills to my name—yes, my name only—I felt part of it all, or even that this room was mine, as if I were wedded to the family. At the same time, I sensed Benton II at my back and recalled Irina’s words about his “eying you today.” As people spoke to one another, they glanced at the newcomer.

Desi, the one not looking at anybody, stood in a corner. Unaccountably, Desi was not in the regulation get-up, but wore a floppy beige suit, white shirt, oxfords. Maybe it was his defiance, and maybe it was why he was alone.

As we passed through, Moorea was making the requisite exclamations of “It’s been so long!” and shaking hands and—a bit perplexing to witness in such an embattled family—hugging (only shoulders touching) with baby-soothing pats on the spine. It’s always startling to watch congeniality, and wholly convincing congeniality at that, among those about whom one has heard only horror. You almost wish they would pull out the coveted swords. (A fine pair shone above the fireplace.) She finally introduced me, although she always managed to be standing a pace ahead of me, as if I were her mere server.

Perhaps this manner was just habit developed with previous men in my position, or it was a stratagem to keep everyone flummoxed as to what my position with her might be. Still, they offered genuine hands and smiles. So I met “my aunt,” with no name given; “my sister,” no name given (but hardly a tabloid cover story, must be Rose); an uncle; an uncle with a name (I’ve forgotten); a cousin or two; spouses of these. With their uniformity of attire, they were starting to meld even in my photographic mind. It’s astonishing how much we depend upon attire not so much to judge strangers but to differentiate them. (Nudist colonies must go by bellies and upper-body sag.) I was looking like the only non-“official family” here. Not a one gave me hard eyes or asked what I do or even stooped to oh-I-follow-your-website. Despite some heavy local accents, the courtesy shone so, it inspired me to write an etiquette manual for my site. (I have not.) But the brightness also made me suspect Irina: why really she had brought me.

We came to a long and narrow veranda looking on the garden. The length of the room just fitted several tables end-on-end, all rustic, little more than sawed planks, seating about thirty, I guessed. The table setting was merely rough and dull ceramic plates, a few straw baskets holding folded cloth, what appeared to be bronze goblets, and frayed cloths for napkins. At one end of the table, the goblet was gold.

“If you’re starving,” Irina said *sotto voce*, “after this course, you’ll be more so.”

She had worn a sleeveless black gown, a permissible color, I surmised, but likely borderline acceptable, amid the satin whites and pinks, greens and lavenders. Hers was a rough cotton, just this side of gingham, perhaps her own statement,

subtle as Desi's was loud. Even with her voluptuous ample arms, her abundant hair up in a taut ball, she could have been a serving woman at this medieval inn or mourner at a Balkans' wake.

The guests quickly began filling the room, losing the kind glances into one another they had exhibited earlier. Their faces went silent. Each stood behind the high wooden chairs. I saw that, whatever the mild cheer in the other room, this occasion was no-frills.

Irina braved a whisper to me, "Don't say I didn't adequately prepare you."

Benton entered the room last, as precisely as prompted theater. He stood at table end with the gold goblet. His voice, though, came off as high and ringing as a CEO's at the company holiday dinner, announcing the door prizes. "Thank you everyone for attending the annual Reynaldo Christmas Celebration, ten years now after Father passed away, and forty-one since our Grandfather Benton. We're pleased everyone's turned out in such numbers—"

"And thank us all for *RSP*ing, Benny!" injected a red-faced boulder-headed man, apparently a rare attendee. No one rustled.

"For those who haven't been with us in a while," Benton continued, unfazed, "we recognize the value of the commemorations our father introduced into the celebration and the value these instill in us as members of his family and extended family. These values come to us as naturally as the blood our father poured into our veins. So, everyone, no need to stretch out the ceremony. Let's sit down to the Welcome Dinner."

The guests hesitated, eying the baskets on the table with constrained ravenousness. I expected them to draw straws, leap forward and dip into the baskets and pull out rocks to stone someone (me?). These hermetic rituals can be unnerving for audiences. But slowly, one or two started, pulling the chairs out with a grinding of raw oak on unpolished oak floor. Benton II was last to sit. And instead of reaching for the baskets themselves, maids reached over our shoulders. Onto each plate, they clanked a pellet of bread that indeed sounded as crusty as a stone. It was about the size and texture of a dog biscuit. Was this in fact the sort of bread Benton Reynaldo I had fed his children in the Dust Bowl years? The maids poured into our metal goblets from what appeared to be blue tin decanters with lacey white flowers. Had that country family drunk from such vessels?

Everyone waited until all were served. We heard only the steely clanks of the bread and slush of pouring. Then the three maids went out.

Benton II, erect, face dead as ever and eyes darting as if following flies, hesitated for moments, as priests do in mustering holiness and piety from congregants. He then lifted his dog biscuit in one hand. "Our grandfather Benton had only these morsels at dinner, as some of our aunts and uncles gathered here today recall. But we are the very incarnations of the blessings borne by such meek fruit. This bread, then, is the blessing of our lives and the very flesh that made him and us. As he would say, 'Let's eat, not forgetting where every chew comes from and where it ultimately goes.'"

Unabashed, the boulder-headed man could not restrain a low chuckle, and he dared one low remark, to his wife: “We all know where every bite ends up.” His wife turned as red as him.

Some people simply can’t read the hearts of those around.

The bread was, in fact, a bit surgical on the gums, each crumb knifelike. I snuck a side glance at my love, who ate respectfully, teeth emitting not a sound. The feat was as miraculous as firing off firecrackers without a sound. The whole table munched smoothly, meditatively, even the crude wisecracker, hunched now like a quieted pet. Moorea’s ready submission to the ordeal disturbed me like the scene from *Planet of the Apes*, when Charlton Heston and crew emerge from initial capture by the apes, showing scars on the temple where their captors had performed cerebral excisions. How much of Irina was forsaken in this crowd of blood?

Benton II uttered similar litany over Gallo-filled mugs. (This wine, he informed us, was in fact the same recipe Benton I had drunk: The Reynaldos had contracted with the vintner to resurrect the grapes and obsolete production of the label that Benton Clive had imbibed.) We commemorated the blood that Grandfather had shed in his struggle with Cayman and that had been recalled at these celebrations ever since. The wine in those bronze goblets certainly had the iron tang of a lick of vinegar off a steel cap (as metallic as any hemoglobin I had ever tongued). Benton II closed the dinner with, “We, and Reynaldos and kindred forever after, will do this in remembrance of Benton Clive.”

We retired, with only the sounds of rustic chair legs clawing on unfinished oak. The guests, knowing the steps,

moved through the veranda's sliding door into the garden. The boulder-headed man was getting some hushed tongue from his still reddened wife. His shoulders were hanging. Irina whispered to me, "That's a new in-law, a neophyte to our feasts, married my cousin two years ago. She can only blame her poor skills tutoring him." Irina squeezed my humble bicep. "You, my Man, only command my trust ever more. And that was already complete, from the start."

Now my purpose here today was edging on the horizon of consciousness.

The garden, either from outdoor heating or sun, was warm, as the maid at the front door had so wisely foreseen in unburdening us of our coats. The yard must have been a half-acre. Cedars forested it. Miraculously under that shade, St. Augustine grass grew plush, quite pine-green for December. And in the midst: the barn, realistically dilapidated, although here only six years. The flecked red paint had faded into the wood's gray; timbers sagged; the hayloft door leaned open on one hinge and sprigs of gray hay drooped out. The embracing cedar boughs hid the monstrosity from eyes beyond the fences. But not one offending odor, not even of cedar bark, sifted through this yard.

The crowd gathered on the lawn between veranda and barn, Benton II at the head again. His head bowed, but still fixed on the group, I kept expecting an alb and miter to sprout from him. "Let us take a moment to turn our thoughts to Grandfather Benton Clive Reynaldo, and how, many decades ago, in this humble structure, bravely he refounded his ancestral faith. And to our father Jeremy Reynaldo, who refounded this structure on our Louis Quatorze homestead and

continued this annual offering of our respects for his own father's intrepid feats."

The one thing Benton II neglected here, I noted, was the unforgivable act of the Louis Quatorze's current owners, the Kerteszes. They had agreed, orally, to retain the barn for the day Jeremy would buy back the home. Out of typical Jeremy Reynaldo neglect or pride, he had not made the agreement formal. But days after the sale closing, the new owners ignominiously razed the humble structure. Like felling Lincoln's log cabin. The name Kertesz went unspoken in this household.

Of course alluding now to this historical fact would only pop today's illusion.

"It was the refounding of the ancestral faith, building on the strength of what the family had been for millennia, Father realized, that had made his father who he was, and him who he was to become, and we who we are still becoming."

Benton went silent, on that odd note, and all heads stayed bowed. In this mid-city arbor, the only sounds reaching us were cedar fronds shifting in the breeze through high boughs just under the clear blue. A spasm of hilarity, of the sort you get in church at age twelve during unbearable pauses in the pastor's prayer's, attacked me. I fought hard to contain it from spreading beyond my stomach. I kept expecting Irina to whisper something like, "The same damn speeches, word for word, every year, how can they hold the least mote of meaning anymore?" But she stayed fixed on the commanded meditation before her, as if nothing could hold more meaning than each letter of these rites.

And so she remained as the group moved inside the barn. She kept close enough to me her body heat and its rich odors wafted to my face, but never touching me. Benches lined one end of the barn, and before them, a plain wood lectern draped in purple velvet and lit from overhead spots. The word was that Benton Clive II had attained some kind of ordination, perhaps by mail-order, to sanctify his holy doings. Today, the crowd did not take the cordoned benches but stood at the far end. What literally startled me was that behind the rostrum, I guessed in what would be the “choir,” stood some actors in 1930’s railroad-workers’ costumes. Lit by the spots, they had the four-dimensional crispness of full-sized wax tableaus you see in museums. Once the barn door closed behind us, on some cue, the actors set to work. “Aroint, ya dad-blamed fool, Benton Clive, I heerd ya startin’ a church in yer own durn barnyard!”

I picked out “Benton Clive” before he could muster a response: Shirtless, Godlike as Odysseus, he could certainly crunch skulls between his flexed bicep and forearm. But he was soft-spoken, kind, slow to excite, while the taunting Cayman was loud, raspy, and roly-poly as Benito Mussolini. Benton II stood in the “wings” narrating. I was reminded of the Nativity and Steps to the Cross skits I’d done in church in Clay County. We witnessed the two combatants descending on their boss Pylon while he was shaving in his office. Good props: he was applying the old-timey kind of cream from a brush and soap-dish. The audience responded with a throaty canned laughter at the cute scene, as Pylon offered the two men his brush and soap for a shaving-cream fight in the railroad yard. Cayman grabbed the chance and, as actors so love to do, they went plowing right through audience for the barn entrance. But Cayman accidentally brushed a wad of foam on a woman, (one to whom

I might have been introduced, as far as I could tell in the shadow). She yelped and leapt back, hands going for the mess on her gown, while he sped on, mumbling, “Sorry, missus.” He had splattered her right on the chest, which did jut out substantially, into the actors’ path. She grabbed herself and wiped and shook off the cream, which flew onto the floor and others around her. She kept massaging the offended area to lave it well, while we all watched.

“You’re leaking, honey,” said the boulder-headed guy, forgetting his earlier shame.

“That wouldn’t be the only way she’s leaking,” Irina whispered to me, breaking from her earlier spell.

“Maybe you should go wash off, hon,” an older woman said, “that stuff’s not good for the fabric.”

“It’s only soap, why should I care?” the victim said with a voice, not of defiance, but of reason. But she stepped ahead of the others, out the door and, I figured, to the house.

Behind the actors and Benton II, we guests proceeded outside, if brightened and rudely shaken from the solemn mood. The two disputants accosted the rail-yard manager Harrold to help arbitrate their quarrel, and Harrold declared he would pass judgment on a religious matter only upon a sign from God. But if given no such sign, he warned that any such dispute must stay off company property. No sign appeared, and so the ruckus mounted as the two tromped out of the rail-yard and coworkers leapt in—actors flying out of the bushes. Benton Clive’s pal Sam took up for him: “You dad-blamed Yankee squirts, you, ain’t got no toleration for a man’s freedom of religion.”

That sparked the free-for-all, which rolled right up a low grassy hill that, obviously, Benton II had constructed, unnatural in this flatland. At the summit, the tussle settled into hands-on-neck wrestling and kicking and boxing between Benton Clive and Cayman. Friends pulled at them and thwacked each other. The crowd, now—the *guests*—in a little development of which Irina had never enlightened me, began rooting for Benton Clive. They sounded huffy as football fans in front a TV set. The noise could well have roused the neighbors had it not been so footballish. Finally, Cayman pulled back from Benton Clive and slammed him with an upthrust fist right under the chin. Benton Clive choked, grabbing for his throat, while the crowd chanted, “Go, Bent, go, Bent, go for the kill, Benton Clive!” joined by Sam. Benton II was even leading us like a choirmaster. As if emboldened by these spirits of his future family, Benton Clive gathered strength in a chest-swelling breath and a colossal fist and rushed at Cayman. He blew him right in the temple, and with a crack of the skull—the sound-effects were excellent, whoever did them—Cayman collapsed. The skull, split in two white pieces, bled. Great visuals. The crowd, with all due respect for the corpse, merely cooed their cheers for Benton Clive Reynaldo.

The great grandfather stood over the body, looking upward, looking toward the future, as jaw-dropping colleagues shrank back. Noble-purple lighting beamed onto his glistening shaven torso.

“For his defense of his life and our right of conscience,” Benton II narrated, “Chillocothe County crucified our grandfather Benton Clive. But he, of course, forever withstood death.”

I am leaving out much of the spectacle, the rambling speeches and flights of bombast: The thing ran on almost two hours. And everyone but, apparently, me was frighteningly enrapt, including my dear Irina. Those two hours included a return to the barn to witness the Trial of Benton Clive. And during that pause, what with all the wine I had swilled to absorb the sand-dry dog biscuit, I merited Moorea's approval to excuse myself.

It was in the process of self-relief, in the house, I encountered another Reynaldo mystery.

I had to wait a good while outside the washroom. Someone inside interminably ran a faucet with a hollow plunge of water as into an unstoppered drainpipe. The water would cease, then recommence. Whispers inside the door seemed to scuffle. In a marble corridor, I faced a chocolate-white door in gold trim. The floor and both walls, all but the ceiling, shone with smooth white stone. At one end, high up, was a brassy mirror, with convex glass, recalling the less-posh sort you see in warehouses or in guarded entranceways so one can see around corners. Yet, the spied-upon in the corridor could as well spy the spies.

In the hidden room beyond, dim and leathery like an old-fashioned smoking room, I discerned my and Irina's beloved cheap PI. He faced me squarely, unabashed as ever, as on that flurry day at the park's lakeside. Although the pinpoints of our eyes could have hardly shown in that curved glass, I stared right back. He, good guest, seemed to wear the regulation get-up: jeans, denim shirt, snakeskin stompers. But I soon detected beside him—the outrageous beige suit being light enough in

that dark to give him away—Desi. The two heads appeared bent toward one another, as though they were comparing notes about their specimen here.

But it was another discovery that surprised me.

I was about to go ask my spies where was the next washroom, or rudely shake the doorhandle. Then the faucet halted and soon the handle turned.

TEST DOCUMENT

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II.

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11.

A woman emerged, luminous in her lavender gown in this brilliant marble corridor. She at once noted me hovering hard over the door and abruptly pulled it shut. “Not yet!” she said. The half-liter of liquid in me instantly felt to double in volume.

She remained, hand on doorknob as though I would crash in anyway.

“Someone’s finishing up,” she said. You would think, being seen emerging from a washroom with someone else inside, she would blush. Instead, her lightly tanned face bloomed with a smile as if she were visiting with the sun. Like almost all the women, she wore a red carnation, and it only magnified her radiance. The brilliance was so great, I took it as a compliment, bestowed because it was me in particular standing there.

She relaxed the puffed-up guard stance. “I believe we’ve met.” She extended a white-gloved hand (the other stayed on the doorknob). “You’re Moorea’s. Stuart Beholt.”

“Ah, yes.” I recalled her from the salon, where she had been dimmer. Here she flamed. Her fine natural blond hair stood high in a swirled wrap; blue eyes provided entrances to her mind. But Irina, per usual, had provided no name.

The woman read my awkwardness and helped: “Rose. Moorea’s sister.” She held my hand only by the fingertips, but firm under that silk glove. Finally she let go the doorknob and took my fingertips in both sets of hers.

“Ah, yes.” And the name sent a cat of panic chasing my inner mouse. She released my fingertips, and her regal gaze felt like all that Irina had forewarned: offering not merely entryways into her mind, but earth-borers into mine. In my peripheral vision, the round mirror gazed as well.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a few minutes,” she said. “I apologize we’re such inadequate hosts. But if you wish, there’s another washroom, not for guests, in the back.”

“Oh no, no. My only regret is that we’re missing minutes of the commemoration.”

“Yes, I never miss a moment. Every year, it’s moving. It’s always fresh.”

I noticed Rose was as attractive, in a blond, Nordic fashion, as Moorea was in her black passionate way. Where Moorea was round and gentle-lined, Rose was hard-jawed and heavy-browed. Her gown’s long sleeves stopped at her shoulders and bared them, angular and so silvery white they reflected the corridor’s light. You could not see, though, how these two women had come from identical genetic stock. Maybe they hadn’t.

“For a first-timer,” Rose continued, “perhaps it only appears like a play. But it’s much more. In ancient times, Aeschylus was no mere theater but a cultural rite. It was masque and music, dance and chant. It told the people who they were. It united them. I imagine you get that sense here today.”

“Why of course.”

This was the Chief Inquisitor, in Irina’s words.

“Good. Very good. You’re beginning with the right frame of mind.”

This was the one who supposedly would hardly give me a hello. She had not given the hello indeed, although she had started the conversation.

“Then don’t worry if you miss a few moments. We’re very understanding, you’ll find. You’re a sharp man. You’ll fill in whatever you missed. Or, I hope for you, you’ll fill it in at another time.”

Here came my Reynaldo surprise: I felt so pinned, as a select specimen under examination, it ting-tinged the private parts. For someone to stand rigidly before you and stare down your mind to the bottom of your gut can be astoundingly exciting. While you flail around inside for a grip. As the two pinpointy-eyed men in the round glass watched me, I quietly begged her mouth to attack me ever more.

Yet, the lofty Rose stood above all that. “But,” she nodded, “I tell you, it’s a different experience every year. Entirely. Sometimes actors, sometimes—who knows?”

She turned about, in such a way her vigilant pupils on me were the last to go. They spoke of complete assurance of me, that I would not barge into the washroom, which had never been locked after her exit. And onward the pupils proceeded, under the mirror and out of the corridor, with never a goodbye.

The words revolved in me, “fill in another time,” “different experience every year.” What confidence that I would attend the next commemoration. So had the Inquisitor inquisitioned? And had I passed? Had Irina’s unspoken ruse for me here today, down to the aloof way she had introduced me to all in the salon, run its course? Unlike the in-law Boulder-Headed Man, Beholt the Man had slid in graciously? As I had long been suspecting, the day had begun appearing to

take the prenuptial social route—and that route, here in the corridor, grew ever more thrilling. Ah, permanently tied to all *this*! But the real mystery under this mirror was how differently Rose was in life from how Irina had painted her. Rose, if hard, proved kind; if haughty, then amiable; if harsh, actually sympathetic. Hardly cruel, but human. And, far under there, passionate.

I hope for you she had said.

Irina, I'm kind of liking this idea, the knot. It's not just a ruse to keep Desi at bay?

The sound of what could have been a hair dryer, humming for moments in my subconscious, abruptly shut off, in the washroom.

Again, that white and gold door crept open, this time with more hesitation than was good for my groin's fluid gauge. My sense of entertainment was looking for a well-groomed jet-haired youth to emerge, for the four eyes in the spy mirror. But when edges of another gown showed, a bright green one, bare arm, through me a greater buzz shivered: a *homo* tryst, at that! The woman dawdled at the half-open crack, as if she smelled my nosing. But she was brushing the front of her dress. Smoothing out the evidence! Finally, she came on out, clicking the light switch, then caught me observing and froze.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea anyone was waiting."

I recognized the woman who had been swiped with shaving cream.

"No problem." I amused myself by rubbing in how I had witnessed the bathroom tryst: "I had a good chat with the woman who had just come out."

“Oh, Rose. She was so helpful. I’m ashamed to say, you might have noticed that actor splotted me. I dropped my gown in the washer-dryer on speed-cycle, but still there was a stain. So she tracked down some stain-remover. It isn’t even her house.”

The woman stumbled so rapidly through her words they sounded like a likely story. But indeed, her gown was wet, over the breast. My naughty little mind was still trying to connect the moisture to someone’s mouth. But the spot was the large and rough-roundedness of having been swirled by a determined rag, with not a shadow of stain promising to remain after drying. With surprising abandon before a stranger, she pulled out the fabric and chafed it, often accidentally rubbing her self.

She lacked a red carnation.

“But I won’t keep you.” She made a movement to go and, badly as I needed her to clear out, I shot out:

“That was awful arrogant of that that actor.”

“Wasn’t it?” She stayed. Switching her eyes about as if watching for overhearers, she lowered her voice. “Actors for such an event as this. It’s the most banal stunt I’ve seen.”

So critical, she couldn’t be a Reynaldo, unless she was merely hot over the offense. She at least could not be the third sister, the tabloid vixen, being almost matronly, matronly before her years, what with the wide, almost stumpy upper arms just waiting to loosen, the rounding jaw, the light hair on its last stand before losing its hint of reddish.

I said, “You haven’t seen the show with actors before?”

“With or *without* actors, all the same. Don’t tell anyone I’m telling you. It’s just an opinion. But an informed one.”

Whoever this was, I still had to be diplomatic. “It’s rather touching. It’s my first viewing.”

“Ah, you’re the—! Moorea’s—. I was a bit late and missed introductions. I have actual work on Saturdays. I’m Emilia Reynaldo, her sister. Rose’s sister as well.”

She offered a full, quick, business handshake. Emilia? This filled-out woman? She might have been a senator or secretary of state. Not one glitter-speck of the vamp. Another misrepresentation of Irina’s. But I saw the family resemblance: Rose’s square Nordic forehead and light hair, Irina’s roundness and fleshiness. Yet where Rose and Irina beamed bright, this one’s eyes simmered as if observing from far within, wisely. Where Irina spoke high and sweet and Rose high and grand, this one spoke tenor and sure.

Still, Irina’s portrait of her kept me cautious. “Stuart Beholt,” I said. “Moorea never divulged your line of work—if you have to work Saturdays: I sympathize.”

“A nonprofit I oversee I won’t bore you with. But you, in your line of work,” she again lowered her voice, “this sort of show must be pretty far afield for you.”

“In my line of work, I remain open to whatever humans can do.”

“Whatever they can do! My line of work, yes, I remain open. But I have some concerns here. Do you know how much this show cost?”

“It can’t be too ridiculous.”

“For Reynaldos! What about by world standards?”

I saw that this woman dwelled far from my manner of thinking. But I was only more intrigued why Irina had portrayed Emilia so inaccurately. Even the hair—not really red

as Irina had implied. But who would dye a red to this almost-graying whiteness?

Bursting at the groin, I loitered.

I said, "It would have been much cheaper in Zimbabwe, given the exchange rate."

"No, that might have employed some unemployed Zimbabweans. My brother could not have countenanced that."

"So he—Benton II, I take it—is the impresario?"

"Don't give it such a highfalutin title. There's a whole fund our father established for this annual celebration of him. Can you believe, he formed a nonprofit corporation for it. This," she waved her hands in a wide circle, "is a charity."

I saw this woman dwelled far from Rose's manner of thinking. And from Irina's. No red carnation. How could the same genetics have formed such varied souls? Perhaps one or other of the brothers resembled, on the inside, one of these three.

"I take it this is not the sort of charity you work for," I said.

Her head dropped back as if a flying pancake had hit it. She eased into a smile. "I *thought* you would understand. Moorea is such a good pretender at these occasions. And on your web site, if you want, for all I care you can reveal what I just told you about these shindigs being funded by a *U.S. nonprofit*. I don't think it's ever been revealed. Put me down as quoting it."

My puffing bladder was about to unbuckle my belt. Could Irina have confused her own sister's names, so it was actually Rose who dripped with swampy sexuality? Or these two in the

washroom had conspired an identity-switch, a party-game for the first stranger they encountered?

“I’m afraid my site is not a news-breaker,” I said.

“I know, it’s not terribly serious.”

“I take my work terribly seriously, ma’am.”

“No doubt you do. But you must have ulterior plans. Everyone on Silicon Mountain does.”

Unlike Rose, who penetrated her interlocutor with a singeing rod, Emilia seemed to thwack accidentally upon the truth while flailing in the dark. And that made me feel she wanted guiding. She evoked not an iota of fear. Yet, all this could be as much play as the one outdoors.

“Of course I would like to keep expanding business,” I said.

“In which directions?”

“Really the same, with a different flavor. Less self-helpy. Still edging humanity into greater stages.”

“Don’t we all wish,” she sighed. “Yes, I *thought* you would have a big picture. I can just feel it’s bigger than most of you silicon mountaineers’. I like a big picture; more people need to have one. I feel everything I do is working toward it.”

“What a conversation to have at a washroom door.” I hoped she would see my immediate, smaller-picture need and wait here till I was done. But she only smiled, with sunrays at the outer sides of the eyes. Remembering the tale about Emilia’s disastrous city-council run (if Irina got that right!), and momentarily wanting to quash her from my curiosity and move on, I said, “You’re a politician?”

“I have to do *something* more than the theoretical. My theory demands it. I’ve done plenty theory-theory. Nine years

for a Princeton doctorate was nine in the docket. I couldn't tolerate our father's restricting us to home-schooling; even got a lawyer. Next, papers in fourteen professional journals attest I've served the time. And I still have to serve the time. Research, write, writhe the hands. But five years ago, when I was done in Jersey, I was a Dalmatian breaking out of the fence, no longer could just race my tracks around the yard, had to go lay those tracks in the big world. Rawls—my topic—is about global justice, and you can't stay indoors. So I came back to home town. And, yes, politics is one way to lay real tracks."

"And charities."

Her smallish eyes, dark and hidden by sleepy eyelids, turned to somewhere around my chin, then away, for quite a pause. "Stuart, there are many ways of 'edging humanity to greater slopes,' as I'm sure you're aware. You asked for my big picture, and that's it, in a thumbnail—if it can fit! Now it's your turn."

Abruptly, two more people had entered the corridor, apparently feeling wine's gravity, and I let that fact serve as her last sentence's meaning. "Yes, I should move along." And I turned toward the door.

"You can do more with that web site," she said, sending the sting of conscience as those full of social conscience do so well.

"It's doing more than you think."

In clear earshot of the corridor's newcomers, she said, "Let me think on that, and I'll tell you any ideas." It came off so business-like, overhearers could hardly have mistaken it as a call for anything but idea exchange.

Once I shut the door, bad though I had once needed to go, I paused at the door's towel rack. The graduate degree, the spiel of a scholarly career: that really had to be Emilia, not Rose. That could not have been acting, not two peoples' practical joke on me. Rose, the imperious leader, was the Rose I had met. So why had Irina painted Emilia as the passion poison?

Not thinking, I went to the sink, bodily urgency fled, and washed my hands. The faucets were gold. Or that must have been gold plate. A patch of the hot-water knob had worn down to the steel underneath.

Irina, you don't mean I had not decoded you!

12.

My fury at Irina for having misconstrued her family persisted through the rest of the spectacle. I had little patience for any gala dinner, until I could get out of earshot and have some words with her. True, though, after today's theater was done, I did go on to score more success with her brothers than I could attribute to my easy manner. Did my pique over her family portrayals drive me to discover how the rest of them corresponded with her stories?

The spectacle's final scene had been an excruciatingly long rendition of Benton Clive's trial; it must have incorporated the entire original court transcript, down to every last snuffle of the bailiff. The ever-devout audience drank it in. The jury's pronouncement of Benton Clive's innocence was met not with the earlier cheers upon Cayman's morally just death, but with the sighs of legal justice done. Then Benton II before the emptied "courtroom" briefly narrated the remaining life of Benton Clive and son Jeremy. He concluded with the refrain, "As long as we're Reynaldos, which we hope will be an eternity, we will commemorate those who made us what we are today." After a pause, he added the last word, "And that includes repossessing our family home, the Louis Quatorze Father built." *That*, now, ignited a storm of huzzas that roared for three minutes.

I approached Benton II soon after, diplomatically, about that last topic, as a businessman to a "businessman." (Or so I

flattered him, pocketing like gold the ersatz “business” card he handed me.) I shook his hand for the moving, deeply beautiful commemoration. “And how *do* you hope to regain the family home?” I said.

“We don’t just hope, Stuart. We’re on it twenty-four-seven.”

“Wow, with that manpower, I’d think you’d clinch it in a week.”

Unfazed, he rattled away. “The current residents are renting, over two hundred thou a month. From Qatar, royal family. Are here like twice a year, to see their poor relations. Not interested in buying from the owners, don’t want maintenance hassles. You usually can’t keep such a high-end rental full, but they’ve been there five years. We’ve pleaded with them just to let us take over the lease. But this is the best property in North Texas. They laugh because American families have no ‘royal.’ Our lawyers plug the owners with monthly offers we bump up one percent every month. We’ve pushed the Make-Me-Buy offer on Zillow up to six times the market value.”

I had to test him. “What’s that market, Benton?”

He faced me straight-on, and for the first time, those ever-flitting eyes rested on me so hard that I knew, before he spoke, I had him. “Eighty-four million.”

Six times that makes half a billion. He was whipping the cloak of “stranger” off from the person of Stuart Beholt and revealing the family coffers. I felt, that moment, that Rose, after our corridor visit, had already spread a good note about me. But I attributed most of this ready chumminess to Benton II’s fetal stature as a businessman.

“It looks like years’ of plugging these gents with ever-tastier offers isn’t taking.”

“They’re close-minded fools. We’re open-minded. We’re even open to suggestions.”

“You might try talking to the owners in-person.”

He returned to his aloof-butler eminence that he’d displayed upon welcoming me and Moorea at the door, shoulders back, chest out, chin high. “None of us can bear the presence of such people.”

“They must have a side you can appeal to. Everybody has that side.”

The way Benton II could avoid your glance made you feel you were as offensive as that family.

“After all, they like your father’s house,” I said.

“They’re simply mean. They don’t care for the house. Renting it out!”

“All business is personal. Particularly real-estate.”

“How talk to those people? Invite them to my humble home for a cocktail?”

“How about going through a representative?”

“Who has our interests but us?”

“A seasoned businessperson can hold any interest.” At that point, still in the shadows as to Irina’s ruse, I took a stab at it: “But I believe I have a deeper one here.”

He shook his head, and in the traveling eyes I saw some calculating intelligence. “That’s kind of you,” he said. “But that would take some discussion.” It must have been unconscious, but he swiveled a glance about the room, likely for Rose.

I came away from this visit feeling good, the body-opiate tingle after a mere inkling of triumph in a boardroom. Benton checked out to be much like Irina's portrait of him. He grabbed his brother Clark, the "rubber stamp," who passed near, and introduced me. "Father always said a good businessman is worth knowing," Benton told him. Clark, as my *Dearest* foretold, did gab, jawing away not about ghost mines but Monaco coinage. A head shorter than Benton II, he greased down his short black brush-top. The smooth cheeks prolonged an age thirteen despite the blue sheen of shaven ebony bristles. The thick bifocals only kept him locked in his crystalline world of hobbies. His wife stood even shorter and dreamier, although equally pretty in her nonstop grin and white gloves to the elbow.

Irina had as perfectly described her brothers as she had botched her sisters.

Even Desi lived up to the image she had conjured, but with a surprise. After the dinner, which was as lavish as the lunch had been stark, bellyfuls of Gallo sent guests weaving among one another in the rooms. I ran upon Desi in that strange "smoking chamber" where, in the curved mirror, I had viewed him alongside the cheap PI. Now he was alone in the lightless room that dimmed with the falling day. Still in his floppy beige suit, he slumped in a hard chair with a padded leather back. He apparently didn't hear me enter. Before him on the table, a clean-wiped plate stared back. For a moment I had a wave of pity for this creature. Yes, pity for a creature who might be some kind of hit-man and be worth—if his sister's means were any indication, and I couldn't imagine him squandering a penny—at least a hundred mill. That wiped plate looked like a prisoner's waiting for the scullion.

(Or had he been disinherited due to some darkly distant misdeed, and that fact had formed the stick enforcing his duties?)

I almost turned as quickly as I had entered, but this curio intrigued even more than the other Reynaldos. Going on in, I made some noise, scuffling. He looked up, without a startle (a person long past fear of anything).

“Oh, someone’s here,” I said. “Don’t mean to intrude! I just wanted some quiet.”

As on the day I’d met him, he remained askance to me. Whereas Benton II glanced everywhere, Desi nowhere. He also said nothing.

“Wonderful meal. Sea ray and truffles,” I went on. “Imported langoustines. I think the raspberry tart permanently stained my palate.”

It is difficult to soliloquize when your listener won’t respond.

I kept pushing. “Not like the lunch, hey? That was impressive, such a ceremony.”

He winced, as if he were searching for an appropriate response. I was making progress, but he was still stumped for answers.

“You’re, uh—?” I helped him. “One of Moorea’s brothers? Didn’t we meet last month, at some function?”

“I don’t recall. Yes, now I recall. Her new house.”

“Yes, her new house! So you remember who I am?”

His face, so large and heavy, could have been sinking with thought, more thought than he was prepared to have forced upon him today.

I said, “That new house really takes your breath. Literally! What great odors.”

“Yeah, it’s charming.”

“Charming—? The splendor, the light, the open space is like the Earth itself. I’ve often wondered—you know, I never asked her—of course I’ve never been in the Louis Quatorze. But I just now realized, could she have been replicating a splendor—?”

Desi’s glance shifted with the word “Louis Quatorze.” He turned almost toward me a moment. I grabbed at my chance and milked it. “I guess you’ve been in the Louis Quatorze,” I said. “You must have spent some of your childhood there.”

A movement short of spasm passed through his shoulders. He swayed faintly back and forth at the chest, like a rabbi remembering a prayer.

“You must have fond memories from there,” I said.

“Fond? Maybe that’s like calling Moorea’s place ‘charming.’”

“An understatement,” I said uselessly. So this boy shows some intelligence, if you prick him in the right place. He might have articulated the Reynaldos’ sentiment better than the whole commemoration had. Why, *that’s* why he had sat it out in here.

“Yeah, there’s no way to put it in words,” I went on. “I can really feel that.”

But then, I could not go on. I checked an urge to share how, after my talk with Benton II, I might pitch in on retrieving their home. I discerned a hypersensitive Reynaldo here. It was too early in my projected new role with Benton II to assuage Desi with any hope I might provide. He would seize upon the

least incongruity or insincerity in my utterance. To gain proper sincerity, I need more time to formulate where I stand.

After a few more words, I let him be. My newest Reynaldo surprise gripped me. Desi, the feared, may be the most devastated Reynaldo. He may be the Reynaldo soul-keep.

Through even such a pleasing surprise, my fury with my *Dearest* roared, until we were walking to the car at twilight. Why, *Dearest*, did you portray Emilia so radically, and Rose markedly, different from their true natures? Only our footsteps on the sidewalk resounded through this lull of a Saturday evening, while neighborhood folks indoors readjusted their spirits for the night's excursions. Chill air, the type that's particularly sharp after a noon that peaked just short of warm, invaded the collar and down the spine. I had no sense what kept Irina shut up, beyond mere social exhaustion.

In the car, I adjusted my side mirror, which someone had bumped. Then in my rearview, the sight of the street empty of pedestrians and the gray-green BMW empty of a driver hit me. "Our cheapo PI is not coming out to join us," I said.

Irina twisted all the way around in her seat to look, staying so as we slipped down the street. "Huh!" she said. "It really may have worked. It may have convinced them."

I needed not, by now, ask her what "it" was. But I was feeling sorely abused, if *it* were a mere ruse and no more. I chose my words—yes, I admit—slyly. "So, somehow, they've come to believe, during today's event, that I am not just another in your history of lightning strikes."

She settled back in her seat, and I sensed from the side of my face her calm, satisfied simmer. "We may have broken them out of their bad habits toward me."

“And did you employ any magical word in this effort to break those habits?”

Despite her shoulder harness, she leaned against her door and continued the warm emanation. “It was not just any word I employed. It was your performance. It was both of ours. You saw that in-law, the husband of my cousin, the one hurling the crass jokes.”

“Boulder Head.”

“I was happy he showed up. You shone out against him like a searchlight over a mudpit. Everyone came up to me and uttered what a find you were. Even Rose—Rose, Sty. Rose of the stitched-up rear end. High and mighty Rose of the Reynaldo Circuit Court. She whispered to me she had a delightful conversation with you in the hallway. First time in my life she said anything positive about me and mine.”

So my respectfulness tactic with Rose had worked. Still, the name of Rose got my heart a-pattering.

“We talked not two minutes, about nothing,” I said.

“She can read pages from a flutter of an eye. The Master-Mind herself reported to her puppet, the Master-General Benton, and official word seeped down the ranks. I’m sure. So the afternoon slid smoothly, down to our view out your back window just now.”

Turning onto Lovers Lane, I checked again, and still no headlights followed us. “Whatever word you used still must have clinched it for all of them. What had you told beforehand?”

Irina faced forward again, rubbing her palms on her thighs. “It was just a ruse, Sty, I’m not putting anything on you that you don’t want. I told them that for the first time in my life

I found someone marriageable. I said ‘marriageable,’ didn’t say we would. It worked, that’s what’s important. Look out your mirror, it worked.”

“Just a ruse?” I said. Flaying myself—*Sty, get a hold of your silly sentiments*. But I felt I should be on my knees before her lap. Instead, I kept my eye rigidly on the sparse traffic, and my peripheral vision revealed she did the same. My fury at her momentarily subsided.

We rolled along miles, no word of where we were going. We should be pulling over and lolling on one another’s cheeks and making outrageous plans. Instead, my earlier fury, which now seemed pointless, reared its little worm head again. It emerged in pesky worm-snaps at her. “Then at first, in the salon, why were you introducing me to everybody in such an odd way, keeping me a pace behind you?”

“*Sty*, you exaggerate. I didn’t want to throw you in their face, like I’d done with boyfriends in the past. I had to be subtle. You see, now they think we’re low-libido.”

So I was just another in her long line, and her ruse was just to protect her continuing that line?

Watch it, *Sty Beholt*, your ego will get you hooked.

I went on, “And why did you wear a red carnation, if you don’t really—believe?”

“But it *worked*. *Sty*, aren’t you with me on this?”

Alby left a text-message, which I retrieved only upon arriving at Irina’s:

My Chippie-Chip is working, my Chippie! You gotta hear the results. The new corp. is finalized. We'll be doing the IPO, week after Xmas, 500 million shares, eleven apiece, so the lawyers (me) advise. Once we release these results, public will snort up them shares in minutes. AND, Chippie pal, just got a prototype on a new toy, advance has the CS/AI community worldwide will pay any bucks for one. Not the lay herd, but the pro herd — one of THESE little teat-feeders born every minute too. Upon ITS IPO this'll knock over even the Chippie-Chip. Hands deep in your pockets, boy. Stay geared.

In the bed I leapt up to sitting position. This was the longest text, 488 characters, I had ever received. It was the first I had received from Alby in a year.

Irina and I sprawled in her Holiest of Holies. She had filled the air with cinnamon, among the cheapest aromas you can find, but she said it works miracles on the pubic nerves. She also forced on me a sweet, fruity and strongly bitter “herbal” drink, which she told me, when halfway finished, was laced with ketamine, yes a date-rape drug. Now why a couple who screwed an average of twice-per-date, three dates per week,

should need such a concoction, I could not fathom. Yet I had to pretend to, to keep up my image of ever reading her mind. Still it was too early to pin any drug effect on my heart-ripping response to the text.

“You aren’t leaving!?” Irina veritably screeched, pushing up onto elbows. I could have been absconding with her child. Her position on the sheets, in that gown, made her more seductive. The folds of the satin lent sheens that spread tight along the lines of her thighs as if they burned. Now as she leaned, her breasts bowled toward me in their fabric. Her hair curled and boiled all over her bare shoulders.

“We have to put some eggs in this,” I said, holding the phone screen at her. “Right now.”

She glanced at it not a split-second and laughed, derisively, as though I were a three-year-old chasing fireflies to light my room. She pushed the phone away. “No, baby, I’m not letting you mix play and serious bed-work any more.”

“Have I ever?”

“Maybe you never send emails under the sheets, but you’re thinking them. You’re always up and dashing out.” She grabbed at the phone like she was going to crumple it.

“Just two seconds, then we get down to ‘business.’ This is a friend, good friend, known him years, he’d never give me a bum tip. This may be our chance of a decade.”

“I’m giving you the chance of a dick aid,” she said. Irina swatted at the phone again, slapping my wrist. I yelped and fell back, turning off the phone and slipping it safely under the bed just in time. She landed all over me, and the satin and cinnamon, the flesh so satiny under satin, on my cheeks and arms and chest, I almost collapsed. “You’re staying all night,

Chippie,” she said. She’d caught at least *that* word from my phone screen. “You’re giving it to me the way I’ve always wanted you to, Chippie boy. It’s going to be this way from now on.”

She’d had too much Gallo.

“All right, but one more second,” I said, and it was becoming hard to concentrate. The cinnamon, yes even the scent under her arms, from her sweating chest in the satin, from the very pit of her, about overwhelmed my hands. They settled on her broad cheeks. “We need to have forces mustered this week. As many soldiers as possible.” I was no longer thinking of what I was saying, to what import. I knew only that the money she had given me had already gone into investments, and I hated to pull them out so soon for this new offer, but perhaps that would be the best thing, given this opportunity. And I still felt they were kind of her goods, and she might want to offer a word about their destiny.

She whispered, inches from my lips. “Sty, my man, you’re mixing your play with my business. Didn’t I tell you just play with that stuff elsewhere? And you’re so swollen now.”

With an abrupt if smooth effort, she rolled over me and, still holding me, reached into the drawer and pulled out an envelope. “Put it with your friend, wherever,” she said. And I don’t know how, but I had the impolite gall to open the envelope while she hovered over me emitting the most wonderful human fragrances that a swampy good body possesses. The one point of control I had that evening was in not blinking at the number I saw there. It instantly told me that I, or that strange little pot of figures I was accumulating with

her, had just about doubled in value. Alby was going to be proud of his text message.

In that instant I also grasped, after our day with her family, what she was handing me in these envelopes. She was hardly handing payment. She was offering tokens of a bond surer than marriage. From our first day she trusted me even more than she would herself or a spouse—not to give the goods back, and not to not abscond with them. Those were irrelevant issues. Strange as it struck me, she indeed did not care about the funds; they were more intangible than paper. Rather she trusted that we viewed identically what was of value. So whatever I did with those funds had to be whatever she would do or have me do, if she only had some ideas in that arena. Only *us* had substance.

I lay the paper under the bed. “It’s practically vulgar of us to deal with such stuff when we have better things to do,” I said.

“Then let’s don’t do that again.”

I don’t know what took over me. Perhaps the lessons of Irina’s spirit were seeping into my skin. I was, as she said, wealthily swollen. I filled her with that wealth many times, as she offered her coffers from all angles and attitudes. I found it an interesting prospect, for a change, to “stick around,” not hop away home as impatient me was prone. While she was making quite a ruckus, the tenth or twelfth time, leaning forward there on her elbows and forearms, the rest of her pointed high skyward, asking for ever more because now she just could not stop and so I should not either, I had a glimmering that she must have given a real “concocktion.” How unlike me, all this grabbing and licking. Yet I quickly lost the thought. But then the day’s fury still rolled me high in its waves. Often I felt like

the neap tide pounding the seawall Irina. Take that, you liar, you story-teller you! In time, when she remained bowed in that same way, bottom to the heavens, panting away, me now aside her, she spoke between breaths. "I've made you, Stuart Beholt. I've be-molded you. It's so much better this way. I took you, the raw materials. Such raw materials. Stuart Beholt himself, the little Proteus *I* made. You were already perfect. Now you're really perfect. My own recipe."

Who, I asked the cosmos, cooked whom?

13.

In the morning, sedated and exquisitely exhausted, she scribbled the codes for this third account, as she had for the first two. Not a word spoken; I felt she was writing me a check. After last night's "conversations" this procedure was starting to evoke twinges in my skin.

At home I delayed making the online transfer. A stack of work gesticulated from my inbox. A first for me, I dallied in my chair, lethargic. My body felt like a wine skin that had been pinched from tip to spout for every last drip of juice. Would I ever have sex again? To think, she and that Persian guy (or whoever) had habitually wriggled themselves all over their exteriors in such a way. What had they been seeking? It was too odd, too very odd, that in short time I had become trustee, guardian, proprietor, for all practical purposes owner of sums previously unthinkable for me. I let her strut me about her degenerate royal family, show me like a collectible doll, dress me up like prince to marry her princess, haul me back and yank off the comic costume with a chuckle, pour on the abracadabra and turn me into a robot to tickle her all-too-human animal hide, so alien to my custom, then write me these unfathomable sums. What a weird whore I was. She wanted so much just to get rid of these moneys anyway, so indifferent to them, that it twistedly made me all the cheaper, a laugh at the very idea I should ever be married.

There were plenty I could have married, who'd wanted to, whom I'd wanted, if I'd bothered. I didn't need Irina Moorea Reynaldo to be gauge of my qualities. I simply do not like someone thinking they can call me "marriageable" for the sake of palming me off to people who, really, were not the quality they pretended. Compare Benton II or Clark to Alby! Or to their own Father Jeremy.

And then fibbing, for no purpose, about her sisters, as if I could not find out.

The unthinkable sums. (*Are they mine?*)

But in the end, it is all right with me. She thinks she has me. Pour on the potions. Who serves whom?

Okay, to some people my accepting control of Irina's funds might seem unconscionable. I should not act as any sort of guardian or trustee in unofficial capacity. She did not fully perceive what she was doing, might be moderately unstable, certainly irresponsible. If I loved her, I should better guide her, for her own interests.

Yet, if I loved her, I should also please her and value her values and wishes. She was reared by about the most esteemed parents in the state, under tutors educated at the top schools, and knew more of Western *and* Eastern cultures than did etchy sketchy me. And she was an adult, fully autonomous, not on drugs. How could I shatter her love by saying, "Now, Irina-girl, I'm still somewhat a stranger after even a month. Don't trust that we cherish all the same values until you know we do for sure, which may take years." I sympathized too well with her romanticism. These funds, furthest from any sense (subconscious or not) in her that they were buying me, were just so much nest-stuffing from the nest she so happened to

be born into. People in love long to share their secret stuffs, whether it's diaries or their own recipes for cakes. They long to exhibit their generosity, and what better way to show you're not greedy or grasping than showing that your fiscal means, if enormous for most people, and inherited at that, are meaningless to you!

And yet, for all my understanding of her, I must respect myself. I must heed my feelings. How many months, years, of her tickling me as her toy must I take? It's demeaning to be bandied, without warning, as some "marriageable" token only to pacify the Puritanical folks, with no follow-up discussion on the matter before being pumped up with sex-shop dope. Understand her as I may, love cannot let lover stomp upon beloved. She, the moneyed, has an upper hand. I, the outfoxed, do love justice by nursing its fury.

Emilia lost no time: Late that Sunday afternoon, her promised email appeared, headed "Our Big Pictures."

Hi Sty,

Business is discretion. If you recall our dialogue yesterday, I promised I would get back with you with ideas, if I had any. Ba-boom! Who would guess I would wake up so deliciously early with cranium-full of ideas of what more you may do with your business for laying 'real tracks' out there in the big world. They're just ideas, but I'm always ready to share, whatever way and whenever and if-ever you want. As Rawls would say,

maybe we could reach some 'overlapping consensus.' But there's no rush.

Emilia

In that word "Emilia" I saw "Rose," somehow a road to Rose. I contained myself from replying immediately, lest Emilia think my eagerness was for her. If Irina were going to play "marriage-able" then not take me seriously the whole evening, let's see how her rosy married big sister "with the stitched-up ass" might respond in other locales than the corridor. I'll get there by opening all the doors in the Reynaldo home.

Was I overreacting? I knew I was, the very moment I overreacted. But anyone, let's be honest, sensing you're being toyed with, or at the least being made very love-confused, anyone normal would start to go to extremes.

14.

The directions I had printed from Emilia's email map-link had to be wrong. At the big intersection of Northwest and Webbs Chapel, they were pointing me to the broad swath of crumbling apartments nearby. She would have to live in an astoundingly modest apartment. That's a modest way of putting it. She might well have asked me there "to tea" to demonstrate its humility, or she was luring me into a subterfuge.

Now, at that big intersection, one glance at cuddly Bachman Lake's green, riverlike bend may lead you to believe the neighborhood at least comforting and snug. Then wait another minute, and the skull-cracking screech of an airliner about a hundred feet up, caroming to Earth, tells you Love Field's runways halt above the lip of the lake. The other direction, a line of landing-beacon pylons cuts a weedy field sharp as a tornado's path right through the sprawl of apartments. Whoever built these apartments a half-century ago could not have dreamed they would long last as waystations for young bobos on their way upward to build nests elsewhere. Even when I was a kid and we drove into town this way and I could see the passengers' eyes through the landing planes' windows, I felt sad for these buildings. I felt their very foundations splitting under the thunders. Not surprising that in the 1980s, when the whole nation sprang for riches forever beyond the horizon and the city spurted forty miles northward, the bobos had left these shells behind. Now these apartments

have made a comeback—through the local news: Colombian and Panamanian cartels, FBI drug busts, drive-bys, explosions.

I can give no better description of the 'hood than that sliver of history. Simply one slab of two-story units after another, in homey red plantation style or boxy beige modern or brick colonial. Curving streets wind you through these slabs as if it were all supposed to be a storybook land. Emilia's slab of a dozen or so units had a first floor of brown vertical lumber and a second floor of gray horizontal lumber.

The screen door of unit 2, my destination, leaned on its remaining hinge.

I waited in my car a few minutes, studying 360i,^o for signs of the cheap PI or, who knows, Desi. I also stared at my directions several times in disbelief. A *Reynaldo*—here? Since the wind came from the south, an airplane's roar from the north abruptly sounded, and soon the thing itself appeared, here maybe three hundred feet up. I had to finger-plug the ears. No, if dowdy Emilia did live in unit 2, I doubted the Reynaldo powers gave a hoot about her. Irina's report of Reynaldo indifference of Emilia might have accorded with reality this time. Still I pulled onto another street and surveyed for moments more before getting out. The neighborhood probably posed more threat than geeky Desi did.

The street wafted with a potent odor of old boiled potatoes and canned spaghetti sauce. Guys in bunches of three or four watched me but chatted loudly away.

The main door opened behind the askew screen door. An odor much like outside's, of meaty food boiling away, seeped out.

“Stuart, Stuart, I’m so glad you came. I just pulled out a pan of hot rolls.”

That was Emilia’s voice. Whatever drifted out reeked more like bacon grease. Emilia opened and held the screen door with such skill that neither did it fall off, nor did its dangling spring snag me. She spent a minute returning multiple locks to their positions.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, something, maybe those oven fumes, slapped me with a bald fact: This was indeed Emilia’s abode. This excursion then offered no route to Rose. Rose would never consort with someone who lived in such a place. Emilia had to be more cut off from the eldest sister than Irina was.

I was also comforted, finally, with a certain assurance: Someone who, given the world’s choices, opted for such a place would not peep to Irina about my visit here.

“Let me take your coat. Sit, sit. I know you’re busy, so we won’t dawdle.”

“No rush. I have an hour before meeting my advertiser in Addison.”

“So kind of you to drop by.”

The place was cozy enough and, now that I detected the lemony cleaning agents, hygienic. A black leather sedan hinted of her true blood, as did the mahogany coffee table carved with ancient warrior figures along its four edges. The shelves were crammed with curios—Tyrolean tankards, Scottish bagpipes, Japanese Noh masks—and of course the scholar’s books, but no electronics, no lures for her neighbors’ glass cutters.

Emilia brought in a basket with folded cloth and set it on the table among a porcelain tea set painted with blue scenes

of Brittany. The cups were little thicker than my toenails. The tea as she poured was redolent of heliotrope; the basket, as she unfolded the cloth, unveiled creamery butter, hardly bacon grease.

I was downright ashamed to “have tea.” I never “have tea.”

“I long thought I was the only in the family to keep our grandmother’s recipes,” Emilia said, holding out the basket. “You see, there’s another side to our family than Father’s passion play.”

“You mean less ambitious?”

“Oh, there can be ambition in a well-made roll. I mean less ostentatious. More appreciative of the quotidian.”

The roll in my hands split open easily, steaming with the aroma of a local bakery. The white butter melted so fast the pat slid in its own lake.

“What else is there but the quotidian?” I said, humoring her.

“It’s where all quality reigns. But some dire folks tell you quality’s only in the mirages always out of reach.”

“Like the Louis Quatorze.”

“Like the Louis Quatorze. When you’re living in a place like that, it’s just another place. Why gulp up so much just to make your daily space?”

“Surely a space like that has resplendent light. It inspires the spirit.”

“Then go outside and bathe in it. Not every day is sunny anyway. I’ve been to my grandmother’s in Chillicothe County plenty times as a child. Three bedroom and a half-acre garden, probably not twenty thousand even today. But twenty times the

ambiance of Dad's French Palatial." What must have been a Chillicothe lilt to the speech, not far from a Clay County's (my home county, don't forget), eased into her voice. "Those wood-plank floors—if you step across this corner of the house, someone feels it at the other corner. You actually see the planks shake. Screen porch, bugs hitting the screen all summer, you're protected and breezy. Sunlight from all four sides, if you want it. Always something cooking—chicken pot pie with carrots and celery, biscuits, concord grapes boiling for jam. Some Reynaldos remember, Stuart."

A plane overhead drowned her out. My chair vibrated, as did the floor and walls. I wish I could record all the airplane interruptions, but that would mean about three dozen recurrences, which always came off like one long unpronounceable shouted word. Just understand they turned out to form a prominent member of our conversation.

Emilia expertly waited until the roar had receded to just below her voice's level, then repeated her last sentences and continued. "But frankly I don't know why Father forgot. I never fathomed what he got out of a stack of marble."

"But some of you didn't forget your grandmother's recipes." I dipped a knife into the concord grape jam from a Mason jar, homemade I deduced.

"Desi does a killer mulberry cobbler. Moorea, I don't know if she cooks, you might know better, but she always loved Grand Mamie's vegetable garden."

I was hoping to hear Emilia pronounce "Rose," but she discontinued her list. I said, "And Desi, too, I understand, is quite dedicated to the Louis Quatorze."

"Yes, he wants it all but I'm afraid he ends up with little."

She clamped up. Today she wore a plaid gingham dress which made her, what with this setting and her talk, even more dowdy and homey than she had appeared in Saturday's satin gown. But her hair was down, and in its full and wavy luxury over her shoulders it lent a piquant, perplexing counterpoint. Not at all red as Irina had said, but not whitish today either. In this, I hate to call it "hole" or "squalor," in this austerity, my ire at Irina for her false picture of Emilia resurged. Ever more baffling, the further I dug here, this baffling family kept me from excusing myself to get on to my Addison errand.

"But it wasn't to beguile you with these little family quirks that we agreed to meet, was it?" she said. Her tone lost its country wistfulness and regained the brightness of the woman I'd encountered in the corridor. "But this appreciation of the quotidian *is* relevant. Because we want to talk about The Big Picture. That picture is about using resources wisely and rightly. Your web site is one such resource. And the quotidian, not the mirages, tells us what is worthwhile in life and where to focus."

This woman was so distant from me and everything I represented, my muscles were quivering to fly out, excuse or no. But she was so odd I stayed.

She was *too* normal.

"Tell me," I said, "I need a bearing on what you aim to do with the world's resources, what's this charity you work for."

"Oh that. It's an umbrella group I formed with several locals, a consortium overseeing distribution of goods and services to those who need. We work locally, in neighborhoods all over north Texas, but also globally, coordinating with Oxfam and Doctor's Without Borders and so on. We operate as

oversight for folks, such as you and me, who believe one has a responsibility to one's own community but equally to communities elsewhere. We're all basically Rawlsians, even if we don't all so label ourselves. We feel that everyone deserves an equal starting place. It's a start. It's three full days a week for me. Research and conferences eat up the rest. But it's only a start. It concerns *now*. We attempt to give everyone a fair starting position—nutrition, medicine, literacy. But, you ever bake a cake, and when the batter is just right, you swirl a semicircular trough in it, and the trough settles right back to smooth? Always, when we leave a community to itself a short while, the trough we laid, of goods and services, folds right back to the flatness we'd first encountered. Because your average decent person *doesn't have the aggression to sustain themselves against the more aggressive*. This year I visited a Cambodian village that, three years before had been in bankruptcy. We had restored the schools and water system, taught all illiterate adults to read, and balanced the village budget. Three former rivals united as a shared village head. Then we left them to their own. This year, I visited, because I have long been concerned about the problem of 'the future.' In three years, the central village fountain—just a public spigot—had busted, went unrepaired because the budget had gone haywire and no funds left, the three shared heads had been driven out by a rapacious local farmer who raided the village account. Dysentery, unknown there for decades, tore from house to house. This is why I say, 'Only a start.' What about fifty, a hundred years up ahead? How do we ensure everyone will retain a fair starting position for long enough they can make fair *use* of that starting place? This is where I'm looking for a further-reaching project. The Big Picture, Stuart."

I drank my tea, a place to hide until I could concoct an answer. I had a big heart on hand here, my hostess. I was feeling right humbled, as her type could make you feel, I did so little goody good. But of course my entire project in life was the future, and that future included everyone as well as me. Create that future just right, and you need not worry so about how things stand now.

“I can see how you wanted to discuss with me,” I said, hedging upon circumbendibus to ease me out of being put in an overly exalted position. “Yes, fifty, a hundred years along. Me and my—compeers—are focused completely on that concern.”

I put down my teacup softly enough it would not shatter. And an airplane overhead gave me a few more seconds’ reprieve, while it punished the cup on the table so severely it well might have cracked. Emilia peered at me the while, with a Napoleonic high chin and forward shoulder that communicated she had met her equal.

When the earth-shaker passed, she said, again, “I am looking for a new project.” Upon this repetition, slow old me, I saw I need not keep looking to escape. “I’m not sure how much I can offer, as I have no experience in nonprofits.”

“Two of my current partners are businesspersons lacking nonprofit experience. You know well from business all parties offer their own expertise.”

She must not have used this place to win their trust. Or she had other, more entrusting arenas. Or this one excited a particular kind of businessperson’s confidence.

Emilia was starting to erode my confidence in my social insight.

“Well?” she went on. “I’m hardly trying to push you into any projects anytime soon. I’m only at the ideas-gathering stage. I know you want to guide the future of the species in the right direction. And I’m sure by ‘right’ you mean ‘just’—am I not right?”

“Of course by ‘right’ I mean ‘just.’” And her very tone would make it so, Madame Socrates!

“And how do you plan to ensure it’s just?”

“You use airplanes, don’t you, to transport your medicines and services overseas,” I improvised, just when another inspiring help from heaven shook the roofs and floors and so I could bake my next sentences. “We will use a comparable means of transport to convey our life-changing, species-improving pharmaceuticals across the seas of time. We aim on ending all suffering, Emilia.”

She kept her chin-high stance across the table. “Explain.”

Seeing I faced an academic, I chose the most reputable-sounding, reasoned, empirical argument I could muster. “It’s all a question of controlling the soul, in both humans and—since they suffer too—animals. The human soul, mind, spirit, call it what you will, all arises from the human brain, as most everyone now agrees. That brain operates through a complex of physical and chemical processes, and these, we are finding more and more clearly, when they misfire form our sources of misery. Guide these neurons in one of two ways: Give them better balances of neurochemicals—which we are on the verge of mapping, down to every whistlestop neuron of the hundred million in our adult brain. Or, bolster the very genes that form these neural cells in the first place. Then they’d all fire smoothly at every synaptic junction, working happily as

networks of efficient trains, making the whole body contented as a well-fed nation. We're decoding the secrets of each precious neural cell, each as dear as an infant, as rapidly as we decoded the 2.9 billion nucleic base pairs of the human genome. We will soon have the means to happiness down so pat every soul on the planet can have them in hand like they now palm smartphones with computational powers that, only two decades ago, only the richest could afford. It's the one route to social equality and (I noted Emilia's Beethoven symphony CDs on the shelf) universal joy, that bright spark of divinity."

Emilia remained so still, gazing into the back of my very retinas, she sent a tremor through me. I did not know if she suspected my improvisation, or if I had ensconced her in my retina's inner chambers.

My mighty river kept going. "These means are that magic power that reunites all peoples once divided by custom. And eventually, *all* creatures will drink of the joy. Soon to be aided by hyperintelligences, we are mapping the neurons of all animals, sponges, clams, even plants—Venus fly-traps—anything with the least likelihood of suffering."

I had to stop before I got down to viruses and rocks—just in case they had the least capacity to be hurt.

She stirred. "This sounds a bit far," she said. Finally she relieved my optic nerve of her heavy gaze. "I grant the scientific basis. All my respects for it. Somewhere in there it gets off on a tangent."

"Perhaps the animals and plants part. That is a bit much for most people." I clamped my lips for the white lie—as a teeny one—as I had not yet tested this material on a soul, except the representative in my mind's lecture hall.

Nevertheless, I discerned, it seemed to be working into her scaly shell.

“That’s what gives me some pause over the whole thing, Stuart. It has a taste of the enthusiast.”

Her bright tenor tone was reverting to the country-home tinge again. I had to get her back into the brilliance of reason.

“So where is any reality in this?” she went on.

“The reality is in untold hundreds of billions in research and development. Nigh trillions by now. Business folks, you know well, put such bucks only where they see real returns coming.”

“I know well enough pharmaceutical giants are ready to turn a buck off someone’s depression.”

“I mean visionaries. People with the best wishes for our species. I have a friend, excellent friend, top-flight businessman, not some pharmaceuticals leviathan but an independent, a successful hard-worker. Just recently I witnessed a clinical trial of a new neural aid that fits exactly in with this schema for suffering-reduction. He is part of a group of forward-lookers whose aims are converging toward this same goal of goodness. There is nothing more real than this movement, Emilia. You hear little of it because it’s not glittery, not splash with gala balls and Monte Carlo evening wear, no more than dedicated abolitionists in 1820s Connecticut spreading their vision in churches made the news. Just a set of patient men and women, watching the meniscus levels on their burets, going about their daily chore of eradicating nuisance, impatient only for the day we will all indeed be taken care of.”

Emilia nodded her head just detectably. “I have heard a *little* of this work.” She had dropped the accent, and so the air

felt cleaner. “I had a notion you might have a toe in it. Your Big Picture. I’m just at the thinking stage. I needed to hear more about it. From a mouth at my table. We’ll see.”

In Javanese court gamelan, as I’ve learned from Irina, a gong serves as throbbing marker of a musical work’s periods. Every several moments, at varying intervals, it sends its currents deep through the court floors. Another phase in the music has begun, and the flute and voice continue. In Emilia’s humble court, the airplanes served as gongs, setting the phases for us subservient instruments. Upon one notably throbbing sounding, we were on our feet and, by the time it passed, at the door.

Her gaze had dropped, to somewhere to my left. “It’s been brief, but believe me productive. I thank you for your time. And I apologize I didn’t really give you a thing.”

“Some splendid rolls. And the first ‘tea’ in my life.”

“You’ve never had a tea? I’ll invite you for your second one, and I promise I’ll offer you something more in return.”

As I walked to my car, the next airplane stormed overhead. In a window I swear a boy was looking out at me.

15.

Pity made me invite Irina to my folks' for Christmas day. She, daughter of Jeremy Reynaldo, sibling of five, three of whom were thriving, had nowhere to go. My folks', though, was little better than nowhere.

It was early Christmas Eve morn when I made her the offer. The day was waking, crystalline sky, but ice forming on the panes of the greenhouse roof like many-armed homunculi scrambling to get in. We had slept on the cot there, under mounds of comforters, her favorite place to bed since winter had set in. We breathed potting soil and peat moss aromas as potent as our bodies'. For weeks we had been so hectic before the Reynaldo party that we had hardly discussed the holidays. Now I was blasting away how I couldn't wait for the holiday to pass because mid-week I would visit Alby. The new product prototype he was showing me would hail in a whole new generation of devices to wash through the planet. Then Irina confessed she could not wait for the holiday to be over because having nowhere to go was always painful.

Moments after my invitation, I noticed a drop under her eye. It fell in a path down to her jaw. Her voice caught, so she whispered, "No one has ever asked me to their Christmas."

But moments later she was up on her feet on the cold wood floor and throwing on her clothes and laughing. She led me in a barefoot chase across the frosted yard and inside the unheated home. (She used heating—"such waste"—only

when pressured for health's sake.) As she skipped through the Ion Room with its passive solar system, the peeping sun was already warming it. Then up through the mazes of stairs and corridors to the top floor, the Holy of Holies. She yanked open the lower desk drawer.

"What a waste, all this, just rotting in a hole," she said. She held out a stack of report envelopes, her eyes bounding at me with glee.

I could not simply put out my hands and receive the stack as if I were eager.

"You intend to put it into a Christmas present for my parents?"

"How many airplanes could they use?" she said. "But Alby, now, sounds like he's doing worthwhile things. You're doing worthwhile things. So much better places for this stuff to be. I mean just all of it, finally." She shook her head at what she held.

Soon we were sitting on the carpet, leaning against the bed, while I began opening envelopes with as businesslike an air as I could command. She was reading poetry, a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Some kind of social conscience or social self-consciousness, or my ever-mounting mystification over what these strange offerings meant, was working in me. "You had wanted, a while back, to become Proteus, so you could elude your punishing family," I said. "So you had wanted to invest in companies with very forward-looking technologies. But now you've found a way to keep *them* off of us anyway. So do you still want to fulfill your Protean dream?"

“Of course.” She spoke while she read. “You never know how long my stratagem last week may work and if they’ll be on our trail again. It may end up being only a stop-gap.”

I was adding up account balances without letting my lips move and getting carried away with what I saw. I was reaching some height that, in case she were to prompt me to talk, was leaving my throat unable to respond. Speaking of Christmas, in terms of its real meaning, I was feeling much like what one of the elect of the God of Calvin must have experienced back in old Geneva: The hand of the Almighty Reynaldo, from the moment she laid eyes on my site, had thrust itself across the cosmos through cyberspace to place those choosing fingers on unsuspecting little Beholt the Man. She had arranged all the fate of the world just so I may end up on this spot on her carpet, salvation in hand, purely by her grace.

When she abruptly looked up at the papers trembling in my fingers, I was at just over one billion.

I feared she had caught my thoughts in her headlights, as if thankfulness for grace should be suspect. But she only bit her lip and said, “You know, I need something to live off of in the meantime.” She reached over, at once found envelopes of a certain logo and took them.

When I reached 1.18 billion, I was done. She read on, and on. I tried leaning back against the bed and, closing my eyes, keeping a new tic from jiggling the lids.

We drove to my parents’ that night, with some dear presents: emery boards and a packet of a hundred sheets of drugstore stationery for my mother, the same I’d gotten her every year since I was eight, to her annual delight. She still

wrote by hand to her relatives and filed her fingernails before the boxy TV. She thought my web site was a kind of game-show comedy series, though I tried dispelling her belief via laptop demonstrations. My father, for the coming planting season, always needed a pair of garden gloves. For my sisters I got the usual rotations of potholders, cookware, sampler sets, and doll dresses and board games for their children. For all, they emitted no greater surprise of delight than that over the expected. To my brother, the grumpy exception, a highway engineer, I gave a \$50 Home Depot gift certificate, which he would spend on planks for the backyard shed he'd been building the past ten years. Irina had tried pulling Cuisinarts and smartphones into the shopping basket. Wrapping the gifts, I had said, "It's best if we keep your family name under the blanket a while and don't scare them." Customarily in my family, boy/girlfriend last names were not queried. Finally she and I had settled on her co-signing the "To/From" stickers with her first name only.

We arrived in the dark lane, lit by a sole street light, around nine. The gray clapboard house was already shut-eye. The half-dozen bare post oaks casting their skeletal shadows on the walls made the place all the starker. "Wow, a genuine small town!" she exclaimed. "First time since my grandfolks' in Chillicothe." The beagles in back stirred up their blood-freezing howls. I had feared Irina would be as embarrassed as me and shrinking in despair. Instead she was opening her door before the car stopped.

The porch light came on. A cat leapt off the wooden porch swing. The front door jerked with the unsticking snaps of dozens of gluey connections. My parents appeared in their pajamas. With Irina beside me I remembered why I had worked

so hard in high school and fled to Austin on scholarship before my eighteenth birthday.

My mother squeezed Irina's hand in both hers. "Stu's said so much about you."

"I hope it was favorable!" Irina said with a laugh.

"You always have to tell from his tone. Now we got your two rooms set up, and I hope the quilts are warm enough."

So quickly, bedclothes were her topic.

The living room had only the chimney's fake-log gas heater. The sole lighting, from the hall, made the bare walls all the chillier. The Christmas tree was so shut down for the night I couldn't make out its silhouette.

"He was saying this morning on the phone," my father was telling Irina, "it's Irina Reynaldo. You're from Dallas, no connection to the aerospace Reynaldos, I imagine."

That's right, my subconscious had slipped out the name this morning.

"Who knows if we don't share some blood somewhere," Irina said, genius of fact-packaging.

Perfect duty-mongers, they shuffled us at once to bed. And perfect moralists, they had us the unmarried couple in separate rooms. But an hour later while they snored, I snuck to Irina's, the furthest from them. There I sank into some sacrilege against this hut's very foundations which I'd been premeditating since age twelve. Gladly Irina joined festivities as silently as she could stand, without a tinge of my defiance. There was no sleeping tonight anyway, what with the figure 1.18 stunning me ever since its summation. No better place to pass along my stun but to Irina, its maker. They say moolah is the world's best aphrodisiac, and I had used to pooh-pooh the cliché. "No

wonder people in the countryside have too many kids,” she said. “The fresh air. It’s like a layer is peeled off your skin.”

The duty-mongers woke us at seven; no sleep-in here. No sooner did we arrive at the kitchen’s breakfast table than my sisters’ kids clamored their arrival in the driveway. In minutes, brothers-in-law and brother and sister-in-law and a turbulence of small persons I could not count were clattering and stomping through the rooms. Irina managed to ingratiate herself into storm’s eye. She whisked infants onto her lap, nuzzled their hair and whispered nothings in their ears with a goochie-goo and showed them wrapped presents, chatted with terrific nods of the head to kindred and inlaws, brought out pots of hot chocolate and jars of marmalade. In no time, children and adults alike were calling out, “Irina, could you come—? Irina, what do you think of—?” She so quickly settled in, her face drenched with contentment, I wondered if she were not already Proteus. What need you of my new world’s bold inventions, Irina? While I had long ago escaped this primordial mossy swamp, I had been so unable to rest till my fingers tapped keys and conjured soothing straight lines on a screen—she blossomed in it till her bare ivory arms and neck flushed red. But, I retorted to myself, hadn’t she fitted her shape so seamlessly into her own scorned family’s event? Protean IR! Protean infrared who could invisibly warm up any environment.

My father, habitually the Santa in my earliest memory, was pulling off his red cap. “Irina, why don’t you pass out the presents. My glasses are being repaired and I can’t read the stickers. It’ll be a good way to learn everybody’s name.”

“You’re too *sweet*. But I already have learned everyone’s. Why not let Sty or—?”

“The boys were never into it.” He was pulling the fluffy beard from the box.

“I’m a girl, girls don’t grow beards.”

“Neither do I.”

He assisted her into the red jacket with white lapels but spared her the red pants. All fitted, the beard almost to her eyes, despite the black hair spilling out of the cap and the dark tan, her broad merry cheeks made quite a storybook Santa. She passed out the presents from under the tree, already knowing three-quarters of the names and faces, with a smile to every hand as if she had hammered out the goods in her own workshop. From the same old predictable contents, more true cheer rippled through the room than in Christmases past. Even my older sister, convert to a strict Mormon sect, lightened her scowl at the pagan rite. (She and I share more than her theism might hint: eyes on the future, to a “millennium” when we transcend our icky animal existence. But—the only full-time mummy among my peers—going flabby as cookie batter pumping out nine kids, like she had to puff up paradise with happiness!) Then, my other sister, trim as a surfboard, rheumatologist in a poor town, some kind of agnostic (damn fence-sitter), she about bowed at Santa’s knees. She, when Santa’s beard got snagged in the boughs, scampered under the tree for gifts. Only three kids, but she glommed onto sacred rites like they were intrafamily cement. “Oh, what lovely angels, Stu!” she exclaimed about my 99¢ discount giftwrap. “I mean, Santa!” She kissed Santa’s jolly brown cheek. “It’s Santa

who left all these presents for us last night,” she added for her seven-year-old, “wasn’t it, dear-heart?”

The seven-year-old twirled her eyes. “How could Santa, when the chimney’s blocked, and he’s Uncle Stu’s girlfriend?”

My parents together looked up from their mass of torn paper. Their lips held back the words, but I could hear them anyway: *When will Santa be leaving us more babies?*

Out of her costume, in her white dress, Irina almost presided at dinner as well. The carving of the turkey had to go to the man of the house. But as naturally as Snow White at Grumpy’s side, she was catching the slices in plates and distributing them among the tables. Dinner in this Protestant house went with nothing stronger than iced tea, even while Christmas winds chilled through the cracks. The tables, all the way to the children’s in the kitchen, chirped with sunny lightly caffeinated babble. At the adults’, for the first time ever I watched faces switching to the left, the right, and to each and every across the table, instead of focused straight ahead.

I stole plenty chances to succumb to the reverie that had captured me since yesterday, sapping my sleep but keeping me alive and awake. The 1.18. Whose was it? Was it, finally, everybody’s here? Had I, finally, outstripped Alby, for doing nothing?

Farewells on our departure at twilight were full of “Don’t wait till next year,” and “You know you can drop in anytime,” even from Irina. While my car crept down the street, she turned back and waved at the children until we turned.

On the drive back she maintained the high chatter. She rattled away how joyful had been my doctor sister, how generous my mother, how patient my father, how simple and

beautiful the gifts. “I see what you meant, when we were shopping, to keep it plain. It’s all about being together. They don’t make up a lack to one another by filling in with fanciness. Everyone fills everyone with each other. How different from my family, who would twirl their eyes at this. I’m glad we’ve seen both ours now.”

Are you about to join this one? I knew the question was partly up to me. But she had so thoroughly ingratiated herself into their heart—yes, at my invitation—and so ingratiated me into her family’s, one could only expect a hint of her intention. With that unfathomable figure she had yesterday etched upon my inner cranium and possibly my personal account, it was more awkward for me to take the initiative. *Well, Dearest, now that I know one or both of us is so well off, why don’t we make the bond permanent and I’ll find out how much more you’re worth? Well, Dearest, now that you appeared to have paid me off for bed tricks done your style, let’s legalize the understanding.*

And she had put herself into an equally difficult position for finally speaking up.

“I’m sorry they don’t do New Years,” I said, “but they and the kids love Easter.”

“We have plenty time to decide. Oh we’ve got plenty time.”

16.

Wednesday, my own “Big Day,” I stood at Jefferson and Zang at eight a.m. sharp as Alby had advised. Such generous streets, 4-6 lanes apiece, you’d expect the morning clogs and exhaust clouds of similar crossroads in Far North Dallas. But here, in South Oak Cliff, a neutron bomb could have snuck away all life. A traffic light caught maybe two or three cars. Jefferson here, for blocks in either direction, was a strip of brown-brick shops, half with white-papered windows. In the early 20th Century, when Oak Cliff had been a separate town from Dallas, Jefferson had been downtown, the shopping center of its day, the heavenly mile. A boulevard island of arched streetlights hinted of the old splendor. But Dallas engorged Oak Cliff; racial pressures in the 1960s scattered the whites north of the river. Now, where walls had not collapsed or been cleared to rubble, pawn shops, check cashers, and close-out marts checkered the street. And, somewhere in here, Alby’s Hardware Test Lab.

He came strutting up precisely at 8, within five seconds’ margin by my watch. The businessman’s businessman. In his perennial brown jumpsuit, he fit right in, could have been a cleaning crewman. But he had been at an *earlier* meeting.

“The South Bronx only years ago was a bombed-out DMZ,” he said as we strutted right along, up Jefferson. “Today, crackhouses of yore are multimillion dollar lofts. People love to build their foundations on the fertilizer of the previous Troy.

Inner cities' bones make tomorrow's palaces. Unfortunately I wasn't the first to sink a treasure box on this street. At least four other bettors my size have planted runners."

We ducked into a gray two-story building with a broad plate glass, could have been a jeweler's or gun shop. No sign on the door; only "AT Ent." above the letterbox. A fellow in a black greatcoat entered right behind us, and he and Alby greeted. No introductions to me. Although opening the front door with a key, at the second door Alby put his thumb on an infrared fingerprint reader. This heavier, steel armor door opened automatically. The hallway and its chipped linoleum floor reeked of must. Yet the elevator was marble, brass, and mirrors.

"We're still working out the above-ground," Alby said. "But that entrance is sterile, just can't scrub out the smell. I'm keeping the store fronts. They'll pay off. We have five lots, and we girded the ground floors of the middle three, then from the back dug down through the shale a dozen meters to install what you're about to see."

The elevator door opened with a wish, onto an entirely new world. Here, all was white laminar, steel, and halogen and diode spots. It reeked of chemical sterility, near sweet as toluene, the essence of airplane glue. The guy in great coat went the other way, and Alby explained to me *sotto voce*, "Just a lab tech. I can't introduce every lackey to prospective investors, and I don't just bring 'a friend' down here."

Other workers in white in rooms we passed were already at work so early. We came to another door, marked "Clean Room," which again required Alby's thumb. It opened with a suck of depressurization, and there we had to doff our street

clothes and shoes for white plastic suits, surgical face masks, hair caps and vinyl gloves. It was chilly as a desert cave. We passed another door into a large room, so brilliantly lit from its high ceiling it drowned all shadow. On row after row of ivory laminar lab benches arose chromium lab ware and plastic-cased electronics that seemed to converse with one another via blinking red and blue and green lights.

“I visited NASA’s Goddard Lab in Maryland as a kid,” Alby said, “and I thought I was in heaven. Well, I’m telling everybody, you don’t have to die to go there.”

In one of the rows far off, between a lab bench and the cabinets above it, I caught the torso of a lone worker, as you might catch sight of browsing fauna in a forest copse.

Down one row, Alby stopped at a bench top and punched a code into a cabinet lock. Inside lay a small contraption. He laid it on the table like a coney pelt he’d bagged, for my eyes to feast a minute. It appeared to me like a mere set of swimming goggles, maybe a bit fancy being electric blue. But my week’s expectation of this moment capsized and sped toward ocean’s floor.

“You know,” I said, straining for diplomacy, “Jeremy Reynaldo, soon after he triumphed in aerospace, went into sports equipment.”

“This ain’t no mere sports goggles, Chippie.” He swept up the thing carelessly as though it were indeed a 99¢ toy and started to shove it onto my head.

“And soon after he went into sports equipment,” I continued, “RSVP collapsed.”

Alby proceeded strapping the thing on me. It did fit snugly, without the strap-buckle nuisance on the back of the

cranium of most underwater goggles. I figured this was either a joke or some knock-off item he'd dashed off for a quick market niche, and then he would show me to the awaited item for today. The lenses were remarkably limpid, sparkly fresh as murmuring brooks. They also showed small red crosshatched circles like you see through rifle scopes.

And murmuring trickled from somewhere, in human tones: "Now my eyes is lookin' at my hands." It was Alby's voice, in an exaggerated local (Texan) accent. I looked up at him.

"Now my eyes is lookin' at Alby Tolby." But Alby's mouth did not move.

I looked away. "Now my eyes is lookin' at a lab bench." I shook my head, feeling like my own mind were mind-reading itself. "Now my eyes is lookin' at a cabinet. Now my eyes is lookin' at the floor. Now my eyes is lookin' at a Siemans Interferometer—"

I pulled the thing off, quickly headachy and vertiginous, much like I'd felt once after taking a friend's Prozac.

"What's the point?" I said. I dropped it on the bench top, and Alby pressed a button on it, I guessed for "off."

"Millions," he said. "Multi."

"But who would want it? World's quickest way to a headache." I was feeling as disappointed in Alby as if the thing had been mere swimming goggles—or more disappointed, because at least those were useful.

"You quickly acclimate to the vertigo," he said. "So far, almost two thousand engineers, researchers, scientists and AI entrepreneurs want it. We did advance marketing on 100,000,

and in a week got a two percent response—excellent rate. At \$4500 apiece, that’s already nine million, cover my R&D.”

“What the hell did you fool them with? You’d sink nine million in R&D for this bauble when there’s thousands of real projects to move us along?”

I felt myself above him: As I had realized days ago, what with the funds I already controlled added to the boon Irina had passed along Christmas Eve, I had more at my command than my old pal here had. In fact I *had* done something for those funds: provided someone badly needed unconditional love. Better than cheap toys.

“Most of the R&D for it was borrowed from other projects,” Alby said, “not even a million directly went into this one. All that AI software in the microprocessors comes from pattern-recognition systems we’ve been developing almost a decade. I cannot believe you aren’t jumping up and down and clapping your little hands, Chippie! Surely you see the significance.”

“Sure I see the gadget employs some significant technology—”

“Its data banks, accessible by wifi, hold every face in facebook and twitter, every product in most major product catalogs, every map in what’s-his-face’s maps, including the street views, the positions of the stars in every season at every latitude, almost every damn thing the human eye can land upon—”

“And how will it tell the millions of ‘John Smiths’ from one another?” I was getting tired of him interrupting me. He no longer knew with whom he was dealing.

His shoulders actually slumped a millimeter in concession. “Okay, it’s not yet a fully autonomous intelligence—”

“And what are you doing siphoning off the valuable funds of thousands of researchers for some gewgaw that can’t do anything for anybody?”

“Because *they* see the significance of it, Chippie! They can’t wait to land their hands on it and play with it and touch it and take it apart and see what we did and be inspired to take their own work a step higher. Now add this little honey to what you witnessed at the clinic a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, a device that says in good Texan, ‘Now my stomachs is feelin’ like dey wants to empty demselves.’”

He smirked, and I sensed him coming a notch further down off his high priesthood, toward a more palsy high.

“And why *your* voice, in that accent? Like you’re mocking the customer,” I said.

“In real models, customers sample their own voices, so it sounds like them.”

“All right, so: you can mix the idea of these goggles with the—” I hated to say the name, but I did, “Chippie-Chip, and I presume the goal is a device that detects your thoughts and speaks them aloud for you to hear.”

“Good, now you’re growing up.”

“Pointless! Redundant! Redundant is stupid, at least in this case because I don’t need your gadget to tell me what I’m thinking.”

“Who’s been softening your ear with Luddism? Sty, Sty, Sty. Redundant is never stupid in electronics. What are endless backup systems all about? And what makes you think you

know your own thoughts? My little CerebroCare will help you make sure you haven't been missing your thoughts as they pass. They'll all be recorded as well, for later perusal at your leisure."

"But if I don't catch my thoughts the first go around, maybe I don't want to or they aren't important enough."

"You know how we're always missing the most important, fleeting thought."

"And when, three days later, we finally recall it, we see it wasn't so important. If it's important, it comes back to us."

"Sty, you're not thinking like A Salesman. I'm surprised." Alby somehow always capitalized The Salesmen when he spoke, for he strongly believed in Their persuasive power as his front men. "This would be only yet another device. People, not merely engineers and researchers, will gobble it up. Install it in your smartphone. We're talking billions of customers. And still it's only another step, because the next will be, of course, to record the thoughts of everyone, every last baby and cockroach on the planet, along with their movements throughout the day, stored for monitoring and study. We must have this perfectly open society, because some of these technologies will be sensitive to abuse, and we don't want the wrong people doing wrong things with them. So we get everyone habituated, step by willing step, to more and more intensive information-gathering devices such as the CerebroCare, which they are glad to gobble up. We then take the funds they have provided and, as I've told you before, Sty, we catapult ourselves, through research, to much greater heights than they can currently imagine. Even the Ogle Boggle here, which interests mostly engineers, is a way to divert the funds from their coffers—as

they are so willing—to mine, in a sort of game of wits, testing who and whose projects are most deserving of funding. If mine are, you will take my lesser spin-offs that I concoct along the way so I can use the money you give me to boost myself ever upward.”

He folded the goggles into their felt cloth, inserted them in their satin bag and returned them to their cabinet. It seemed like he was packing away a toy early because I had not proved deserving to play with it. The gesture led me to reflect how, all right, I can back off and continue playing the dumb inferior me he had always taken me for. He’ll then continue to provide me with ideas and meditations that he would otherwise be too intimidated to provide an equal or superior.

“There’s a quote,” he said upon turning back to me, “by a philosopher.” I detected, like an odor, Alby’s gearing up for a genuine Ritalin “afternoon”—which for early-starter Alby could start at eight a.m. Even back in our Austin days the man slept only three hours a night, from one a.m. to four. “This philosopher observed how consumers are already accustoming themselves to the future that you and I want by scrambling for every latest product. They vote for us by their pocketbooks. He promises the consumer that the future so dear to you and me will let *consumers* possess ‘unlimited wealth and resources through the virtual cornucopia, and if we want, it promises old-fashioned abundance all-round.’ Now isn’t that a dandy promise to the—*hm-hm!*—born every minute? Philosophers can be such eloquent little heralds when they’ve bought your side. They know just where to put on the cloak of logic. Three or four already are sold on us, and more—” he patted the toy cabinet—“are coming. But otherwise—let me give you this nugget—steer a mile wide of them, you can smell them like

a piss-soaked bum, and if they trespass, shoot. They're the brats at the breakfast table who find the last nitpicky hole in your truth and keep whining 'Why?' They'd stand at Jehovah's judgment throne and deny he has a right to sit. Anybody, Sty, can pinprick a ravel in the best-made cloth, I don't know why these people are trained and paid to do so. Yet they've wormed their paths to the ears of politicians in the form of President's Ethics Advisory Committees—but we're proceeding ahead anyway, Sty my man. We're bounding outside their legal clutches." He dampened his voice further, I gathered, so that the lab-worker a few rows away could not hear. "I told you about my Chilean ship-building connections. That's not merely a 12.7 per cent per annum investment. We've already begun work on a floating island. It's the size of a few supertankers, completely self-sufficient. My consortium, including Rick Nostrum-Dammus, Piet Steal, Jeff and Jollie Churchyard who teach surfing philosophy out at Santa Catalina Surfing Academy; and my buddy Dee Garish over in China, is recruiting our island's future citizens. Don't forget Buddy Slaves up at Tree of Knowledge. Some call him "Body Slaves" for pretty obvious reasons. Damn, he came over from Afghanistan as a kid, built up his company from good ol' Silicon Valley mud, came up with the Fruity computer all on his own, then the *iFruity* and *iClone* and *iZombie*, which are all putting us well on the road toward the vision. Most unfortunate my old pal went tilt with tumors before he could witness it realized. But just taking his name alone we'll be able to reconstruct him; a name stores all the essentials in a person like an acorn does an oak. Already 253 folk have enlisted. I'm even allowing some females, if some folks want to replicate the archaic way, though I'm thinking of pruning

my liberality. You can come along, bring along one of your cuddle-buffs, we could use a good web-meister, and I'll tell you why. We plan to weigh anchor in ten years. We're floating out to international waters. We're our own nation, our own constitution, and it's a constitutional anarchy. Complete liberty. No one can touch us. That includes U.S., Europe, China, or goddamned Zambesiland. Experiments on humans in the U.S. that I have to pay fucking near 100 mills for, to please the FDA's asshole, on our island we can do for free, because everybody on our island wants to be experimented on himself. That's why we're there, so we can spiral at mega-warp speed into our own self-constructed future, and how much faster we'll do it without years and decades of red tape. And if the leagues of our planet's backwards nations find out about our experiments and try to stop us, they'll be visited by some protection they'd never imagined because we have the world's best brains working on physical self-defense. But they won't know we're doing our best work in lead-shielded rooms in lower underwater decks, shielded much like this underground lab. And every citizen on the island volunteers to wear thought-monitoring devices, so no spies down below selling our secrets to the double-backed beasts on the continents. And with everyone in touch with everyone's thoughts, we're one big brain, and so there's intensified cognitive power. Each brain is worth more than one brain because it's part of a big brain. Then, we're all augmented anyway, because my buddy the Singapore neuro-pharmaceuticals manufacturer and his top teams are on board. Nootropics, noradrenergics, dopamine agonists, he's looking into them all. Without red tape we'll be launching hundreds of smart-drugs a year because we're all willing and craving to be test subjects. He's making gene-

enhancements so all one-hundred billion smart cells in our heads will be buzzing alive. But that is only the booster to get us to the real cerebral stars. Dee is giving us a double push into hyperspace. He's so hot the Chinese government enticed him to their labs—with their world's fastest computer—so they would have dibs on his good works. But even the Chinese got nervous and finally kicked him out, they're so scared they won't know how to handle the power he's creating. One big project he's about achieved is his Nano Engine. It's a tiny widget the size of a few gold atoms. It can crawl anywhere. It has a tiny computer onboard, transmitting and receiving to and from a mainframe or laptop. It can go wherever you want and tell you whatever you ask. It's like a cute little Mars Rover Robot. Moreover, Dee's next big step he's on the verge of perfecting, it can reproduce itself. It can make billions, trillions, quadrillions of copies of itself, and you can have these crawling all through people's bodies finding out stuff like where diseases are and zapping the malady dead, or crawling in the brain and transmitting the person's brain structure to the computer. This gadget offers a much better way to track thoughts than my little CerebroCare consumer toy. He's sending me one soon, a tiny seed from which I can grow a forest of them.”

Between his words Alby slipped his pill box from his pocket, tapped tabs into a palm and threw back his head all so deftly I barely caught the motion.

“I do my two hundred fifty vitamins between four and seven, at home while emailing. Man they feel good. On the island, while we're using the Nano Engine to unite our thoughts into a massive brain, we're also sending them in payloads of high-altitude planes, spreading them across the globe so they will be breathed in by everyone and we can then better monitor

everyone and better protect the island. And then I'm sure you know how such tools as a Nano Engine provide the best way to upload your own mind into a computer. Once the engines have transmitted your brain structure to the computer, the computer can model your brain precisely and you will essentially have a twin of yourself online. You can then make millions or however many copies of yourself you want, so you'll never die, living virtually like a web site. You will also have access to all, in all of the world's best computer banks—information, calculating ability, problem-solving capacities. You will have intimate access to all brains in the world's population—although the ones not on the island won't have such access to you. So you can imagine how smart you'll be. Don't worry, you won't suffocate inside that machine. Virtual mountain valleys animated by computers, virtual friends, virtual smelly onions, it'll all look and taste exactly like all this stuff before you now, even sharper. Step right up! Ain't I The Salesman? Here, see, where your job description lies, Chippie. Everyone who has uploaded their mind—and you know all the island is eager to—being much like a web site, these web sites will need some custodial work. You can be the island's web master.”

I pouted my lips and nodded, as though I were honored to be his island's virtual janitor, no matter how lofty he made the job sound. “Gladly,” I said, girding myself to rest humble: The pose is working, I'm extracting more from him than from any of our drug-smearred nights in a dorm room.

“But I haven't told you Dee's second big project, the one that's making China nervous at his university there. He's also constructing artificial minds, using artificial-life software. I'll treat you to the technical when I have more time—I have a meeting in eleven minutes—but on the island he has the

freedom to create, and we're all behind him. In whatever form we are, whether as drug-enhanced hominids, computer-bio-blends, or uploaded minds, my whole effort is verging into this project. In fact, it is already mine, as I have begun taking it on in another lab, funneling his results to a much more efficient software basis that I'm writing. The project is directing the growth of artificial minds that sprout and reproduce on their own, to do whatever they want in life. Their main goal—much like humans' has been, until recent advances have allowed us to shed this cocoon—is not only to reproduce, but to reproduce for the sake of higher thinking. Like dogs bred and trained (and brained!) for blood, these things lust for intellect. They voraciously consume the realm of intellect, gobbling and digesting information, metabolizing and building great sinews of mathematical and physical theorems beyond human reach. We can likely sell to governments small, contained versions of these, because they will be eager for the unprecedented brain power. With the funds we will only be building and nurturing, feeding and watering, greater and greater artificial minds. We are letting the first large one construct its own floating island—an island that is nothing but intellect, one ounce of which would contain more intellectual power than all of human history combined. We've named these megalopololects.”

“What's that? A dinosaur?”

“Anything but. These will never die out, come meteor rain or shine. Precisely the opposite. Anyway, it will either have its own name for itself, or be beyond the need for mere language. This mind grows and reproduces its parts so rapidly, certainly by now beyond any human control, including ours

on the island, in time it must incorporate the entire Earth into itself.”

“Without regard for humans.”

“This is beyond an ethical issue. Ethics are for our small, DNA-directed selfish minds. At this point it has become planetolects. Next, it expands to the size of the solar system, stellarolects. It has certainly by this point sent out patches of itself to grow in other parts of the galaxy, and then to other galaxies. Galactolects are formed, and these expand, rapidly—though by now these have so conquered the laws of physics, that the concept of time and space are meaningless. They are pure mind, consuming matter and turning it into pure thought, until the entire universe is consumed, a universolect.

“Hey, and if you’re concerned these things are not you, are some other kind of entity that gets to have all the fun, my pal Rick Nostrum-Dammus in his psycho-neuro labs up at All Soul’s has prognosticated that those of us who upload our minds into computers have a good chance of becoming universolects ourselves. We simply start adding silicon modules to our uploaded minds so we too can multiply our intelligence by billions, trillions, hell googolplexes of times in no time and start gobbling up the universe. Can’t you imagine, what an appetite to have, to chew up all these useless inert galaxies and turn them into the pure logic and mathematics your ever-multiplying brain is experiencing? And Sty, Chippie-Boy, if you’re our Web Wizard, you get to be directing it all. Maybe we can outdo Dee’s machines, but what matters is that we make it happen.

“What, progress? That’s the catch-word we’ve been feeding out like cat’s milk, and the bulk of the population and

its leaders, be it governmental or industrial, laps it right up with their brushy tongues. You get a better picture of what's-doing from my ol' comrade 'Hands-on' Christenson-Anderson up at Harvard Biz. Now he's got the fairy tale for eternity: Disruption, that's what counts. Just so you innovate so as to disrupt what's already there. Introduce a 'smart' phone with a couple hundred gizmos no one can use, all out of cheaper materials than the previous products on the market, in fact a lousier product in all, but the whole point is you're disrupting what's already there, making enough panic across the globe they snatch up your downhill product, and the other guy's thrown off the throne. Now that appeals to my all-male drive to creation and destruction. Ever see a one-year-old on a beach, builds a one-bucket castle of sand and at once stomps it out of existence? Now that's the soul of business, creation-destruction. Make something, stomp it. Disrupt, destroy. Heck, God does it, he's the male principle. Who really gives a flip about profit and bucks. The whole point of any profit is just to feed the next disrupt. Any business worth its weight knows it. You don't build up your castle only to live in it.

“And this universe is only the start, because physics is already pointing to the likelihood of multiverses, the fact that beyond our universe are infinite more. That is, whatever the case is about existence, it goes on and on and on and on, universe after universe, forever. And our universolects would have long well understood how to penetrate beyond our universe, and keep consuming the next universes, and on and on, forever wolfing up mere dumb matter and transforming it into ever and ever greater thought. Universe cancer, if you will, like cells gone so mad in our bodies you can't stop them, multiversolects have gone mad for thought. This is what the

universe—the multiverse—is becoming, and we are ushering in this stage. This is not just a dream, or a mere possibility; this is science.”

“And if they encounter other universe cancers growing out there—?”

“Like cancers in the body meeting other cancers, they’ll join forces. But I’m hedging we’re the first to induce the process, because if others had, at least in our universe, our scopes would have detected it by now.”

“Really, Alby, universe ‘cancer’? Nobody’ll buy it when you put it that way.”

“I just put it that way for you, Chippie-boy, to get you to say just that. But it all comes to the same idea however you phrase it for general audiences.”

“What happens if there are only countably many infinite universes and you use them all up?”

“Can’t trip me up with that one, Chip! You can’t use up even a mere countably many infinite universes. Always more there for you to gobble. And if you could—I won’t deny anything is possible from our mere gray-matter view of logic—if it starts to look like you’re about to waste them all? By then, your cosmo-collective hyperbrain is so smart, like Yahweh in the old days you create some more, all your gargantuan appetite could ever want. Now that’s smart-bones, calling on your own smarts. Anything you can say now, you can do. Even Willie Van up in Cambridge Mass knew we’ve poised logic to be kicked out the door. You say one plus one equals googleplex, by gosh it’ll be true. Say zero equals five twenty-sevenths, twelve equals infinity. Everything is anything and is nothing. Jumble it all blah-blah Buddha. Just get our next

step after universe cancer—you think we can't go bigger than that? Now you'll dig this cool new technology coming down the road, as my chum Davy Chummers says. We're gonna stomp all mere logic and mathematics like we know them today, blast them out of the cosmos. Super-mega-meta-hyper-logic-mathematicus. Don't tell me anything is inconceivable; the concept doesn't exist. As soon as you're telling me the thing that's supposedly inconceivable, I'm already starting to conceive it, and once I can conceive it, I can start to find a way to make it happen. Take $5 + 5 = 2$. Tell me that's inconceivable? I already got it in my mind, I'm working out a way to make it happen. Think we can't do absolutely anything you can put in words? I already got a tune we're gonna play. We'll make a machine that can destroy all damn infinite of the multi-universes. Oh, don't go bunching your lips—"

"I'm not."

"Don't be scaredy-cat, I'm not any crazed-out schemer bent on some Freudian revenge against the heavens. Don't get freaked by my universe-cancer talk, because anyway we'll be so smart we'll crack the Second Law of Thermodynamics: No more need to consume a damn drop of matter or energy, because we'll be reversing entropy and creating the stuff. Anyway, here's where we're breaking down all laws of current puny logic: The machine, once everything's been obliterated—I mean nothing left, not even vacuum—it'll be set so that one second later—well, what would be one second if any shards of time were left around, but all time will have been destroyed too—so *approximately* one second later, the machine brings everything back, to just like it was."

Now I may have been bunching my lips, not from fright but pointlessness. “Why?”

“Exactly. No freakin’ reason, and yet it’s pure rationality. Because it can be done. And then sort-of-one second later, the machine will destroy everything again, and a sort-of second later, bring it all back. And everyone will be, like, not noticing a thing, because for the second they’re destroyed, they won’t be able to notice they’re gone. So it’s not quite a strobe-light effect...”

“Alby, the machine can’t re-make everything, because it’s destroyed, too.”

“Don’t give me this puny, man-will-never-fly, mere *logic*. I’m telling you we’ll be discovering super-hyper-mega-meta-logico-mathematicus. And this little project will be only the first, only what this feeble little gray-matter brain of mine can concoct.”

“Well, show me where to invest,” I said. He had no idea his janitor was humoring him, and I would gladly keep his blinders on him as long as he didn’t detect.

Smiling, he turned back to the cabinet and took out the toy: the toy locked away minutes ago because I was apparently undeserving.

“Let me give you a three-minute tour of the lab,” he said, putting on the goggles. Only eight minutes had passed since he had announced his meeting would be in eleven minutes, he had spoken so rapidly this Ritalin “afternoon.”

And so we proceeded, my guide narrating. “Now my eyes is lookin’ at a mass spectrometer. Now my eyes is lookin’ at a tunneling electron microscope...”

17.

I hate to admit, before noon that day I took a plane to Padre Island and sat on a beach. My purpose: I had to make Irina's Christmas donation sink in. To my head. Truly. That morning, I had tried putting my hands into my inbox's backlog. But with the weird fact of my massively pumped up personal means, I could not focus.

Padre Island, not much wider than a beach, unrolls hundreds of miles parallel to the coast, down to the Rio Grande's palmy lips. A dune in the shape of a reclining camel, as I fancy it, lies a few hundred yards into the Padre Island national park. I jeepped up and down that sector of the beach three times, and could not find my Camel Dune. Protean dunes! I settled on another, which may have been mine, resembling more a collapsed circus tent now, with assorted concavities where mesquite and such weeds had not better gripped the sand. I found a squat summit where I could stretch out with some privacy-protection afforded by two-foot rises of sand around me yet a view of the ocean straight ahead, the Atlantic's generous Gulf. Behind a squall edging in from the south, lightning frizzled softly in blue cloud banks. The air, touching on 70°F, lay on me solidly, a lover's skin. The slow breath off the ocean did not merely smell of sodium chloride but penetrated into the palate with the sweetness of the ocean's metals. No one in the world but me and those lulling rolling laps of waves breaking along the strand, under the squall. I

love the way how, after the foam creeps to its highest reach then slips back to ocean's body fast as a beast's tongue into its gorge, there follows, in a line all the way up the shore, a glistening regiment of moisture just under the surface of the sand. It recedes at a uniform rate—until the next wave storms over it. Then after the foam, there that glistening line recedes ever patient again.

You see how we animate even something so terse as the ocean.

What severe reality in the unreal trance of that water, lashing again and again, stern as a parent, a parent as omniscient as that gray horizon. It lulls me, nodding, back, into a reassurance like that in which my poor, long-forgotten placenta once suspended me. Yes, as with previous accounts, Irina had given me the codes to these recent ones. And the investment bankers from the many firms had, these weeks, been calling her, shocked, puzzled, fretted, and sometimes outraged. She had stonewalled them with the declaration that she had other plans for those funds. She refused to divulge more to them. She and I were as good as wedded through our transactions, however much my tacit indebtedness might quietly curdle me. One jerky move, and I could puncture all.

Mightn't, though, her noodle be rigatonied, and I was taking advantage of twisted mentation? Sure, anyone with such heirloom could grow indifferent and fritter it away in Monte Carlo or Hyannis Port. But the very way she slipped it all into me sans souci, with such untested trust as if we were cosmic twins, and I was to do something barely articulated and vaguely beneficial to her in the end, she had to be more than touched in the noggin. And yet, nothing else about her

was mad. She ran a large house and oversaw its maintenance efficiently as a nun, stayed in brassy health, spoke limpidly as a streaming bottle of filtered water, fit snugly into any social scene, revealed compassion, showed self-interest, ravished life and its senses. Could someone be sane in all vestments of oneself and yet, in one back pocket of a pajama, nurse a raveled skein of yarn? Insanity must instead be like cancer: Once it takes hold, in time it sends its creepers to every reach in mind's garden. One rose bed may look bloomy, but sniff till the sweet scent fades and you arrive at the gray weed. Even if most of us somewhere harbor a benign tumor, our system seals it off, while its bulb protrudes to public's or lover's sight. No, Irina was all right, in fact in top shape, and therein lay her peculiarity. She sloughed off canker money for being alien to her nature but, just as the poison selenium is precious-essential to the body in micro quantities, the minimum she retained fed her modest flourishing.

Yet, if her extra funds (what a light word!) were to be "mine"—if we can ever know what that possessive means in such circumstances—what could I do with such sums? Besides gloat? I'm no gawky-eyed shopper. Trips like this, my rare indulgence, are far from extravagance. I like to work and win, all I ask of life. And, win, yes, this time, maybe I had managed to, far beyond the level of work inputted. But as to *work*, period (now something like conscience was throbbing), shouldn't I be channeling all those abstract numbers into things concrete, that is business development? Oh yeah, those numbers were invested; they were busy. But I felt I had gluttonized like you do in dreams where banquet table after banquet table display whipped chocolates and skinned fruits and browned ducklings, all for free. And even the overstuffiness was fleeting as in

a dream. By comparison, all my years of eighty-hour weeks at the console—pecking out penny after penny till, hard as jailhouse bricks they stacked up to five million—looked now like self-inflicted bondage, all for a *measly* five mill. And yet, to let them float off from me as past foolishness, merely because these past weeks could puff them away, was somehow immoral against myself and those years. I almost didn't want this monstrous bill slipped into my pocket, even if I peeked many times a day to see how it matured. Although anyone would embrace such luck.

Why work? as I can hear many of you clamor. I had always admired the “Lotto Syndrome”—of those in Skokie or Pootapoo who hit the eight figures but continue their day job bookkeeping at the high school. Now I had the bug. But it wasn't just a matter of ethic, or habit, or life meaning, although those matters did matter. Something eerier was going to draw me back to my laptop in Dallas: Given my safe ocean view here, I could count five million in a lifetime—at the rate of one dollar per second—as visible as that lightning. But the billion plus, it went beyond the squall, zimming past that gray-smearred horizon, way way, to Africa and past, to Asia, around the Thousands Islands, on and on, so much untouchable metrics.

In not two hours, the sun (lost during my afternoon's journey) was already touching the land behind me. Evening air lapped in, chill as the waves I was toeing. I jeeped back to my hotel in the commercial strip outside the park. I book a room the once or twice a year I come here to air out. A seasoned thirty years old, its pinkish block of a tower rises good-as-

forgotten behind its beachfront scatter of rooms and cafes. The sparse inter-holiday crowd at the sandy tables appeared to be the homeless of the leisure class: men in tie and white shirt but alone and shirttail out, women in sleeveless whose upper arms and dead hair told of too much sun and cigarettes.

Still, after my must-do banquet of tempura Gulf shrimp and raw oysters, I happened on a charming woman. In high black clogs shiny as her pupils and a knee-length dress green enough to drink, she stood at the bar, refusing a stool. I forget her name, but I had to go stand beside her and place my drink order. She never pressed for who I was beyond “Sty.”

“As in ‘in the eye,’?” she said. “Or the sort of thing pigs wallow in?”

“It’s my own self-christened nickname.”

“Who would give oneself such a nickname?”

“You know *Peanuts*, the character Pigpen. If he could still win you over despite all that whirls around him, then he’s done something. If I accomplish as much, then I’ve attained my own style.”

When she spoke, she enunciated clearly as one whose whole mind formed each vowel. With green fingernails, she smoked cigarillos without inhaling. Her hair was loosely barretted behind her ears, which, while small and ornamented with silver loops, bended a tad outward, as if intent listeners. Her sharp chin, shining along with her eyes, appeared to be dissecting your every word for chances for riposte. It took me an hour to notice she never smiled, because she was too welcoming and present to need to.

If the rest of the guests were mainly rejects from their set, she had rejected that set, along with the rest of the world, at

least for this week. A lover had betrayed her. She had come all the way from Oregon, not just to air out, but to figure out her next flight in life. A marine biologist, she knew most of the world's reefs and their research stations, from Wood's Hole to Tahiti's Gump. She nursed an affinity for Padre, having come here as a child, and would crave studying its Ridley's sea turtles, but the park had no job openings. On abrupt notice, she was taking her month of vacation from her Oregon post while she inhaled deeply here and sailed off applications around the planet. She absolutely could not rest within a thousand miles of her fiend back in Coos Bay. Luckily he was in boat rentals (being the bay's local tycoon), not biology, so she would likely not encounter him elsewhere.

So I had the extraordinary chance to intertwine with her trajectory. Swimming had filled her muscles perfectly just to the line of skin, so nowhere did they bulge with trainer's aggression or sag with neglect and food. All that scuba underwater, sun could barely penetrate and damage her tender lightness. Right where upper arm rested against shoulder was a curve as of a porcelain creamer, if only I could touch.

"You listen well," she said. "Better than my diving students. You ask questions, just the right ones, to pull me out and make me feel comfortable telling more."

"They don't listen, when they could get the bends and die?"

"Oh, they listen to bald facts! Anybody can do that. I mean what counts."

"What counts?"

We strolled, feet in lazy foam. The lightning had never come further but still silently fluttered; and above, the stars

had come out strong with no moon. This diver, toned as an acrobat, nonetheless found occasion to stumble on a shell so I had to catch her arm. The memory of that touch lingered on my fingers like the sun's glimpse under shut eyelids. We dropped onto the sand where it was dry and talked on about her, fine by me. Just enough light from the stars and distant cafes revealed her cheeks. She laughed now, though her mouth rebounded to neutral without a smile. We reclined side by side, and the moment came to fall into one another. She ceased talking, looking at me, at my mouth, quietly asking to bundle away Coos Bay. And I stayed still as the windless sand. If I moved forward by one grain, she would be triggered to come the rest of the way. Every such situation in the past, I would trigger that avalanche the first second it trickled. For the first time, I held back, and for the someone else in my life. What a beauty before me, the slit of that skirt still greenish in this light, sweetly fallen open as a leaf up to the thighs, perhaps the most lovely and intelligent woman I'd encountered. She didn't even know my full name and trade. But if I budged, I would fall terrifically into this woman wherever she plunged across the planet. Was it faithfulness restraining me, or fearfulness? Fearful I was no longer my own man?

We walked back, no longer in the lax water but just where the sand was wet so we could tread steadily. She stumbled on no more shells. We now only commented about the tide and chill and the lights ashore shutting off. We came to the café where we had met, now closing; she would go up to the tower, I to a beachfront room. We exchanged emails, hers only numbers, and promised to write. Right. She walked off slowly, brushing sand off her skirt.

Never had I let a woman go off lonely.

Instead of retiring to my room I paced about the beach. The moon came out, icy. I finally collapsed on the sand. I rose before the sun, wet from dew and shivering.

Upon return to my Cedar Springs closet and my inbox shouting with exclamation points, the mail I pounced on first was not Irina's but Emilia's. Heading it "Your route may do," she merely expounded upon the pabulum I had fed her at our visit. Against my better sense, I caught myself searching for teasers between the words, as though to prove Irina right about her. "Ridding the world of the very *possibility* of suffering may be the best way to stop it," she said. "Root the very chance for experiencing pain from organisms' genes themselves. I had always hoped for a more moral route than brute-force tactics. I tremble at the prospect of letting our technologies like dirty fingernails scratch out the warts. But, I'm daunted by a future of mere normative measures failing again and again, and I find the rational part of me faltering, succumbing to your way."

No, Emilia was as rigid as ever I knew her, exemplifying again Irina's inexplicable deception. I wrote back, fired by Alby's revelations yesterday—okay, right, he had disappointed me and sounded on the brink of a pit. Yet into my email to Emilia I poured on the fire I'd felt upon expecting his revelation—before the revelation had quenched it. I even giggled, for two seconds, while I wrote. It was like a secret joke I was constructing, connecting these wires between two unknowing personages whom I did not quite believe in. But while I connected, asking Emilia to meet and discuss my new discoveries, I pictured her, that dowdy, powder-skinned matron. And, upon recall that she was female under the

bulwark, the flesh twinged. How unlike me to lapse for that sort, as if, in defiance of Irina's deceit, I defied my own taste.

After extensive back and forth trying to nail down a time, we settled on meeting well into January but (I could not suffer the airport landing pattern again) not on where.

Irina and I spent New Year's in a docked boat at White Rock Lake. A friend of mine—rather, a client—John Pooper, had loaned it, in fact had forced it on me for the occasion. "I'm certainly taking it nowhere," he said. "And such a breezy tongue as you, you little charmer, and that granite jaw and sparkly eyes, and no doubt a good wad in the bank box, I'd hate to count how many Miss Chippies you got stashed away. Bring out your favorite for a little water sport if it pleases you."

Irina, in the humid cabin lit only by her candles, foisted more all-night substances on me. So the boat sloshed and banged against its dock. We went up bare to the frosty deck with blankets, and its locked spar swayed and rocked, till a dark neighbor somewhere shouted pipe down, but we did not. All that she alluded to the New Year was "This is our resolution, *this* every night of the year. What do you say?" I didn't say; I only acted. And all else still unsaid between us seemed to dissolve in the touch of fingerpads on skin and to slip off us like beads and slide without a splash into the water.

18.

Flattery and boat-loans don't come free, and Pooper and his moans beguiled much of my time until my next meeting with weird Emilia.

Pooper and his company, Pooper's Scoopers, had sunk quite a while back and never quite resurfaced. A waste-hauler, P.S. had suffered trumped-up rumors, originated by a rival, of environmental violations. Sales had capsized; Pooper had brought in image consultants, who did help. But despite sustained agony and hope, he had never recovered. Years of arrears still dogged him. He had taken me on to boost employee morale, which had continued to founder, confessing he may have a hard time paying. I don't take sympathy cases, I warned, and somehow he managed to pay my invoices. Employee morale hinted of recovery, but his personal life remained in the depths. As soon as I invented Beholt the Man, he seeped into it—it offered better rates—and I became more like his therapist. He confessed to such odd guilts as never paying back the image consultant who'd saved his company (an irrational matter of pride) and hiding junk mail from his wife. He was one of the site's few steady male clients and its only male with whom I did in-persons, *grace* our past relation.

Now he was undergoing religious crises, that is, he was floundering close to the desert island of scientology, and in sounding distance of the shipwrecking raëlian reef. He pounded me with treatise-long emails of profound visions sparked by

these doctrines, in a ravel I could not unravel. He told me of wrestling with the tyrant Xemu or Xenu on planets Teegeeck or Tralfalagar (these interchanged) and flying away in DC-8 airliners quadrillions of years ago, down to details of these planets' lunch menus, which often featured tacos. Interspersed were pages of domestic regrets such as not properly sealing last night's trashbags. "I was in a race-car contest 75 million years ago with the tyrant Xenu. The steering wheel was made of tame plutonium, or radioactivity didn't hurt me, I was so clear and impervious. We were coming around a bend, and Claude Volihon was standing atop a giant bronchial tube, waving me on, and all the Elohim in the stands were cheering me—and right as I was approaching the finish line, Xenu just inches behind me—we were racing at .99999 the speed of light—I recalled *forward* in time, to just yesterday, when I forgot to scrub the bathtub mildew after I had showered, and my sister-in-law was about to visit. And I was so suddenly guilty my hands flew off the steering wheel and I lost the race.

"See how the merest petty daily worries foul up our achievements? This was a race with *Xenu*."

I kept reminding myself: such is the sort of matter about which I take pride as my life's work. For such, I sweat in my closet at my console, sacrificing the seconds and minutes and hours of my allotted time on Earth, when I could lay all of this down, shut off my laptop never to return, and wander the world's dunes with my lady in green. I have her email, all sixteen codelike numbers of it. And yet, Pooper here did lend me his boat. And I did find my work mildly amusing. Some of these multi-page missives were poignantly unpredictable and kept me wondering what might the sender dream next. John Pooper's phantasms might not have started up until his indeed

stressful company woes had; yet, he simultaneously managed to tow the firm up to air and light, however stormy. And the images and philosophies he wrote me about, however swirled and dappled, were believed by tens of thousands of functioning humans (including famous actors) across planet Earth.

What strapped me to my seat for many days on end was trying to unswirl and straighten out his visions and convince him of a better belief. Yes, I shared even with the mild bourgeois John Pooper the more rational alternative, extrahumanism, which I redubbed “exhumanism” for him, to compete with his more exotic rivals. While I keyed away, I envisioned John Pooper, short man with narrow shoulders always in burnt-chestnut suit with red tie, bald as a China bowl with gray ambergris mustache and protruding front teeth. Once a Napoleon, now a rump. We exhumans, I told him, we exhume the treasures of science and put them to use. The humbled man liked that: “Tell me more.” I sent along the standard extrahuman doctrine that you can snip from a number of my web site’s drop-down menus, tailored just for him. Certainly he had heard it from me in untailored form before.

By the end of two weeks, I had collected \$12,474 in fees, which he paid with three credit cards, and a sense of triumph more touching than any I had felt when Irina had handed me her papers.

The night before I met Emilia, Alby called. If Alby never emails or texts, he calls less than never. Upon sight of his name on my telephone, I thought it some prankster, if a prank that only he might pull off.

“News, you brimy lass!” he snarled. “You’re the fourth I’m telling, you see how far our old pal-ship bumps you up the list.” Then his voice brightened and waxed enthusiastic the more he narrated; I don’t believe he let me exhale one word after hello. “The lesser part of the story is: all three volunteers with Chippie Chips implants have survived. But their lives are no big deal since they signed them away and we’re square with FDA and they’re all non-citizens anyway and are True Believers in *us* and will sacrifice all for The Vision. The big part is: Just late this afternoon, not two hours ago, one of the subjects, that same Buster Javits you saw implanted, communicated to us through the internet. I mean *by way of the Chip*. The computer in the Chip, through wifi, we’ve been directing to different web sites—the Dallas Cowboys homepage and Jetsons fan club and Snickers bar info pages. We’ve got him here in a hospital bed in the lab, and over the weeks he’s been reporting thought processes that demonstrate a high correlation with what we’ve been inputting. He’s a big Home Depot shopper—being a poor student, he just likes to stroll the aisles and covet—and we went right through their online catalog, signaling it to him. Within the same quarter hour we scrolled through the electrical sockets department, he was thinking very vividly about electrical sockets. But that’s nothing, that could be coincidence, and our statistician is analyzing the data.” Alby, although he so uncharacteristically declined from admitting, was his own statistician. “The headline’s coming, boy. We’ve been trying to train him to write *to* the Chip computer. After all, the neurosurgeon had connected the Chip’s input to afferent motor cortex fibers for the fingers. It was pure guesswork on our part. For weeks, nothing. The Chip has a nano digital keyboard that connects to

its output signaling to our console, and all the subject's efforts came to zilch. Then, today, Sty, hours ago—poom, stuff starts stumbling from *his* Chip onto *our* console. Gobbledeegook, like 'ampersand, star, percent, H, bracket, 7, 8, comma.'" But *stuff*. Headlines, pal. Headlines of the fucking millennium. That smart little subject-kid, he trained his friggin' fibers! In no time we'll have him writing emails in his Chip. This is greater than the invention of the wheel. Your old mushy cerebrum is about to go. This is the Exhuman Age, Era of the Multiverse. Are you ready to be our web master? Come down for a brain refitting now, Chippie Boy."

No more than he had said hello did he say goodbye, and the line went dead. What struck me was how he had said "Exhuman," when *I* had concocted the term, for Pooper.

19.

Emilia and I met at a dive in the city's most rundown redneck district, Pleasant Grove. My suggestion. For some reason this ramshackle storefront, Rundle's, served exquisite peasant food, and word was starting to spread but hardly so far as to capture a Reynaldo. Perfect for Emilia. When I drove up, she stood outside its front door and at once fit right in *and* stood out. It was one of those days when Dallas spreads sheet-ice across macadam and to the very tips of bare trees. The zinc blue sky and brass sun bore down with the weight of cold iron. Glare shot from all the crystals. The old storefront in a stripmall, a former shoe repair, was loosing mortar in powder from its yellow bricks, but its crooked windows were withstanding the weathers. And there Emilia swathed in her gray scarves and tattered bulk appeared as abdominal as any redneck.

Yet when I walked up, she grinned. For the first time, I saw her outdoors. In light sharp as a dermatologist's, the powdery grayness of her skin sublimed into thin air in the way that dry ice turns to smooth white steam. The texture now proved clear and satiny, and her big wide face wielded extraordinary power as though erupting from her coats. The hair, now down in fluid abundance, showed not a trace of white but a blond that even from a distance reflected rainbows from the sun.

"It's me, Stu," she said. "Are you surprised I'd show up in such a place?"

“Maybe you just make me happy that you would.”

She studied me, perhaps for my veracity. Yes, out here, the divinity of her blood, its unwrinkled eternity against the dry cold, stood out against the bowed patrons entering Rundle’s.

You have to see Rundle’s to see how it suited Emilia. It was square and petite as the shoe-repairer’s that once occupied the space. Its far end boasted the old counter where you once dropped off your broken footwear. The counter even had a cube-shaped lacuna, an abrupt lower shelf where, I guess, you passed your large boots. Now the waitress pulled waiting orders off that counter top. The other three walls barely accommodated eight booths, with two more tables in the midst mid-floor. But none of these booths had arrived fresh from the restaurant supply. You know those guys in ratty trucks who cruise the alleys for large garbage such as furniture. Rundle must have scavenged these from one such truck’s sale at the flea market, if not driven the truck himself. Each one was different sized, some melty soft as vinyl, others crispy as celluloid, some infantile blue, others tobacco brown, some tabletops spotless formica, others chipped pine. And the walls: Not only had the fifty-year-old white paint persisted through Rundle’s lean budget, but apparently the old repairman had smoked. The upper reaches had that deep-orange tint that years of nicotine fumes impart to white paint. Either the health department had not penetrated this city corner, or their rules had neglected aesthetic repainting. But Rundle had distracted the eye by means of framed close-up photos of, unaccountably, large rodents such as woodchucks, squirrels and marmots. Except for the ancient paint, all else, down to the splintered table top under our elbows, appeared bleach-clean. The only odors were of fresh hot oil. The customers, four and five to

a booth, wore overalls as splattered as their pickups out front. They spoke in shouts, as did the waitress and the cooks over their percussion-section pans.

Emilia's gaze kept straying from her menu card and studying all around her, as if this plain setting were a Byzantine tapestry. She spoke so softly I barely heard above the clamor, "How did you discover this little place?"

"A client." I.T., actually. "Nights, the workers go home, downtown arrives."

"I'm sorry to hear it's been 'discovered.' These folks need their quick lunches."

"Rundle gives the night-set their own tony menu, but still he's struggling for air. He's near declared bankruptcy four times, and he's only been open a year."

"He may not be here in a month."

"Enjoy while you can."

"I'll always find food. But maybe he won't always find a restaurant."

As we talked, she shed more covering. The yummy cooking oils did circulate plenty heat despite drafts through the opening door. She piled one coat after the other on the booth beside her, local style, there being no coat hooks.

"How do you know all this, if Rundle isn't so well-known?" she said.

"His wife is another client." I.T., just before our breakup, had turned me on to her. And I.T., for all I knew, might have turned herself on to the woman as well—if not to Rundle. I'd never met either in person.

"And you would share this poor client's secrets with just anyone, like me?"

“You’re not just anyone, Emilia,” I said.

Bowing her chin and gazing sidelong, Emilia gave me her first look approaching coy, before she dipped back into her menu. She had just finished shedding her wraps down to room-temperature wear. As on the Reynaldo feast day, she went sleeveless, odd in today’s weather. It was a mere slip of shimmering gray with strings at the shoulders. I couldn’t blame her in this stuffy dive. And with her jeans and sneakers: Heck, any of these guys’ wives could have arrived in the same, it was so “inappropriate.” But in the low winter sun through the plate glass, those upper arms, yes round, lost their matronly stumpiness of Benton II’s dim corridor. They were smooth as a glass urn. I pictured her as a night diner sitting across from I.T. Also I recalled that circle of water on her green gown weeks ago. That same body—bull’s-eyed that day although quite covered—now beamed a beautiful structure much more precisely through that shimmering tissue.

It’s irritating when a person of a stiff and logical character accidentally reveals a chink of good physique.

Rundle was so strapped that he grew his vegetables on his plot and greenhouse in Balch Springs. Collards, pumpkins, onions, jalapenos, butterbeans, carrots, watermelon, turnip greens, radish, grapes, cilantro, lettuce, basil, spinach, red and purple potatoes, blue and goose and straw and black berries, and an orchard with apple, apricot, peach and cherry. On an adjacent plot he raised broilers, layers, dairy cattle, goats and turkeys. It all arrived twice daily in a jalopy little spunkier than Jed Clampitt’s but proudly splattered on the sides “RUNDLE/FRESH EATS.” (I had no idea whom among the workers between truck and kitchen was Rundle. Maybe he was Madame

Rundle's creation.) What for Rundle and his plots was economy, for clientele was gastronomic gold. "No pesticides," the menu card announced, "because I can't afford them."

The menu cards seemed not only photocopies but based on originals typed by an old-fashioned typewriter, in courier font. The Rundles had no computer; she emailed me on a neighbor's.

Emilia took the Choose-Your-Poison option, your selection of raw and cooked vegetables. I'm no diet snob, it's all so much tasty gasoline on-the-go, the longer it lasts in your tank the better. I took the home-stuffed schnitzel and red cabbage. At Rundle's the orders seem to arrive not a minute after you place them.

Emilia viewed her plate a moment as she might a Cezanne still-life, one that she could subtly sniff as well. Then she forked up the mushy collards and shut her eyes.

"You realize," she said after some bites, "in the century after the Civil War, and probably other periods in history, the farming classes lived better than the blokes in the city, because they had all these micronutrients, these luteins and lycopenes we're just now learning about. From what I've studied, they didn't have so much of the diabetes and cancers we're seeing."

You have to enter professorial types like Emilia through the voice box. I know well from experience with a female professional type—to whom I was drawn into dating—in a college Greek class. As an engineering student I had balked at the language requirement, so useless for my endeavor, by taking truly useless Ancient Greek. To this day those gooky verbs, *luo*, *luein*, among the 900+ forms a Greek verb can assume, still stick to my skullbones, This woman went on to

become an economics advisor in Washington and journal editor by age thirty. Every weekend, I had to discourse my way into the sheets. Many of you have probably also witnessed yourself compromising yourself to board your dreamboat.

I said to Emilia, “All their weakling little babies in those eras died at birth, and now we live till diabetes and such catch up.”

“Your typical distorted statistics. Yes, vaccines have cut infant deaths. That’s where most of our apparent increase in longevity comes from. Discount infant mortality, and you’ll find longevity has actually been decreasing recently. Thanks to exploding numbers of products that our soft tissues can’t tender. And they’re why I hate trucking with your side and why everything about it repulses me.”

We ate on, hardly in silence considering the yaks and yuks and huzzas and guffaws and clanks and clinks and poundings of fists and squealings of cushions all around.

“This is what you came out here to announce?” I said.

“I’m telling you why I’ve so completely resisted you and your side all along. You’re almost as wrong as wrong can be. But I’m overwhelmed. My side. Using your techniques to solve the problem is our penultimate—next-to-last—choice. The worst choice is doing nothing and letting suffering go unassuaged. Your side, though, has been a root cause, sending out its runners across the globe, sprouting product after product for their own sake, regardless of the long-term good.”

“What about vaccines, you just mentioned?”

“A blessed accident. And now we’re swathed in your garb. Yes, swathed: we can’t get out. The only way out is to cut

through, but we can't reach the scissors. This is where I feel like surrendering."

As we spooned and cut, her own garb proved not so suffocating. In fact it left a good volume of air between it and her as she bent over her plate. I had to take some gulps of air myself, at the sight, more roundly structured than her other smothering garb had allowed weeks ago. I did wish she would rebundle herself as she properly should and we could focus on affairs at hand.

I swiped my lip. "So you call it 'surrender'?"

"But at the same time it's not. It's a completely willful action. I desire—an ending to this suffering. I will always actively resist succumbing to *that*. I'm saying you have left us no other way but your techniques, so then I will use since I must."

"But you fear that my techniques—technologies—can only exacerbate matters."

"Exactly. If you rush in headlong. So we have to proceed *very* slowly and cautiously. One rash impatient move that rubs against nature can send us and our little world tumbling. You catch my drift?"

I wished her top would not flop so when she spoke so.

"I believe I do," I said.

"Men's techniques—technologies—have always gone too fast, before we can feel out how they affect us, and often before we see their damage. And now, Moore's 'law,' doubling in overwhelming power every year and a half. I'm asking you to be so much *more* cautious, if you want me to join you in the least."

“Yes, ma’am, I believe I understand.” The “ma’am” simply slipped out. But I pushed my empty plate aside on purpose. “I believe I have something almost tailor-made for your desires.”

“Oh? And, Stuart, what’s this ‘ma’am’?”

Emilia could as well have dashed me with her iced lemonade. Even the racket around seemed to subside. But as I could not decode Emilia’s words, I said, “I try to use ‘sir’ with my male clients in person and ‘ma’am’ with my female.” Pooper notwithstanding.

“You’re so respectful and old-fashioned, for someone so modern.”

“We all have inconsistencies.”

“You were about to tell what you have, tailor-made for my desires.”

“An invention of a prominent colleague and long-time personal friend, Alby Tolby of Albert Tolby Enterprises. I observed it in level-three clinical trials only weeks ago, and only yesterday he reported its breakthrough results to me, among a few select people.”

She had stopped eating, although some scraps remained on her plate. She had slumped some in her seat, as though under the seriousness of my tone, her forearms in parallel across the table, leaning toward me. I was astonished by how I was attempting to bring together these two people at a business level, in both of whom I did not quite believe. I had ceased believing in Alby the day at his Oak Cliff lab when I had perceived he would never cease condescending to me. And Emilia, well, she was a dowdy academic. Yet, I watched myself proceed to promote Alby’s program at her expense.

“How,” she said, “can you know it’s a genuine breakthrough so soon?”

“The inventors of the wheel must have known they had breakthrough. So must’ve Edison with his light bulb. Emilia, this is the first time a human brain has controlled a computer from inside its head.” I described the Buster Javits internet experiment.

“If this were such a breakthrough I would have read about it.”

“I trust you’ll keep the news between us until he’s ready to announce it widely.”

“How could it be that *I*, out of all the coincidences possible, could be the one to be hearing this first report, if it were for real?”

“Somebody had to be among the first to hear of the wheel and light bulb.”

“People trying to nab your confidence always have big stories, make you feel special.”

“Alby Tolby is not some crank. He’s successful at whatever he touches.”

“I believe I’ve read about him. Isn’t he anti-democracy?”

“Who knows what reporters say. The pioneering are always oddball. The point is what you can do with the thing for your cause.”

“Another diseased contraption, tailor-made for *me*! I came out here for *this*?”

“We came out here, first, to eat wonderful food.”

She studied me a moment further and, reluctantly as a teen reprimanded for not eating, resumed her meal.

Calmer, she said, “I’m not wowed by anyone’s merging brain and toy, if it’s true. Tinkerers have always existed, and their doodling is always the same, brats grabbing attention. And look at the mess they’ve left us.”

“This one may be the scissors to cut out the suffering and the tinkerers’ messes. By controlling what passes through the device. If signals for suffering start to arise in the organic brain, the device detects them and filters them out.”

“That,” she meditated on her last tasty mouthful, “is brute cut-and-chop.”

She cut her sliced tomato, a mammoth bloody scarlet beefsteak sunripened off the vine, before forking it up, fork in left hand, knife in right, European style. At the holiday feast, all Reynaldos ate in such manner, though not the cousins and aunts, those not descended through Jeremy.

“Surgery was the only thing medicine ever did well,” she said.

As the lunch-hour deepened, customers by the door, waiting for a table, eyed us.

She said, “It’s utterly repulsive, these tinkerers’ attacking the body, like malnourished mites, vying to turn us into their peewee nightmares. Make us silvery metallic.”

With her homemade roll, she sopped up the juices.

“Use your reason,” I urged.

Emilia pushed away her clean-wiped plate. “Do you really believe your words?”

“Why, I do believe so much as to share the information with you.”

Her gaze dropped to the plate. She shook her head slowly. “I could never, never deal with such transactions myself, even for the right cause.”

Just outside the door, we stood a moment. She was tall, about my height. Our breaths huffed in clouds, yellow in the sun, and dissipated upon each other.

“In your emails, you sounded ready to get to work,” I said.

“I don’t have a ‘sound’ when I email. And I’ve been at work for years.”

“At the start of lunch, you said you had to choose ‘my route.’ I hope nothing I’ve said, like of Alby’s invention, has unconvinced you.”

“I was resigned, never convinced. Quite a different thing. You’ve left us but one meager direction.”

“I don’t know if I’ve been helpful today. Is it worth meeting again?”

“I’m sure I’ll remain staunch. I’ve told you my resolution: I cannot proceed in your direction directly. I’m not sure what there is to convince me of.”

She put out her hand, more softly than her tone would presage. I took it, and the texture of even the palm was as satiny as her face. My thumb reached around to the back of her hand, which was ever softer, pliable as the cushion of the field between two positive magnets held close. Her other hand joined the first in clasping mine. I said, “So I should try again, find what to convince you of.”

“You tell me.”

And so, allowing no further ado, she went to her car.

The satin impression of skin remained so distinct on mine that I used my left hand to reach into my right pocket for the car keys, and so retain the impression.

20.

One of the first things Irina said when we next met was, “Curious. Emilia called me last night. She never does.”

I stopped the motions of the dangerous instrument in my hands. We were, like a couple of yokels, out breaking up her far-back turf, for a new garden come Spring. The day before, the winds had shifted to the south and melted the inches of ice in hours, causing the usual floods in the city’s low river-districts. Ecstatic, ebullient, Irina had called, eulogizing Spring on its way. She could smell it in the tinkling water-drops from the trees, in the rich earth they saturated, in the flower buds urging to burst. We had to, had to, had to get out and reach fingers into the ground. I reminded her that Dallas winters often cycle through these ices and torrid thaws. “More reason to get a start before the next freeze. It’ll take till February to break up that loam.” She would not task her gardener.

Before she noticed I’d stopped, I resumed, jumping on the heavy pitch fork to knife it into the clay. Here I was in muddy overalls for first time since I was seven and her gardener’s boots which happened to fit me. I had to drop even business at my new master’s bidding. Going to Padre, I had snuck around her, never to be discovered. I certainly had not mentioned one meeting with Emilia. It was a tenuous position to take, guarding these last gossamers of my identity. Any moment, any thread, such as the two absurdly hushed rendezvous with her sister, could snap, and snap this whole new life I was constructing.

Irina did notice my pause, looking up. “That surprises you, too?”

I focused on working that dug-in pitch fork back and forth to wedge up a good chunk of black clay. Since I was seven, never had I again had to tolerate that black grit on my tongue, like the soilly taste of cheese mold. Why did Irina have to wait an hour into our visit to exhume this subject? She was so controlled, she must be roiling.

In my peripheral vision, I noted her pith helmet still pointed my way.

“What, again, surprises me?” I said. “That your sisters would call you?”

(Why had I ever presumed Emilia would suppress sister rivalry and maintain a scientific silence about our business? Are humans ever such good robots?)

Irina persisted in her stance, now leaning on her upright shovel. “Not ‘my sisters,’ but Emilia. I say ‘she never calls me’—I mean like once a year. Rose, *literally* never.”

“So this was Emilia’s once-a-year call.”

“Last time was only early December.”

“So she got this year’s done with early.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know. I have no idea what she talked about.”

You know how it is when someone’s staring at you and you keep persisting at a task to keep them from seeing you and all you do is look guiltier. I finally halted my work, and I leaned on my dangerous instrument in mirror of her.

“Know what I think?” Irina said. “After the Christmas fest, it’s slowly sunk into her that for the first time the family has accepted my private life. You and I. And that we have

something. And the way she is, I told you how she is, it's finally nettling her how she may never have such a thing."

What nettled me—and it was not just the weedy root saps in the soil, oozing into my gloveless hands—was how Irina continued this same old charade about Emilia. The slut sister.

I said, "That's all you talked about?"

"Hah! She wouldn't touch it. I wouldn't dare mention it and hurt her feelings. She talked anything but."

"Like—?"

I couldn't control myself, looked down, as if at a next place to knife. Yes, I, Stuart Beholt, social advisor, was losing social self-control.

Irina shrugged and pouted. "You know, her usual, the family, how they're such cheats, the poor, the world at large, politics, Chillicothe and why don't she and I move there for a simple life with a vegetable patch and fish pond. Always it's *her* topics."

Those did sound like Emilia. "Not about her exploits?"

"She never talks about them. I only know them because of the way she is."

"Since she was a teen."

"Oh, preteen. Age ten was her first time, she was so precocious."

"If she moved to tiny Chillicothe, wouldn't her pickings be pretty slender?"

"Any old hog-slopper would suit her. Even better than urban snobs."

Irina had a different tone when she spoke of her sibling, as if she were transported back to preteen herself. All adult sophistication molted right off her voice.

“So this call came out of nowhere?”

“She *said*,” Irina sighed or huffed, “she was concerned about her health. A few days ago she had heard-tell some information about the future. And it was all nightmarish and worried her all night. She went to the doctor yesterday morning—she’s such a hypochon—and turned out she had palpitations. But everybody has palpitations. That’s like saying I got a blister. She never calls me about her medical appointments.”

Somehow, Irina’s report abruptly spelled relief. Emilia must not have told her of our visit, only alluded to our topic. I was facing the eight-year-old Irina in her green overalls.

But despite her stubborn image of her sister, she was giving me a fair report on yesterday’s phone-call, not setting me traps. I even cut Irina some slack: Who knows if she hadn’t once stumbled on the sister in a puppy-love act that forever stained her eyes. Still Irina, a responsible adult, had no cause to paint Emilia such a hot red.

Relief in one district came with a new tremor in another: Emilia lost sleep from my ‘nightmare future’? Heart palpitations? It was all very, very touching.

“I think,” Irina went on, “she was just ‘passing another stone.’ You know how people with kidney stones pass these little 2-millimeter cysts that are supposed to feel like cannonballs. I don’t know how many stones she passes through her heart every month, but this one must have been sizable. She should just change her private-life diet. I think the fact

is finally sinking in, and that's why she called. She probably wants advice to seep in from me like osmosis, if that's possible through such minimal contact. She wouldn't dare chafe her older-sib pride by asking me. Don't you think, or am I being a little too prideful too?"

Yes, Irina was shooting perfectly straight, laying no trap, honest and true. With a few consoling words, I set her at ease so we could return to our tilling. "I'm sure just talking to you does her good, like it does me."

But Irina only looked distant, into a faraway thought, then began shaking her head. "Nutting," she mumbled, or rather "nothing."

"It's not nothing. You do me and probably her a lot of good."

Her head shook slowly, saying as though I weren't there, "Nutting. Nutting."

But later, in the glass house, on the floor cushions she had long ago laid out for us, she draped her arms over my bare shoulders and kissed without one rush or gnaw of greed and triumph, not one huff of "Now I have you back in my claws, you are mine and never hers!" Yes, we passed that ripple.

If anyone, including myself, had asked why over the next several weeks I kept meeting with Emilia, I would have said, "Next question."

Sometimes I heard a voice: "This is altruism. She wants a home for her money."

We rendezvoused all across the 7000 square miles of the metroplex, close to her home or in distant corners, in dingy art galleries, outside post offices, on the DART train between

Dallas and Ft. Worth, at a flea market, in a Rockwall County honky-tonk, an abandoned stone quarry, beside the Dallas Hunting and Fishing Lake, never anywhere where another Reynaldo might tread and never, bless her, in her digs under the landing pattern. When we met, we conveyed not a tone or air of subterfuge or tryst, merely an issue of “getting on with business,” “needing more convincing that this high-tech route is the thing,” “working out details,” “becoming comfortable with something so alien,” “soothing an ambivalent conscience.” I, in fact, was the one more often to call or write and suggest a meeting. She agreed with an initial shrug of indifference but in no time took over as factotum and suggested the places.

“I’m still waking up nights, in sweats, with images of humanity being fed—like pigs into meat grinders—into your mind-extracting devices, Stu. Convince me you don’t intend such a thing.”

So we strolled the footpaths through jungled marshes of Rochester Park, while she, amateur ornithologist as I now discovered, described the egrets in the Trinity River. “Those are snowy egrets, the most common species of egret around here,” she said. Two white birds on black chopstick legs dipped necks slender as a squid’s tentacle into the water and walked with trouble as if their bodies would fall off. “Great egrets are larger, but you rarely see the cattle egret, the third species. See how the feathers are looking a little shaggy?” she said. The snowies were a good hundred yards distant and appeared as gleaming as their name. She was making me nervous, her abruptly revealed fascination with animals, like Irina’s mesmerization by the zoo monkeys and axolotls. Maybe Irina would come paddling up

with binoculars. “Come April, their plumage will grow brilliant, to the point of iridescence. For mating.”

It was Emilia’s first allusion to the private underside of animal survival; and in its dull scholarly coating, it was tasteful and compelling.

“Do they mate for life?”

“They mate because they desire it.”

So went this meeting, like most of them, with little mention of the looming subject, how I might help her battle against suffering. Did we simply enjoy one another’s company? I couldn’t tell; I simply had to be there, beside her, ambling along, or rocking in the train seats, or shaking under a honky-tonk’s country-western speakers.

We came to our cars, parked side-by-side in the swamp mud. “I still haven’t convinced you to direct any resources into Alby’s or other projects I know.”

“I am feeling better. Just coming out here with me and seeing life helps me feel confident in life. It will keep going.”

I could not decode that statement. I felt she was leading me through some labyrinthine puzzle, just to eat up my valuable time. “What will convince you?”

“Haven’t I told you that’s up to you? If you can figure it out.”

She buttoned the tight collar of her giant coat like nothing could choke her. Then we shook hands, and in the frigid air, that flesh pliable as kid left its impression on my palm. I waited until she drove away before I spoiled the impression by gripping the wheel.

Her words “If you can figure it out” cycled in my inner ear, as in the very cochlea, until the brilliant afternoon when we

stepped up to the abandoned rock quarry. In sight of the deep blue water below, those words clicked.

21.

As usual she suggested the place, an old “high-school hangout” (which she had frequented only about twice, having never attended high school). “I’d love to see if it’s still there. What memories.” The day was already warming by 10 a.m., tomorrow the first of spring and already we had peeps of summer. Irina, veritably to my relief, had made no further offerings from her drawer of envelopes: Their meaning still confounded me. Those she had exhumed for me I had quietly stowed away in busy little hamster cages. The wheels spun their numbers to higher digits almost daily, despite the toxic airs of that great experiment called the economy, and I glimpsed these numbers curiously as I might a neighbor’s outdoor thermometer. Otherwise I muffled the thought of them. Irina and I traipsed along a plateau that stretched to every horizon, a plateau delectable to the senses, with its spring odors and licks of sunrays, a plateau she must have desired eternally and for eternity. With every step, I thought, “We will settle here? Build a cabin there?”

As usual, Emilia and I drove separately. This trek, our longest, wound me through some curly back roads and a dozen turnoffs left and right, past neglected pastures head-high in ragweed and barbwire posts lying asleep on the ground. Under overgrown branches, signs for soft drinks decades obsolete were peeling their last. The route took us out of the metroplex’s radiation, halfway even to my own Clay County. How as a kid

had I not heard of this spot? How had Emilia's urban "friends" (!) ever found it, any more than Dante could have found the 9th Circle without Virgil?

The fields were already throwing their strips of yellow, and yellow and pink, and blue and speckled white, of blooming spring across their rolling hillsides. It seemed the wildflowers opened so fast I could see them spreading like a cloud shadow, or were they just waving in the breeze? Wind through my window whipped my shirt. Emilia's other words that day at the Trinity River still cycled through me as well, how my being there seeing "life" with her made her feel better, with greater confidence that life would go on. But how much more would her confidence need stroking, and to what end in the end? Already, between her whimsy outings and my everyday sweet pressings with her sister, I was farming out more of my work to associates and subcontractors. But never could I hire out client responses to be signed "Beholt the Man." That's *me*, *my* identity! Never filch that from me, thieving Reynaldos! This hours' long chase through the post oak woods had to be the last that Emilia Reynaldo would extract from me.

Now, she said this quarry collected rainwater, blue as coral reef and pure as the marble formerly mined. At the last minute before leaving, I had pulled on my swimming trunks under the jeans and grabbed some towels. But what a chill March water there would be. Maybe it would shake me out of this Emilia mirage and settle me on Irina's plateau.

You have to park along a stretch of the road, designated by a pattern of oak trees and a drainage ditch. Luckily Emilia's faded green Toyota was already there, aslant on the road bank.

I would never have discerned the pattern; one tree looks like another to me.

“Not one car in the past ten minutes!” she exclaimed. “Desolate as ever!”

She was bundled up to the neck, even on this warm day. What fools were my swimming trunks under my jeans. I held up the folded towels like shields. “In case you want to sit.”

“I never simply sat in this place.”

A trail so faint it appeared only rabbits took it cut through the woods’ underbrush. “Posted” signs scattered here and there on treetrunks, as pocked and bled as the soft drink signs. She led. The odors of leaflet saps were dusted with spring’s pollen and winter’s drying mud. My sinuses steadily opened and closed, readying for a sneeze that never came. Through the oaks’ upper stories a breeze groaned just within hearing, just enough to bemoan the silence around. A loan bird beeped, beeped.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s been here in years,” she said. “I hope the quarry hasn’t been filled. I can’t believe high schoolers are too lazy for the famous lovers’ leap.”

While dim, the path followed a broad, high swath in the branches and brush. Emilia explained that long ago it was a dirt track for the rock-hauling trucks, since overgrown. Dating to the late 1800’s, the quarry had supplied stone for many an early Dallas mansion but, a limited vein, had closed in the 1970s. “It may have provided some for the Louis Quatorze,” she said, “but that, you’ll have to ask Desi.”

Ahead, a gleam through the trunks promised a clearing. The stretch of golden light proved to be wide, crowning a summit in the low rise we were mounting. The path grew wider,

as though here the stone trucks had turned about and parked. Then the woods halted, and before us, in sun so dazzling I had to shield my eyes, was a nearly rectilinear gouge in the earth. It exposed insides as white as an incision into a hard fat belly.

“It is still here, all right,” Emilia said. “Once seduced, now abandoned.”

It must have been a hundred yards across, several acres. A steep road went down one side, for the trucks. Beyond was the brown of the woods’ treetrunks, the green of their tops, the blue of sky and yellow of afternoon sun, a world of primitives. Emilia beheld it at this distance awhile, absorbing the rays of memory. We slowly approached, and there indeed was the rainwater and snowmelt, the jade that water takes on amidst such whiteness.

“That year,” she said, “it was only about four to six feet, depending where.”

This year, with all the sloppy precipitation, the bottom did not show.

She pointed out where the wall was straight enough you could leap from the top, safely if the water were deep enough. The drop was a good thirty feet. That was the Leap. She gave it a solemn moment as if it had taken some lives; I dared not ask.

We strolled all four contours of the rim. She recounted how in its day forty or fifty or a hundred bodies would be sunbathing or swandiving. No doubt the cold winter had scared off visitors, and we were on a weekday. Blots of litter showed the site was not forgotten. “The kids must use another trail now,” she said. Sometimes she waxed idealistic, intoning the high sacredness of this site where social garb of classes and beliefs were dropped. The fact that a visit was quasi-outlaw,

a trespass (though the owners, probably heirs, shut their eyes) tied all in camaraderie. Otherwise Emilia strayed so deep in this teen world, her academic façade peeled away. She skipped a few feet, turned about walking backwards and gesticulated as she narrated. Her voice went high and hilarious. I hated to break the moment by getting to “the topic.”

After one full spin about the perimeter, we began a second, straggling ever slower. Back again at the jump-off, we dawdled until motion simply ceased. The sun on the ripples reflected as jittering stripes on the walls. Our voices, too, soon ceased, and there was only a vulture, a quarter mile distant, circling in a thermal.

My voice came like an intrusion on peace. “Did you ever make the plunge?”

“Oh yes.” Her voice had a blush, but when I caught a glance she was not blushing, and her tone, in retrospect, was of stating mere fact.

And then I figured it out. In fact, I uttered the non-sequitur, “I figured it out.”

She received the words with a noble deadpan, revealing she knew exactly what they followed.

I no sooner spoke them than my hands were unbuckling my belt and pulling my baggy jeans right around my sneakers, yanking off the footwear and throwing off the tee shirt, down to the trunks. She gave the proceedings an understanding deadpan. I returned the look, or absence of one, and turned to the cliffside. The water thirty feet below looked three hundred, with deceptively tranquil wavelets. They hinted not of the depths beneath. I took one second before springing into the

most foolish act of my life. First note that struck me was how she uttered not a peep.

A 100-meter breaststroker on the high school team, I knew the dives. But this one, in the least foolish part of this act, I took feet-first, arms pinned to my side. Still I looked feetward to see what was coming at me. That water took a minute to arrive. So much went through my head, I figured death on its way. I saw that if I would do such a foolish thing, I must have been ready for the end. I had achieved a lot, far more than I had expected when hoeing the garden back in Clay County. Never had expected to hit the six figures, much less the ten. So I must have achieved as much as I could, my subconscious knew, and I had hit something as hard as that shallow water coming. I could go no further, mired in Irina. The only way I could go lay in what lay ahead, if that be the end. At the last moment, I saw those peaceful egrets, brilliant feathered, drifting to the marsh reeds for their duet.

I struck and first thing I felt was extreme cold, so cold it must be instant death. But I slipped down, down, till my feet hit rock. Then I stopped, eyes still shut, the cold so godawful. I felt a million frozen needles sticking into me—and the ears, a spear through my ears. I thrust upward, but the cold crushed through like plates of iron and collapsed my lungs till I suffocated.

My hands broke into air, and I had to keep pulling up as out of a hole. Through my splashes, I heard a voice, as though it came through a tin can connected by a thread. “Wow, there’s a helluva lot of water!”

My eyes finally opened, and far, far up the white cliff was a body, from this angle could have been a foot tall and a foot wide. But I did notice that now, not enclosed to the

neck in blouse and skirt, it was but all skin and two strips of orange. With a couple kicks she unshod, raised her arms, bent the knees.

“Don’t—” I shouted. “It’s freezing!”

But she was flying, feet-first, arms wrongly high overhead. She might knock back her chin and whiplash on impact. Her trajectory would land her just feet from me. I pushed back. In the flash before she struck I caught a vision I could never have imagined. Emilia Reynaldo the stern was creamy, strong, firm and flattered by an orange two-piece.

She hit with some kind of bad slap, and I at once dropped to get her. In the murk her hair was streaming up like Venus’s in her birth from a shell. Her top, too, was torn off by the force and dangled about her neck. She landed on rock bottom, and fearing her concussion, I took her under the arms and thrust us upward. It’s horrible, I’m no trained lifeguard, but the flesh of my rescue was deliciously tender.

We broke surface, she gasped, struggling to shout, and then shouted, “Burr!!! I’ve never been so cold!”

And I took her, full, in both arms, for all the warmth. She too enwrapped me, her hands on my back distinct as smudgy fingers on a winter’s plate glass. We writhed and wound through one another for all the warmth we could find. Finally we came to tread water, staying afloat, breathing, and clutched. Then we could look at each other, a shock so close, and she said, “It’s never been this way.” We gazed, her dank hair in great ropes and torrents, her cheeks and nose and lips red from the cold and fresh as March. “You took the initiative.”

“I figured it out.”

We kissed. We fought to stay afloat and we pressed between us the one thin sheet of warmth in these million gallons of fluid ice. All the walls fell sheer into the water with no shelf or handhold. Our only safety was the ramp cut into the walls for the trucks, at the far side. Aimed there, we worked together slowly, a four-legged swimmer. We could not stop kissing, as though for sheer survival. "Tell me what you figured out," she said upon surfacing, and then we resubmerged.

"It was up to me," I said between kisses. "And discourse alone would never get us there."

"And so you know what to do about my whole project."

"I take the initiative."

"And life for me can keep going."

We inched our way, in no hurry, to the ramp. Sun beating on the rocks left them almost burning to the touch. Between the pebbles some places were as smooth as polished granite. Our extremities blue from hypothermia, our middles were merely crisscrossed with emergency red. Our frigid backs on the hot stone only felt numbed, not relieved. She finally freed the orange top from her neck and gave it to me. We laid out our suits to dry then lay scrunched together, kissing and soothing away the spasms of shivers.

She said, "You won't tell Moorea how you rescued me?"

Later we went for our towels and belongings above the cliff and returned to the ramp. We soon found that we could go in the water for minutes. We even preferred the water, where we had first found one another. We paddled to the landing spot which was "our spot" and rediscovered the sheet of warmth, ever fresh. We never left one another apart, and I wondered again and again that this woman could be so deep; her intellect

reached to her very skin's fragility. Once it did occur to me that Irina might have been right about Emilia after all, and that this innocent enchantment that seemed like our first entry into Earth's garden was only a repeated tableau. Yes, she was no naïf; she knew about her sister and me. But evidence dismissed the thought: Emilia peered into me with too contented a smile. She touched with too tender hands, she reached with the generosity that sought to smooth away suffering.

“Then what do I tell Moorea?” I said.

“You don't have to tell her a thing. I'm not greedy.”

So we stayed until twilight, lips close, on the towels on the stones. I was very much in love with two very different sisters.

22.

Benton II had to be bent on torturing me. The timing of his whim was too cruel.

You know well how timing can make it seem that the Fates not only exist but are spinning against you. Consider a certain bad-timing episode with I.T. She used to throw me out at twilight after our protracted lust assaults. Because her high-rent building bordered on a low-rent district, the front entry on the street had a secure metal gate before the glass doors. While pushing me out her door she always reminded me be sure to shut the gate downstairs “till it clicks click-tight.” I, humiliated by my disposal *and* the reminder, groaned, “Haven’t I remembered the past sixty times?” One night a couple was maneuvering a triplet’s stroller through the entry. I politely held the door and awaited their passage to shut the gate click-tight. But one triplet decided to cry, and the couple held right in the entry to retrieve the emergency breast. I in all humility decided they could close the gate, even *reminded them*, and went home. That was the one night I.T., on a whim, took not her usual freight-elevator back entry but the front one. Surprise, the triplet-tormented couple had left the gate open. Or so I tried explaining to I.T. Only, days later, I encountered her in her own entryway, with Mr. X.

The one time she took that main door at night, and that couple had had to arrive! Of course, she was only searching for

an excuse for me, as if she needed any such excuse. Still, that left-open gate felt keenly like cruel capricious Fates.

Benton II's caprice was double-pronged: Prong 1→A first-time-ever Reynaldo Easter Extravaganza. Prong 2→He had finagled a daylong rental of the Louis Quatorze for the occasion.

The Louis Quatorze! Put yourself in my place. I was invited. The whole family. Momentous. (...)

This announcement not a week after the quarry: what impeccable timing.

Benton's brain child, midwived by Desi. Or I should say brain mutant. No rituals, no theater, no baskets of rocks called "bread." Just a second yearly chance to gather the group on an "informal" basis and "revitalize the links of our chain fence." (Eek!)

"I know it's because of you and me," Irina analyzed with her news. "The Benton-Rose-Clark triumvirate is so relieved that I seemed to have settled down, it no longer has to chase me down with spies. It believes it's triumphed. It believes the family can now reenter the world and get on with its destiny."

Irina, in fact, did appear to have become a harbinger of destiny. Her shoulders had grown round with muscle like two bronze medallions. Her skin had taken a deep solar hue with no underwear line, thanks to workouts in-the-raw here in the Ion Room. Her hips, still ample, had lost their late-thirties cornucopia. Even the duo of smile creases were smoothing away. In months I had watched Irina shave off years till she was twenty. What rejuvenation to shed the weight of gold. In this flame-blue sari she looked some eastern deity stepped in from the dawn.

“But how,” I said, “could they have triumphed if Emilia and Desi are still—lost?”

“Desi’s their lackey and Louis Quatorze fan, and Emilia—hoodwinks everyone.”

Even now Irina, in her sari, sat on the exercycle, seemingly because it appeared in her way as she was headed across the room. She did several heated cycles, while the sari bounced about her thighs. As usual she invited me to join on the twin exercycle. But I was too mortified by the news of the Louis Quatorze to spill my anxiety into sport. After a rapid kilometer, she dismounted and swished along to her present destiny, the Ion Room’s baby grand. She set to playing the Opus 90 Impromptu in E-flat major. I interpreted her caprices this moment as joy at the news. And here I had merely stopped by the house for our usual Wednesday afternoon.

She stopped playing and patted the bench for me to sit beside her. I sat.

“What’s more,” she said, “Benton said I could invite even another guest. Or even two more. That’s in addition to you. Know what he’s hinting? *You* are friends ‘n’ family.”

“Why not simply invite us to dinner at their place? Why extravaganza?”

“Because it’s bringing us out to the world. You don’t know my world. This is what the triumvirate coveted all along, sociality.”

“So they’re also reeling-in important people?”

“What’s ‘important’? Look, the Reynaldos have been in mothballs a while, they have to go an inch at a time. Up to two guests per person (I get up to three!), one must inch out carefully, can’t shatter the Tiffany eggs with dissonant souls.”

“So my family can come stomp on the Tiffany egg shells.”

“Maybe one of your sisters. Or how about the kind friend who lent us the boat New Years?”

Pooper. The garbage man. Great for leaded crystal and egg shells.

“Can I think on it?”

“You have three days. Dearest.” And her fingers returned to the measure where they’d left off.

The Louis Quatorze.

Not that some sham miniature replica of some hubric king’s palace awed me. But facing that crowd of eyes, while juggling my loves in the same manicured salon?! Rather juggling my true love with—with whatever I was to call this mounting madness with the slightly older sister. Certainly many of you have been in such a position, and probably a few in which both were sibs or close family, so you know the discomfort from experience. Those who have not can, if they can sympathize, only imagine. Only the masochists would plan on such an emotional walk on coals. Only the normals would stumble into it.

A mess of work suffocated my closet once again. I sprang out for a zigzag hike through downtown. Padre Island was calling. But I had an appointment with Emilia the next morning. I could hardly take her along—what sort of escape would that be?

For a day’s rental from the Qatar renters, Benton II, as Irina had surmised, had plunked down about what those leasers paid the Kerteszes per month. About two hundred grand, I deduced. From the Kerteszes, he had somehow wrangled

permission from the Qatar family the legally required sublease. Both families had to be laughing at him, looping this Reynaldo sparrow on a string and swinging him in circles: Dream, you Reynaldo birds, that one day you'll fly loose and have this house to yourselves again! And the Qatar family, practicing Moslems (it was said), who so willingly rented to the Catholics on their high holy day, must have joined those Hungarian Protestants for a royal giggle.

You Reynaldos truly believe this one day's profligacy puts you one millimeter closer to recapturing your heirloom? Where the king's afternoon sun pours through ribboned drapes, you'll collect the gold of future peace?

The only rational explanation for such expenditure was that Irina was right, I did not know her world: The event was her and my "coming out." That justified the cost.

I called Emilia. Throwing myself right into the furnace. Could we push our appointment forward to this evening? She sounded harried, had business till ten. But she caught the strain in my voice as well. I said, "I think I know what it is. We should meet."

You Reynaldo children, father Jeremy could put whole worlds in their proper place, but you children could not.

That evening my feet took me as far as Fair Park, miles. Through the neighborhoods of crack houses crumbled and former crack houses given way to brown lots, I tromped, vulnerable and intrepid. No one was about but SUVs heading to gated bobo enclaves amid the rubble. Then back along the asphalt deadends and weeds and potholes by the river, where white wood taverns appeared to sink from their midriffs while

their shoulders shrugged. But just as I sniffed the levy's swamp gas seeping through the head-high Johnson grass, I sniffed Desi behind my torment. Gas, gas, gas. Desi, Desi, Desi. No longer preoccupied as Irina's enforcer, Desi had much free time. Desi the sensitive. The cultivated. The connoisseur of ribboned curtains and gilded cabinets. The gentle thug.

By the time I walked up to the giant cascading billboard above Stemmons where I was to meet Emilia, one bit of business came out of this night stroll. My dinner guest will be—not John Pooper. Stuff crass John Pooper, *pace* his kind loan of the boat. But—what a stroke—what a match: Think of sensitive Desi, of course not as my guest, but object of my guest. A guest whom it would do Irina well to meet—as well as Emilia, who so needs to see the one whose life may serve in her valiant fight. A guest who in polite company can behave gallantly even to females. Alby, of Albert Tolby Enterprises.

The mammoth Coors Beer billboard rises on top of Goat Hill above Stemmons Freeway, where the exit ramp cuts off for the North Dallas Tollway. Nights when you're driving Stemmons north from downtown, a mile off you catch sight of the rock waterfalls shimmering in their lights, fresh as beer flooding down a mountainside. It was a true relic of 1960s visions of paradise, when Pearl Beer had first sculpted the work. You can wind up a back road to a restaurant that shares the hill and park in its snaking lot and then walk over to the billboard.

Emilia had had her meeting in the restaurant and thought it would be funner and safer for us to sit up in the dark hardscrabble under the great monument.

We met outside her car, parked strategically at the end of the lot, and walked up to the fence. The sign company had built it years ago to keep out bums and partiers who sported in the artificial falls. But we had a good view over the expressway roaring below, the thousands of wending white headlights and retreating red taillights, the lit towers of downtown, the black strip of the river and floodplain. Above us the phony falls pattered away and splattered their drops. Just the fact Emilia would pick such an inappropriate and breathtaking spot made me happy to know her.

“Will we always meet near water?” I said.

“We’re made of the stuff, so I guess we will.”

Her gown’s wet spot had been another example. Even in the hotel we had taken days ago, we had stayed mostly in the tub.

At once her face drained its brightness. “Stuart,” she said. It killed me, how much she used my full first name, so formal. “You realize everything I’m about to say. And the fact you do is only proof how trustworthy you are. And that I’m speaking it is only evidence how much I trust you because you won’t take it amiss I speak the obvious. But I have to say it for me, to confirm aloud my own trust. So: You know how delicate Moorea is.”

“Like a dandelion. Of course in public with her I would never allow a breeze of indication how you and I feel.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” Emilia sounded as if she spoke without catching a breath. “I know you are in perfect control of your smallest toe muscle. And that’s all the more reason to trust you and why I feel as I do. But no matter how sharp anyone is, they cannot know Moorea like I do, having grown

up with her. She doesn't know how well I know her, not even the fact I realize how thoroughly she has misunderstood me all our lives."

"She completely misunderstands you."

"I love her no less for it. Maybe the need to protect her evokes even more passion. She has to be protected from her own misunderstanding. But well as she can misread a soul, she can read a misplaced wink with acuity."

"I do control my eyelids as well."

"I'm sure you do. I'm saying all this only to say Moorea, generous as she sometimes is, lives cramped up in her own sphere. She has never seen a soul like yours. A soul is immaterial, and if, like Jesus's fish, it's handed out in the right spirit, it can fully nourish another. This is why I believe you are more spiritual than you admit, and the fact you don't admit it only confirms your spirit."

"I believe we are at one on how we'll present ourselves at the gathering."

"I believe we are."

Emilia finally took a breath. I wanted to hold her, such a noble-hearted woman. But she was looking off, over the forever flowing white and ebbing red, still deep in a matter more pressing than our mere feelings for each other. I had never met a human so lacking in envy or jealousy but so loving. She had every reason to condemn me for taking her without abandoning her sister, or for even the possibility of abandoning her sister carelessly to take her. Instead she spreads a wide net over human passion, acknowledging her own bigness while shepherding others' limitations. By putting her younger sibling first, she breathes into me the capability to look after both. My

love for this woman mounted by the moment, at the same time the other woman in her vulnerability gripped me the more.

“*That said.*” Emilia sighed. “Now, can you imagine—no, I cannot—two hundred thousand, I estimate, just to rent the grounds for a day? That gaudy wet dream of stone and marble, out of a ‘My Favorite Princess’ coloring book that my sad daddy must have coveted from his sisters! How many vaccines could that buy?”

And on she went. Even the noblest hearts have their other side you have to sit through. I murmured and cooed her through this magnificent rage that had built up behind the dike of her lips since I’d phoned her hours ago. How far the sibs in their extravagance had strayed from reality. They’d never get that shack back, no matter if they squandered their whole fortune trying; this rent-a-party exemplified their ineptitude. Their desperation showed their void of love and the feckless only way they knew to try filling it.

She raged on till, soon, this stern noble giant of heart and mind was in tears. The world boggled her, how it could fritter in such waste when such good was to be done. The cars flowed on, the southward reds birthing from the northward whites in an unending kaleidoscope. She, this hard academician, folded into my chest, shaking.

To boondoggle—let’s say “encourage”—I’ll compromise at “lure”—Alby Tolby into a social event takes work. Mark how Alby had had but two romances his whole life. The first happened when he was five, with one “Tommie” whose name I’d seen inscribed in a mathbook cover of Alby’s. Alby had cleverly avoided using the third-person pronoun when speaking

of Tommie, and you dare not interrogate Alby pointblank (even in university days giant Alby had worn gray jumpsuits). So I never knew this love's gender. All I knew was that Tommie was an eight-year-old deity who sat crosslegged on floors with eyes shut for hours and then spoke truths that Alby was still fulfilling in his enterprises. Alby's second romance, equally lifelong, was his work. At university in Austin, he attended all of two social events that I knew of. One was the dedication ceremony for the renovated home of an electrical engineering professor of ours. Alby had helped him fully automate the place. That was when I witnessed Alby's exquisite behavior, even to both the professor's wife and mistress (another professor of ours, who almost flunked Alby). Without a boast, Alby toured the guests through the house, noting the features he'd helped design, the robot that drove the car from garage to front door (and even smoked like the owner), the gene-reading entry coder, the meteorology-reading sprinkler system (though the grass was artificial). Alby needed the professor's letter of recommendation. The second social event Alby attended during those four years was that same professor's funeral. He almost did not go, but I enticed him, noting that business types would attend and remark his absence and spread the word about it to the global community. We attended together, and again he displayed gallantry to all.

So I strolled up to his condo's gate Saturday with a mighty task in hand. It was a drizzling chilly early-spring morning, but an email or phone message on such a matter would only get scrapped unread. I had to nail him eye-to-eye as I had those previous two social occasions. Though I expected, 99.9%, a stillborn No.

His voice took minutes before it came over the intercom, with lots of huffy interference. (This engineer of Humanity's Future had a thriftstore-quality intercom!) I told him I wasn't just out for an amble but had an urgent matter. He took another moment, then demanded, "What, exactly?"

Just weeks ago he was texting me Magna Carta-sized messages and guiding me through his innermost labs and intergalactic visions. Little did he know I was pondering unloading a half-a-bill into his enterprise. Make that one full bill if Emilia were properly convinced. And here the rain was mounting and my shoes were filling with water.

We fussed a bit over what could I have at hand so important on a soggy morning. He had earth-shaking conferences with his top technicians this morning, and I could not even state my business. An elderly gentleman in rubbers and plastic-coated hat out for his daily constitutional halted across the street and watched me haggle with a scratchy intercom. I saw that a chance of a decade—a meeting of a great heart and a disturbingly profound mind, a deal I just had to make for the sake of the deal—was about to slip from me. I shouted into the speaker, "I promise you, this could be the future of your life's work!"

The lock buzzed, I opened the gate, nodded at the gentleman, and walked in.

Alby awaited in his part-open door, head-only poking out. The long hair out of its ponytail flew in a thousand strands, each vying against one another. He didn't even say, "Well—?"

I halted at the foot of the lengthy stairs.

Against this unwelcoming, my tongue withered. The door began wavering toward a final shut—when I blurted. "You

have to come with me. Easter day. Nobody's working Easter. Even your atheist, god-becoming lab techs will spend time with their families."

"Not me, Chippie-boy."

"The Reynaldos, Alby. There's six of them. They're all drowning in a vat of cash and dying for places to slop it. They're holding an event."

"What do I care for the washed-up spawn of a leaky mind?"

But he held; the door stopped wavering.

"Resources. And there're some finer minds there than you're giving credit."

"So you did some girlfriending there. Take your unethical scheming elsewhere."

For a moment, him penetrating me from on high, I felt he'd seen not just the Irina in me, but deep down to the Emilia. I protested, to myself, I had done no "scheming," and the bounds of love were hardly unethical. Yet Alby had always been a profound ethicist.

"You have one minute," he said, looking at his wristwatch, "and I'm off to my beauty bath before conference."

"Didn't you say an old school buddy could always pop by?"

"So you popped. Fifty-five seconds."

With this guy, it was always The Alby Show. You couldn't talk about yourself or even your topics for thirty seconds before he started yawning and walking away.

"Look, how do you ever make completely new business connections—?"

“Through other business connections, the only trustworthy way. Forty-two seconds.”

“Stop taking my time by telling me the time! So take this event as a business connection. There’re some Reynaldos who are dying to invest in you.”

“There’s a missing business-link here. I’m sure there’re hundreds, thousands, of crazy people out there who want to invest in me.”

“The business-link is me.”

“You? You have more than immoral connections to them?”

I curled at the “immoral.”

“I have business connections to them. And they to me. And I to you.”

He looked up from his watch. “You had eleven seconds left. Not bad.”

He lowered the wrist. The door crept a few inches further open. The rain increasingly increased.

“If you have connections to me,” he said, “I guess I do to you. What are your connections to me?”

“I’ve invested in ATE.”

“You did after all? Why don’t you ever attend shareholder meetings?”

“I vote by proxyvote.com. Your meetings always conflict with mine.” Actually, his last conflicted with an Emilia appointment.

His ignorance of my investment astonished me. So Mr. Hands-On did not soil his paws in every vat of his company, such as its shareholders list. In fact, I had sunk only a few

hundred grand of my own sweat-earned cash into ATE. I had so far withheld any Irina-linked funds, in case he did peruse his shareholders list and noted investments in my name far beyond what he conceived me capable. He might then deduce more about my private business than was good for anyone, except me and those intimately concerned, to know. Now I feared his querying my Reynaldo business connections.

“And what,” he said, “are your connections to the Reynaldos, besides the congenital?”

“Let’s cut the unwarranted personal imputations. One of them I’m negotiating with on a financial expansion initially through my company.” I dared not even hint of my negotiations with Emilia, lest he did attend the gathering but gallantly and unwittingly disclosed that connection. “Others I’m aware are looking for opportunities. As I tried telling you as long ago as November, the family has been cocooned. But now, they’re proving my old hunch right. They’re coming out into the world, bright crispy chrysalises. Looking for lots of juicy spring nectar. And very suggestible. I’ve never seen such a meadow of opportunity, Alby. Get in before it’s gone.”

My own persuasiveness panicked me. In enticing him, I was tangling too many fine threads from one node of this social event to another. All he had to do was walk into it, and he’d see how profoundly Irina and I were entangled. The party would, as Irina had said, appear made for us. The fact would belie my whole coy ruse about “business negotiations” with one Reynaldo. My thin thread of hope was that, before he could storm out pissed, he would serve Emilia some winning gallantry, enough to warm her. And then there was that other Reynaldo I’d had in mind... But, my other delicate thread, the

one connecting me to all Reynaldos—why was I luring *him* in, to this vat of milk, which was not infinite—?

“Any idea, Sty,” he said, “about what our total liquidity is here?”

The “our” was unnerving, but I gave my best reckoning. “I calculate there must be between five and ten bill ready to go.”

Alby, a control geek, never let one tic rupture his smooth machine. But, when I spoke my estimate, his eyelids widened till they bared his irises.

“Let me check my schedule, and I’ll text you later.”

I turned home, leaden with my success, and the rain turned my soles to slush.

F

23.

A few days before Easter Irina mentioned “those funds” for the first time in months. My insides jerked.

We were up watching a pod-people movie. Irina is far from a pod-people-movie kind of person, and the genre grates on my liver though I quietly tolerate it when it’s forced on me. Irina, a cinema anachronism you might call a *cinéaste*, avers that no movie made since roughly the time of her birth achieves true quality. She swears by her “Roman triumvirate,” Rossellini, Antonioni, Pasolini, or “the RAP,” and sometimes Fellini, a smattering of others (Bergman, von Stroheim), and liberally admits that some early episodes of the Three Stooges and *Desperate Housewives* “had potential.” But a friend, Mantranto in fact, passed this film along with a message “study it.” Indifferently this evening, she had started the movie, muttering I could provide “an extra pair of perceptions.”

The movie had reached that point when you start deducing that a part of the human population is infected. These people appear like human beings, display all the emotions, talk with the same intonations and passions, join in relationships, think as clearly and keenly, even appear to empathize with and understand their fellows as patiently as anyone else; and yet some essential human element “just ain’t in their head.”

You come to see they can’t be trusted. I conjecture the appeal of such movies is that at some point, the viewer, like

myself, feels relieved: We know *we* are trustworthy. We're safe. Through that one fine umbilical cord connecting to warmblooded humanity, we can survive till the end. But I still don't see why squirm in one's seat for two hours to get such reassurance. One should simply know all along.

So now a main character was proving to be a creep, a pod. In fact, an actor with a big name, so you had thought all along he was a good guy. (I don't recall the name, nor the poddy movie's title since such stuff doesn't stick well unless you're a fan.) Maybe some deadness in the eyes. He was too willing to take slightly too large risks for some unwary people in getting rid of the other pods. The usual progression was at hand: they pod, y'all pod, we pod, he/she pods, you pod, I pod.

My liver was starting to grate.

Irina sighed, I believed in sympathy with me and my masked impatience. "Remember those funds?"

"I believe. Why yes. Of course. What makes you think of them?"

"Are they holding up okay? Not that I care."

"They're doing well. I'm happy for them." I kept my eyes on the screen, not to insult Mantranto's taste by being easily distracted.

"I don't ever think about them. I'm so happy not to think about them."

"I guess that's the relaxation of movies, worthless thoughts are unfettered."

"Like dreams. Stuff you never think about."

"Like dreams."

So the story played out; a cluster of real humans made it through. I felt the small seed of triumph and allowed it. But this

modern version had to leave the ambiguous germ of possibility that the podness persisted in someone.

Irina remained slump-shouldered on the floor where we had sat out the whole film. “I don’t see what Joe was thinking. Do you?”

“I don’t know Joe that well. Perhaps all that steeliness affects one’s opinions.”

“How about something more heartening now. *Last Tango* for your first time?”

Irina and I shared an unfathomable desire for peace.

Easter, sun broke right across the sheets in the bedroom just under the Holy of Holies like the very picture of resurrection. We lounged in the light. Its brilliance on my skin burned away care of this afternoon’s threat. These may be the last moments our life would stay island-intact. The volcanoes were rumbling. But here on the sands, eyes shut in orange splendor, we heard only the surf.

By noon the clouds were scurrying in, furtively as mice building nests. I drove. The cars themselves on the freeway appeared to be scrambling before darkness washed them out. Alby had never confirmed if he was coming. Now I hoped he was not. Not that he was a social slob; he could only impose more variables into this already mess.

The Louis Quatorze lies in a subtle curl in the North Dallas grid. Precise as a Euclid proof, the major roads cut mile squares across the former flat rangeland. At half-mile intervals between, a feeder road shoots just as straight, if bumpy with potholes, and the residential lanes branch off. But within one of these rigid mile squares, the feeder road flounders, gets side-

tracked, and bleeds elsewhere. A redoubt of high fence with the tops of a veritable forest behind has appeared. But it remains so quiet and hesitant you don't pay it much notice. You're too busy renegotiating your route back into the grid's straight lines. But Irina pointed out, from under fence vines came the wooden gate just wide enough for a car. We stopped, and she pressed the code.

Strangely for such a rickety old cobble of wood, the gate opened on its own. She bit her lip and said, "Wait." She was gazing straight ahead, but not anywhere. "It's been a while. Not that I missed it." Then with knuckle at her brow, she said, "All right."

The gate closes behind and you enter, not a forest, but the seventeenth century. A sculpted garden unfolds. Rows after rows of hedges spread in mazes, their tops so rectilinear and smooth-shaven they seem to shimmer even under these clouds. At their ends, and in strategic middles, rise bulbous shrubs equally finely cut, in potbellied Bishops for chess or castellated Rooks. Perpendicular to the hedges, lines of rose trees trumpet their colors like ranks of heralds: orange to turquoise to purple. Horse-chestnut and plane trees pruned to the posture of soldiers occupy the periphery.

"Oh Christ," Irina whispered. You'd think she was viewing someone's death. "They've added awnings."

The road had just passed a bend, so around the border of trees we clearly saw to the grand garden before the house. Or I should say "castle." I gazed on a miniature Louvre or Versailles. And not so miniature. It had to be at least eighty rooms. Three floors, all in cut marble. Two-story square towers crowned either end, and the peaks of two more showed that

their twins topped the back end. Arched porticos framed by double columns ringed the ground floor. Dozens of chimneys flew high above the roofs.

And, indeed, the high windows, on every floor, had a green, if tasteful, awning.

“And solar panels on the roof! Gag, what have they done!”

She was baring her teeth and gritting. She had never before made one hint she nursed the ancestral sentiments of Desi.

“Irina, they’re the owners. Or maybe they allowed the renters to do it.”

“But when you buy something rare, you have a duty to our species, who *created* the thing, to respect it.”

(I about launched into a disquisition on the fuel-efficiency of awnings and solar panels, the respect for the planet that created us, possibly respect for the desert wisdom of the occupants’ culture. But we loved peace too much to quibble.)

Along the curving front drive a dozen or twenty cars seemed to radiate before the marbled glory despite the dull clouds. A party of six getting out of a car clustered around an elder, one of the great aunts. Like Irina, the women wore the pastel greens and blues of April. I noted a black tux and cringed: I had simply worn springlike pinstripes. If Alby came, expect a black and gray jumpsuit.

“Don’t worry if some people are formal,” Irina said, knowing me. “This whole day is a complete mess already anyway.” I parked at the tail of the line of cars, then she advised me, “Wait till they’re inside. I’m not ready, I’m about in tears. And are you my only guest? I’m supposed to have three. We have only the front two rooms and the garden, but in this

rain, we'll be jammed indoors. They'll all be gaping into us, expecting us to answer why this absurdity, and we won't be able to escape in the bushes. Why hasn't your friend come so we'll have some buffer from them?"

"He's always last." I kept hoping he'd not come at all and save my nerves.

"And what about your boat friend? All my friends are males, females don't get me. I couldn't invite them because people would talk. And I couldn't invite my trainer, like inviting my cleaning lady. I hope Lillian will show. At the pool yesterday she promised."

"I know. You'll be all right, sweet."

"She's intimidated, Stu. We've done laps for four straight years, and she's never once come to my new house. Always a café or her place. When I gave her my last name two years ago, she stopped talking about herself and asking me to her place. Only my name! I never said a thing about my family beyond stuff that could be anybody's. I know she did internet searches. And now she's looked up this address on online maps or whatever, so now she won't come. And this is supposed to be the Reynaldo coming-out."

"I know, sweet. You'll be all right."

The party of six moved inside, and I kept Irina under my arm until another car came up and disgorged, and she hid in my armpit.

She said, "If only we could undo it all."

Encouraging her not to ruin her hair smudging it, especially if the rain got harder, I prompted her out of the car and under an umbrella.

The marble foyer under chandelier offered a pair of stone urns for umbrellas, and a man at once mopped the puddles we made. An oak-countered coat check took our wet things. The ceiling was so high the coat-hangers echoed. I noted: no Benton II greeting the guests this time. We were directed to a broad door on the left.

“I never used to enter this way,” Irina said. “God, I forgot how living here was like a hotel. Horrible.”

A tear bulbed at a corner of her eye. What sentiment, even for a detested symbol. If that were sentiment.

White columns framed the lofty door, and above the arched lintel spread a mural to the ceiling. On a background of sky-pink and blue, a rank of pre-Raphaelite cherubim flitted and blew their horned clarions. I expected to enter a throne—or ballroom decked in curvy period furniture.

Instead the room, gymnasium-sized, was decked in steely straight-lined modernist pieces: bars and serving tables, chairs perfect for lethal injection, squat tables with cubed vases in which the flowers looked strangely fussy.

Irina halted. Her hesitance today called up the first day we met. “I forgot, Dad had put all the furniture in storage. Desi has the key. This stuff is the Qatar family’s.”

It clashed with the walls, something like a scream in a temple. All four walls and ceiling pulsed with Baroque murals. On one long wall hundreds of men and women gathered with astonished faces at a Roman forum. On a narrower wall a goddess Liberty like Gobrecht’s sat on her throne while her shield fended off attacks of Boschian demons. Opposite the Romans, Christ broke fishes and breads amid hundreds on a sylvan green Dead Sea shore. Opposite Liberty, Venus was

born fully clothed on a shell. And ten meters above, among the roots of the long chandeliers, seraphim whorled around God whose finger appeared to create us here below.

It all so shrank us I forgave the furniture—and only now gave the guests any note. A good fifty or sixty, they appeared still and hushed by the immensity and by the echoes of their whispers. One of the first guests I discerned, his head far above the others, was Alby. He was busy, with a *woman*. Emilia in fact.

“Look at Benton, hidden in the crowd,” Irina whispered. “Not like the Christmas spectacle when he’s leading the onslaught. I think he had to defer to Desi the curator. But Desi’s pacing on the periphery as usual. He has no skills here. He’s probably sulking. I heard we couldn’t get his favorite room. It has the murals of the scenes of Benton Clive enacted at Christmastime. But who’s going to introduce us to the newcomers, Stu? We’ll be ignored. This whole caboodle’ll be the biggest waste.”

Alby saw me, raised a hand and set to disengaging from his consort. Irina did not notice but kept walking on toward the cluster. Nonplussed by the awkwardness I faced, I stayed put.

He wore black and gray jumpsuit, with black sneakers.

I had never harbored one regret about my actions toward Alby, until now, infuriated I had invited him. Emilia watched him approaching me and Irina slinking away.

Alby’s big face appeared to be leaping out from under his ponytail. “I did a search on this joint!” he exclaimed when still three yards away. “Why didn’t you tell me? These murals!” He gesticulated. “You know the flake who did these, Idréas Sirini, this is the only house he did west of the Mississippi?”

“I had no idea, I’d never been here, Irina never—you never—”

“I was one of the first to arrive. Our Reynaldos have given me the dirt. One of them, the short fella, ’s the real expert, I’m doggone impressed. You know these things you couldn’t even put a price on, like the Sistine Chapel?”

“Why didn’t you call or text you were coming?” I hadn’t even seen his motorcycle out front, what with the rain and Irina’s frets. I felt everything was being slipped out from under me.

“Just stand here and absorb the whole effect a moment.” He held out his huge arms, like he had taken over as emcee. “What do you feel these old Baroque designers were aiming for?” Frankly, with Emilia and Irina and Alby all in the same room, my art-appreciation muscle had gone limp. “The old Roman villas with their landscape murals tried to do the same thing.”

“I don’t know, tried making the room feel larger,” I said.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon, Chippie-boy! Have you no sensibility? Your job teaches you nothing. What does ‘making the room feel larger’ do?”

“Fools everyone, like this whole building does.”

“‘Fools’? ‘Fools’? Don’t your eyes forever fool you! It’s virtual reality, man! Those old Romans were onto it. Appealing to our subliminal sense of space. It’s not ‘fools,’ it’s reality, unless reality be fools. Sirini’s the master. He leaps not only space but time in a single bound. He rides us across the millennia in this one spot.”

Looking at the fishes and breads scene and the Golbrecht Liberty, I said. “I’m sure Jeremy Reynaldo dictated the scenes.”

“No, Sirini allowed the guy some selection. Every Sirini is a spacetime warper. Our little man there says this joint has seventeen Sirini rooms. That’s more than in any other Sirini erection on the planet. And since he’s dead, this one’ll never be bested.”

I had only hoped Alby would be quickly bored here and leave me less complicatedly with my complications. Instead he was working himself into greater and greater infatuation with the soul of the place. Emilia had wisely ceased staring at us and the distant Irina and had gotten buried in family, though she flung me desperate eyebrows. But Desi, whom I finally noticed on the outskirts, *surveilleur par excellence*, had locked onto us.

“Seventeen rooms here and how many hundreds elsewhere?” I said. “The Master really slapped them up.”

“You think he ever soiled his fingers with a paintbrush? He had teams, of twenty, thirty. Why do you think we call them ‘hands’? A man of his capacity communicates to his paid extremities through force of mind. You know that, Sty my man!” Alby occasionally gazed at the wonders about him, hands folded at groin, like a confident bidder. “And what makes it better than a framed painting, you don’t just gaze at it from a corner of your eye, you live in it. And it’s virtually impossible to slice the canvas and steal it. But what is it doing just sitting here?”

“Obviously it’s being pretty stubbornly owned.”

Desi made twitches in our direction as if he would brave his way toward us. Then I would face a fuming duet of gaga for this estate. Surely Irina was growing indignant from being abandoned without guests of her own. My only choice was to duck Alby into her graces and so stave off disaster a few more

minutes. The afternoon presaged dire needs for one quick move after another. (If he'd only leave!)

"But that ownership is just a sort of joke," he said. "Against the big bloke Reynaldo for being so hoity and reckless."

"He's dead, right? So don't think the owners are jokey. If you're so interested, let's get you properly introduced to the would-be owners." I steered Alby across the room, I believe the first time I led him in any way at all.

"I already made the rounds," he protested, but came (I dare say "followed").

"You've missed some key arrivals."

We entered the press of bodies, but the social presence didn't stop Alby from stooping to whisper in my ear, "You must mean the one who's taking your wanger, you immoral Sty."

I had no other direction but ahead, no faith but in his wisdom.

Irina at once broke from her conversation and smiled up at Alby. Her springlike white cotton dress brought out her innocent darkness. He took her hand, which went limp, and you would have thought he'd kiss it. I had to introduce her as "Moorea," with explanations too him later about "Irina" if occasion called. In that beam she gave him, she was so proud of us, so proud I knew such a famous handsome chap. He praised the house, the occasion, the group, their vivacity, this morning's sunshine, the pleasure of rain, the snugness of staying indoors. (You'd never guess he itched to put it all in binary code.) He even let Irina speak, cued her with questions, at once lifted her shade of timidity without her knowing, in fact let her talk more than him. You would think he knew women. No wonder he

had slid so lithely through Harvard Law and gracefully directed the hundreds and thousands of hands that, like those myriad uplifted fingertips at *carnaval*, loft the carnival king to his throne.

“As a child in such a place,” he said, “didn’t you get lost in all these rooms? Didn’t you need so many maps and intercoms?”

“Certainly *you* have a lot of rooms,” she said. I had told Irina so little about the real Alby Tolby.

“Not so many. But weren’t you enchanted? Little girls are so enamored by princesses.”

“I preferred the little children-in-the-forest stories. I was claustrophobic.”

“In all this space?”

“I’d escape to the garden. I thought it was a forest. Even on days like this—they were the best. I’d have to protect myself. I tried to take my sister Emilia or my brother Desi. But they said they’d never, in such weather. See, I like all kinds of sky.”

Alby brought her out so, I envied his skill. He edged on cracking the Moorea–Emilia mystery. Thank god he was no skirt-chaser.

Servers, silver platters overhead, winding through dropping the salvers to waist-level without a spill. People streamed through the entry. We had to shout over the voices, echoes and piped in Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*. Even Irina’s friend Liliane appeared, a slight woman, a dried webbed leaf that shakes at a breath. Irina’s glow, upon this third allotted guest’s arrival, could only increase so much. But given this crowd, easily a hundred already, Reynaldos on all sides must have

cheated on their two-guest quota. All this shuffle dropped a basket over Irina's shine as the special Reynaldo, the one freshly safe from a tainted life, the exemplar of the family's reemergence. Still she kept me directly to her right, often enfolding my hand at our sides till our hands snuggled her twin cheeks. She kept Alby directly before us as our stockade, Liliane diminutive at his left like a gate, and so in this fortress we inched through the room. We rarely let others in, but they did look up, especially at Alby. Far off, I occasionally glimpsed Emilia. With impeccable kindness and skill she let her gaze on me linger only a 100 milliseconds. But not to make this distancing apparent, she did slither her way over, and finally broke into our stronghold.

"Alby Tolby, again!" she said. "You were Stuart Beholt's friend, right?"

"You remember Stu, don't you, Emilia, from Christmas?" Irina said.

"Of course I remember Stuart." Emilia gave me a hand and such a sincere eye that vanquished all irony, no one could call her deceiver. I couldn't imagine I was ever this adorable woman's, and I desired all the more to stroke her neck in thanks. Who could say why I expected Alby, so unlike him, any minute to shatter this blown-glass fragility between sisters, unless because he knew me so well.

"Alby was giving me the lowdown on his law school," Emilia said. "I've never trusted that place."

"It's the students who lack ethics," Alby said. "They'll rape and pillage for the pocketbook, no vision. The profs are just pulling a paycheck."

“We’ll have to compare notes. The ideas leaking out of that joint, no wonder it coughs up such ethics.”

She introduced her guests, one a president of a notable philanthropic association, the other an academic from SMU. I marked the irony of how Irina knew only males, excepting this seedling Liliane, whereas her reputed mankiller of a sister had full-blown women friends like a normal person. The three wore professional attire, one a suit, Emilia and the other the dark skirt-and-jacket combos of sportier women presenting at symposia. Although both her guests had wedding rings and Emilia was a fan of sharing, no chance either were ever her flame; honest Emilia would have whispered such tastes to me. How she had transformed, since our hallway chat at Christmastime over her wetted gown!

A ways off I spotted Rose, in much the same ritual gown, a *rose* one. Hair up in an antiquated bun, that bun jerked left to right like a gust-blown weathervane as she switched from one blabber to another. Oh, gorgeous, that nape, that sharp-cheeked profile, but how could I have ever—just because she’s so commanding—?

“And Liliane,” Irina suddenly remembered. “My lap partner. We go back.”

“I hear lap partners know your soul like a hairdresser,” Emilia said, apparently not knowing her sister’s best pal, and she extended a hand.

“Biggest little shoulders in the West: 1:25 on the 100 butterfly,” Irina said.

“Whoa!” the group cheered but knew not how to follow-up the fact.

Upon each introduction, Liliane's chin kept shrinking further between her narrow shoulders. She almost grabbed the server upon any close pass, and sometimes simply reached high into the salver and sloshed her hands with champagne upon taking a flute. Finally by the fourth or fifth glass in this quarter hour, her shoulders opened up, her brittle wings moistened and she stepped out from under Irina's.

"Actually," she told Emilia, well after Emilia had spoken to her, "I do know Moorea like a hairdresser. I do hers."

"Oh?" Emilia said. Now she softened, more than at the swimming facts. "You make house calls?"

"Only for lap-partners," Irina broke in, a half-lie since Liliane never visited at Irina's house. "But she has two shops. If a bit pricey for *some* humble types."

"You know both her laps and hairs," Emilia said. "Tell us what we don't know."

Now I was ready for Emilia to amble along tastefully.

Liliane took another swallow, a cornered innocent signing the cross before wolves. "She's the sweetest heart there is. That's what I know."

"We know that," Emilia said, so sincere that Liliane let her champagne hand fall to her side. "It's simply a fact."

The group gave a pause, then Alby said, "A regular businesswoman! Two shops! Are you looking to expand?"

The giant took the waif into his bosom, hovering over her till he blocked her from view. Irina's fingers, I noticed, trembled, her bronze face flushed. Emilia squeezed her hand with cooing words I didn't catch in the hubbub, while Irina looked away. Then Emilia waved at someone in the distance and tastefully shambled on. I didn't know what ancient ripple

between two sisters had just passed, nor why Emilia had had to come stir it up. But I was glad it had passed and she had been so good as to move on. Yet, a tidal wave could be mounting. Irina gripped my upper arm with both hands, and we turned to Emilia's guests who'd stayed behind upon the solemn exit. In the room's perimeter, I noted Desi, watching—us? No, it seemed, the giant and the waif. Rather, just the giant.

And the giant was watching in return.

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24.

The entry doors, five yards high, shut. Latecomers locked out, or we locked in.

But that event made nary a ripple. All turned to Benton II at the other end of the hall, ushering us into the next room. Earlier a server had pushed through the crowd asking everyone's name and thumbing it into a device, but I'd given him little thought. Now the scheme started taking form. As Irina and I, her arm in mine, passed through the door, Benton II took my hand and clasped my elbow. "Stuart, Stuart! So glad. I tried to work my way to you, but you were always occupied. I'm making it up to you. Look where you're seated. We'll have plenty opportunity in time."

He laid such light lips on his sister's cheek he could have buttered it. "Welcome."

This second room was the twin of the first in spatial volume, but only the fraternal twin in mural style. I merely saw these tableaux were red and swirly, like glasses of strawberries coiled with cream, before social duty overtook me. There were two parallel, absurdly long tables, rather trains of well disguised folding tables, draped by glistening silken linen. Servers were gliding about with their devices in palm. As soon as we entered, one came up, thumbing the keypad. Wisely, he only glanced at Irina and said without asking, "Moorea Reynaldo, of course you're with Stuart Beholt, right, right, right, you're—come this way—" And he swiftly led us up the

full length between the tables. Behind us, I heard the *klon, klom, klon, klom* of Alby's Talos boots on the hardwood floor. "Don't tell me we have no choice of seating. They always want to buy your liberty," he was mumbling. I guessed to either Liliane or their server. Even in the clouded window-light the floor shone like a still lake at noon. Overpowering the smell of fresh floor wax was a mustiness of damp rugs, as if some had recently been pulled off the floor.

At the end of the table, the server stopped and held out a hand. He spoke with dazzling courtesy. "Mr. Beholt, you're here, and Ms. Reynaldo, to the right. Feel free to take your seats when you wish." And he was off.

I believed he was wrong, because he pointed to the end seat for me. But Irina had such a smile that went to all four corners of her face, she eased doubt. I pointed at the seat anyway and said, "He must have meant you."

"Not at all. Look at the name cards."

On each plate, there was an embossed name card, which apparently Benton's helpers had printed from the guest list compiled moments ago and arranged by him. My name, *Stuart Beholt*, was grinning at me from the end-seat's plate.

"Welcome," she said.

Alby brushed up to my left with an air of grumpiness that only gallantry could polish, and Liliane settled at his left soundlessly as a snowflake. "Well, it looks like I'm *your* left-hand man for a change, Chippie," he told me.

I whispered to Irina, "Did they just pull everyone's name from a basket, and here mine landed? I'll stand out. You or an uncle or aunt would be better—"

“Don’t question,” she said, looking brighter than I’d ever seen her. And she moved around the table to comfort Liliane.

My stun held my tongue, and Alby held his too. The hall grew louder as it filled. Nearby guests stole glances at me, ranging from wondering to reverent. Emilia stood about midway down the other table, facing me, and gave one of her skillful eye-flickers.

Alby said well under the noise, “I guess your wanger’s really dug you in deep.” And I about rapped the guy’s knuckles.

“You and your jumpsuit really fit in, don’t you.”

He ignored it, like any criticism, and gazed above. “I believe these are all Creation, at various stages, though I can’t place the model. Maybe Rubens. The heavy theme of red seems to be the fire and stuff of the Creator’s energy. And the white, like in that whorl of angels and doves, the light of thought. See how it bleeds into pink, in the way pure thought becomes red energy, which then molds the cooler colors of matter.”

I was too preoccupied with my position as head of a table to turn my head upward. Alby leaned over to a silver dish beside his plate for some nuts. “I could fire up my own little Robie creation with their nut-roasting recipe,” he said, munching.

“Yes, Rodey?” His middle name always sends creeps down his collar, but I still swear it’s his robot’s namesake.

“I could sell these guys a few Robies.”

He was studying each incoming guest. Only the very young or old were taking seats yet. The hundred-odd chairs were nearly identical, hardwood frame, walnut or cherrywood, and gold-brocaded cushions and backs. Imagine, how could Benton and Rose have found that many matching chairs, unless

they were all from storage. This room had more windows than the other, from waist level to the high ceiling, breaking two walls' murals. Rain pelleted the panes like thousands of slapping child's hands.

Then, one of the last, Desi slinked through the door, and Alby flinched.

"Sty," he said.

"Yes, Rodey?"

"Have you ever seen me drown myself in wine—or beer, or liquor?"

"Never in your ruddy rigor, Rodey."

"Stop the paining, Sty. I'll incontinently stew myself before bed tonight."

He kept his gaze across the room.

"What you talking, Alby Rodey Tolby? Art silly, gentle man?"

His face tightened. All right, he was impatient with my frivolity. But I *had* never seen him fumble, and when nobles fumble, who's to stop them toppling?

"This is your territory," he said, as humble as he could get.

His first ever sore spot needed iodine. "Be more clear."

"Never, Stu, have I seen such sensibility."

I wanted to laugh: Are you fooled? Or are you fooling?

"So, go make sense of it," I said.

"This is your territory."

He leaned back, ignoring even the nuts remaining in his hand, flashed me a glance then wandered the Creating ceiling. I'd sooner change my skin with a chimp's than sot my brains for the likes of a Gideon Bible-thumper like Desi. But, with

Alby placing himself in “my territory,” I’d hardly confess my attitude here which could compromise this window of luck.

Yet, when someone of such stature places himself in your realm, tempted as you are to stretch matters a bit for a lark, you have to stretch them for their benefit as well. You must be responsible for all parties affected. In my three dozen years, I’d seen plenty harm and good, but no one who showed proper self-love. Not even, I now properly saw, Alby. “You have to be careful with unusual family feelings among members,” I said.

His head abruptly dropped from its ceiling gaze. The crowd had grown noisier than the rain on glass, so we could discuss these matters above a whisper. “What kind of feelings?”

“For the longest time, years, Desi followed Moorea about, shadowing wherever she went. I mean, when she was with her love. Especially then.”

Alby’s upper teeth slowly assessed his bottom lip. No doubt he was a bit taken aback, not just for my seeing to the depths of his intent, but for my hanging such an impediment upon it.

“You mean he’s set on her.”

“I never uncovered the whole mystery. But he stopped soon after I came along.”

Alby turned more toward me. “You did dig a little spot here for yourself.”

“That’s putting it unfairly. But you know these big old families. Delicate sensitivities develop. With those come sensibilities, which you’ve witnessed today. But these sensitivities are easily displaced, as I’ve seemed to have done

for Moorea's sake, so she can have a normal life. It's no coincidence this party has happened soon after."

"All right. I suspected something like that on his part. I'm glad I asked."

"You're doing right. Going surely and slowly, not rushing to other tables at the meal. After dinner there'll be more chitter-chatter, you can ease your way back across the room. In general, you're making money. You'll keep making your money, fattening that wallet, those purse-strings tightening around the belly. That's good as far as he's concerned, you'll have plenty to spend here."

"Plenty art here, buddy. What sensibility. The stuff, the mind for it, all in one place. And you've built the road just in time for me, huh?"

"Plenty to spend here. Don't hesitate. The family jewel. Snatch up and give him the jewel itself. You're making the dough, you're fattening that wallet."

"I believe you're backing my hopes, buddy-o."

If he could indeed divert that snooping pair of eyes, I would be more at home with my Reynaldos. His showing up today might not turn out to be my blunder after all. "That's awful fast to build up such hopes, a single noontime."

"When I see my game, I move."

"Remember I have interests here, too. We have to look after each other."

"You're my hidden eyes."

In one convulsive wave slithering throughout the room, people began taking their seats. Irina came around from Liliane and invited me to assume my place. But still, while Irina sat,

I, standing with the chair seat against the backs of my knees, hesitated.

A good dozen yards from me, down a stream of cutlery, china and glassware, propped the chubby cherubic face of Desi, teeny from here. At the next table, mirroring my position was Benton II, also standing like me, and at his table's far end sat Rose.

I was the only non-family at a table-end. Or was I not what I was?

Benton surveyed the entire room, in one upthrust of the chin without turning his neck, as if he wished to speak. So I quickly fell into my seat, if on the edge. Irina gave me a serene and confident smile before looking around at Benton. The whole room, too, was looking to him, as if expecting a speech. (Strange time for one, before the meal!)

Apparently Clark was too ineffectual among the triumvirate to have an end seat; Emilia, of the non-triumvirate, too eccentric. Desi of course had deserved honor in securing the house for a day. And Moorea, released from ostracism and here celebrated for it, still bore too much color on her past to get the seat itself. I was her obvious stand-in (sit-in?) for my role in her restoration. But was I more?

Alby leaned toward me, but the room was so hushed that he did not speak. He just flicked his eyes with a concomitant move of head to our opposite end of the long table. I dared whisper, "Of course I notice."

Benton cleared his throat, and I braced myself to be pointed out under the weirdest of auspices, compared with the blatant duties of Desi, or even of commander Rose. But instead, Benton did right, followed the rules of order, and sat.

The servers waited a beat, then began their fusillade.

For starters, terrine of eel, teensy roast squab (which nobody but I ate—"Blech, it's just *pigeon*, and right off the street!"), steamed chanterelles, macadamias in tamarind glaze, cinnamon apricots, and *mache* marinated in hot chilis (everyone went bongo over this item). For entrée, quail in olive marinade, caramel pork, fresh-pea pancakes, cashew lamb, and bite-sized veal hamburgers McDo-style (but with frog's eggs). All was tastefully portioned to make way for the half-dozen cheeses and dessert: apple *confit* with licorice ice cream, coconut-cardamom *Chantilly*, chocolate-nougat rice crepes, blueberry soup, and homemade Snickers bars. I recall this all because I have the menu card in my hands, rescued from plate-side (as couples keep their wedding dinner menus in scrapbooks). But I believe the flavors are permanently grooved in my mind. Quite the contrast to Christmas's austerity.

I have never watched Alby eat more than hand-snacks. If today he did not dive in with Epicurean zest, he did each part of the creation the same justice that he showed to every conversation around him. Irina could not control her voluptuous lust for the material realm, and I watched the same curvy fangs that have lain into parts of me now lay into these smaller fleshies. Liliane, predictably, ushered only the plant items into her sanctum (I would have thought she would, ironically, best all our gullets). Conversation even with the guests beyond Irina's foursome stronghold went so smoothly, palliated, I believe, by the nourishment, that I almost forgot the ceaseless tensions. I couldn't cap my spying on Emilia midway down the next table. She turned to her left, right, across the

table and never to me, so gracefully my head began chanting, “Emilia, Emilia.” The wine fed the chants, and the wine fed my adoration of Irina’s fangs. Toward the end of dessert, while the dozens of coffees and teas were being wheeled about on carts, people one-by-one began unsticking themselves from their chairs and sneaking little visits. Emilia was one of the first, and she graciously went about placing her hands on seated shoulders. I chanted a prayer begging her not to approach our eight shoulders. But another unexpected came, Rose. She thrust right past Irina’s left as if her left were not there and took my hand from its goblet and into both her own.

“Don’t think I ever forgot your patience in the washroom corridor,” she said, so warm-hearted even Irina chuckled. Rose’s eyes, the blue of gas fire, as ever revealed straight to the heat of her brain.

“He was gone so long that day I thought he’d skipped the show,” Irina said.

“Oh not Stuart, never Stuart, he’s faithful to us from the start.”

“My only impatience was to get back to the show,” I said.

“You don’t need to exaggerate. I know you’ll see it till you can recite it. Anyway we don’t think of it as a ‘show.’ More like our reality.”

“But it’s very moving.”

“Like much around us, when we look.”

This was the Chief Inquisitor, I recalled. Once more she had not said hello.

“I mean your patience that day,” she went on, “consisted in calming down nature. And I see again you’ve had too much wine.” The cloth behind my plate was spotted with red. “Not

like your friend here who doesn't savor his grub. We're good Catholics. God forgives a little indulgence. Now, are you going to keep yourself scarce year-round?"

The question must have been for Moorea and me, but Rose so leveled her gaze on me, right in front our friends, that, as at Christmas, I felt pinned. The charm of her command came back to me. Was the whole Reynaldo family to be mine?

"We don't just invite ourselves to people's houses," Irina told her sister.

"Neither do I. But invites have to begin somewhere. And," Rose went on, still looking at me, "you did get a fine place today."

The noise in the room rapidly ebbed. Benton had risen before his plate. Without looking around, Rose began moving off. She gave me a wink, one with the dignity only a respected president could give, the only wink I'd ever seen without a drop of slime. "'I'm glad you did your lunch justice, Stuart. Don't worry, you don't have to speechify. And Albert, eat your peas. You, too, Liliane."

I watched her move, with a grace of form at once balletic and magisterial, all the way to her seat. As she passed Emilia, Emilia, who had not once spied on Rose's visit with us, abruptly, as if she had eyes in her nape, swiveled to her sister. She smiled big.

Even Emilia, fierily independent Emilia, truckled to her Rose.

For some reason Benton chose the end of dessert for his sermon, when several people were too bestirred to return to their seats. Perhaps his subconscious hoped the potent coffees would keep the stuffed diners awake through the interminable

twenty-five minutes. He droned, not with rhetoric and exhortation for having recaptured, however temporarily, the homestead from the Kerteszes, as I'd feared. In fact, he avoided the topic (likely they'd bugged the place). Instead, he recited the history of the terrain since Indian days and its purchase from a corn farmer, detailed the construction, listed the architectural minutiae, and bumbled about master Sirini. His strategy apparently was to stoke family allegiance through facts and circumlocution. The only rapt faces among the hundred-odd were Alby's and, fifty feet down our table, Desi's. The others' were merely reverent. Even Rose was busy kissing the hair of one of her smaller children in her lap. Clark was staring before him as if stranded on an island. Benton's own small ones were crawling under the table, where a giggle sometimes peeped.

When we were released, to work our way back to the reception room, Irina and I got separated from Liliane and Alby. At one point, she and I turned together from a chat with a couple, when Irina collided with Emilia.

"Moorea, I was worried for you, did you find anything in that *nouveau* turkey feed that you could eat?"

"The macadamias and the mushrooms."

"For all the rainbow colors in that spread, we could pour it into spray-paint machines and write graffiti on Central Expressway's walls."

"So you went starving?" Irina's face was lit with sympathy, as by a sparkler.

"Me? I wouldn't waste a scrap. We were scarfing the same burnt pigeon as the desperate homeless whom we could be feeding by the thousands."

“You realize,” Irina looked to me, “Emilia is the family conscience.”

“So I’ve gathered.”

“A conscience is a hypocrite that doesn’t act enough. Stuart must see *you* aren’t like the rest,” Emilia told her sister.

“She’s all duty,” I said. “That’s what brings her here.”

Emilia leaned toward Irina and lowered her voice. “No one’s mentioned Clark. He’s said nothing. He’s awfully pale.”

“It’s Marion. She’s so hard. She’s always saying he’s ignoring the kids.”

“Shouldn’t someone ask if he’s okay?”

“You know how impossible she makes it.”

Emilia noticed someone nearby whose arm she took, and Irina and I moved on. I breathed.

Irina leaned into me and said, “Emilia’s conscience is solely in her pocketbook.”

The place where Desi and Alby had been chatting, near Desi’s seat, was abruptly empty. As was the whole room.

25.

So nothing happened at the event after all. Yet everything happened.

That evening, at Irina's, I saw Irina get intoxicated—if barely—for the first time, perhaps her first time in years or ever. She hadn't a sip of wine at the dinner. The culprit was a small blue vial of an herbal liqueur, much like chartreuse. It was said to contain a hundred and three herbal essences cultivated by Nepalese monks, and no deadly sugar.

"I don't know how long it's been since I felt so good, down to my toenails," she said. With a sigh she lay back on the grass still damp after the day's pummeling rains. It was the last patch of non-native lawn in the wide backyard, which she (rather, we) had been slowly replacing with native and xeriscape gardening. The humidity was rising in mists with the season's first clickering of crickets. Though her excuse was *Let's celebrate spring*, we remained outdoors since her AC-free house was a bit stuffy.

"I feel tiptop like after a workout in the Ion Room," she went on. "There's only one thing that makes me feel better." A hand crawled across the grass and into mine.

"You're experiencing the magic of this stuff called alcohol."

"I've had alcohol. There's no alcohol in this, or hardly any. Look at the label."

The label indeed only listed the herbs in their Linnean terms, illustrating a few flowers bending before the Himalayas. “I don’t think they believe in alcohol in Nepal,” she added. But there was no mistaking the sharp whiff under the heliotrope. She had bought the bottle during her final family voyage, when she was nineteen, and had saved it for years for what might be the turning point of her life.

I said, “Maybe Nepalese laws at the time weren’t strict about listing alcoholic contents.”

“You always have to be so honest, so frank, so good. Can’t you for a change be not quite so good?”

“I never said I’m so good.”

“Of course you don’t because then you wouldn’t be so good. You can’t help your soul. It’s not the alcohol—” she took the bottle from me—“there may be some effect from the herbs. But—” She poured another libation into her blue cordial glass. “Herbs don’t make you into another person like alcohol does. Like exercise, they only bring you out more. So everything I’m feeling now is absolutely, absolutely correct.”

“I’ve never heard of a ‘wrong feeling.’”

“Oh, Stuart, Sty, Sty, Stu. Stud Stu. We did it. We finally, finally did it.” She lay back again, arms spread out, face in the sky. “We broke the logjam. The family logjam.”

She deftly put the glass to her supine lips. I brought my glass to my nose. The stew triggered a kaleidoscope of flavors, from bitter green to sweet pink to sour blue and sappy red.

“Toast!” she said, and we clinked.

“Only six months ago,” she said, “I was trailed like a friggin’ serial killer, just because I love the body. And today—we’re at the head of the family table, at their silly

feast in their silly house. Thanks to you. You don't know what you've done for me. And I still love the body. Little do they know. Oh come to me, come here to me. Fuck, fuck, fuck, let's fuck ourselves into silly nirvana."

When it was well dark, she picked us up and in high energy led the way inside. Up in the Holy of Holies she opened the bottom desk drawer and pulled out a large stack.

"Let's make it concrete," she said. "Making love is so spiritual. It's so spiritual like butterflies I want to pin it down. Don't you wish, sometimes, all our times together could be put into little specimen boxes, each with its date label, and we could look at each one in all its unique colors and designs, because each time we've been together is so unique like a different species, even if they all blend into one fantastic order. And someday, Stu, you're going to look straight deep into me, and do that all night and into the morning. You're going to learn. We're going through Vatsayana together one day. But here—" She dropped the stack before our crossed legs on the floor. "Here's the concrete. We make it spiritual. Like the ancients with their hecatombs. It's just a little symbol. Because we're already spiritual. In a way, that's all we are, you and I. But these worldly matters, people let them destroy their spirits and destroy their coupling, while we can take care of these matters in a minute. It should be fun as a game. And then we have it done, and then it's behind us, and we'll stay wholly spiritual for as long as spirits last."

She took the top envelop from the stack. "I'm holding onto this one. It'll pay expenses, especially if something happens to you. It's only about 100 million. See how distasteful

it is for me to talk in such terms? But we'll say this and then no more." She pushed the remainder of the stack toward me. "Take care of the rest, like you've been doing. I don't know why I didn't have you take care of it right off. The trust in our spirits is what counts, and you gave me trust the moment you walked into my house."

No telling how much lay in that stack, the largest yet, though I surmised it must again be in the nine figures. But what froze me was her announcement she had reached barrel's bottom, and she saved one spoonful for herself. The responsibility she was handing me for her life made me want to ask, *How can you be handing this to me?* I am not, nor can anybody be, your alter ego, no matter how spiritual you feel it. But to ask that would be to deny her trust. And that we had so carefully built.

I put the stack to the side of us and reached for her arms. Form, not duty, called. I whispered, soft and urging, "It's time we at least think about marriage."

She bowed her head and would not look at me. "No, I don't prefer. It's too artificial. Maybe some other time."

"It's only proper. Others will expect it. Especially after today."

She continued shaking her head, as if denying the very reality she celebrated tonight. "You're always so good," she said.

"I'm not trying to push you. But others still exist. We're still not Proteus."

Irina smiled at my allusion to our first discussions. But again she shook her head. "Let's put it aside as long as we can. In these circles, people wait years."

The white shoulder straps of the dress had slipped down her upper arms. My hands cupping her shoulders made me feel condescending, treating her as a kid who in fact had done no wrong. “You have to promise me we give it serious thought.”

With only the merest wavering at first, like heavy cannon taking precise aim, she finally leveled her stare into me and locked. The black pupils grew large as cannons’ mouths, the amber irises undulated around them as sunlight striking metal. She was teaching me to stare at love.

In the morning we dumped the stack into a Whole Foods grocery sack as if I was taking out the garbage.

Once home, I have to admit, despite a backlog of work, I sat at the closet desk and added up the accounts. Soon I passed 1 billion, and hadn’t finished a third of the stack. That was in addition to the 1+ she had already handed over. I started adding faster and faster, as though, if I didn’t finish this exercise and start transferring, she would call and change her mind. My fingers tripped on the number pad, so I had to enter and reenter amounts over and over. My head seemed to be flailing in altitude sickness. As I passed 2 billion, I started getting faint. What did these numbers mean, anyway? 1,100,000,000 (and climbing) had been sitting in my name for months. Now my name would have 3,000,000,000 and climbing. A couple years ago, only 3,000,000.00, slotted penny-by-painful-penny into miserly pink piggy, had seemed more beyond my sight in the clouds than Everest. Now I commanded a *thousand* times that? And climbing? A thousand times—a mountain to the moon, when only 15,000 feet up you’re already gangrened with frostbite and wringing out brain cells from dearth of oxygen?

Shivering, my fingers shook so, I had to stop keying. I placed my hands under my thighs to warm them up. What insanity, or utter relinquishment of reality, or truly unprecedented love, I had happened upon in the form of Irina. But the “mere” 100 million she reserved for her own fingertips was still twenty times my own sweat-earned 5 mill of last fall. That 100, knowing her, would re-mushroom, in time, back toward 1 bill. How could I be wrong in following her wishes, even if I had, months ago, so subtly nudged them this direction? With no more success from my worn fingers, I tried tallying in my mind’s eye. But even knocking off the cents, I could not keep two seven- and eight-figure figures in that jittering LCD behind my nose. Finally I just rounded off, 6 mill here, 19 mill there. Still, somewhere in the high figures my mind’s fingers themselves began shaking and the total crumbled between them. I took a pencil and scrap paper to aid me, and finally, though I temporarily lost my numerical dexterity, I made very rough progress.

Now I’m not admitting that, with all this fumbling and breathlessness, I succumbed to cupidity or was by any stretch uncouth in agreeing to be guardian of these funds. After all, I had a huge responsibility in great taxes to pay and possible harassment from the IRS, the SEC, the FBI. Of course, I was so in the right here, these transactions were so above board and legal, I had little to fear from such hassling besides any investigation’s possible exposure to the family of our monetary intimacy. I could hardly comprehend these figures enough to become avaricious. I simply could not comprehend the force, within me or without, that had put me on such moon-scaling heights.

She had noted, as in passing, the password for every account was the same she always used: the 8 letters of her last name, scrambled into two words that posed a challenge. (Sometimes, if alphanumeric were required, with the numeral 8 inserted between.) She used the same password, I divined, in defiance of hackers, just saying, “If you want it, have it.” Given her social and account numbers, I could get right to work. If I started moving funds, then as before, with the security measures, the flurry of phonecalls and messages and texts would rain down on her, which she would shrug off. These brokers and bankers just may know one another and catch on where all these funds—almost all she owned, relatively speaking—were going. They could warn the Reynaldo triumvirate. The three could “see through” events. They might step in and ruin Irina’s whole salvation of herself.

By afternoon, I got a hold of myself. The total was just over 4.3 billion, in addition to what she had already given. Jeremy Reynaldo must have willed the six children equal shares, with very little (maybe a few hundred mill) for the cousins and aunts.

Soberly, I sat with a cup of black joe and opened the Fidelity site. It asked for account name and password. I had done this a dozen times for Irina’s. This afternoon, I hesitated.

26.

It was two days before I saw Emilia. “Whenever you can,” was her only text. With such patience, you can’t help but make it soon.

So we ended up, of all places, at an abandoned church. In Pleasant Grove (in fact not far from Rundle’s), it had been on the block for years and bought by her charity group as a community outreach center. This former Church of Christ consisted only of a sanctuary the size of an average house, a few closet-sized Sunday School rooms and an office. For weeks, volunteers had been coming to clean and repair. Emilia proposed that it serve for food-distribution, medical services, activities for seniors and teens, but no decision had been made on whether to clear out the pews. Today she was alone putting the office in order.

First thing, on answering my tap at the office door, she dropped her arms to her side and gawked as if I’d been pinned with Olympic Gold. She took a moment to speak. “That was perfect. A perfect day. You were perfect.”

“No, you were.”

“Moorea was perfect in her beautiful white dress. And Albert—I was so charmed to meet him. You know this changes everything? We all made perfect a perfect squandering of resources.”

“It was Benton’s treat?”

“And Rose’s and Clark’s. Let’s don’t talk about that. Let’s talk about how this changes everything.”

She finally moved from the door, then turned at the desk without offering a seat. There was a folding steel chair behind the steel desk and one before it. Though cleaned, the place smelled at once musty and dusty, as though it had weathered years of floods and droughts. Through the small window, sun shot yellow-white off clouds and off the empty dirt parking lot. A lone succulent in a clay pot tried to cheer the space.

“First I want to say how uplifting it is to see Moorea in such form,” Emilia said. “You know the whole extravagance was thrown just to caress their appetite for that ramshackle hut. But she feels it was tacitly done for her because they so cleverly worked you into that humble little seat. You, now, have a huge responsibility to her, best for life, if it so turns out. And I believe you’re up to it, if you can handle her among those hundred souls.”

Are you real? I wanted to ask her. Can any human being be so magnanimous, so selfless, as to wish her lover be locked up for life with her sister?

“I may be up to it,” I said, repeating her words for want of better.

“But what changes everything—because for Moorea, everything must stay the same—what changes everything is Albert. Meeting Albert. It puts a human face I never could have imagined on him and his enterprises.”

“He offers quite the human face.” I stretched my point at his expense too far for comfort, as her conversion to him was about to prove felicitous.

“Doesn’t he! I never would have pictured him so—*dashing*. Not from your description of his work. I’m still a little shaky about all this, this turning humans into quicksilver to erase suffering from the universe. But now I’ve met him—not that I didn’t trust your promise of its goodness before—now that I see the one who’s actually pushing the program through, I trust that’s—much more human than I’d feared. And you know what really was the final grain of sand that dropped me to his side? His treatment of that little Liliane, Moorea’s friend. She’s such a speck, in most people’s eyes, especially the kind of eyes my family wears. Though I don’t say one soul alive is a nothing. But he, he had no reason to bat one eyelash at her, and he looked after her when no one else did. That is goodness.

“I confess,” she went on, “that, deep down, in my smaller self, I’m still shaky. But there’s a part of reason that builds upon the foundation of emotional truths. Because there would be no reason without the irrational drive to live. And my emotions have been wholly won over to the irrational depths of this man, which have stamped him ‘as good as you can get.’ And that emotion guides my reason, and that reason I let overpower the smaller part of me that shivers.”

She walked to the window and held her hand to the church’s dirt parking lot. “When I bought this place six weeks ago, I had heard about it the day before and drove over the next morning. Over several years its price had sunk along with the neighborhood to half of the original asking. I decided within fifteen seconds of the realtor’s finishing the tour. I’ve thought it over the past two days, and the sum I’m considering for your and my project, compared to the time I spent considering it, is about in proportion to the sum for the church purchase and the

amount of time for that decision. Stuart,” and she startled me in using my full name as she had at the party, “I’m going to invest in Albert’s work as a work toward the good. You’ve convinced me.”

“Good,” I said under my breath, not to appear too eager. In fact, I was starting to regret I had pushed his work so hard on her earlier, before things between her and me had taken their turn. Even though that pushing is what had turned things.

Besides, Alby had started looking a bit far gone even for me.

“I have merely not yet decided,” Emilia said, “in just what form to make the investment. The shaky part of me wants to be assuaged. I’m not one of these people who go in for the good ol’ handshakes and pats on the back after a beer and cigar and the next day the check arrives. That was the way our species dug its ego hell.”

“You’re the master of discretion. Nonpareil.”

“It’s not mere discretion. It’s more vain. It’s an ideal.”

“Have you considered a trust fund?”

“My best option. But I’m still unhappy with it. If he’s as hands-on as you say, he can trace the source of the investing trust fund, and then I’m back to the problem of the cloakroom handshakes and cigars.”

“I don’t fully grasp this reluctance to do friendly business. You just said you’re willing to invest now you’ve seen the man’s smile. So, people have long liked exchanging goods over each other’s smiles. What’s wrong with letting him see yours?”

“Smiles best not feel paid for.”

She stumped me. Still, I already saw the opening she had made, if I could get to it. “He’s not quite as hands-on about finances as about every other part of his business.”

“That type of bright guy, obsessive about doing every person right, will obsess about doing every niche of his trade right, eventually. I’ve seen lots of businessmen and women, in my own trade.”

“With him, why not go anonymous?”

“You know the SEC doesn’t allow anonymous investiture.”

“I mean as good as anonymous. Someone else sets up the fund in their name, you put in the amounts you want, and the fund does the investing.”

Emilia took a rare moment to think. Usually her brain and tongue work at the speed of optic wires. So if she was taking seconds, there had to be a whole North Plains of storm flashes scintillating inside her. About four seconds were up when she said, “That would take an unprecedented amount of trust in someone, considering the amount I’ve decided to put in, and I would be losing my legal connections to it.”

“Though you’re seeking only to have those returns be reinvested.”

She searched through every corner of my eyes with a bluntness she’d never displayed. “Stuart, that’s an astounding solution. But even if I could trust that person, how could I ask him to spend his time and responsibilities for something which is not his project?”

“Maybe that person would have to be as dedicated to your project as you.”

“You’ve told me you made an investment in him, and a good amount.”

“Yes. And I’ve added to it.”

“Stu. Sty. The trust is there. There is no one else I could trust with this project. The issue is, I would hate to burden you with it.”

“If you really feel this is the place you want to direct your resources, for your goals, it wouldn’t be a burden for me. I would just manage your funds alongside my own.”

She placed a hand on my forearm and very faintly squeezed it. “If I were to ask, promise me it wouldn’t be a burden.”

“Okay, it would take a few more minutes each month. But I completely adore everything you are and everything you believe. What’s a few minutes for someone you believe in? It should be a few hours, or days. A whole life. And here, you’re so giving, you’d have me stay with your sister for life rather than with you.”

The faint grip tightened just a notch. “And you would have to set up a trust fund.”

“That’s a phone call to my lawyer.”

“You would really do all this?”

“How else will we share our lives? You look out so much for Moorea.”

“And you do. The more you’re tied to her, the more we are.”

“So this project would tie us doubly.”

“Only if she doesn’t know. She cannot know.” Already, in fact before this meeting, I thought of how the stink the IRS and CIA would make over my abruptly magnified taxes from the

Irina funds would be further amplified if they discovered any Emilia-sourced funds. And that fact may get back to Irina. And the righteousness I felt in paying taxes on her funds could not explain to her why the Emilia-sourced funds.

I said, "That's not deceiving her, not to say?"

"It's not deceit not to tell the infinite facts of the universe."

"What if she asks?"

"If she asks, that's different. She'll never have cause to ask."

"But you still haven't asked me, if you want my help."

"No, I'm asking. I'm asking right now."

And so in minutes, she was at her laptop, showing which funds she wanted moved, to the fund I would set up in my name.

27.

A third volcano building up from the Louis Quatorze party erupted right away.

I could not even get home from meeting with Emilia, to input the code she'd given and see what those funds amounted to. No. Alby, who had called me once in my life, who texted me rarely (I've recorded these rarities already), who had certainly never invited me: Instead of my getting home to play with numbers, Alby had to call and invite me. Come this very minute.

Ladies and gentlemen, I adduce the ultimate evidence about Alby, to let you decide.

I arrived at his research hospital in Industrial Park at twilight, eight o'clock. The sky was much what we'd seen for days, with grizzled clouds like old men's hairy paunches. This evening they were indigo mottled with that soothing blue that inner lightning gives night storms. In fact, far to the south occasional flashes broke, still too distant for thunder but approaching.

Only a few cars of the hospital night crew dotted the parking lot. At the gate I input the code, and the metal clanked shut behind me. Still, in this district, I locked the car. Along the long wall of the former warehouse, the installed windows were dark. I imagined his experimental specimens slept the long night of metered consciousness. At the far end of the wall and the parking lot rose the bombshell racks, and this late, that

area was shadowed. It was where, mysteriously, we were to meet.

The bomb racks loomed twenty feet above me. In the wind, they groaned and hummed. The shadow in this far end of the building was cast by a light on the roof, apparently a crime light not well positioned. Or the light for this sector was dead. I did make out one thing below, a bluish glow the size of a book. It was jerkily shifting in pattern. When I neared, it clarified into a laptop. And the visage above it, disembodied by the dark, was Alby's. He was sitting in the threshold of an unlit doorless door.

"Got every last screw in the blueprint down, I believe," he said without looking up, apparently upon the crunch of my shoes. "Haven't slept since we last met. Yesterday morning I had my architect here. The contractor met with us later. We signed the preliminary plan. Today the crew came to start clearing out this space. I'm angry the clods didn't put the door back on for the night. Here, take a gander."

He turned the laptop to me. I could only make out an architectural schema of what appeared to be a few rooms. "I've been futzing with the architect's masterpiece. You realize, I once built a house in a month. In Brownsville when I was setting up a *maquiladora* across the river. It was the only house on the block standing after a hurricane. I will build this Nano-age clinical testing suite in six weeks. That's with a lot more intricate plumbing and wiring than any old house."

He closed the program, and the computer sounded its brief shutting-down jingle, which always strikes me as a scene-ending theme for a cheesy sitcom. There followed a moment of silence, filled by the night's first crickets under the street's tr, bleating against the nearing lightning.

Alby placed the computer on the brief dock, rose and went inside. I mounted the concrete stairs. In warehouse days, this must have been a utility entrance. Now, where maintenance vehicles once parked, I just made out a dumpster. A light came on inside, and through the door I found a large bare room smelling of plaster powder matted by the dampness of neglect. Rusting gray-metal shelves and their racks leaned on one corner.

“This room went mostly unused, and the other two I’m converting with it are just utility and storage. A portable building coming to the parking lot tomorrow will take over that job. What’s wonderful, Sty, is that I had long ago closed off this sector from the clinical part of the building, acoustically and ventilatorily. The subject-patients won’t breathe a mote of dust or suffer a jot of noise.”

My pal, tall as a castle turret, stood with arms folded on chest. He gazed with puissant eyes across the room’s expanse as if they sowed there his vision for me to see. All I caught was the first, extremely faint basso of thunder.

“What,” I said, “prompts this sudden rival to your hurricane-proof house?”

“The same truths I’ve known since I was five. You know I do nothing sudden.”

I gathered he was alluding to Tommie, and truths of that eight-year-old, which seemed to have prompted Alby’s entire post-five-year-old existence. But he was also reaching into his jumpsuit waistline-pocket, and pulled out a small lead-colored cylinder.

Holding it by the top, he jiggled it, like stirring up a liquid snow-scene. “They’re pretty indestructible. They arrived

Saturday. I had no chance to tell you at the dinner. From my pal in China. Not even the panopticon Chinese government knows about these yet. Nanny Drivers, my pal dubs them. I told you they were coming. Machines the size of a few atoms. You could fit a hundred trillion of them on the *point* of a pin and still have room. Back at the Jefferson Avenue lab, my technicians transferred *one* to each of twenty cylinders. This is one. They're self-replicating. It's in a suspension of certain elements and compounds. By tomorrow there should be a few quadrillion of them in here. I'll open and test it."

At first, I figured I just may be making a good investment (for Emilia's hope for the future) after all. I asked what the machines do. He explained these were just tiny robots that could do little more than replicate themselves. But if the tests proved satisfactory, he would have sufficient confidence in the next generation of Nanny Drivers, which the pal in China aimed to deliver in six weeks.

The timing of these matters could not add up to explain this remodeling.

I pressed again, gently, for what spurred Monday morning's call to his architect. My intuition, a platinum-tipped needle, said there was some soft tissue under this tendon.

He swayed, faintly. "Not—not to change the subject—" Alby, the tower, fumbled, for the second time I had ever witnessed. The dinner had been the first. "It ties in. You know, those Reynaldos have a rare knack. Especially one. I visited with the one quite a while. Desi. In no time I was explaining the Nanny Drivers. And I rarely divulge major projects to laymen. This one, I saw the second we'd met, was no idiot. He'd never dabbled in nanorobotics. The closest he'd come

was nanoparticles like titanium oxide. But he has a scientific mind. It's all geared to restoring his dream. He zipped off stuff even I've never heard. Laser ablation. Satscan. Cavitation damage. If his beauty were chased in inks on his inner skull he could live in that alone. I never come across such minds. But the man's frustrated. You know that building's situation. But, the Nanny Drivers, he caught on—" Alby snapped his fingers.

Alby had long regained control of whatever had overcome him and turned to strut on across the room toward its inner door. Still, he strutted much more slowly and less volubly than usual. In fact he ambled.

I said, "Are you implying I'm not catching onto the Nanny Drivers, while a layman did?" Yet I knew Alby was not implying as much at all. For once, he didn't know what he was implying.

"Of course you're catching on, too, Chippie! This room," he went on, "will be the testing center. We'll have a bed and such comforts for the subject. Only one subject at a time, because of—you may be wondering why not simply use one of the clinical testing rooms already in the other wing."

"I'm not wondering because you haven't clarified what you're building." I also wasn't yet clear on why he had invited me here tonight.

"It's because this room must be completely sealed from all intervening electromagnetic waves. And in the next two rooms—" He opened the inner door but remained in the threshold and waved at two dark shut doors across a hall. "—we'll put the supercomputers I ordered actually long ago for the Jefferson labs. But as of yesterday one has been rerouted

here. It's critical for each of the three stages of the project: scanning, interpretation, and simulation."

I refrained from challenging him as to how such intricate, delicate machinery, as he must well know, requires longer than six weeks for installation and programming. I wanted to see where he would go on his own. I did rub one smudge of reality into his eyes: "Does the FDA ever approve a project so fast?"

"You forget my friend at that fine agency. Besides, this project'll move so fast, they'll never knew what blew past them."

He stayed put in the threshold. "You realize, of course, the outstanding results of the Chippie-chip trials," he said. "Buster Javits has hung on with us for months right in this building, communicating to us through his Chippie-Chip. He's ambulant, he jogs in the streets. We let him drive a car while all along we beamed him directions. I was in the seat next to him, with my laptop, streaming the map right to the website on the chip in his noodle. He was able to read those directions off his chip and drive to a Burger King he had never visited. That location even had a promo on fries, for internet customers only, not advertised on the building, which he ordered at the drive-thru. Do you see what this means?"

"Yes." I have to admit, for the first time, I did not believe Alby. Since the swaying of moments ago, I noticed, in my conscience a quiet questioning of Emilia's investment decision had begun.

He patted the wall, as if the outcome of all his intentions lay behind it. "This means the timing of my every projection is working out on schedule. I've prognosticated even ahead of my chump Cursewell. This is not 'prognostication'—this is

scientific prediction. For $\alpha = .01$, I have 99% confidence the outcome of this next project will come out as predicted. Screw the statisticians, I have 100% confidence. The project merits its name, Screech Owl.”

The word struck me, though at first I only thought of the animal, which I had heard one night in some Central Texas woods outside Austin. I had been with a girlfriend, in moonlight, and upon that lonely cry she threw her top back on and ran to my car.

“Beautiful choice,” I said.

“Great plane, with those retractable wings. Every engineer told Reynaldo it would never work and he insisted he had 100% confidence. His own pen sketches on a church donation envelope. It went on to break a speed record; not one crashed. I saw the photograph, knew at once my baby’s name.”

He patted the wall again. “That room will house one of the world’s fastest supercomputers, backed by more memory than any. Has to. There’s a lot crammed into that little bone cup on the shoulders. Everyone’s been anticipating this generation of Nanny Drivers for decades. They’re mini-mini-mini Chippie-chips—plus. Okay, call it ‘Inanity-Plus’ if you have to. These minis’ll crawl through every last passageway and crevice of your gray matter and scan every last molecule and atom of that brain and transmit the info to the computer. When the data are all in, the computer simulates your brain. You become a virtual entity. Still your body and brain stay intact. And you know, he understood so fast, the moment I mentioned it, the mathematics, the pentaflops involved, he at once asked if he could be the first. Now that’s trust.”

I did not ask whom Alby meant. I knew it was not Buster Javits. But I was touched by how he used the third-person pronoun without clear antecedent, as a five-year-old does. The febleness was touching.

He paused, I believe to catch himself from swaying. Thunder came so low and far you had to listen hard to discern it was not a distant dumpster truck bouncing its emptied load.

“He understands very well that, once every molecule, every atom, of your mental information is scanned and interpreted, stored and simulated, perfectly uploaded, you’ll have perfect control of—and access to—any experience you want. All these pentaflops can give you more detailed information, of any room you want to live in, than you could discern in the vividest dream. Trillions of nanocameras floating in mists through any chamber or space you desire can transmit more experience than you could absorb actually standing in it. You can live in it more than ‘actually.’ So puff-puff, a jet of spray. Who has to care what any Qatar owners or anybody else tries to tell you what life to live?”

That was a lot of love for two days to grow. But Alby had been long primed.

“What a mind!” he said. “So dedicated to a vision. So—one point I’m stumped on, in this whole project. Everything else, the machinery, is so easy. But—you know I’ve never been stumped. It’s humiliating.”

His big face, wide as a lit-up laptop, stared down into me begging. The black hair, pulled back tight for the tail, made a flat question mark above either ear, while in this incandescent light the skin was gray. He appeared unused, an untried carton

in a basement. I felt he was laying it all at my feet for me to open up and try.

“But you feel you’re more appropriate to test it out,” I said.

The face lit up yet one level brighter, as in shock. Then he turned it away and shuffled from the threshold. He put a hand to his throat. I saw now, certainly, why he had invited me. I was the only who knew both prongs of his dilemma, besides that one prong, Alby himself.

“I do know more about what to look for, true.” Alby was mumbling, still pulling at the throat, a huge, stumpy footballer’s throat. “I have been immersed in mind-uploading research for two decades. But I would almost feel selfish, for once, stepping in while, well, someone has so quickly shown such eagerness.”

I had no doubt that had I not come tonight, he would have given Desi the honor and stuck to that decision for the next six weeks. “You’re not selfish,” I said. “You do have to answer to investors. You are the best suited.”

“What luck I’m the first to have the drivers.” He was shuffling almost to the outside door, free hand on his hip, but turned just in time to continue along the further wall. “I do want to. It *is* the key step.”

In his shuffle, he flipped one brief glance up at me, a glance whose cheeks and undereyes dropped with all the weight of a downtrodden slave. It told me “But I’ll be leaving someone behind.”

I said, “But with mind-uploading, your original intact mind stays in your body.”

“And so—?” he said, not looking up.

“And so do it.”

He stopped and snapped his fingers at me.

28.

The investors.

At home I tore right into Emilia's account as if it had already been invested. They were still there, tiny innocent numerals in their darling dollish box. So toylke and innocent, they underplayed what they said, till my eyes told my brain more. That first numeral, 4, was the mini locomotive on an empty if very loaded 9-unit train.

She had empowered me to place exactly 400 million (4 followed by eight zeros) on the head of that man I'd just seen raving in a storeroom.

Project Screech Owl.

I moved my own funds right out of ATE. Just let him find out and ask.

IRS Day—April 15—was approaching me like a locomotive. Last December, I had transferred a good part of the original 53 mill (that *measly* 53!) into my name, where it pumped a sizeable six figures of income that showed up on my 1099's. In those mere few weeks, those few extra investments had increased by more than half my very own five million's income. Probably that increase would not raise any tax examiner's brows—except I did have to declare the 53 for gift-tax purposes—

My nerves bucked so, they woke me at four in the morning with images of next year's 4-billion+ jacking my

apparent income up into the *nine-figure mark*, multiplying my investment revenue by a factor of *one thousand*. All kinds of g-men would be all over my house day and night. And gift taxes—would those swallow a large part of Irina’s money? What a pitfall —and to let all that blood-earned aerodynamicist’s funds go into highways and intercontinental ballistic missiles!

I finally got out of bed and did what letter-perfect Stu never had since filing a first 1040 at age eighteen: filed for a six-month extension. I gave myself till October to find how to candy-coat this wholly innocent paper trail.

In a few days, Emilia called and, Emilia style, asked pointblank how the investment process was moving along. I said that the lawyer had set up the trust fund in my name, as he had. I told her that at this moment ATE shares had spiked, as they had, and so it would be good to wait. (Alby must have leaked hints about that (unsupportable) new project.) I prognosticated that soon the spike would turn the other way. I did not tell her I planned never to put a cent of that 400 mill in ATE, not because I no longer unconsciously desired some secret revenge against her type as I had before I had gotten to know her intimately, but because it would be a dump of good funds down a sinkhole, period. Not in my name! But the explanations I provided her sufficed: she moved onto other topics.

29.

By late spring a pattern emerged in my visits with Irina: Monday night; Wednesday evening for dinner and into the night; then Friday night to Sunday morning, when she allowed me to sneak away early to catch up work. Some folks say such patterns are the ruts of a relationship's decline, but that's unfair. Our life moved into the sunny shade of her lawn. The season unfolded with merciful mildness for Dallas, afternoons reaching only the low 80's. Frequent storms cooled off the sun, blanketing the city in moist greenness and whiffs of bouquet even in the cement depths of downtown. Irina's investment in replanting her garden was paying handsomely. The wide stand of bluebonnets persisted long into the season, so dense in coral blue that the white and pink peaks of their flower bunches sparkled in daylight. The theater of orange Indian paintbrushes, baby blue-eyes and the magenta rose gentians appeared to effloresce as you watched. The lemon tree balms were drawing bees so heavily I kept thinking some old guy was back there humming gospel tunes. Saturdays she continued to bend her back and genuflect at her sacred earth, while allowing me to play catchup on my laptop on a chaise longue. With plenty of sun-cream, we were browning.

Rainy days Irina let me work in the glass pagoda, and in downpours she escaped there herself. Since last year's disorder, like clearing fog, both shape and structure were starting to coalesce in that enclosure. The hardbacked chairs and table

remained, with the fridge of fruit drinks. But most of the stack of framed heirlooms got hung in various dark parts of the house, thankfully including the B&W of the Louis Quatorze. Curiously, one of the three pictures she retained here was the color print of the Screech Owl in flight. She let it lean against the glass wall, on a countertop. This portrait included a snippet of Earth so far below that you saw a line of atmosphere on the horizon. The sky was the indigo of near-space. Although in the stratosphere, the airplane was still climbing, ruthless, its retractable wings swept all the way behind its shoulders. But the old photo's color was starting to separate and fade. The print, strangely, was signed and numbered, this one being number 5, Irina's birth order in the family. (Desi's print must be number 6.) This print's persistence before my eyes I took as a reminder from the impersonal forces of the universe: I had let Emilia's funds sit in the trust fund's money-market account, without moving them into ATE as she had once requested.

On our approximately two visits per week, Emilia kept surprising me by not asking after the funds. It was an odd life, true, between these two sisters, tense, as one of them might not approve of the other's generosity, if she knew. But it had its points. As ever, Emilia chose miscellaneous locales, still often with water in some form: the indoors ice-skating rink at Fair Park, the boarded up Lancaster-Kiest shopping center which she sought to salvage for its 1960s style though the fountain was dry, a rowboat on Mountain Creek Lake, a Wynnewood apartment complex where one of her groups was housing the needy. Once we met at a swampy dilapidated hangar at tiny Red Bird airport, where she was considering buying a Lockheed Lode Star for anthropologists out to preserve "autochthonous" cultures. Never had she or I had a tryst in a 1930s luxury

passenger seat. (Later she decided against the clunky old two-engine airliner for being a gas-guzzler.) Any day she would ask about ATE and I would have to work up a truthful excuse.

All this chasing about town required another hire, to manage my team of Beholt dissimulators. I finally gave in and bought a former five-and-dime in Oak Cliff for almost nothing—off Zang Boulevard a mile from Alby's Jefferson labs—to house the crew. It was just a shell now, with a glass front, had served in the meantime as political campaign headquarters, a crackhouse (inadvertently), and briefly as a police holding tank. Still it smelled to me of the bubblegum and chocolate of five-and-dimes. We walled-in some offices at the periphery for the higher-ups and left the middle an open bullpen for the general customer-service. With the team centrally located, the manager, like a schoolmarm, could more readily rove an eye over them. You know how these workers come and go. Although associates were trusted with secrecy about whom they were imitating, I installed a blue gel over the front glass, as if the filtered light would better keep that secrecy inside. I could have just bricked up the plate glass, but like Alby I revered these monuments to ancient economies.

To pay for this refurbishing, I shaved a little off the top—the mere cream of interest—of one of Irina's cash reserves. The market, except for ATE, had dipped; it would be wrong to sell off my mutual funds; and I'm not one to take loans. It was the first time to use what she'd handed me to manage, and she had, apparently, left matters to my judgment.

At erratic points on the calendar, at home, I blindly fished one of the statements from the pile she'd given me in April and

made the transfer into my name. I chose this random, gradual method, after my original hesitation upon first facing the 4.3 bill, as one to minimize stir. She did occasionally report that one distressed, another hurt, a third just curious broker called asking why she had sold an investment. But in time those reports tapered off. I calculated that, at the rate I was going, I should have all the handed-over funds transacted within two-and-a-quarter to two-and-a-half years. As it appeared that our garden-path life would continue indefinitely, there was no rush.

One white-flower Sunday, the air under the trees was just cool enough from the early mist that the first drifts of sunned air opened the skin pores. The broad leaves of the cottonwoods, as fragrant as warm rain, and the horse apple trees and black oaks blocked us from the neighbors. On a chaise longue accommodating both of us, she lay into my chest, both of us bare to the toes. Her skin added just enough warmth to make the sweat welcome. For one Sunday, now that I had my five-and-dime team, I wanted to sustain this freefall into bliss with her the rest of the day.

I broke our long meditation. "A day like today, I see why June's for weddings."

She just kept breathing softly under my fingers. Another's breath can be sweet as a kiss.

"You feel like all time will be this way," I went on.

"It is always this way." Her voice was small and relaxed. "What's ever different?"

"You must feel different when everything's iced over and night descends at 5."

“Then I go to the Ion Room. That’s the magic of it. It makes all of life tropical even as you step onto ice.”

“And what if you didn’t have the Ion Room?”

She turned to her left so she was no longer in my chest but facing the leaves above. It was a wide chaise longue.

“Are you saying I’m missing something?” But she wasn’t defiant. She reminded me of the meek and halting woman I’d first met at her front door last year.

“You ask for little. Beside your Ion Room and your garden.”

“Why, and you of course.”

“Do you?”

She exhaled. Or sighed. I can’t always tell. “My Ion Room and garden wouldn’t be anything by themselves.”

“So it’s all right by you if we are exactly like this for all time.”

She turned all the way and propped up on her elbows. She does not get irate, but she does take emphatic stances. “There are June weddings every year. But every month is as wonderful as the next.”

“You wouldn’t prefer any month?”

“Sty, you big baby. No, I wouldn’t prefer. To put on some ridiculous puffy dress for five hours?”

“I hear there are nudist ceremonies.”

“And the whole point is for the family, like they’d attend that.”

“I thought every girl at heart likes those ridiculous puffy dresses.”

She moved onto her elbows so she leaned her whole self upon them, right over my chest. “You keep teasing me about this.”

“Okay, it’s just a show, to pretend I feel we should do what’s right by them.”

“I know it’s just a show, because you agree with me that we are complete as we are. No one on Earth has what we have.”

“No one.”

“Not even me and what’s his face—”

“Mahmoud. Reda.”

“—Mahmoud. Though any and all of them had memorized Vatsayana. And you know, it’s time. Speaking about for all time. It’s time you start memorizing. I’m going for my copy—I *bought* you one a while back.”

She pushed up to her knees.

“I guess I’m going to linger a little longer this Sunday.”

“That’s not for show, is it, that’s for real.” She rose to her feet.

“Then I’m staying here half the week now. I’m almost moved in. What will they think?”

“No more talk of marriage, okay, unless I bring it up. And that’ll be never.”

She set off across the garden to the Ion Room’s glass door, swishing her body in that just detectable swish. Yes, this Sunday stay was not for show. It was for necessity. Her emotional necessity. I could no longer play the marriage gambit.

*

Monday morning, I opened email in the closet office to a weekend's backlogs, and there was one from Rose Reynaldo. She requested to see me. Her alleged topic was her brother Clark, who seemed troubled.

I trembled. Oh my, oh my. Rose.

30.

In minutes we had an appointment for Friday afternoon.

I paced about the house. The very name of Rose pierced my ribs. She was commanding me. She had commanded me the moment we had met at the washroom. And at last she had fingered the tortuous route by which to keep commanding me in whatever she had in store for me. But she was married. Oh, didn't that mean she knew just what to do?

That night at Irina's, I remained so stunned, she had to spend her evening massaging me.

Before Rose and I could meet—like one of those dreams where you're just about to grasp your gold, or your beauty, when a door slam awakens you—another event intervened.

I recall in exquisite detail what I was doing that day, as anyone does those moments upon hearing history-making news, an assassination or war declaration. I was in my closet office, of course, about the only place I was anymore when not with Irina or Emilia, imitating catch-up with the ever-mounting backlog I simply could not farm-out to my team of imitators. I was just wrapping up a new online client in a tough predicament, before turning to poor John Pooper, for whose deepening hell I could not further procrastinate my remedy. The new client's problem: he embraced my XtraHumanism Dynamo doctrine with all his pectoral strength (which the photo exhibited well), but he could not reconcile it with his

newfound faith in an African animistic religion. There were gods in everything and everywhere, in every bush, mountain, and sip of my Dynamo Future-Building Body Powder mix. But the Xtrahumanist future, he feared, would wholly artificialize, devastate and violate the gods' many dwellings and kill them through our atheistic power surge. I wrote him a feverishly rational reply, one I'd never before dredged up from my underwater mines. One day soon, I assured this sufferer, we will have the technology to go back in time. We could then even go back to the universe's beginning. And if the multiverses are infinite in extent and in time, you could, if you so desire, go back to the beginning of infinite time. (I gambled on the client's not questioning the possibility of reaching back to the beginning of infinite time, or of time even existing outside the timespace of our universe.) And by then, my dear client, our technology will be so versatile, you could reinstall those dethroned gods, then return to present time and live in religious joy that those gods really are there behind every bush and mountain (you may no longer need my Dynamo drink in that glorious future, I fear!), guilt-free about any atheism. Remember the soothing truth, "Engineering Can Do Anything You Can Put in Words."

Condense this truth into a mnemonic, ECDAYCPIW (Pronounced, "ek-dake-pew.") and carry it with you like a prayer. Aka "Ecdaycpiw." Sounds like a company. I'd snatch up stock in Ecdaycpiw. What all else we could do! The most wondrous things. We could make every object in all the infinite multiverses into objects all exactly identical with each other, yet without any unity to the whole, so they're all discrete individuals! You might ask, Why do that? Because ECDAYCPIW, so it *can* be done. Think of it as art. We could

(as Alby portended, though I did not tell my client the idea's origin) build a machine that completely annihilates everything in all the multiverses, even the machine itself and the very idea of time and events, and yet, one nanosecond later, because of the program, everything reappears exactly where it had been as if nothing had happened. The machine could repeat this scenario, a billions times a second (even if time stops existing every nanosecond), and no one would notice a thing! And we could do this while our neighbor here has another machine that expressly holds all the universes exactly as they are and prevents our machine from doing its task. Both machines can work together simultaneously and successfully. The possibilities are endless. So there's hope, dear client. And invest in Ecdaycpiw Corp. upon its IPO.

So I had just sent that reply, not entirely satisfied because it did not wholly convince even me (I have to believe my consolations wholly to be wholly satisfied). It was a gamble, this response; but if he bought it, he'd buy anything from me. (I was taking more gambles these days, whatever it was that had so fortified my confidence.) And then—I was *just* turning to the impossible challenge my old pal Pooper had left me. His life was dissolving in his hands. He had sold off bits and chips of his company Poopers Scoopers till he was down to a rump operation of four trash trucks and was driving one himself. His wife openly had lovers. He had even sold the White Rock Lake sailboat—the very vessel that had memorably buoyed Irina and me New Year's. He was threatening to make this missive his last contact with me ever, unless I offered a real, workable solution *right now*. The Singularity, if it would only arrive, would save him, he had no doubt. It would stir us all in its promised bedazzling chaos and comfort of total machine

control of our lives. If only to be totally taken care of, right now! But Pooper confessed to having no more patience. It was up to me, he challenged: what with all my fingerholds on the cliff of industries I scaled (as Pooper phrased things) in my XtraHumanist ascent, I must have a thumb in pharmaceuticals. I must have a friend who could mix together a drug to give poor Pooper patience. Weren't drugs one corner in the extrahumanist pentangle? All Pooper asked for was patience, and he could wait out the salving Singularity forever. Please, patience, he begged. And I was beginning to slap my brains around warming up to shadowbox with Pooper. He was my most lucrative client, and even if I had respectable backup funds, I could not lose him just in case. He was so desperate, he sent along an Etchy-Sketchy Homo for analysis as well.

At the critical historical moment, I had two lightning strikes of insight. You know how you get these flashes, and then, as if upon their striking Earth they have created one of those old papyrus scrolls, and you spend some time unrolling them and decoding their dazzling inscription. The first insight was an interpretation of Pooper's Etchy-Sketchy. His drawing was an almost completely blackened frame of horizontal and vertical lines, so random and scrawled it appeared like a child's angry pout in a corner. My insight, as I would relate to Pooper, was that he was depicting the very depths of a true singularity, the original singularity of astronomers, the one which, no doubt, was sucking its inverse inspiration into the subconscious of us extrahumanists: the very zero-dimensional point at the center of a black hole. This ultimate singularity, entrapping and inhaling every quantum of matter that neared the shell of its event horizon and ripped apart all order and energy contained therein, was at once total chaos and final order,

complete control and total freedom, an ending of time and a beginning of eternity, an artifact of nature and a natural idol for all our actions. Pooper, I was going to tell him, was displaying the Singularity already within him.

And then I had just laid my finger on the second scroll of insight to unroll it, when the office phone rang.

You know how, when you get these flashes, you need peace to decipher the fragile papyrus. Upon a noise it can crumble, never again to be pieced together.

Not breathing, I let the phone ring till the voice mail came on. (Phooey on that land-line I had to keep, for all those businesses and clients who refused progress) Speaker-phone on, I heard the caller's message while it was made:

"Hello, Mr. Beholt, I'm Darlene MacKenzie at ATE Labs." Her heavy Texan-drawling voice was tense, urgent, making me angrier at her for shaking my hold on my thought. "I'm calling because I understand you are a friend of Mr. Tolby's, and there's a matter of—utmost importance here, I urge you to give it priority, it would help us as well, if you could please call me or come down to the labs right away."

She gave her number, but I did not jot it, as I already knew what I would do. That was the point when—she had not yet signed off—my fingers felt the powdered thought pass through them. My best client, and, I feared, my business itself, had slipped out of my hands. I slapped the message button off on her mid-sentence.

I sat still many moments, waiting for the thought magically to rematerialize, as sometimes happens. I already knew what the woman wanted, had suspected this development for weeks. And already knew what I would do: I would drive.

No rush, if my hunch were right. Just keep stepping, gingerly, ahead, and maybe all would fall back in place.

It was late morning, July 2, the heat off the streets already heavy. The wavy lines in the air that vibrate roads and car hoods appeared not to rise but to bear down. Late morning marked the one time of daylight when traffic actually moved, say at the speed of poured asphalt. Some people might have taken off for the holiday, or the heat wave drove them to the reservoirs. Still I poked along, elbow in the open window, hot breeze only heating my sweat. Since I had last seen Alby at his research clinic, when he had sought, in his roundabout way, my ear and tongue, I had had only emails and texts from him. He inadvertently revealed, through cracks in his cryptic fashion, his newfound—what shall we call it? “*Multi*-multiplication! Test results: Quintillions of these little machines formed in one day. We’re on our way.” I gathered who the royal “we” was. “Injected in SCID mice. Two weeks later, still no harm.” Call this Ecstasy? That lifts you beyond that drudge called “caution”? “Six weeks to the minute, the nanobots will arrive.”

About seven and a half weeks had passed.

I turned onto Jefferson to scout out the lab before parking. Yellow tape, proving my hunches, crisscrossed the modest door through which he had once led me. A fireman’s ambulance appeared to be ossified several car-spaces up. But guys in street clothes, jackets off for the heat, stood outside the tape. One was a lab tech I recognized from that day of my tour. Though I already saw everything I was about to see, I rushed the car into a space, then ran. You can’t arrive at such a scene you’ve been called to without being out of breath.

“You a client?” a hefty man asked, with a cop’s crude authority.

I explained, and the lab tech, scrutinizing me with a cop’s squint, said, “Yeah, that’s him, let him through.”

The actual cop, his plainclothes sleeves rolled up to a trout-tattooed forearm, lifted the tape three inches for me to pass under. I tried a limber-dancer’s move but still snapped a stretch of tape. The squalid hall was lined with mumblers in office and lab garb, eying me. Abruptly the elevator left me all alone. Why had everyone not simply been dismissed for the day? Because, of course, Alby forever commanded secrecy. The door opened on a woman my height but triple my bone size. Her hair cropped at the jaw pointed forward.

“Stuart Beholt?”

“Darlene MacKenzie?”

“Why didn’t you leave a message?”

With a sergeant’s huffiness, she turned and led me toward the labs. What a quibble she was making at such a time. Along the hall, a few firemen and cops alternated with further stray lab workers, in various stages between concern and cool. She came to a door which, by the way she turned in the threshold and held it open so her hair’s cropped points pointed at me, had to be the final one. But she spoke with unnerving softness.

“We called you because we understand you’re his best friend, since Austin. I’m sorry you didn’t call back so I could prepare you. We still haven’t located family. Some folks here would like to know a little more before we get through to relations—”

She turned ahead again, as if placing her stature so as to block my view. I only noted several people in white hazmat

suits, before someone was putting one on me. The woman was suiting up herself with the nimbleness of an old hand, and her hard jaw melted ever softer and kinder. Everywhere reeked of vinyl and disinfectant. “I don’t mean to pressure you at all.”

I was startled to find my body shaking, as by the touch of the terrible suit. “I mean if he’s dead, why not just tell me. This is horrendous.”

She froze, startled as well behind her head cover. My dresser halted too. “But I told you in the message what happened.”

She had me—for my petty annoyance over her call’s interruption which had led me to cut off her message. “I guess I still can’t believe—”

“Are you sure you want—?”

I shuddered again, maybe too visibly. “I’ve come this far.”

She slowly resumed suiting up. We hadn’t had the chance to introduce ourselves properly.

There was, in fact, a further door, and this had a portable plastic entryway. We had to enter a kind of decompression chamber, as I thought of it, of oozy clear vinyl that swept too lazily across the floor to keep out many contaminants. The suit crinkled with each move of a finger, and the helmet echoed my voice as we maneuvered. Beyond the plastic chamber’s second door, the lab room was darkened except for two spotlights trained on a rectangular mound in translucent plastic. It housed, as I could barely discern through the glare, a hefty seat such as for dental patients, reclined at a yawning 150 degrees or so. In it sprawled a person, or a body. A number of upright hazmat suits scattered about the room, scribbling, staring at electronic hand-devices or doing little.

Darlene MacKenzie led me up to one of these and introduced me to so-and-so, which I was not registering until I heard “medical examiner.”

This hazmat suit rudely did not stick out its hand, although I offered mine.

“Thank you for coming down, Mr. Beholt,” came a male voice from the suit. “You’re not really in danger. We’re just taking extra precautions with an unknown agent. Otherwise we wouldn’t have asked you down.”

The voice was so formal and robotic like the suit emitting it, my own voice lost human words for response, beyond gutturals.

“We thought,” the hazmat continued, “you’d feel a duty, as the first among friends and family, to come care from your friend. And we are pleased you followed through. We haven’t been able to contact any family. So maybe you can help us.”

Emotion—anger?—finally gave me voice. “What’s he doing *here*?”

The hazmat—not even eyes shone behind it—kept such a level on me it seemed to implicate. “He came here, not telling anyone why.”

The hazmat went on to assure me that there was no possibility in my being implicated in what had occurred. He would then like to ask a few informal questions. His assistants were making a preliminary study of Mr. Tolby’s research notes. (I saw how shallowly this M.E. had dug into Alby, who would command such a man refer to him as “Dr. Tolby.”) The notes so far seemed to indicate that Mr. Tolby had told no one except me that he was participating as the sole subject in this “leg” of the clinical trial.

“That’s very unlike a professional like Mr. Tolby, who has reputation, and plenty evidence to back it, for being a scrupulous scientist.”

“He also had a side for secrecy.” I responded too quickly. And I recalled Alby’s vision of having nanocameras everywhere in the world surveying absolutely everything.

“I repeat, we’re not implicating you, Mr. Beholt. We’re just trying to piece this together. Were you aware that he was planning to undergo this clinical trial himself, and that he was telling no one else?”

“How could I have possibly suspected he would do anything so unprofessional?”

“That’s what concerns us, that he would undertake such a thing—so did you notice any psychological instability in him recently?”

“He was the same unstoppable guy I’d always known. What do you expect me to do, shut him up and tell him don’t you dare as if I could ever influence him? And what exactly did he do—what did happen to him—?”

The hazmat held its silence a moment. I then—and I never thought of myself as sentimental—felt my throat go lumpy. My eyes expanded in their sockets.

“I don’t think you want to see your friend in this state.”

“Then tell me.”

“The substance he injected in himself caused a severe reaction in his cranium.”

“Tell me exactly.”

“Essentially, his brain burst. It was under such intense pressure, it would have burst the skull if it could, but it streamed out through the vascular.”

Pointing with an arm, he was leading me out of the room through the “decompression” chamber, as if, in directing me from the grisly scene, he would direct my line of thought from its grisliness. So maybe I had quieted his suspicions. “But why did he come down here,” I said, “when he had been up at the clinical lab where there’re doctors? I thought.” I was revealing more knowledge of the story than was good.

“He had told everyone there he was feeling ‘under the weather’ and wanted to work quietly in the privacy of one of the clinical test rooms that had just been constructed. Professional, but yes he’d always been a bit eccentric, like his type. Then three nights ago he suddenly and surreptitiously removed himself to this lab room and locked himself in. He aroused curiosity, but still no one suspected. Apparently he was sensing what was happening and was trying to work up an antidote, as we found vials of the substance he apparently had injected himself with— And during these ten days since he had injected, you were the only one he emailed.”

He had stopped in the suiting-up room, where at once assistants set to unsuiting me. How could they have already penetrated what must have been a monumental passcode of Alby’s for his very own personal email server, while they couldn’t even locate the family? Unless they were testing me—?

Through the M.E.’s hazmat hood I could construe only the barest limn of a jaw. “So our big question here is why, when your friend was indulging in such narrow margins of positive outcome—?”

My questioner did not finish. My mouth, on its own, finished for him. “I remained silent, you mean to say?”

Other people were coming into this lab room, in lab and street clothes. I vaguely recognized a few from my visit of months ago. My only thought was I had to get away from this corpse-digger.

One of the closest of the newcomers to the room was veritably glaring at me with uplifted eyebrows, as though he knew I had answers. I took the chance to break, if rudely, from the M.E. and approached this lab tech. I said, “You’re—you’re—Stanley—?”

He garbled his name getting it out and got to the real issue. “You just saw him? You’re his friend, right? What’s the deal?”

As he came forward, already his colleagues were coming too.

“You heard of the Nanny Drivers?” I felt the story welling up behind the back of my tongue, anything to shirk this M.E. “The nano-robots that would trace his brain, down to every last neuron and molecule, and send the structures to a computer?”

The gathering lab-workers, now five or six, were deadpan. They also knew-not.

“The purpose was to have a perfect copy of your brain structure in the computer, and so, in the computer, your mind would be replicated. It would be conscious like you. It would be you.”

The lab-tech closest to me mumbled, “I read about such a possibility somewhere.”

I kept going, ever faster, like when you’re drunk and unreeling an anecdote you don’t really know. “And so he had these Nanny Drivers, from China, in a vial, I mean nano nano nano, you could fit a quadrillion on a pinpoint and still not see them. Each one had sensors and a computer and transmitter,

and they could replicate like viruses, but he had no doubt they were safe. He injected them into SCID mice, who lived. So at the clinical labs, I *gather* from the M.E. he injected them into himself, he believed so strongly, he didn't mind, it seemed, he believed in the outcome, and then, well—the little robots just replicated and replicated, and—”

The guy closest maintained a faint wince, as if sniffing an odd odor, or fending off a smirk. But I only locked onto that grimace and fed it: “— and they apparently caused an edema in his brain—”

“We don't know if it was an edema,” the M.E. said.

So the guy was still at my back. I went on, “But his brain swelled and swelled, the pressure built and built—”

Someone gasped, like the gasp of swallowed chuckle. “Like in those cartoons when the head balloons?” someone said.

That pierced the room like a lancet, and a guffaw burst in one clap. Tension reliever?! “No, the skull can't swell like that!” I said. “This is your boss. His brain had nowhere to go. It had nowhere, but to go out the vascular system—”

A woman clapped a hand over her mouth, while her eyes laid on me with a horrific grin. The gathered labworkers gazed at me, still as if unsure. The woman lowered her hand, and the grin was flickering about her lips. The man closest to me, stocky and thick-necked, released air as though impatient for my punch-line. And then, he gave up, visibly: He lifted his eyebrows, put a hand to his chin, and chuckled.

The act was infectious, like babies in a nursery when one starts crying. The lab worker next to the chuckler hunched as if shrugging off the same pestilence in himself, shook his head,

but still his ribs began shaking. He looked to a colleague for help, but that one, too, fighting the eruption through strained neck muscles, let it out through the nose. “Stoked up his brain for the next life, all right!” one lab-worker managed to say.

That only prompted another to let a laugh rip. And that did it. The circle plunged into titters.

Others, the cops and hazmats, looked on.

As quickly as the eruption came, it passed. The culprits looked from one to the other, furtively.

Words from years ago, from my Greek class, which had struck me as ghoulish at the time, came back:

At once, the red blood

*Ran out of his mouth, and he fell in the dust with
a groan,*

*Grinding his teeth and beating the ground with
his feet.*

*But the lordly wooers threw up their hands and
nearly*

Died laughing.

I looked to the M.E., who still had not shed his helmet. His whole suit looked so deadpan, he had to be equally horrified. What better chance to get away. I flailed my hands. “This is unbearable,” I said.

And got out of there.

*

It took until that night before I could tell Irina the news. She enfolded me.

She cried, too, tears of sympathy, running slow fingers through my hair as though I were an ill child. She whispered, “Those lab workers were probably just releasing a freak bubble of nervous tension. Don’t make yourself worse over that.”

We can be awfully stoic about grief in our country. We don’t jump into graves wailing. I don’t know why, as Irina held me I kept recalling a time in Austin when he came pounding at my door at six in the morning—he almost never knocked at my door—exclaiming he had solved the Riemann Hypothesis. I was so bewildered by the visit, and so tired, I fell asleep as he demonstrated the solution with pencil and an empty carton in my room. If I had stayed awake and listened, maybe he would have been encouraged to pursue the solution further and become, safely, a mathematician and not a reckless entrepreneur? I didn’t tell Irina of the incident. I had thrown away the carton next day.

Later, she put on another pod movie Mantranto had leant her, as if that would distract me better than a film from her shelf of taste. She was right; it pierced to the heart of the day. In all these movies, it seems pods can’t know they’re not people. They can only play at the idea of being people. They have no conscience by which they can assess the nature of their motivations—and maybe no consciousness. They cannot detect their podness, nor can anyone, really, and they can’t even *know* if others are pods. At best you can only surmise how a suspect’s actions begin to add up to podhood, and then you postulate whether a real conscience could allow all those actions. That is, you had to figure out by introspecting your conscience. This

fact used to grate on me. No longer, not tonight. I just *knew* who were pods.

Those lab workers, deriding poor Alby's end, they, they, *they. They.*

31.

The family, who were finally reached the next day, set the funeral for Friday. It postponed, yes, my meeting with Rose.

The investigators found no family contact information among Alby's affairs. One left a message for me, asking if I had any, but I texted back I did not. Alby had rarely, if ever, alluded to his heritage. They finally went through birth records and tracked down the Mormon couple living way out on the Staked Plains of far West Texas. The two respectfully arranged the last rites to occur in Dallas as their son's adopted home.

Irina insisted I come rest under her wings every night; and mornings, Emilia came to console. Both sisters tactfully refrained from asking about Alby's stock. And Emilia, whose funds I was supposed to have heavily invested in that stock, should have shown every interest. It fell to near zero.

I did have another visitor, who appeared too soon after Emilia had exited than could be a good sign and who showed every interest in the details of Alby's aftermath.

The knock came to my front door late Wednesday morning. Strange, someone should forsake the buzzer but instead tap, humbly, pleadingly. And strange, someone should try the actual, unmarked front door, not my office's marked entrance. I opened to find Desi. He stood back as if I were throwing rotten vegetables at him. He had gone as white as his shirt and appeared to have lost fifty pounds from everywhere

except the domed gut. I mustered all the feeling I could and said, “Desi, Desi, Desi.”

He straightened up some, but then leaned forward, bowing his chin. In seconds he was starting to shake from suppressed sobs. I said, “Come in, come in,” and stepped back. He came, in humbled-boy steps. Once I closed the door behind him, he looked up at me, eyes wet. Then he swooned and fell upon me, sobbing.

He clasped me, all the way around my chest and locked his hands at my back. He sobbed so long, holding me so tightly, I genuinely had to excuse myself to go rid some of my morning coffee.

When I returned, he was in the same position in the living room. And though I stopped a good pace away, he cleared that pace and fell right back into his clasp around my chest.

Finally, some time later, mouth practically at my left nipple, he managed to work up some words. “You’re the only who could understand.”

And still later, I managed to work him over to the couch. At least we were sitting, although he still had his hands around my neck. I remained rather stiff. Never had a male positioned himself in such proximity to me, and I was unsure how to respond. Having introduced him to Alby, I held some responsibility for his present condition, and all protocol says you should show kindness, even if that means reaching beyond your normal barriers. The lighting in the room was embarrassingly low, as I rarely use the living room and keep the blinds shut. You could just make out the outline of the framed paintings of panthers, whose eyes glowed even in this dark.

Emilia's lingering eau-de-cologne drifted a long way from the bedroom or office. But Desi was too preoccupied to take note.

He muttered into me, "I'm going to be alone forever."

You can only stroke the hand of someone who says that, even if it may not be true.

"He spoke of you all the time," Desi whispered. "You were really his favorite pal, maybe the only real one he ever had. I know, he didn't know how to show it. But I knew it, I could tell. In the very way he called you 'Chippie-Boy.' It sounds demeaning, but that's just his way of showing affection. He didn't even bother with people he actually hated. You know what he called me?"

"No."

"Guess."

"I don't know, how can you predict him. 'Desi Wesie.'"

"'Dizzy Ditzzy my Gypsy.'"

He was having trouble getting words out.

"'My Gypsy,'" he repeated.

Often I had to let him fade a while. Then another tidal wave would convulse him.

"He did it for me! I know he did. He practically confessed it. He sacrificed himself because he wanted me to enter his neverending kingdom. He said there I could have my family's home forever, forever in pristine condition. Never would a stone erode. And he would live in it too, in eternal beauty. He so much loved beauty. And once our minds would become translated, he could make millions, billions of copies of me. Can you imagine? Billions of copies of me. No one else could ever feel that way!"

He shook so, he could not speak. When he regained control, he repeated many of these thoughts in slight variation, as people torn by grief do. The time was getting past noon, but I had to let him spill away. You can hardly ease out of such situations. I did slip and start thinking of all that pressed from the real world: my manager's report of the team, an urgent reply to the evermore wretched Pooper, and that new client wailing about the Greek gods. I was searching for respectful ways to hint how we still must trudge on with our duties in this world as long as we're in it, despite the heaviness upon us. Then, well after one o'clock, Desi subsided enough he actually sighed, his grip on me relaxed though held.

When he spoke, his tone was more reflective. "To think, of all he did for me, somewhere in my heart, I kept questioning whether—he really felt anything for me. Can you imagine—that I could doubt? What could be so wrong with me? Just because he never, really, quite came out with the words. You know, the words. As if they were a cliché. That's all, he just found them a cliché, and he could not dare demean his feeling by coating it in quotidian rags. But my bratty mind kept insisting, 'I have to hear you say them, Alby. Pull out a Hallmark Valentine, if you have to, and read it to me.' How trivial of me to think he didn't feel."

Though Desi, only inches away, was looking into the distance, he spoke with the most calmed reason he had exhibited all day. "And I acted on my feelings. That's how much they gripped me. I acted by not acting. I promised to invest in him. He never checked his investments records, you know. I had even put the funds aside in a special account, waiting for the moment. And you know what the moment would be?"

Desi turned his gaze onto me, for the answer, so long that I finally said “No.”

“I was waiting for him to say the words.”

He was gazing away again. But slowly, his hold resumed its strength. His speech took on an urgency, as if via urgency he could override guilt. “The funds are still there. I’m waiting, I don’t know for what now, maybe for his company to resurge. It will resurge, won’t it?”

“Of course it will,” I whispered.

“Of course it will. His spirit is in it. His spirit will push it forever. It will soon uncover how to reconstruct him. He will come back, through his company.”

“Of course he will.”

“But when? When do I put in the funds? When the prices are base now, and so when they resurge they will be ever richer? I don’t know, I’ve lost all judgment.”

His hold on me was so hard, he had muffled me in his neck, and I was practically suffocating. “Do you,” I said, “need someone to judge and act for you?”

He did not immediately answer, or answered by easing his lips onto my neck.

I recalled a friend from university, whose father died of love for a young girl who never yielded. At the funeral my friend picked up that very girl, who so pitied him. Deaths and funerals are said to be good for sympathy pick-ups. I felt Desi digging for that secret sympathy. He dug through the very buttons of my shirt. A male’s mere odor is repulsive. As his hands searched for pity, I could just hold in my nausea. But that was only taste; a greater call dangled faintly through the storm. You swallow the grit and bend your head and body to the gale.

“You have so much of Alby in you,” Desi said, “you can act, I know.”

32.

Friday Irina and I arrived together at the Lake Highlands Mormon church well before the eleven o'clock service. But, beginning a full block before the church, parked cars already lined the roadside. I drove on to the church lot just to see, and it was so full that a guy in a suit stood at its entrance, motioning as if pushing us back. At the head of the lot, and in clusters outside the church building, dozens of people, or hundreds, awaited.

“Where did his family dig up so many people?” I said.

“Your friend was well-loved,” Irina said.

In his whole life, Alby had known: me, Desi, his company. And one Tommie.

I opened my window and identified myself for the parking manager. He only shook his head and commanded I go try the streets.

After we parked and were walking back, I spotted men and women I had not seen since university days, some getting pudgy. They nodded but ventured no further. More to my horror, I recognized two or three of the technicians who had made merry over their boss's demise. Oh, now they made solemn, bowing their heads in the brilliant day. For whom so solemn, eh? In front of the church, you could tell the journalists, the only attendees not in “Sunday best” like anyone who respected customs. They darted about, noses out as if sniffing meat.

Irina sensed my disturbance. “But wouldn’t he love this bustle?”

“He’d have other things on his mind.”

I felt too exposed in this snoopy public. The M.E. might show.

At the front door, a shrunken couple whose hands and arms were being comforted had to be the parents. I looked hard for Alby in them. The woman, no higher than Irina, had twice the girth and had to have given her son his bones. But, while her hair still had color, of neglected hay, her face was creviced like parched earth. The man may have once stood over her, but the high plains winds had rounded his noodle of a back. He had Alby’s wide cheeks but not the Cro-Magnon cranium. The giant Alby had come out of these sticks and clay.

I gave the old couple my name and said I’d been a college friend. The mother wasn’t even looking at me. The father squinted at the distance above my shoulder.

“Well,” he finally said, “it’s always good a boy has friends. You’re Mormon?”

“I’m afraid I am not.”

“Albert was a good Mormon before he was even baptized. You know it.”

Only then I noticed the father was addressing someone behind me, and I turned to a guy in a yellow suit. Even taller than Alby, as strong, but clean-cut and shiny, he stood out from reality in that way of high officials and celebrities, as if they have an extra physical dimension. But he was too young to have known Alby before Alby was baptized.

“You can bless your boots he was a topflight Mormon,” the man said, “so topflight he didn’t have to advertise it. But in no time the four corners of the universe will know.”

This guy didn’t even sweat like the rest of us in the July heat; his skin shone from pure force of will. But before I could introduce myself, others descended on him.

Irina and I politely moved on. We came upon people she had asked to attend, some I had not seen since the day I’d met her. Mantranto her trainer clustered with the trader in African masks and Astarr Fixx, the clothing importer whose fabrics transport oxygen to the soul. Fixx took on an undertone, as if in a still undisclosed secret, when he told Irina and me, “I understand your friend was really the sage. He had an incredible vision for us all and was just putting it into effect.”

Irina, staying under my arm, gazed at me proudly, as if I were the one orchestrating all, even Alby’s solo.

“Yes, he was a smart boy,” I said.

“I’m going to have another meeting with all my sages, in honor of Alby,” Irina said, “to knock our minds together with the pieces he left.”

Mantranto, in short sleeves though a tie, stood aside, arms folded on chest, either fist pushing out the upper-arm flesh. He gave only his usual skeptical monosyllables.

Further on was another member from that first meeting of sages last year, now in quite a different role (I presumed). Near the guywires supporting a sapling, Desi slowly paced a short distance in short steps. The way he offered not a glance our way, I surmised he was impatiently awaiting a word with me.

I had not a word for him. Before I could think of some excuse for Irina and me to go comfort him, my elbow was clutched. At once I knew Emilia and her love of surprises.

When I turned her face sunk from great delight to great pity.

“I am so grieved, Stuart,” she said, as she had every morning this week. “I only met him that once, but he made such an impression on all of us.”

She wore a brimmed hat which shadowed much of her face. Still, as she gazed at her little sister, lines of pity pulled down her soft features: as though she knew that Moorea were the one to take all the load of calamities, and as though it were Moorea’s future she feared. I then noticed Emilia also had an arm extended in another direction. I tracked it, and there, in fact, were the other members of “all of us”: Benton II, alongside his wife, nodded at us, and then—my heart bounded—Rose. Rose alone. In a black gown whose color alone could call it mourning, certainly not its neckline or brief sleeves. She lifted her chin in greeting.

“All of us” (except Clark, it appeared) were here, and “all of us” were separate.

“There’s some kind of reception or fellowship afterward, isn’t there?” Emilia said. “We can all talk then.”

She moved off, as if she had anywhere to go. Mantranto’s eyes followed her retreat, and then he looked to me.

Irina bent close to me to say, “She tries to come off so caring of little sister.”

With the turnout, many had to stand in the back and spilled outside. But the parents ensured that Irina and I had a seat,

somewhat near the body. For the first time since university days I saw Alby not in a gray jumpsuit, and for the first time ever in tie and jacket—and lying down. One eerie matter no one dared discuss was that a hermetically sealed (or so I deduced) clear plastic sheet covered him. Apparently the health department (the M.E.?!) had not fully conceded that those nanorobots were not for real. The family could have opted to close the casket and not scare anyone, but their customs might not have been so circumspect when it came to their boy. Still, through the plastic you could well enough view the stilled spirit. He appeared, not asleep as they say, but caught in a blink: In the next nanosecond the eyelids would shoot open. The two big balls still appeared to burn their suns behind those lids. He was boiling to spill his next scheme. What a talented mortician he had.

Through the songs and opening remarks, Irina stared at the corpse. It was her first funeral since her father Jeremy's.

She whispered to me, “You told me long ago he wanted to be frozen, and then thawed and reconstituted some centuries later, after the Singularity.”

“With the accident, they didn't have sufficient time to freeze him. But his genes have been stored frozen, so he can be reconstructed later.”

“So we'll see him later. But won't he be a babe in swaddling clothes?”

The priest for this East Dallas Mormon stake gave a healthy oratory salted and spiced with encouraging dogma. The Lord will gather all those unto him who have striven in their sainthood. Even in the next stage, those who have not been baptized in this one would still have a chance for salvation, for the Lord was all-merciful. He did have Alby's biography

in hand, on a few pages of printout, from Alby's valiant days as farmer boy on the Staked Plains, to his blessed achievement with "Albert [*sic*] Tolby Enterprises." His catapult from such humble but noble origins to the greatest heights of Earthly labors only proved how the Lord blessed America as the home of His saints. But I could not gather from the priest's talk whether he truly believed that Alby was among the saved, even if Alby had been baptized as a child.

The next speaker left no doubt as to his position, from the start. The priest had barely announced a welcome for any to come speak who would, when the big shiny guy in the yellow suit was striding to the podium. He introduced himself as Harold Brent Mapleton, a priest in a Utah stake. Claspng the podium as if he could crumble it, he looked about the room. Then Harold bloomed. His visage took on such a glow it lit the air around it. His bass voice resounded so against the walls it turned the chapel into a Cathedral.

"When the day of transfiguration shall come," he said, gesturing at Alby, "receive an inheritance upon the Earth.' So said the great prophet Joseph Smith. For all ye saints gathered here today, you have come to witness a transfiguration. And the transfiguration of this saint—and from the Lord I know this man to be a saint although I have not met him before today—has given us a new inheritance upon the Earth. As our prophet Brigham Young exhorts us, 'You are in just as good a kingdom as you'll ever attain to, unless you make it yourselves.' And now, dear saints—and I know from the Lord that each and every one of you who have journeyed here today, and I have come one thousand two hundred miles, would not be so guided here unless you had sainthood chased upon yours hearts—Albert Rodey Tolby has given us the means to

create this kingdom ourselves. Yes, this Earth as is, is the Lord's Kingdom and gift to us, but he gave it to us to nurture through our spirits, through our knowledge, through our hands. Our knowledge is our science and our hands are our tools, our blessed techniques. And now, this moment, through this gift of our Lord through Albert Rodey Tolby, we have the tool for transfiguration. The Lord has given us America and its democratic institutions so we may be free to exercise His glorious will that we reach His Kingdom which extends through the universe and beyond. It is up to us now to enact the Lord's will through this blessed knowledge and so attain our transfiguration, so that now to every human soul we can share this transfiguration, and all will be saved. We are the saints to bring salvation to the human species and all minds and spirits throughout the universe. This man—and I say I have met him today, because he is alive, he is but winking, in the scale of the universe's time, bidding us to take up this Lord's gift he has given us—he is patient as all shepherds. But it is our duty to take this gift and do as bidden. The exhortation of this Church and Kingdom, as prophet Brigham Young tells us, is not prepare to die but prepare to live. We live and build the Lord's Kingdom through our hands, our hands make the tools and machines, and thus we build the Kingdom and live through our tools and machines, our hands. And thus we enter the Eternal Kingdom, living forever 'out of time' as 'eternity' itself means. This man, this God's child, is the leader of all us God's children and all such as he who bring us such gifts on the Earth today. As the great president of the Church Lorenzo Snow said over a century ago when our stakes in Utah were as young as Albert Rodey Tolby is today, 'These children are now at play making mind worlds. They shall rule as gods.' Is there

any doubt why the great Lorenzo was a prophet? Here this child of God Albert Rodey Tolby is making mind worlds, so that we shall attain our spiritual essences as pure minds through the tools he has given us. And so we shall all rule as gods. ‘As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be,’ Lorenzo Snow tells us. This soul we gaze on before us is the one whom this prophet foresaw, who has enabled our hands so we may become as God now is. This the Lord has shown to me, and has directed me to come these one thousand two hundred miles to declare to the world Church, that our Albert Rodey Tolby is not only saint but prophet.”

Several minutes later when he was done, he remained at the podium, silent. The air about his face glowed, warmly as a taper. (I wondered if he had a diode in his collar.) It even seemed his bass voice continued rumbling through the chapel walls at sub-audible frequencies. His presence stayed so firmly implanted that even as he strode away soundlessly, it remained there. For minutes no further speakers rose for the open-mike session. The church merely echoed with squeaks of pews and covertly clearing throats.

So the merrymaking technicians had been but rejoicing. Smile on, ye saints.

After the burial, the reception took place in a cemetery garden.

At least a dozen tables end-on-end in white linen snaked about the lawn. Covering most every square foot of their surface—plates of meats, bowls of fruit. Metal pans, whose part-opened aluminum foil revealed toasted toppings, and copious stacks of paper napkins all fluttered their cheering

hands in the breeze. The hedges of pink azalea and crepe myrtle billowed with greenness cool and triumphant over the drought-stricken yellows beyond the fence. Perfumes of hidden irises and roses drifted lightly. As we approached, through the fruit-heavy branches came a rapid loud voice. It zipped off an anecdote, which was followed by snickers; elsewhere random handclaps and bated hoorays. Vestments of bright red, mauve, apricot and canary shifted among the foliage. Irina and I, along with the other Reynaldos and secular acquaintances, were among the few to wear black.

Roundish middle-aged women with knives and ladles stood behind the tables, the “Relief Society.” They precluded how well they would serve you by doubling each paper plate. “Make sure you get enough Funeral Potatoes,” my server said as she made sure using her hand-sized serving spoon. From the name of the dish I was expecting mounds of whole potatoes shrouded in an ivory smooth sauce. Instead, it was a cheesy brown mush in which I searched hard for the texture and savor of tuber.

“Maybe the dish gets its name,” Irina said, “from the fact it’s the potatoes who have died, and their souls are lost in limbo.”

We overheard the trick from one Relief Society lady telling another “*the* surefire recipe”: beside the usual tablespoon minced onions, etc, “the secret is one part Betty Crocker potato buds to one part Campbell’s Cream of Chicken Soup. Now that’s manna.”

Shameless Irina ate no more.

While we ambled with our plates through the spring-air of a garden, strangers and old college acquaintances alike

interrupted us to ask me what it was like knowing Alby while he was building his empire. If they were old college pals, I described it was exactly like knowing him in Austin: You never really knew him, only his ebullience, but that was knowing him. Sometimes, the married-with-kids asked with a knowing grin if I had kids. Irina, on my arm, flicked out her bare ring finger and said we would rather do so rightfully. Other old pals squeezed my shoulder and apologized deeply for staying out of touch so long. Instead of cluttering my phone's memory with numbers and addresses, I used pen and disposable napkin. My true current friends abided only a moment, shaking their heads. If the inquirers were strangers, I first made sure they weren't reporters, then gave anecdotes about Alby's jumpsuit and motor scooter. Through all these interruptions, though, I asked every name, but not one was a "Tommie."

The merry techsters and I avoided one another.

Emilia appeared several times, several paces away. She, sociable self, chatted up food servers and priests alike. As she had at the Reynaldo Easter feast, she gave her beloved little sister respectful berth, with only one or two tasteful nods our way.

The building had a washroom letting onto the garden, a single door that led to a door and then to doors for men and for women. Immediately outside the door overhung the first trellis of a walkway twisted with wisteria and other flowering vines. When I emerged from the washroom to go rejoin Irina elsewhere in the garden, I walked to within a foot of Rose.

"So are we always to meet outside restrooms?" she said.

"Is inside better?" Shock scrambled my good sense.

From her smile faint as a simper, I saw she had planned what she had said and planned to come say it. And my reply did not fluster her. Still, my heart beat against my ears. The way she at once clasped her fingers and began wringing them, her heart had to be beating her ears as well.

She turned and stepped in the direction I was heading, under the trellis. She no longer needed the washroom as excuse. She, the one always in command, was losing control. We weren't even talking, just ambling side-by-side up the path. Anyone—Irina, Benton, Emilia, Desi—might see us.

“So Clark didn't make it,” I said. “Is he still having some difficulty—?”

She strolled along, not answering. In the black gown, her arms were now bare. Whatever thing with sleeves she had worn before the service, she had removed. Small diamonds on chased silver hung from her ears. She smelled rich as Provence lavender.

“We can talk about it later,” I ventured. My lips would hardly operate.

“I don't want to talk about it.” Her throat was catching as well.

“We can talk about anything we need.”

“Thank you. I feel like I'm going to take that freedom sooner than I should.”

“For the best of both of us, we should not take that here.”

“I don't plan to. We'll be in touch. Are you planning to marry Moorea now?”

“The death of a friend has no effect on such a matter.”

“It would make things easier if you did.”

Her vagueness beguiled me. “Easier on her, or me, or you?”

She, or we, halted our stroll. One person was lingering far up by the first trellis. Rose looked on me so expressionless I felt she raged at the fact I dare keep existing.

She spoke just above a whisper. “I know I can say anything to you.”

We eased onward in our stroll. It was one of those conversations where you don’t quite understand the words but sense their emanations. Her whole being beside me seemed to be emanating electronic waves. I had always thought she had pulled this magnetic act upon me. Now it appeared I did it upon her in turn.

At the other end of the walk, busy Desi shuffled with hands clasped behind back, took one glimpse of us, froze a second, then shuffled on.

Rose saw him but continued on, unruffled.

“So we no longer need Clark or washrooms as excuses,” I said.

“We can talk as we need.”

“You know I’m pretty preoccupied, first with business.”

“So am I. I have family. There’s plenty business.”

“Excuses make good reasons to bend the schedule.”

“I believe we’re both excuse enough.”

At the end of the path we halted again. Within the press of bushes the air was still. Her scent overpowered even the vines. Voices from the dozens in the lawns around abruptly broke into the moment. I returned to Irina.

We were preparing to leave the festivities when, as I was sneaking from the table with more of those vile potatoes, Desi caught me alone.

He literally stepped into my path and said, "I don't care you're with Moorea. I never cared. She's a woman."

This blast out of nowhere flustered me a minute. His bluntness certainly lacked the nuance of his older married sister. Desi, you never quit your original job as spy for your family conscience, did you. "Yes, she is a woman."

My response appeared to fluster him in turn. Yet, in those perpetually off-roaming eyes he always appeared out of sorts. "But from the start I knew you were with her. It was a given."

"Yes, you were there from the day I met her. Sometimes too there." Such as the day of the Reynaldo annual gathering when his face persisted in the curved mirror.

"So it's different that you're with her. It's a given."

I wondered if, having never ceased his former habits, he had glimpsed more than Rose and me on the trellis path. To someone blunt, you have to play blunt back. "Are you saying you're not jealous, that's the point of this cryptic exercise? Of course you shouldn't be, you have no cause to be jealous."

He actually let his eyes settle on me, he bristled so. He could barely move his mouth when he huffed, "I'm saying I'm generous and am demanding nothing of you."

From which Reynaldo had I heard that before? Wednesday, he had come knocking yet another late morning, again too close on Emilia's heels for comfort, sobbing. Our visit before, I had sacrificed my lifelong cherished identity to console him. He had never further breathed his promise I should be the one to act for him in terms of Alby's affairs,

which could serve at least as one recompense for my compromising myself. And he's trying to fool us he's the giving one, demanding no repay?

My fury was seeping through. "So you waylaid me here just to prate how generous you are? How generous to detain me so you can buff your angelic shirt."

"I'm such a burden!?" he almost shouted. A Relief Society member ten feet away craned about at the scuffle.

I dampened our voices. "You say 'She's a woman.' That means she's in some other compartment. That means you're in some other compartment, but a compartment you feel should be comparable to hers. Why else bring her into the question." My training in employee relations has paid off for years.

"I don't mean that! Only Alby could ever fill that spot, not you."

"Thank goodness. Oh how generous that makes you. And have you let me step in to fulfill my generosity to you? To 'judge and to act' for you, as you so beckoned? One sign of generosity is to let others repay their kindnesses."

He bowed his head, for so long I almost put my hand on his shoulder, except I could not do so in this public. Even if all Reynaldos here knew he suffered.

I said, "Look, we're both in a tough position. We've lost someone. It takes time."

Irina had come into sight, near the gate, and caught my eye. She smiled in that reserved if hopeful way people do at funerals where there is actual mourning. As I left Desi, he said, "But we're not in the same position. How could you know how to repay?"

I let Irina's gaze at me pull me like a fishline to her side. We headed for the gate. "Thank you for comforting Desi," she said, voice catching. "Just today Rose let me know what your friend was to him. Were you trying to protect me?"

"I know how you feel about such matters. I won't tell anyone that."

She took my arm. We passed the gate.

33.

If there are wedding gifts and the whole party flourishes, I wonder if there are funeral subtractions and the whole party withers. How wise the Greeks to hold field games after funerals, to up the dip-into-darkness. The evening after Alby's funeral, I came home to find that my biggest client, John Pooper, owner of the fabled New Years' boat, had dropped me. He had not merely dropped, but drop-kicked me, to punt me out of the arena. "My wife has filed divorce for a six million settlement, thanks to your phony advice. I'm sicking [*sic*] my lawyers on you for fraud."

While my business would survive without him and still had plenty clients to keep the team busy, the note shook me. I must have been losing my knack, and maybe it would completely leak out of me.

Emilia and I were silent for days, as if in paying our due respects, and then we arranged to meet. The spot was the basement of a private Armenian school's auditorium, where she had long ago volunteered a Wednesday slot to help put things in order. School was out, but the school was poor; she believed in the arts' spirit-fostering. Yet her previous experience here told her the work would take a jiffy; and as I lived nearby and her cleaning partner couldn't make it, she asked me to come fill the hours.

We faced a mess of costumes and scene sets that could have fallen pell-mell out of a giant's pocket. It smelt a carnival of decaying plastic, wood and glue. The fact the walls were leaking, perhaps from a water main, made that decay musty. We seemed to have run out of topics to discuss with one another; the mess offered a good diversion. I went for a pile of large playing cards, tied in pairs by cords so children could wear them like sandwich boards. The dozens of cards' cords all tangled with one another, and the mass of them snarled about a tall styrofoam toadstool. Emilia restored a large paper caterpillar costume, made for a dozen children, by repasting its rips, as well as a hefty papier-mâché hookah. We helped one another match wobbly swords to their scabbards and assort boxes of slapdashed prizes for the after-show fair. I felt restored as well, back to our routine of special meetings.

When she tried on a Queen's costume, obviously made for a teacher, the zipper stuck. Working her free required plenty touching, and at one point she clenched my wrist and said, "At least we aren't talking only about Alby."

"He certainly wouldn't want it."

"He'd certainly eat it up. I know he was your friend, but it's hard to put so much into someone who did so well for himself when there're plenty more needful places."

"You're pretty well-off, and if you went, you'd certainly deserve a lot."

"No: When that time arrives, put your all into where it's really needed."

We worked her free of the costume, and I felt what was coming next. "I wonder if the way he went," she said, "means I misjudged where to put our funds. That endeavor was a cul-de-

sac, as far as benevolence initiatives. You did keep hesitating till the end, right?"

I sighed so hard I heard it. "I knew it was against orders, but I was watching him. And it turns out we're intact. Everything's there but with added interest."

"You could have scooped up a bargain at ATE this week."

"ATE will never be the same."

With a squint she gazed at me not as a lover but a sergeant interrogating a corporal. "Your instincts and integrity are impeccable, Stu."

In a moment we were holding one another. She was hanging from my shoulders, abandoned as my scholar Emilia never allowed herself. In the overwhelming basement damp, the lighting from two bare bulbs was subdued just enough to make stark shadows. "Stu, Stu. Dear, dear Stu," she said into my chest. "The way you handled yourself, and us, and everyone's feelings, this past week, I admire you so much more. And that was already maxxing out my admiration capacity. You were even outstripping John Rawls."

"Rawls! That's unjust, don't exaggerate. I've done nothing like him."

"You do at my local level what he did at the global."

"You were inimitable this week, too. As long as I've known you, for that matter."

"I love you so much, you make me want to love everything."

"You loved everything before I knew you."

"You make me want to do everything right, then."

"You were already focusing your life on doing everything right."

“I was flailing about. We all need an anchor. You were so right to hold back on ATE, and I was so headlong. I know you’ll do right the next step. I can wait out your judgment as long as it takes.”

“I wish you could be only mine, and I could be only yours.”

She lifted her head and hesitated. “I’m sorry too my life can’t be that way. I’m sorry for you if you wished it could be that way. But you know it can’t, for you and Moorea’s sake. My life is others’. I hope that doesn’t hurt you.”

I could hardly contradict her without coming off an egoist. Even denying hurt would make my feelings for her appear less earnest. I could only say, “We always have to deal with hurt, don’t we? And you’re right, for Moorea’s sake.”

It took us time to return to our cleanup tasks. We finished up quickly, as she’d prognosticated, then had the whole basement to ourselves.

It may seem to some that, after such intimacy, and especially with the guardianship over the fragile Irina, to which fate, Emilia, passion and compassion had commissioned me, further contact with Rose would be out of order. Yet, Emilia had left a wide hole in matters between us. And Irina fluttered from sealing our bond formally. Amid all this indefiniteness, Rose alone wielded an iron will. What human being doesn’t crave solidity? And she was the first to email. It came down like a fist on a table: “I’m available Tuesday 2 P.M.” After some quick wrangling over our mutual schedules, we forged a time in two weeks so perfect for us we prized it with daily reiteration. “Three clients have requested in-persons on our

day,” I wrote, “and I twisted all of them into slots as far off as a month later. I’ll give you discount rates for your patience.” “Charge me all you want,” she wrote back. “Well, if it’s brother Clark you need to talk about,” I wrote, “I’m afraid I will have to lock you in the prime rates.” “I told you long ago it’s hardly Clark on my mind,” she wrote, “but lock me in your prime if you must.”

The day I was to drive to her retreat on the Poluxy River near Glen Rose (yes, there’s such a town, a hilly sylvan riverside, and she chose it), a familiar knock came. It had come plenty times over the past weeks. I had soon gotten to keeping my blinds on the streetside shut, and even those on the garden side in case he found a way to peek around back walls. I had stopped sneaking up to the door to peek out the peephole. There in that tiny curved glass would be his looming forehead widened and wrenched into terrifying immensity. It seemed to be bursting from all the torment of loss. He kept knocking and knocking. Although I could no longer go spy on the pitiable sight, in the repeatedness and increasing volume of the pounding the sight kept coming anyway. As it increased over days and weeks, I thought, you’ll finally mount to some threshold, where it’s so unbearable you’ll exclaim “I’ll let you ‘repay my generosity’! Aren’t you ever home?”

Today the pounding carried on for more than its usual three to four minutes. In fact, it sounded as if he began to slam his body against the wood. Did he somehow intuit that in three hours I had to depart for the most cherished visit of my adult life, and he nonetheless aimed to sabotage it? I could call the police. But no, I hankered to “repay his generosity.” I deserved the chance, had worked hard and paid in more than pounds of flesh for it. From the sound of it, he really had

mounted to the threshold, and we could get this matter settled. *Thwmp—thwmp*—— *Bwummp!* His body sounded to have collapsed at the doorstep. No, he came out with another *thwmp*. I could let him in and take care of this in an hour, or ten minutes, still have time to exercise then be on my way.

When I opened, he was startlingly upright. His suit, tie in clasp, showed not a wrinkle. Only his eyes coiled with a redness.

“Well, come in,” I said.

Once he was on the couch, the uprightness slumped, and he began shaking as on that first day of his grieving here. After all these weeks’ need for release, it took him some time, on my lap; and then, when he calmed and his breath evened, came the accusations. “All the times I tried, you had to have been home. You know you’re the only one who understands. How could you pretend to be kind? You have no soul.”

I have spine and have to defend myself. I told him I did understand, that through Moorea I knew he had expressed something of his feelings to Rose.

“I had only told her he was my best friend ever,” he said, “and the best friend the Reynaldos could ever have, and so the best she too could ever have had. He knew what was dear to us. And he gave his life to get it back for us.”

“They could see on your face at the funeral,” I said, “what he truly meant to you.”

“They shouldn’t mind. They’re open people.”

“I’m saying I’m not the only one who understands.”

“You’re trying to bow out of the responsibility to console someone?”

I tried innocence. “The point is you know I’m busy. I’m often gone. Look, today I was home, I heard you and I opened. You could try email or phone.”

He alternated between reminiscing about Alby and longing for him to step into the room, between grieving the infinite hole he’d left and celebrating his eternal presence, between thanking me for being here and accusing me of never being here. *I* could have emailed or phoned, if I had a soul. I assured Desi I was so confident in his fortitude that I had had no doubt but he was well.

“You were wrong. Don’t you care—just make a checkup?”

“Of course I care. I’m here, ain’t I? I’m giving my whole self to you.”

We had used up two hours already.

“Let me show you how much I care,” I went on. “Let me repay your generosity.”

We went on with this tugging and alternating, accusation and consolation. All three hours were up, and I was on the brink of confessing I had put on this whole show—of opening to him, emotionally, physically, as if it were in my bones—purely for that one time, purely for his sake. But that could only come off like further accusation—of his vulnerability—rather than as sacrifice. The strain on my face from withholding this explosion (from starting to miss my appointment!) must have turned me pale: He gave one of his rare level gazes and said, not quite a whisper, “You’re right, I should let you help me, in a substantial way. I don’t know why I’ve been so knucklebrained about it. It’ll help remind me—both of us—that Alby’s alive.”

Still the wrangling went on, he was so stubborn or dense or gamy, till I almost blurted, “Look, if I’m really going to ‘judge and act,’ you have to put the account in my name or let me transfer it to my own account. Don’t you see, that’s the only way you’re going to prove full trust in my generosity?” I phrased it in slightly—just slightly—more tactful terms, coaxing him gently onward as Plato does the slave boy, “I always need some autonomy, the ability to treat the funds as if my own, to put my all in them.”

He backed off from me enough to scratch his elbows. He scowled; he pouted. He said, wincing at the sofa cushion, “You mean, you think, it’s like I’m giving you the funds?”

“Not giving,” I said, voice so restrained from explosion it hurt, looking into his eyes although his eyes preferred the sofa, “temporarily relocating in my orbit. And so I may fool my instincts they are mine, and so I may do the best for you, for us, for Alby.”

At one-and-a-half hours late for Rose, I finally had placed into my memory—the only place he’d allow it—his passcode for his Alby-destined account. Deftly and sweetly as possible, I prompted us to our feet; me going to my garage. He hung on my shadow, shadow man he was, the whole distance. I had to scrape him off by sliding into my driver’s seat, the passenger door fortuitously locked. And even after I backed out and the remote began dropping the garage door, he remained inside it. By some freak notion, I flicked the headlights on and off as if in a dire signal, and he came dashing out to my window. The garage door shut, I waved at him as if I’d changed my mind about whatever dire notion had struck me, and then I drove on with too much squeal of rubber.

Not a block further, I dialed Rose. The voicemail came on, bad sign. She'd assured many times she'd keep this line open for me.

Rose, Rose, how much more in you than in all the accounts of the world.

I checked messages, and found a text from her, dated twelve minutes ago. "An hour and a half. Nothing from you. So nothing from me."

Her fist came down.

On coming home, after hours' aimless driving I don't know where, I slumped right to the laptop. My mind, too, without full consciousness, slumped right to Desi's investment firm. My memory slipped the passcode in place, and then I was looking at Desi's account slated for Alby investment.

Instantly I was fully conscious, sitting up, checking account history, previous statements, even logging out and relogging, in case the system were choking on its own program. No, my eyes, my cognizance, my id, were telling me these pages spoke truth: He had a pissbucket 400 grand in this account. Never more, never less. Earning zero interest.

He could not be so poor.

I have rarely acted irrationally with numbers. I dumped it all at once into one of my accounts, and then I trashed the 400 G in ATE stock, which now stood at a halfpenny a share, 0.0285 percent its peak value. I could have acted much wiser, but that trashing of nothing felt good.

*

In a few weeks, Rose and I finally found a curling textual route back to one another. When you have a resurgence, oh how much more the waves boil, you feel how inevitable the tidal onslaught. After my losing my big John Pooper, the new client who had adopted an African religion thumbed his texted nose at me and split. Business was withering.

Rose and I managed, over panting weeks, to pencil in an ever rarer instant in our near future, at Glen Rose, in early September.

34.

For a day before *and after* that date, I cleared out every possible obstructing event from my life, even reserved a hotel room the night before to evade potential intrusions. A meeting with Emilia two days before promised to be safe enough that I booked it. She was so stable, our unpredictable occasions so routine.

She wanted to fish, I believe in nostalgia for the way our first meetings were always near water. “My grandmother in Chillicothe had a fish pond, stocked with bass and cat,” Emilia said. When she talked of home, her learned murmur slipped. “You could pull ’em out by the barrel-load. But we had our pink-and-white floats and lead sinkers and bamboo canes with bacon on the hooks and played like we were fly-fishers.”

She found a joint up at Lake Dallas that rents gear and a dinghy for diddly-squat. There were plenty coves where you could lie dreaming on the murky lake and supposedly haul in pails of lake bass. She also found an association that would take any catch and give it fresh to the needy. “Supposedly, you’re relieving the squirming beasts from suffering in their overcrowding in the water,” she said. “Anyway it’s not like they’re endangered species.” I nearly canceled, but Emilia needed to relapse into her human form and be indulged. How mistaken my charity that day.

The rental shack’s tin roof was held up by two-by-fours. The grounds reeked of fermenting minnows. Curiously, the

joint was next to a tony sailing club, whose masts pointed and shifted like hundreds of ready bayonets. The little steel boat wouldn't hold the two of us lying down, its hull so sheer a wrong rub could spring a hole. We had to portage it ourselves to the public "shore," which here was an oily marsh. The sky hung with hot dumpling clouds just waiting to drip sauce. They appeared to share their grays with the lake; we had no shadows. With the sculls we worked our way into a cove of more oily shores. It even smelled of petroleum. Any catch here couldn't be donated to the needy very ethically. She and I did share that high-plain childhood lore of cane poles and vinyl line, and she reminded me how much line to thread between float and sinker and how to hook a minnow so it wouldn't fall off. "Man, I hadn't done this in a couple decades," she said. "Thank you for inspiring me." She was readjusting her feet so the dinghy barely kept from taking water. But as we threw line after line, with nothing coming up, the hot press of clouds on the water started to take all the air. Hadn't we, she and I, just been casting our lines over and over for a good part of a year? And this is our love, and for nostalgia's sake we love to cast and cast, but that's all we do. By noon we still had nothing, and it was hot and we were hungry.

At the rental shack we paid up, then were walking to our cars when a pickup truck came creeping along, headed for the club gates. I precisely mean creeping, as something spidery and noxious, down to its pestering crunch of tire on gravel. You could feel its predatory stare. Reflexively I looked up, trying to penetrate the windshield's glare, and noted Emilia studying it too. Sun was just leaking from the greasy clouds. The truck pulled a sailboat on trailer, which bucked on the rutted trail. Not until the truck cab was almost on us did the glare slide off the

glass and I saw a face. It struck me with its arachnid familiarity, small, squint-eyed, scheming, but not yet yielding the name. The name, the name, that tells you who is what. Who's that low forehead with the short black tarantula's hair?

Then the truck slowed even more and the window rolled down. In the sharpness of full air, the face's name came pouncing. Mantranto. Irina's personal trainer. He is a sailing instructor.

He stared only at me, his chin slowly swiveling as the truck crept on. The chin was starting to pivot over his shoulder, when it halted, then the window re-ascended and the truck drove on.

"What was that?" Emilia said.

My throat muscles were so taut I had to swallow. "Did you recognize the driver?"

"He seemed to recognize *you*. I think I saw the face before."

"Maybe at the funeral last July."

"That was it. Do you remember who?"

"There were so many people."

My steps slowed. I felt everything I had built up over the years, even my arm's stringy muscles, was draining out a hole. We came to our separate cars, parked side-by-side in our usual two-car strategy. I leaned against mine, trying to regain cool.

"Odd little rental place," I said, "like out of time. How do you know about it?"

Emilia, proud Emilia, had bowed her head, pondering. "At that reception. Right before you and Moorea left. I found her alone. She started up how we used to fish at home. She's always awkward with me, grasping for topics. She knew about

this place. I didn't tell you she did, I'm sorry, Sty. Do you think that guy had been one of her friends there?"

"Maybe we looked as familiar to him, and he wasn't sure either."

On the drive home, I commanded myself: you have to stop these weird meetings, the city even outside its limits is only so big, the risk is not worth it.

My cool was so gone I sat at my closet desk staring just above the top rim of the laptop screen, waiting. At about six, only four hours after my return, came the knock, different from the previous poundings. This was three rapid staccato raps of the knuckle on my office window. A small, strong knuckle of a smooth muscled hand. Irina, over the hundreds of times we had seen one another, had never knocked.

But when I opened the front door, she was already there. She charged right in.

I.T., hello! "Moorea, hello!"

I, agog, stood aside. Her face was lit. She backed me against a wall, and I prepared to be strangled. Right when her hands flew at me, they dropped. Her tigress's face collapsed. She cried in sobs.

I had called her by her family's pet name. Where was my brain?

She wailed like paid Romanian mourners jumping into graves in her good-taste films. "How, how, how—?" she sputtered between heaves. "How could you let yourself fall into her? I thought you were so strong. You hold up the world. Even you can't resist her."

Irina fell over the back of the sofa, into the very cushions where Desi had flung his head onto my knees. She cupped her hands over her eyes and howled. It's a sad sight, how these Reynaldos collapse. But I could not picture Rose or Emilia falling apart so. Perhaps Clark, but not Benton.

“She’s done it all my life! All my life! And you—? Sty, Sty, Sty, my Sty. Oh you were my Sty. Don’t you know what she did? It’s my fault, it’s mine, I never told you. I thought you didn’t need to know, you were so strong. But no one’s so strong. She’s the strongest lump of metal on Earth, she’s the radioactive plug of uranium that lights up the planet and poisons us forever.”

When Irina got more control of herself for a few moments, she told about Emilia and her in their teens. I remained sitting nearby on the arm of the next sofa; I could hardly settle beside her to comfort when I was the distress. As she talked, Irina grew surprisingly lucid, given the hurricane riding her.

Before Irina’s final tutor, who was in her 40’s and dowdy and *female*, took over, in fact one June soon after Irina’s sixteenth birthday, Jeremy Reynaldo had hired a fellow—“a *boy*”—just out of university as Irina’s instructor. As she had tutors year-round except Christmastime, five full days a week, this one was to keep her at least through August, depending on his schedule. His family was Bengali but had lived generations in East London before his parents moved to the States. He was so handsome, winsome, brilliant and astutely mannered that Irina swore to herself her father must have hired him to taunt her. Not only did she fall for him first thing she walked into the room, but in weeks he was falling for her as well. She was supposed to address him, “Mr. Nutting,” and he to address her

“Ms. Reynaldo,” in the way she had with tutors her whole life. But by midsummer, they were sitting in a corner of the garden and in low voices calling each other “John” and “Irina.” He was, in fact, the first one in her personal life to call her by her first name, an idea he pulled out of his own pocket. The name on his lips pierced her. They sat on a cushioned wicker loveseat under drooping willows so thick they blocked the humid July sun. He told of all his adventures in Palo Alto, windsurfing up and down the cliff-hung coast and, far across the valleys, skiing Yosemite in winter. He was going to be an entymologist, studying beetles in Costa Rica and Panama. He used such sparkly words like “carapace” and “scarab,” which sounded like iridescent blues and greens, and “to phosphoresce” and “to field-station.” He had already field-stationed in those tropics four summers, where the coastal sands are black from the sea’s grinding of volcanic lava spewed only millennia ago, and at night when the waves break they phosphoresce a dull green from all the tiny animals whose bodies shine in water. He would take her there one summer. There you live in your skin and you’re your animal human self to the bone. She should be a biologist, she seems to have such interest in life. And she swore from that time she would be a biologist, do all she could to go to real school, university. So they spent five days a week, into August.

Emilia, now, upon turning eighteen only months before, had absconded from Jeremy’s house. Where she lived, no one was sure, but she had a little money somehow, took the tests and applied to schools. Her own tutors had written her recommendations, to Jeremy’s fury. She was accepted to Berkeley, among other places. But that summer, she would occasionally appear in the house when their parents were out,

or in the garden. One Friday in August Irina took a bad fever and stayed in bed. Her tutor waited for her the whole day downstairs, but the fever grew into a flu (in fact she later found out it was a tropical disease John carried) and she sent word through the maid she'd be out at least till morning. The next morning her parents and Desi had left the house, and the maid said she thought the tutor had left around five the evening before. Irina, alone, desolate she would have to wait until Monday to see her tutor, in the evening wandered feverish through the house, then the garden. The acres of shade oaks, roses and oleander, jasmine and wisteria, were still. Not a gardener was about. Even the usual hiss of the lawn sprinklers was missing, as there had been rare August rains. The grounds smelled sweet from the damp rotting plants, that sweetness that's so much it's fetid and it wears at the back of the sinuses. The whole garden, the entire Earth, felt wrong, some rhythm was off. She kept shuffling, into parts of the grounds where she never ventured. There were many garden shacks in these parts, and just after sunset she thought she glimpsed figures entering one. She approached, not cracking a twig, and listened. There were whispers. She dared a peek in the shack's one window. The figures barely visible were not facing her. She gazed long minutes. The faint voices came with some intimate giggles. They were Emilia's and John Nutting's. Emilia, stretched out several feet from him, before long began peeling off her jeans while he watched. She stood and gyrated in a dance. She unbuttoned her top, then her dark bra, dropping the pieces on him. Irina turned and ran.

On my sofa Irina remained upright, looking ahead as though for how to continue. After minutes, she slumped, seeming to give up the search. In the room, penetrated only

by the light traffic down Cedar Springs, I felt we had returned to our normal existences of our past year together. She had finally told why she resented Emilia, and I was back to serving as listener, counselor, therapist, Beholt the Man. And now that this one, big gnarl was cleared out, we could proceed evermore smoothly.

Then she began shaking her head slowly. “Nutting,” she said, not looking at me. “You thought it was nothing, right? It’s my password. ‘Knotting.’ You must have noticed by now, my password always has ‘knotting’ in it, doesn’t it. You didn’t notice it?”

“I noticed the commonality among your pass codes, but I couldn’t know why.”

“You couldn’t know why?” Her eyes relit, as a camping lamp that’s just about fluttered out, but someone turns the gas valve to revive the element. Still on the other sofa’s armrest, my muscles stiffened, ready to stand. “How could you not know why? You know everything. I don’t have to tell you why. You knew from the start when I told you Emilia was a man-eater, and you had to have heard me say ‘Nutting’ because I’m always catching myself saying it to myself, and you had to have pieced it together.”

“Irina, that’s a little farfetched.”

“Farfetched? You’re going to try to excuse your way out? You had to have known. I told you, I told you.”

In one leap, Irina stood.

“She could do nothing to me, nothing to us,” I said. “She wanted to be friends. She’s all for *you*.”

“Friends? That’s what she told me all she and John Nutting were. The day she left town. Wished the best for him and me.”

“So you had him as tutor.”

“She went and ‘hinted’ at our parents what a sexy beast he was!”

“Who’d believe the renegade?”

“The week after my flu, the lady in her 40s took over. Never saw him again.”

“Obviously he gave you more than Emilia got.”

“She got his body. What you think I’ve been pining for ever since. The whole package!”

Her fists at her sides were clenching. Her arms, bare in the black top, flexed with more ripples than my stringy limbs ever mustered. She trembled.

“Twenty years later,” I said, “maybe she’s matured.”

The fist flew right into the meat of my chest.

“You’re defending her. You should be defending me! *You*’re mine, aren’t you? We’re supposed to be together for life, you’re supposed to know everything about me. You’re the ultimate, Stu. Aren’t you, aren’t you?” That same fist that just thwacked my chest now unfolded and snaked down my back as her head fell on the sore spot. “If you betrayed me, I can never trust a human being, I could never trust a frigging atom of this existence. I’ll fucking kill myself, Stu.”

She pushed herself back. “Did you betray me, Stu? Just tell me.”

“Irina, if I knew in advance what you claim I did, that’s what you call betrayal?”

She let out a screech so loud I cupped my ears. Then she ran outside.

Not a word about the funds.

35.

It took a while to remind myself I really had to return to work. My trembling—from hands to shoulders, from ribs to knees—I decided was from hunger. I had not eaten all afternoon since that distaste of rotted lakeside minnows. With a healthy bolus of squid-ink macaroni and crumbled feta cheese, I made rapid progress diminishing the backlog. Work took on an especial faint glow, like that of a distant hut's candle in a blizzard, or for some people the faces of a family after ages of neglect and bootless profligacy. That work may be my last warmth and cuddle after all. I could feel, plodding slowly as the Commandant's statue at half my heart's beat, my next knocker. For a family that never talked, grassfire sure spread. My job cracking employee mysteries and digging through personalities had built up my hunch muscle, so upon a twitch I could sense who was coming, but not just when. I could only promise myself, this would be the last person to knock my door.

It was after midnight, and the energy of my last shot of black and white macaroni and cheese was waning. I was not a minute from logging off and quitting the closet. The knocks, not on window but front door, came much like his previous, only at once not only firmer and more controlled but also quieter. I responded as promptly, professionally, as you can at that hour, held the door wide, with arm extended. The shadow glided in, if stone could glide, and seemed to pull chains in its train. The great forehead lit for a flash in the room's one ceiling

spot which was on. Then he implanted himself in shade. When he spoke, it was a basso from below.

“You broke her.”

“Be more clear.”

He shook his head, the chains slowing him. “I can’t be clearer.”

“I take it you’re referring to one of your sisters.”

“Stop this.”

“What are you saying I’ve done?”

In the silence even his breath didn’t come. I wondered if he were alive and hadn’t taken one of Alby’s potions.

“Have you spoken with someone recently, Desi? You need to speak up.”

“I warned you, at Alby’s funeral.”

“You didn’t warn me. You told me it was a given I was with Moorea and you didn’t care.” I reminded myself this was Irina’s onetime “extirpator.”

“That was a warning not to mess with anyone else. I’d seen you’d messed with me and you’d mess with anyone.”

“You emphasized Moorea is a woman and you aren’t jealous of women. Women don’t count in your mind.”

“I emphasized she’s a given fact in your life and I am too generous to take that from you. But you’ll take anything you can get.”

“I haven’t taken a thing from her, or from you, or from anyone in your family, or anywhere else. I take from no one but, as a businessman, receive only what they pay.” I was getting defensive.

“You took Alby from me and promised to give something of him back. Have I seen you once these past two months?”

“Yes.”

“Once. Two months ago.”

“You come in raging like you’re protecting the family, but it’s all about you.”

“You were with Emilia. What did you take from her?”

“Nothing I wouldn’t repay.”

“So you were with her.”

“She’s the most level-headed friend I have. I should turn her out?”

“Moorea is cracking! Why aren’t you with her?”

“She ran out.”

“Track her down! What have you taken from her?”

“Let her calm. She’ll accept her sister isn’t all evil.”

“Let her calm! She entrusted everything to you. You went for Emilia and took everything.”

“She’ll ask.”

“She can’t ask back her emotions.”

“What’s in all this for you? Fess up. You want something back.”

“Alby.”

“You have him. Just wait a hundred years. That too long? Oh, you want your money back now? Take it, here, I’ll write you a check.”

I turned for my closet office, but, my back turned, he grabbed my shoulder and whipped me around.

“I want you in court, fraud. What did you take from them? Just tell me, and I’ll go get them to ask it back.”

“Go ask them. They have everything they want.”

He slugged me in the chest. Just like his sib. But this time I bent over and looked for breath. Desi is a heavy man.

“I’m destroying your business. I’m making a website. Once we’re in court, I’m uploading the transcripts. Maybe you can get a job hauling coke bottles on a bicycle in Shanghai.”

He left. It took me so long to get my wind, planets were shimmering in my eyes. Buckled over, I crouched on an edge of the sofa. Time passed so, a midnight stroller peeked in the open door, with such eye on detail he must have been looking for what was available. Then he caught me in the shadow and rustled on.

Emilia called the next day, and we met behind an abandoned car-mechanic’s garage, a property she aimed to sell. Large puddles from recent rains, some in giant truck tires, were adorned with rainbows. She expressed flabbergast over her siblings’ overreactions to our Lake Dallas outing. (I did, at one point, suspect Emilia just may have created that outing knowing full-well, from the intelligence acquired from Moorea at the funeral, that Mantranto could easily show up.) But she shook her head so much, knowing so well her sister’s tendril nerves, tears streamed. She tamed them with her fingers. “I don’t know if she can learn,” Emilia said. “She’s so sentimental, and that’s what I’ve always tried to look after in her. But she does exaggerate.”

Emilia has since kept our meetings to about once a week. Sometimes she expresses confidence we will find another, truer, philanthropic cause worthy of us. The funds rest there,

waiting. But it seems we now meet in places—a putt-putt golf range, a chilly supermarket in a poor section—where intimate relations are unfeasible. Our ethics are improving us.

Irina sits at home, as far as I can determine, not answering messages. That set of accounts continues to mount, at least whenever the economy holds steady, and it's rather exciting to watch the waves roll to a peak, though I feel, well, they only loft me more visibly for critical eyes on shore.

Desi's lawyer has talked with mine; a hearing is in the air. Reynaldos, no doubt, have some political leverage. The counsel's accusations sound like those of a prosecutor, not those of a civil case: fraudulence, and public investing without a license, both unfounded, but he will surely turn it all into a matter of tort. Desi's negligible 400 grand sits in my name. Since that night he threatened the suit, I dared not move the funds, as though the bloody trail would stain me more. I dare not move a penny from the Emilia-sourced funds, nor Irina's. I must sit as still as a mouse locked in a panther's smelling. Emilia swears she will not testify, and if forced to the stand, will vouch she handed those funds over to me to invest in charities. Good Emilia. But who knows what blurts that a dishonest lawyer may extract from a good soul? And then there's Irina, the crown of all funders. No one, no one could know what her lips await.

I've found Desi's website. All you have to do is search "Beholt the Man," and it crops up, three or four down the list: *Deadbolt the Dead Man: The Site of the Trial of Beholt the Man*. Perfectly legal. Not a tad of libel. He promises to post any hearing date that gets set. He marks the daily changes in the price of ATE stock since months before Alby's death. The price

of course bottomed a few days after my pal's demise. But then, shaky as an underweight Pomeranian, it's been rising, from a half-penny a share, now to about fifty cents, far below its peak of 17.53. The graph starts with cataract falls and ends with mere foam, appearing like the stagnancy that stretches ahead for me.

You realize that this website could destroy me and all for which I worked and strained my whole life. I have not done one thing illegal with the Reynaldos, have perpetrated no fraud. I still have that same license I had attained at I.T.'s insistence. And I have never spent on myself one cent of what was put in my name. You must confess that you would do much as I had done if you had similarly entered the household and been graciously befriended. When such a heart as Irina's begs for release from responsibility for holdings that confound her, that seem besmirched to her, you would feel obliged to help by the most effectual means. Some of you may chastise me for having more than one lover at a time—and worse, in the same family, as if that exacerbated the wrong. I admit I am over-amorous. Who doesn't love to love and need it in turn? When a lover drops herself at your feet, yet refuses the traditional bonds of unity, most folks would get worked up and confused. But those of you who disapprove of double-timing no matter what, do concede the powerful temptation from one so beneficent as Emilia. Not all of us are Ulysses.

Any Reynaldo may take in hand what you are holding and see I hide nothing.

You do see, as I said from the start, it is unfortunate to be fortunate. Only the few who have had that misfortune may fully understand and forgive. But try.

Yet, there is an upside, I have to add; I can't leave you despondent. It just came. An email in my box, from Rose, after weeks. I can feel it before I open. She says just: "Wow! How you operate!" I'm trembling. I can see that smile of hers, the uplift of the left of the mouth, so faint you believe you're reading her mind.

Now there's a beam of forgiveness.

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Lantz Miller grew up and lived in several areas of the United States, including Durango and Boston, and attended the University of Texas at Austin, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia, and City University of New York Graduate Center. He received his doctorate in 2014 and currently teaches philosophy at a business university. His essays and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Human Rights Review*, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *Journal of Science and Engineering Ethics*, *Philosophical Inquiry*, *Journal of Responsible Innovation*, *Hypatia*, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, and *Indigenous Policy Journal*, among other publications. His first novel, *City Limit*, appeared in 2013, and the nonfiction work *Should We Perpetuate the Human Tragedy? Values in Crisis* in 2014. He is at work on a third novel and a book on the genesis of inequality.