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The Aviary and Other Stories

Andrew Mullins

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
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## ABSTRACT

### **The Aviary and Other Stories**

Andrew Mullins

*The Aviary and Other Stories* is a collection of six short stories, each examining characters in an ongoing struggle to figure out their relation to the world, their place in it, and how it works, so that they may control it, adapt to it, defend themselves against it, or hide themselves from it. The apparent futility of this struggle is cast in a comic mode in most of the stories. The predominant concerns in the stories are the conflict between the worlds of art, nature, class and self, the tenuous relationships of these worlds in the lives of the characters, and the contrary influences these worlds exert on the individual.

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## Mosquito

She came the first time at night just after the moths and shadflies. Squat and fattish, she carried a small suitcase in one hand and a battered vinyl purse hung over the other shoulder, and while she strode up the pathway to the house she brushed mosquitoes from her face with nervous swipes of her hand. He watched at a window as she moved from the shadows of the path to that part lit by the yellow porchlight hanging from the front of the house. Lost, he thought. Lost and looking for directions.

He was ready for bed, had drained his tumbler of rum. The hopeless June bugs, plump, sticky-winged, had at last stopped tossing themselves at the screen door, lay stunned and all but dead, he supposed, in the gravel, belly-up on the warm wood of the porch. All that remained was for him to show her the one courtesy: "Howard Johnson's a half-mile down the road, Pineview Cottages a half-mile back." When he opened the door, it was to the heat and the humid night, to the barely audible sounds of the circus set up at the community centre on the other side of the woods. He envisioned for a brief instant the garishly painted creatures of the merry-go-round there, their odd, petrified stares, and the music they seemed to pump into life with their motion swelled for a second at his ear.

Later, his neighbour would say, "In my country, this would not happen. The

police would come. They would say, 'You are crazy.' She would say, 'No, no, no. He loves me. He is hiding.' Then they take her away and put her in the jail for one night. 'See how you like this,' they would say. If she comes back, they put her in the jail for one week. 'See how you like this,' they say again. Pretty soon she don't come back."

"I'm looking for Charles Spriggs," she'd said.

"Here?"

"Yes," she said pleasantly. "Here."

She was clearly a cast-off. He saw in her eyes how she hoped to recognize some shadow within the house, some familiar shape to which she could cry. "Charles!"

"Is Charles in? I'm Geraldine."

"There's no one here by that name."

"Is he out?"

"There is no Charles living here. I'm sorry, you must have the wrong address. There's a Howard Johnson's a half-mile down the road."

"Oh," she said. "The wrong address. Thank you."

"Goodbye," he said, closing the door.

"Goodbye," she said, and then was off, back down the path beyond the reach of the porch light, perhaps rehearsing the litany he did not yet recognize.

"Even better," his neighbour would say, "you go to a friend of your brother in the town. He is big, ugly, with the scars of knife fights on his arms. You give him some

money. Not much, because your brother's friend is cheap and it is a woman, yes, which is not a big problem for him. The next time she comes, you send for your brother's friend. He takes her. Maybe she disappears. Nobody knows."

"Is Charles here?" Geraldine had asked the next time, two days later. There was a flutter in her voice, an artificial forgiveness--as if *he* had done something wrong--that riled him.

"I've told you, there's no one here by that name. Goodbye," he said.

"I want to see him," she said, drawing her feet together. "Tell Charles I want to see him."

"There is no Charles here. Go away."

And she began. The pronunciations he was to hear so much.

"He loves me. He wants to marry me. We're going to make a life together."

"Very nice, but he doesn't live here," he said and stepped back in the doorway.

"Go."

He shut the door in her face. Maybe she would go. Find Charles and make a life together, in some distant nameless place. Even better: there was no Charles to find, the whole thing was a hoax. Geraldine was not whom she appeared to be, was in fact a hired actress, the star of some inspired drollery dreamed up by one of his forgotten friends in an effort to get him out of the house more often. There was the circus, an old-time travelling show with tents, a small midway, a freak show with a two-headed cow and an obscenely well-hung pony, animal acts with tigers, and bears that rode bicycles. Maybe she was



with them.

But she sat on the porch steps, hefty and intransigent, herself a large beast stubbornly laying claim to his house. He would come to regard the front path as his spinal column and the gravel under her approaching feet as the sound of his vertebrae shattering under her steps, her heels digging close to the canal where his spinal cord slept, her weight wreaking havoc on his nervous system. At times, he would imagine she did not even come from the street but was some horror from within the woods that bordered his backyard. He would lie in bed, the wheeze of the carnival straining from the other side of the woods into his bedroom window. He would close his eyes and by force of will conjure drowsiness in himself, dream of his neighbour's country, the anonymous breaking of bones.

When she came again at the end of the week, it was in air gorged on moisture. He was waiting for rain, for thunder crashes and electric, lowering skies, the welcome chill and gust of storm winds. And he watched at the same window in disbelief as she retraced her steps up the pathway, the same burgundy suitcase held in her hand, her gait more confident now, as if she knew where she was going and what she would find: not some strange man who smelled of rum and told her lies, but Charles, kind and handsome and gallant, waiting for her arrival, and to say, "Now that you're here, we will be happy."

"You can't fool me," she said to him. "I saw it in your eyes the very first night. Charles is here."

She turned and sat to wait on the porch for Charles while, stunned, the man called

the police and wished he were born with the talent for laying curses, or for huge fate-driven objects to fall from the sky.

Geraldine sat on his steps smoking cigarettes and he brought an ashtray out to the porch for her and sat in a rocker off to the side. Just sitting there smoking her cigarettes, she looked harmless. She had the air of someone awaiting test results, or news from some minor surgery being performed on a loved one. Her black hair was long and coarse, and it stuck to her forehead in the heat. Her eyes were somewhat dark and hollowed, perhaps from worry, and her nose, like her mouth, had hooked slightly with age. The short-sleeved blouse she wore betrayed her fat shoulders and upper arms, and her breasts hung down to the small dome of her stomach, so that sitting as she did on the steps they spilled slightly over the curvature of belly. She wore short-heeled sandals and her toenails had been carefully painted, as had the short nails of her fingers, and despite the sweat from the heat she was not unclean looking. Middle age had been hard on her, collapsing her body where it had been full and round, swelling it cruelly where it had been thin. Perhaps she felt humiliated by time and gravity, sought to rejuvenate herself through love and marriage with Charles.

He rocked in his chair and sipped on cool lemonade he'd strengthened with gin. He had not offered her any, fearing the hospitality might ruin any chances he had of trespassing charges, or worse, be misunderstood as a gesture of friendship, an offer to help smoke out her elusive Charles. She began to ask questions about his life and speak of what she did, ordinarily, in hers.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Divorced?" she asked.

"That's really none of your business, is it?" he answered.

"I was married," she said. "For ten years. I have a child, a boy. He lives with his father, who is a snake, a real rotten bastard. We divorced three years ago. Someday, he will burn in hell." She nodded as if to weigh the likelihood of this. "So what's your name?" she asked.

"Jim," he answered, though regretted it right away. She might cling to it, too, he thought.

"Jim," she echoed. "What do you do, Jim?"

"Unemployed," he lied. He was a teacher, a writer. But he did not want her dreaming of an empty house through which she could prowl in search of her lover.

"I'm a data processor. I work in the city on the night shift. It's interesting being on a different schedule from most people."

This was the nature of insanities, he thought. They spring up like jacks-in-the-box, lurk beneath the surfaces in the dullest of people.

"I've taken two weeks off to look for Charles," she said. "But it's difficult doing it part-time." She sat as if waiting for his admiration.

"The police are coming," he confessed to her. He was giving her a chance. Go, he thought, go now freely and find the man, find the man and marry him. She contemplated the orchard across the road.

"Yes," she said, "I know."

His neighbour would later offer his services.

"We take her to my place. Tell her we have found the man she loves. I have a cellar. We say, 'There! There you go, crazy woman!' Push her in the cellar and I take my key and lock her in. 'Maybe you find him down there, eh? you crazy bitch.' For an hour, maybe, she screams. I am used to that, I have children. They shut up eventually and fall to sleep."

At the end of the first week, the police explained that Charles was not in the house, suggested that if he wanted to marry her he might have looked for her, might have told her so, might have bought a ring. Maybe he can't find me, she said. It's been three years since you've seen the guy, lady, the police said.

She sat once again on the stairs, folded her hands in her lap, and bowed her head patiently, not in acceptance of the facts and not in any kind of prayer, but perhaps to dispel their suggestions.

"It is a test," she said. "All this." A toss of her head swept away the conspiracy, like shaking off a wreath of flies. "Charles is testing me."

He had visited his neighbour, where over a few beers they'd chatted, his neighbour telling him about the circus he'd gone to see in the town. The circus made him uncomfortable and he had avoided it, hearing of it through his neighbour who had already

been twice, fascinated as he was by the wild animals.

"They have tigers who sit on stools like people. They were very funny. A man with only a whip made them jump through hoops! And the bears. I have heard of bears in this country but never seen them. They rode bicycles! They wore hats and carried handbags! A circus is a wonderful thing. I saw a monkey ride a horse. A woman of four-hundred pounds!"

He imagined these tigers and bears the neighbour was so fond of. This was why he hated the circus, he thought. It was a distorted, spurious thing, like the midway's house of mirrors, a poor reflection of reality. Even its music was dreadful, a whirling untuned noise, composed by madmen and fantasists and churned through bullhorn speakers. Outside of that netherworld of his writing, he was a realist. Bears did not wear hats, tigers did not jump through hoops, men were not made of rubber. These were things he could count on, that made life reasonable.

He wondered aloud about Geraldine. His neighbour discussed the benefits of living in his country in such a situation, and condemned laws that upheld the rights of crazy people and ignored the innocent victims.

"It is not right," said his neighbour.

"I've lost days of work because of her."

"You see! She is costing you money!"

"She hasn't seen the man in three years. *Charles Spriggs*. She told me there'd been rumours he was gay. She denied them."

"Aah," his neighbour said of this gay Charles with a comical wag of the head.

"But I have no sympathy anymore: none. Lock her up. Blast this *Charles* from her memory. That's the way I feel now."

"She is crazy."

"Loony."

"Loco."

"I don't know what to do."

"I don't know. This is a different country. Everything takes too long and requires a lawyer. In my country, she would not have it so good."

"I sleep with a hammer."

"A hammer is good. Not like a gun. That is big trouble. Or brooms. People think they're soft and funny. A woman's weapon. But a broom works."

"I shouldn't have to do that. There should be some law."

He went back to his home, which lay in a state of siege, suffocated by the mere thought of her. Windows were locked against her entry despite the heat and heavy deadbolts screwed into place on the front and back doors. Love did not do this to people, he thought. Geraldine had not gone mad because of love. Madness to him was something present from the start, a dormant beast-within-the-body, a malignant alternate soul, which any ill-timed tragedy or failure might roughly kick awake. Once he'd thought he might go mad himself, all for a failed love of his own. But it never happened. He had done the only sensible thing to do with such a failure, which was, in effect, to kill it and bury it. Geraldine obviously had not. Perhaps that was the only difference between them. But it was a huge difference, one in which the world was transposed.

He ran a bath and mixed a rum and pineapple juice, then chose a book to take with him into the tub. He would forget her, by God, for half an hour. The heat of the bath water felt good, and the sweat that first gathered on his forehead then slid down his face seemed part of a sweating out of ills and troubles. He put aside the book when its pages were stained with perspiration, took a sip of rum, and gliding down below the water-line submitted to the water and heat. His face broke the surface on occasion and hovered there for air, then he'd hold his breath and sink down once again into submarine comfort, the warm silence of the tub.

Some time later, he heard yelling. He dried himself quickly and put on his clothes, then went to see what was going on. Drawing back a curtain, he saw his neighbour marching around his front lawn, throwing his arms up repeatedly in exasperation, and Geraldine keeping a safe distance, circling watchfully as in a boxing match. His neighbour wagged his finger as he yelled at her then raised his arms again and spoke to the sky, as if to beseech of it or something beyond it, "What creation is this?" Geraldine would occasionally snap back at him like an animal baring its teeth or lashing its tail in a show of strength.

"You are crazy!" she'd shout. "Leave me alone!"

"*Me* crazy?" his neighbour would shriek. "*You* are crazy!"

"Go away!" she'd say. "I'm here to see Charles."

"You see? You call me crazy. I am not in love with a homosexual I have not seen in three years! You bother my friend! Go! Go! you stupid woman!"

His neighbour dashed over to the porch and picked up her suitcase. He ran with it

held over his head in two hands to the road then stopped and hurled it across the street into a ditch.

"You don't scare me!" she shouted.

"Scare you? I will scare you! Come here, you crazy bitch!"

He'd seen enough, went out to the porch and called the agitated neighbour over to him.

"If you touch her," he said, "you could be in big trouble."

"She is crazy!"

"I know. But don't touch her. They can arrest you."

"She says this is a test! What test? A crazy test! You win the test!" he shouted at Geraldine. "You pass! You are crazy!"

"We'll call the police."

"The police? Too slow. Get rid of her now."

"We'll call the police."

"Throw her in the lake."

"No. The police. There has to be some law."

Perhaps worst of all she has invaded his dreams. Occasionally, she is sitting in a tall wicker chair set in the corner of his room while he is in bed, and she recites poetry and love letters, some of which he recognizes from the past as his own. She rocks back and forth as her incantatory rambling fills the room, and terrified by his powerlessness, he feigns sleep.



Or she has enlisted help, large men with crowbars and some with guns, for whom his silly hammer is no match as they tear at the house to find where he has buried Charles. For that is what she decides. "He has killed him!" she yells to the men. "He is buried in the house! I must find him! We will make a life together!" And the men rip at the walls, floors, and ceilings of his home as he stands watching helplessly.

Or he is dreaming of an apartment in a different city, some city to which he has fled, and he is just waking in that apartment to mid-morning light warming his bed when he hears a noise from outside the window. There is nothing to see, he is three floors up. He goes to the window and presses his cheek to the screen, and there she is, shuffling along the ledge towards him, somehow maintaining her balance along the narrow border of concrete that juts from the building. "No!" he screams, but she still comes, and she is moaning "Charles, Charles, marry me, marry me," and he screams again for her to go. She is a tall figure in his window, like a huge cat on a screen door, and is begging him to let her in before she falls. He flings the screen up to drag her in, perhaps then to pummel her, but the metal scraping in its track has frightened her and she loosens her grip for fear of crushed fingers. There is a moment when their eyes meet and he sees her thoughts quite clearly, sees in her face the realization of what she has done, watches her hands grab at nothing but window. The musculature of her face stiffens with terror before she falls back in a perfect arc and drops flat on her back to the ground, her head smashing so horribly on the pavement below that he feels it, all his limbs weakening at the impact. And he thinks: I will be the blame of this. He pushed her, they'll say. And sure enough, there are people gathered in the street talking hurriedly with one another and

pointing not at her, lying broken and burst open on the ground, but at him still in the window, the scene of the crime, and the murderer caught perfectly in the window like a timely photograph. *He did it! He did it!* they cry, and he cries, *No! No! She fell! I only opened the window! She fell!* And he is astonished to see she is pointing with them, has somehow mixed into the crowd, her head certainly a crushed and bloody mess, but she is standing--*standing*--and is pointing at him with the others, *He did it! He did it!*

He had moved out here in part because the city had turned sour for him. The everyday aggression was worrisome, like a darkness that sprung up unannounced in the lives of the city-dwellers and in himself, feral and beyond his control. Out here, he would often relax by roaming the strip of woods that lay behind his house or the orchard that was set across the street. Not far into the woods ran a creek fed from the lake further uphill. He would walk by the creek and send squirrels scurrying up into the safety of trees at his approach, setting birds of all kinds into flight. He never saw anything more than this, no deer or other large animals, though he supposed that where the woods thickened further west, darkening even the noon day, there could be something. Walking along, he might stop to inspect an assembly of termites as they swarmed a tree stump, would swat at deerflies as they dropped out of the air to dive-bomb his head and pick blood-fattened mosquitoes from his arms and neck. Further down the creek he would cool his feet in the water, splash his face, and when done make his way back to his home. He would turn round and round as he walked, gazing upward into the tops of the trees that spiralled overhead and the crisp sky that lay everywhere beyond them, and would say

to himself that it was in this place and in others like it where mysteries were revealed, where chains were untangled, where the world was laid bare.

Later, his neighbour would recommend taking Geraldine to these woods to drown her in the creek.

"We can say to the police, 'She was crazy. We tell her to walk by the creek, relax, think of what she does. Who is this Charles? Why he is nowhere around? She does this and drowns in the river.' The police say, 'Yes, we met her. She was crazy.'"

Drowned like Ophelia, middle-aged now, humbled to the lowly rank of data processor. She has been driven mad by her final gracelessness, by a bad marriage, by her fatness and plainness, by God knows what. She looks to Charles Spriggs for redemption, but he is incommunicado and anyway has no great love of women. Perhaps she realizes this, the last straw, and tosses herself in the creek. Fare you well, my ugly dove, he'd say; you've done us all a favour.

But no one kills themselves for love anymore. That is storybook and adolescent, and the cops wouldn't buy it. The broken-hearted now kill other people, the loved ones.

So he would wait for her to begin shaking the front door, pounding it while she carried on a one-way conversation not with him but with Charles ("I know you are there! Why do you do this to me? Charles, please let me in!"). He saw her prowl round the perimeters of the house as if anticipating a slip in the conspiracy, some sleepy blunder or recklessness in which he lured Charles out of the basement to the kitchen for a cup of tea. He had lost count of her visits: two weeks had felt like a year. If the police even came

now, it was too late, she had gone. Where was she staying? he thought. Who was responsible for this? For keeping a madwoman in the town, where she wandered freely, while he was locked up in his own house? His neighbour suggested the circus. Only fire eaters, rubber men, and fortune tellers, only strangers and gypsies could stoop to such a thing.

"A man who eats fire, I do not trust," said his neighbour.

He contemplated a vacation. Let her ring the bell to her heart's content, ransack his home if she must, wear herself weary on a house that offered no comfort, no gleeful reunion with her homosexual Hamlet. Let her rifle through page after page of his writings without one instance of her lover's name jumping out at her in some flash of hope. Let her read his life story, the secrets of his heart, and realize she was not in the world she thought, but another completely alien one, that of a person she did not know nor had any cause to know. Let her see she had wrongfully and repeatedly invaded a stranger's privacy, that she was wasting her time, utterly, and was no closer to finding Charles than she was three years ago. Then let her drown herself in the creek.

The three of them stood in his backyard, at the edge of the night-blackened woods. His neighbour paced the lawn excitedly and occasionally whooped Charles' name into the thickness of trees, while Geraldine waited patiently as Jim explained to her where they had hidden her fiancé. It was a liberating experience, he lied to her, abandoning this charade.

Geraldine looked at Jim and asked, "When can I see him?"

"Right now! Right now!" he said. "We'll have to go through the woods."

As they stepped from his lawn to the rough path that led through the trees, a stray June bug caught in her hair. She twisted and danced in fright, but he plucked it from her head and tossed it to the ground, crushing it underfoot as they went on their way. He had a flashlight and lit the way through the woods ahead of them. "Soon you will be married," said the neighbour, taking special delight in the deceit. "We will hear wedding bells, ding, ding, ding."

The moon and stars were eclipsed by thick cloud and the beam from the flashlight was the only break in the darkness. As they walked on, they could hear the sounds of the circus at the community centre on the other side of the woods. Occasionally one of them would stumble on a tree root, and Geraldine would suck in her breath as if they might wake something horrible. He thought how what he'd said to her, though said in treachery and imposture, was true and accurate: it was a liberating experience. He felt in command, and no matter what followed, he would be responsible for it. There was exhilaration in that. His neighbour began to whistle and stopped once in a while to shout, "Here we come! Here we come!" and they marched slowly in the direction of the creek.

No one saw the bear until it reared up in front of them, darkening an already black night. The flashbeam shot up and caught its immense head turned in ferocious half-profile, and its hind paws as the light dropped to the ground. Geraldine's screams and theirs were nothing compared to the sounds the bear made, a resonant and grotesque tenor, sounds from a world they did not know. All three ran through the woods to the house, looking back for the bear, who did not chase them, but stood there, operatic,

claiming the woods as his own. He could still hear the bear's victorious song when he reached the house, heard it as if he were still watching the huge beast up on its hind legs roaring at the world.

"Fucking bears!" he said to his neighbour when they had locked the doors.

"Fucking bears in the woods!"

"It must be from the circus," said his neighbour.

"From the circus?" he said. "Are you crazy? That was a wild animal!"

"Escaped!" said the neighbour. He looked down at the floor, as if something astonishing lay there. "I saw them ride bicycles. They looked so friendly."

"What the hell is going on? That's what I want to know. A fucking bear in the woods!"

He called the police and told them about the bear. What kind? they asked. What kind! he yelled into the phone. Huge! A huge fucking bear! They told him to stay in the house, to not do anything. What the hell was he going to do with a bear? he snapped and hung up.

"What about Charles?" Geraldine asked.

He had forgotten she was there. "What about Charles," he said dumbly. "What about Charles!"

"You can't leave him out there," she said.

"*Fuck* Charles!" he thundered. "You actually think we have Charles, you lunatic? You want him, go get him!"

He poured himself a bourbon and went to the window. Surely the whole world

had gone insane. He was not surprised to see the bear come onto his front lawn and sit watching the house as if it were only a matter of time before they'd have to come out. It was the largest animal he'd ever seen that wasn't in a cage. It rolled its head occasionally and he could hear short guttural sounds even through the shut window. He imagined the bear evaluating the fear in his eyes as it crouched there on the front path and he watched from the window. What could he and his neighbour have been thinking? He thought about the police. Perhaps he shouldn't have gotten angry with them, perhaps he shouldn't have hung up. Of course they would come. Surely they'd come for the bear.

### The World of Science

Sheila is off somewhere, counting her money, making her plans. The government has seen fit to mete out \$180,000 for her study of humping sea elephants, rice rats, swamp rabbits. Something, anyway, reeking of science. Like any husband, I'm happy for her. Since the advent of the new laws, we cheer on the women in our lives as never before, hoping to God they'll do a better job than we did. But like any citizen, my mind reels at the amount of cash, enough to fill a mattress to bursting, no doubt about it. Sheila's explanations: the fieldwork is costly, the price of machines extortionate, the graduate students blue in the face with ambition, hunger, something. Protective clothing alone can run into the thousands, she tells me. No doubt it can, I say. It's the swamp rabbits' turn, she says. It certainly is, I say. She is wily, my wife, could no doubt reduce the panel of judges to tears as she panhandled on behalf of her beloved rabbits, elephants, rats. Here, take it, take the money, they'd say, for those poor, aggrieved little fellows. You're a bloody saint, is what you are.

So now she's off somewhere, divvying up the funds, dreaming her Jane-Goodall-of-the-Swamp dreams, enlisting the hungry drudges, who adhere like newborn kangaroos to the pouch of academia. Somewhere in the swamps, word goes out, the rabbits are revelling, or perhaps they are hiding, for the truth is I haven't a clue what Sheila does to



them, whether it's kind or sinister, though my suspicions, I'm afraid to say, sometimes run to the latter.

And me? I'm left with a perfectly good prime rib, roasted to holy perfection, with which I can do *nothing*. There is something wrong with it all, I say to the dog, who is friendly with me tonight on account of the roast. It was not in our dreams, when we plotted out our lives so long ago, to lose our wife to the world of science this way. Neither, though, were the new laws. The after-effects of which have given rise to sharply honed sensitivities of all sorts, like a fresh skin, feelings we never knew we had, epistemological upheaval, just as, no doubt, the lawmakers in their broad wisdom had intended all along. Still, there's the matter of the missing wife.

But who are we to question, who appointed us scrutinizer general? No one, that's who. So hold your mouth shut and hope for copper pots. Expensive copper pots, courtesy of the sea elephants and the whoring government.

I carve a good slab of the roast for myself, then toss the rest onto the floor for the dog, who can't believe his luck. He will eat until he barfs hooves. Copper pots, I say. Henckel knives. Something, anyway, nice, for me.

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At the mall, I find myself overburdened by canvas sacks bulging with leeks, spaghetti squash, grain-fed free-range capons (on special, ranging no more), and so I sit on a bench. Normally, I shop at Legault *et fils*, skilled purveyors of fine foods, but Legault *et fils* are closed on account of death, which has come for Mme. Legault in the form of an airborne mould launched from the heating ducts of her home. When I told

Sheila of the death of Mme. Legault over the phone, she suggested that somewhere out there someone with a grant is at work on saving future victims. How can one argue with that? But it's too late for Mme. Legault, who in life cooked a *chaudfroid* of thrushes unmatched in this city. She'll be sorely missed, I told old Legault. She will, she will, he said, the widower's tears mounting in his old French eyes. "The world was once a paradise for me," he said, "and now it is a prison." Legault *file*s, rubbing his father's back, guiding him away behind the cheese counter. I did not let on that I'd had a moment of terror, one of those panic-laden flashes where you witness the potential for your own grief in the bereavement of another. The loss of Sheila, for instance, bitten by a monkey, that would be more than I could bear.

So while they bury Mme. Legault, I am at the mall, sitting on the bench, catching my breath. I am accosted by a small child.

Hi, it says cheerily. A girl of about four, blonde tousled hair, pink, mouth like a jujube, eyes like burst litchis.

Hi, I say.

Are you one of the home-daddies? it says.

That I am, I say.

What's that? it says, pointing.

Leeks, I say. For the *soupe à la bonne femme*.

Where are your babies? it says.

Out, in the city, getting their heads pierced by a brute named Carmine, I say.

Giant rings through their heads. They are grown-up teenagers, caught in the flourish of

adolescent life, not like you, small and fresh. The rings are like haloes. Shining around the heads of the children in the night.

No they're not, it says.

No, I say, you're right. They're not. Not at all.

This is a smart one. I lie to children all the time. I like to think it amuses their small uncharted minds.

I think I've been lost, the child says. My daddy was buying me grapes. He probably lost me. Again.

I feed it a kumquat, watch the look of surprise on its face. It climbs onto my neck. Children will do this, if you let them. It is the conquering instinct they all harbour, deep in their tiny little souls. Giddyup, it says. I take it to the pens, where the lost fathers are reunited with their lost children.

My name is Jennie, it says.

My name, I say, is Pete.

The father appears, red-faced, festooned with grocery bags.

Grapes! says the child.

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I get on the bus. The Plymouth is in the shop, being attended to by various grease monkeys, who will perform arcane acts of healing on the vehicle and charge me handsomely for it, drinking all the while from their tubs of Wild Turkey, guzzling from their king cans of Bud. There are things the new laws can't change, no matter how stringently applied, there are constants in the universe, immutable, immaculate.

Meanwhile, I ride the bus, the driver of which is a woman, singing Arabic melodies as she drives. The passengers are fascinated by the strange melodies unravelling from the woman's throat, like chains of flowers, like strands of golden thread, like rivulets of mercury rolling through the desert, like a choir of children leaping from the moon. No one will get off the bus, the bus driver stopping at the stops, letting more and more people on, while the old ladies at the front watch their streets go by, Sycamore, Kensington, Winchester Drive.

It's all very different, of course. Who's ever heard of a bus driver who sings (outside of the odd, church-happy Baptist behind the wheel of a school bus)? They used to be big angry men, the bus drivers, primed for a strike at any moment. They'd boot you in the ass as soon as look at you. But that was before the new laws. Now they sing, the ranks of the public transit users swell, some say the ozone is repairing itself. The legislative tribunals say See? See? and I go home, prepare quails with cherries, sit and wait for Sheila.

\*\*\*

Sometimes she shows me photographs of carcasses, ice bears, sand cats, ocelots. Something, anyway, in advanced dissection, pinned with railroad spikes to a flatbed truck, icepicks to a butcher block, thumbtacks to a dishtowel, whatever. I don't know where they come from, what they're for, but it's always a reminder there's a good chance I've married a sadist, a bloody bluebeard, who probably scalps kittens and blinds chimpanzees. I imagine for her a childhood of exploding frogs and drowned beetles. When asked what she does, I don't say she wreaks holy havoc on unfortunate members of

the animal world, I don't even know if it's true, can't bear to ask, but sometimes it seems that way. *What did your wife do today?* Eviscerated a gnu, cut a manatee in half.

Not that I don't love her. And not that we don't have our good times. A few weeks ago (before the grant) she pushed me up against the Jenn-Air, bit me in the chest, her hands riffling. Within minutes I was protoplasm. She's a take-charge woman. That would scare some men. That would send some men packing. But not me, no ma'am. I'm fully secure, tight as all hell with my own masculine nature. I've been on the wild-man weekends, swum in the stench of other men, been anointed a grizzly by a stick-wielding poet. I came home, tied Sheila to the bed, prepared a *pêches dame blanche* and carpeted her with the stuff. She was almost epileptic, my finger on the button, my mouth navigating the tableau of peaches, chantilly cream. She digs it. Science, she says when in these moods, is not the be-all and end-all.

Amen to that.

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One of the children stands in the living room, abominating me for crimes of the past, committed, he says, by men of my ilk, something he's been learning about at the school. A litany of heinousness flows forth from the boy, rank oppression, bloody despotism, wanton barbarity, the usual line. I admit to it all, as I've learned to do over the past few years. The yoke I've slung round his neck, the shame he must live under, is too much for his fourteen-year old soul. His team of counsellors at the school have told him to work on his self-esteem, his self-esteem is in tatters, so he's gone and got his left foot pierced. He's pissing me off, as children will do. In Chapter 2 of *Reintegration to the*

*Family*, a book they bestowed on us with the enactment of the new laws, Dr. Hortense Laliberté writes candidly, "If they're not driving you to drink at this age, it may be time to worry." I'm on my fifth Hennesey's at this point, not worried in the least. Royally steamed at the school, at the boy, but not at all worried, for there is still the other one

The other one will now eat only bean curd and Hu Yao-bang's Szechuan sauce #2. She is thirteen years old and has a chain that runs from a ring in her right ear to a meat hook in her nose. She is forever plugged into her Walkman, listening to her favourite band, Lymph Node, Ringworm, Pancreatic Spume, something, anyway, that sounds like Satan passing a kidney stone, like camels being boiled alive, like the death of an entire country, the collapse of the sun. Still it's catchier than what the boy's been playing lately, a Wiccan Goddess band who shriek Gaelic sheep-killing songs.

"These are tough days," writes Dr. Hortense Laliberté in Chapter Four of *Reintegration to the Family*. Tough! I feel like writing her in a letter. Tough! she says. There are only so many damn shapes, Dr. Laliberté, into which bean curd can be cut.

And where is the wife? Who will help me talk to our daughter, losing up to ten pounds a week, death calculated at that rate for the early spring? Who will comfort the son, plagued with nightmares of his father, a cruel blackguard in the days before the new laws? Who will eat the monkfish tails, the morels *à la poulette*, the braised lettuces, the potato quenelles? Tell me that, Dr. Hortense Laliberté. There are days, I say, when books might as well be footstools.

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A member of the Gas Company is at the door, here to read the gasometer. She

carries an industrial steel clipboard, some kind of calculator reminiscent of a Game Boy, looks like she could marshal an entire town for evacuation should a gas main threaten to blow. I escort her to the basement, where she interprets the numbers, feeding them into her Game Boy with considerable aplomb.

"You use a lot of gas," she says.

It's the stove, I tell her. Just this morning I've prepared an *omelette à la ménagère*, *Pommes Impératrice*, *tartelettes forestière*. This afternoon are the stocks: veal, chinese chicken, *glace de viande*. It's a world without end. Back upstairs, I let her try a tartelette.

"Sweet Baby Jesus!" she says, would swoon, perhaps, were it not for the uniform, composure woven directly into its steely sheen.

"It's the truffles," I tell her.

She kisses me on the mouth, cries out, "You're a doll!" I should open a restaurant, she tells me, her arm waving across the food wondering what to choose next. Yes, I say, that would be fun, a restaurant, but there is the family, the wife, the son and the daughter, absent as they might be at the moment, and for the next several hours, I presume, far away from the bedroom, where the bed is, etc. etc.

"And there's the new laws," I say.

"Yes, there's those," she says between bites of *pommes*, "damned things. This is delicious."

"It's the kirsch," I tell her.

"There's a movement afoot," she says.

"A movement?" I say. "Afoot?"

"To repeal the laws."

"Really."

"Mm-hm."

"What if people don't want it?" I ask.

"Don't want it?"

"What if we're happy, all things considered, with the way things are?"

"The way things are?"

"Yes, the standing dish. And leery of any projected *bouleversements*."

"You can't be happy."

"As a pig in shit, some might say," I reply.

"That's not true," she says.

"No," I say, "you're right. It's not. Not at all."

For Sheila is still off somewhere, preparing the apparatuses, combing the swamps, harpooning the sea hogs, fish bats, wanderoos--something, anyway, that's kept her from carrying out the conjugal vows for nigh on three weeks, while this, this comely gasmaid talks of movements, practically throws herself at me and my *poularde chanteclair*. What's a boy to do, that could be my motto, the motto of thousands like me, the displaced *jefes grandes* of the recent past, sent home under the new laws.

\*\*\*

The new laws. My friend Harley could go on forever discussing them. Harley stays at home like me, discharged by an employer who was, after all, only abiding by the word of the people, but there is great bitterness in Harley's heart.



"Fuckers," I remember him saying.

The employer, he told me, had rolled into his office on his way to the pastry table. "Cash in your chips, Harley my boy!" the employer had said. "There's one too many of you on the books."

"One too many what?" Harley had asked. Harley's big on confrontation, will never learn, never learn.

"Pudgy cirrhotic number twiddlers. Pasty dyspeptic wampum shufflers. Words to that effect. A superfluity has been declared, fellows like you are the sorry cause of an inequity, an inequity in need of repair. Time to act is now, say the legislators. So take it like a man, m'boy. Dime's waiting on the nickel."

"Fuckers," Harley said. He took it personally, couldn't swallow at all the sacrifice he was being asked to make, and now sits at home drinking contraband liquor smuggled by roving gangs of displaced militia men, six bucks a quart. He will go on about the new laws the way some will go on about the assassination of presidents, if you let him. I do not.

He sits in my living room now, tuned to the *Alfie Durant Show*, a glass of Seagram's in his fist, a plate of fresh *frivolités* in his lap. Today on *Alfie*, he yells to me in the kitchen, the panel of experts will discuss the Politics of Meat, Penile Implants, and Transgendered Hockey Coaches: Are They Tough Enough for the Big Leagues?

"Well, well, well," says Harley. "Don't get me wrong, if they can do the job, and all that, but what I object to..." and launches into another glum appraisal of the new laws, which I tune out with the blender set on crush for my Margarita.

Some time later, I enter with my drink. I must admit it's a little sad seeing Harley like this, a buzz on at three in the afternoon, bits of *frivolités* clinging to his copper beard, tabloid T.V. holding his bearish gaze. Harley's a big man, hairy-knuckled, malodourous, strong as a buffalo. The kind of man meant to trudge off to work every morning, utterly satisfied with the hatred of his job. The new laws are not perfect, no one has said they are.

"Meat," I say to Harley, diverting him from his favourite subject. "Politic or impolitic?"

Harley edges forward on the sofa. "Well that depends on who you listen to," he says and swigs at his glass. "If you're with that pantywaist with the gummy hair and the grappling iron through his lower lip, you're against. If you're with that fellow with the cheese-grater haircut and the Teddy Roosevelt glasses--bets on whether his girlfriend is a sheep--you're for. Then you've got the namby-pamby dietician, Christ, she's a piece of work, yammering on about your fatty acids, your protein deficiencies, your low-cal high-fibre what-nots, your respect for other people's gastronomic beliefs, blah, blah, blah. Don't know what Alfie was thinking, I'd club her with a..."

"And the implants?" I ask.

"They had one guy on, telling how his went berserk."

"It's a peculiar world, Harley."

"You can bet your Peking duck on that, little buddy."

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Yesterday, two things happened. First, in the city, a deer killed itself by jumping

off the fourth floor of the Safeway Parking Tower. The deer had wandered through the entrance to the tower and strolled up the ramps to Level 400, and it was killed instantly, say the newspapers, when it stepped off the open ledge and fell fifty feet to the concrete sidewalk. I imagine the deer: its splayed legs stiffen with surprise in the air. Or perhaps it goes ass over tea kettle, its legs pointing heavenward, its black deer-lips parting with a final exhausted sigh.

This is the angle the papers take:

### **DEER MAKES SUICIDAL LEAP FROM SAFEWAY TOWER**

I always imagined deer as having a pretty good time of it, except during hunting season, of course. Even then, the hunters are often so drunk they hunt cows instead, who are less fleet of foot, easier to track. So I wouldn't have been surprised if, say, Harley was the one hurling himself from the Safeway Tower. But a deer. That's a whole other story, one in which we allow for deer a quantity of consciousness and choice. in which we grant them a capacity for despair, if we believe the newspapers. No, a car scared it, and off it sailed. That must be what happened.

Which brings me to the second thing. Sheila came back, came and went. There was laundry in the chute, an army surplus bag crumpled next to the front closet, extra dishes in the sink, the asparagus frittata in the fridge was half eaten. I was out at the fishmonger's, the special was Arctic char. How often does that happen? There was a quad-ruled note drooping from the fridge door:

Honey, sorry, had to run. Something happening back at the lab. Someone set the subjects loose. Will call.

Love, Sheila.

I took it as significant that she felt she had to sign her name. Things, I decided, were moving increasingly beyond hope. That was the correlative significance of the deer. The children--teenagers, for God's sake--had started whining for their mother. The empty Hennesey's bottles were piling up. The dog had taken to heaping dead cats in the yard.

So something's got to give. There are deer, Sheila, leaping from tall buildings. There are things beyond science.

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I told Harley about the gasmaid, and he was overjoyed to hear of the movement to repeal the laws, running out to join up right away. I fear Harley is not exactly what they're looking for, but that's the nature of movements, isn't it, collecting on their merry progress a variety of fringes, some more frayed, vociferous, lunatic than others. The bean curd people, for instance, are a decent bunch on the whole, caring as they do for animals, hawking their cheese-like wares, but there are those like my deranged daughter, obsessed beyond belief, there are those who go too far, abducting pigs, blowing up ranchers, setting crates of frozen Christmas turkeys adrift at sea in a desperate vegetarian protest. The movement for repeal may find such a person in Harley, all too willing to blow things up, hunt things down, run things through. He's born for the *Alfie Durant Show*, where our more troubled citizens flaunt their tragedies, manias, and fleshy abnormalities within the purview of their neighbours. He will be there one day soon, happy to explain why so-and-so needed to be tied to the back of a Dodge Caravan and shown what-for, and if that means he's bound for the glory of the big house, then so be it, good for the cause, etc., etc.

Meanwhile, I'm out walking the dog. He busies himself sniffing at the well-spoored sidewalks, urinating freely about the neighbourhood, knocking down small children, while I rehearse speeches aimed at Sheila, who is still off somewhere, rescuing the hop toads, roosterfish, wood ducks.

Sheila, I'll say, there is the world of science, that world in which you perform your variety of miracles, poking and cutting and spooning and measuring, all the things you're so good at and for which the government feeds you stupendous amounts of cash. Diseases will be cured, behavioural tics catalogued, whole stretches of the planet saved, because of your particular genius, perplexing as it might be to me. Who knows what you'll do next, what you do now, the world of science is such a mystery to most of us, the laymen, cheering the scientists on in their march to a better world. It all seems so heroic from a distance, a shining example of the shrewd new laws.

Then there is my world. It's a very rich one, full as it is of my own domestic miracles, the handsome house, the *gastronomie*, the survival of the children who, despite their profound troubles and mutilated bodies, are good as far as children go. It is made up of tiny, multifarious moments and random encounters, of shopowners, gasmaids, revolutionaries, lost children, distraught men. And it has not had you in it for too long.

That's what I'll say to her the moment I see her, the moment she calls. The world of science is not the be-all and end-all, I'll remind her. I salute you and your work, whatever it may be, but there is a bottle of burgundy on the table, there is a *selle d'agneau duchesse* in the oven, there is me, sitting, waiting, wondering, wanting.

### Piano Lessons

Bennett whirled into the Tango du Chat, signalled for a pint of home lager, and took his customary chair by the large, feline-decorated window. He lit a cigarette and coughed up another unholy booger from his cold-besieged lungs, shivering at the thought of the ferocious microbial shit that was building a frathouse inside of him. He was already half-looped on double doses of flu remedy, and a few quick drinks would probably nudge him towards the realm of the perfectly invalid and insane, a realm he wholly preferred to the everyday, when sick like this. The only cure for these pesky bugs, Bennett believed, was vigorous physical and biochemical self-abuse. The right combination of pharmaceuticals and alcohol would chase the sickness from your body. "Brandy, too," he gurgled when Coco came round with the lager. "I got a fucking cold."

The Tango du Chat was where Bennett went when he could no longer stand his apartment, his Dostoyevskian hovel, and though the clientele at the Tango--in the opinion of some--left much to be desired, Bennett could count on an entertaining core of dipsomaniacs, college-groomed demagogues, and generally menacing louts to divert his attention from his own stalled life. And there were women around, which was a plus, since there were rarely any that got within spitting distance of Bennett's place. Most of the women at the Tango were actresses-in-waiting from the drama school down the block,

and while Bennett thought acting an unfortunate character trait in itself, he suspected that fucking was part of any good theatrical education, so these girls were a largely welcome nuisance as far as he was concerned. Tonight, though, he expected them to stay even further away than usual, as he hacked luminous goo into his handkerchief and grew imbecilic under the effects of his medication. Such were the abiding disappointments of romance, he told himself.

And occasionally--when he was overcome with melancholy or jouissance and not with booze--Bennett would play the upright grand lodged in the central alcove of the bar. Though a newcomer to the Tango would never guess it, Bennett was in fact a pianist. Usually he was a piano teacher. At least, that was what he did to make money. If someone asked him what he did, he'd say he was a pianist. This separated him from that part of the species made up of menopausal ladies clucking to the pendulum click of antique metronomes and swinging rulers at children's fingers, he figured. He was an artist, after all. Prostituting oneself as a teacher was invariably part of the artist's Faustian lot, he would tell you. Gotta eat, don't I? he would say. That he was not performing professionally of late did not enter into his version of the argument.

So on occasion, he would entertain the crowd at the Tango with a Schubert impromptu, a Fauré nocturne, an *étude transcendente*. The effect was usually stunning. Meeting Bennett for the first time, you might imagine him with the blue-grey carcass of a barbecued chicken shoved back on his table. Playing Chopin did not leap to mind. He was a big man, overweight, inconstant in his grooming, often ruddy-looking from drink. But when Bobby and Maurice, the two men who ran the bar, called for music, or when

Bennett simply ambled up to the keyboard, the transformation--for anyone who had not witnessed it before--was remarkable. This burly fellow who would Friar Tuck his way through the plates of pork ribs they served up at the Tango could also play the Schumann *Papillons* to break your heart. Sometimes, the unlikeliness of his talent worked in his favour, got him a job, or helped him coax the odd, surprised woman into bed. Much of the time it remained hidden. Self-promotion was not one of his strengths.

But there would be none of that music tonight it seemed, as Bennett's chest purred from the cold and his head receded from consciousness. The patrons were left with the faint drub of moronic disco that Bobby and Maurice would quietly insinuate into the Tango every now and then (until one of the happy gang of scholars would threaten to go berserk if they didn't turn off the "goddamned gayboy music." So far, that hadn't happened.)

Bennett, then, sat at his table quaffing in turn the beer and the brandy, puffing his Rothman's, drifting towards death. After half an hour he was wondering if Bobby wouldn't have to call an ambulance. He called Coco over and ordered some food to buoy him against anything he might have overdone with the drugs. The Tango drifted in and out of apprehension. Which is when the ingenue came up to him.

"Are you Martin Bennett?"

"Wha'?" Bennett responded.

"Martin Bennett," she said, "the pianist."

Bennett did what he could to join the conversation. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked.



"Felicity Random."

His head bobbed, as if he hadn't heard the name right. "You're puttin' me on."

"No, I'm not. My parents actually named me that. They're a little strange, I suppose, as parents go."

"They're cruel fuckers is what they are," Bennett said, and Felicity smiled.

She was pretty, Bennett noted, sweet as a mango.

"They want to meet you."

"Meet me?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Piano lessons."

"Piano lessons."

"You still do that, don't you?"

"Sometimes."

"They want to hire you."

"Right."

"Are you interested?"

"Why don't they just call me?"

"They were planning to this week. But I happened to see you sitting here tonight."

"Just by dumb luck," Bennett said.

"Yes," said Felicity, "if you like."

Coco arrived with the food, a plate of grilled sausages, sauerkraut, and thickly sliced fried potatoes. She gave Felicity a motherly smile.

"What I'd like," Bennett said, "is to eat my dinner."

"But you're interested," Felicity reiterated.

"Whatever."

"Can you meet them tomorrow night?"

"I have a cold."

"Yes," said the girl. "Try some ginger tea."

Bennett looked at her like she'd suggested he drink the blood of a mad cow.

"Can you meet them?" she asked.

"Yeah, whatever, maybe tomorrow night."

Felicity took out a small lavender ruled notepad and wrote down the address. "It's in Hillcrest," she said and stood up to leave.

Bennett thumbed the address and phone number she'd torn off and slid in front of him, smearing sausage across the pastel page.

"You're rich," he said, as if it were a nationality, foreign and suspect.

"Yes," she said, turned, and left him pondering her ineluctably gorgeous rear end as she left the Tango, the possibility of fresh money. He had another student, it seemed, another pecuniary distraction from his own neglected music-making.

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What did this music mean to Bennett? In the beginning, of course, it had meant nothing, or was rather a tribulation inflicted on him, he believed, by his witch of a

mother. Each Friday after elementary school he had loped off to Enida Churlofsky's cabbage-scented home, to be brutalized with scales and metronomic torments. forced to play the most inane of children's piano ditties, and the saccharine love tunes Mrs. Churlofsky was so fond of, the perdition of Burt Bacharach, the eternal agonies of radio drivel. Eventually, Mrs. Churlofsky recognized an inkling of talent in the boy, and began to search for more serious music for him to play. Young Bennett also discovered boogie woogie, and started to bring his own sheet music to his lessons. If he was to suffer under the tutelage of this sour-breathed old bat, he would at least play something he liked. Soon this was the way all the lessons went, Bennett choosing the music, which step-by-step grew into a strictly classical repertoire, Churlofsky reduced to pointing out dynamic markings and tempi, struggling to decode the strettis and appoggiaturas with which she became increasingly confronted. When Bennett reached the age of thirteen, she admitted defeat, saying to his stunned mother, "We will find him the best, the very best in the city."

So Bennett was shunted off to Aldo Turinelli, who savaged the boy's Churlofsky-hatched technique and began a new series of musical afflictions to correct the damage of four years. "Polish housewives have no business teaching piano," Turinelli howled. "You are lucky you were not crippled," he said and pounded out arpeggios for Bennett to duplicate. "You have no *tone*, boy," he would scream, "*Marcato, marcato!*" Turinelli was Bennett's instructor throughout his teenage years into young adulthood, was a true pianist who had studied in Paris under a famous woman. He taught Bennett many things, and though in the early years Bennett secretly hated the man and his raging method, he

also had a respect for him he could never have had with old Mrs. Churlofsky. Turinelli, for one, actually performed. The first recital Bennett ever attended was Turinelli's, a mighty programme of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* and the Liszt B-flat sonata, and it had been a life-altering event. When Turinelli, in his encore, had discharged the final notes of *Islamey*--Balakirev's finger-defying fantasy, a piece that had been rumoured to cause nervous breakdowns in mature pianists who tried to conquer it--Bennett had leapt from his seat, tears of revelation swelling in his eyes as he applauded his teacher. This is what he would do, this is what his life would be. There wasn't a doubt in his mind.

Turinelli taught him to respect the music in a way Mrs. Churlofsky was incapable of doing. He showed him how Chopin was not just ethereal, effeminate salon music, revealed to him the steel-hand-in-a-velvet-glove approach to be taken with Mozart, and introduced him to the Russians who would become some of Bennett's most beloved composers, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Prokofiev, and the cerebral, tormented Shostakovich. "You want to do this," Turinelli had told him more than he had asked. "I'll sell my soul," Bennett said melodramatically, "if that is what it takes." "Perhaps that is what it takes," Turinelli replied, "but first, practice, practice, practice."

So Bennett practiced. He practiced so much that his mother worried about his social skills, the typical misadventures of adolescence seemed missing, it was as if Bennett had bypassed teendom and gone straight to neurotic adulthood. There was no father for him, that man having died when Bennett was but a baby. Bennett's mother was too busy working to rear a complete and complex human being. Yet perhaps she recognized this in herself, for she spoke to Turinelli about her son. "He is fine, he is

fine," Turinelli had told her. Just to be sure, Turinelli began taking Bennett out with him in the evenings. They would fraternize with other musicians and with their hangers-on in cafés and bars. Bennett was eighteen. Turinelli introduced him to people much older than this, and often when the evening was growing late, they would return to Turinelli's apartment in the company of women, who would, it seemed, do any favour for Turinelli, even if it included a tall and pudgy eighteen-year-old boy.

The next year Bennett attended the university where Turinelli taught. There he began recitals and playing chamber music in small ensembles. Turinelli found him a small student apartment when the news came that Bennett's mother was moving to the West Coast with a man she had been seeing for the past two years. When Bennett began graduate school and winning student competitions, it seemed he was indeed poised for a career. Then one day Turinelli told Bennett he should have a new teacher. It was a matter of development, a fresh perspective, it was common practice, he said. Turinelli himself would be moving back to Italy. There was no choice.

Things were not as good with the new teacher, a Frenchman with whom Bennett had terrible trouble communicating. To support himself, Bennett took on pupils of his own, and, gradually, he started to fade from the music scene, where each year there was fresh meat, younger and younger talent, it seemed. He broke with the new teacher after a year and did not take another one. Eventually he received word that Turinelli had been sick, had gone home to Italy to die, had done just that. He was amazed his old teacher had not confided in him. Music for Bennett, which under Turinelli had been a dream, an ambition, became a refuge, and then a mere means of subsistence. Occasionally now, in

performance at the Tango or in practice at home, it took on its old magic for him, that transcendental orpheum virtue, the purest of the arts. But outside of the bar, he became afraid of performance, the scrutiny of the musical establishment. He was in a musical limbo, eking out a living only, when Felicity Random had approached him at the bar.

They are rich, he thought, and need me.

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The house was there somewhere. But there was a fog on the evening, and Bennett's brain was addled again by his medicine. The estate itself had more damn trees than he had seen on a private property in his life. He walked through the stone arch at the base of the driveway, its iron gates open as if for company--though in this neighbourhood the company was doubtless expected to arrive in a car. Bennett's car had been repossessed. Having advanced beyond one layer of camouflage, he was able to view windows lit from within the enormous residence, a series of dim lamps along the front footpath. Still, he felt uneasy as he made his approach, there was something unnerving to the whole foggy panorama, like the *mise en scène* for an upscale murder. *Well, it fucking wouldn't be me*, he thought fancifully as he walked up a wide arc of interconnecting rose-hued brick. *Because at the first sign of trouble, I'd be gone, gone, gone.*

He pressed the doorbell. He had never visited a house like this, the house of the truly wealthy, and for a moment he wondered if a butler would answer. Of course, he told himself, there was little chance of that these days. Everyone now scrupulously limited themselves to Filipino or Jamaican cleaning ladies, in accordance with the current political *geist*. An advantage was these women were cheaper and did more work. The

best of them were in the country illegally, since there was then little protecting them from their employers. *If they have a cleaning lady answer I'll leave*, Bennett told himself, though he knew deep down there was little chance of that. He needed the money, after all.

These people would no doubt have him travel here to work, which was just fine with him. Based on the impressive neighbourhood, Bennett had decided to double his usual rate. *Relocation costs and all, you see*, he'd explain. *Normally, I'd teach from my studio*. How could they know this meant the half of Bennett's bachelor apartment without the bed?

The front door of the mansion opened and a well-dressed giant of some sixty years greeted Bennett. An enormous hand reached out of the doorway, its fingers, Bennett noticed with professional habit, the thickness of medium-sized carrots. Bennett shook.

"Come in, Martin!" the giant said. "We've been waiting for you."

The old man himself had answered the door, it seemed. Bennett could not claim outrage--at the exploitation of a Filipino or the excess of a butler--and had to enter the house, submit to the prodding and poking that was the royal prerogative of millionaires hiring piano teachers for their offspring.

"It's Bennett, actually," said Bennett. "Martin Bennett. But just Bennett."

"Bennett, then," the root-fingered titan agreed with a slanting of his head to the east. "Step in."

Bennett crossed into the entrance way. He made motions towards his boots,

miming whether he should remove them. He was used to walking through the city, its streets littered with human syrups, half-eaten, half-rotting food, an obstacle course of dog turds and remnant bits of greasy latex. Random did not notice or ignored the gesture and gently pushed him from the foyer into the house.

He stood in a large hallway that was shaped in a rounded arch. Each side of the hall gave off to two wide doorways, and Bennett noticed sculpted half-torsoes of grinning cherubs and nymphs that swelled from the plaster above two of the doorways, the iconic animals that policed the hall from the others, all painted over in white. The floor was laid with a stone tile of pastel pink and grey. Up the right side of the hall ran a wide staircase, a heavy mahogany railing on the left, the stairs carpeted in a wine and green runner. Bennett could see at least four large portraits hanging on the walls of the landing, previous, gilt-framed Randoms perhaps. Even the slight furnishings of the hall itself, the intricately carved mirrors of bevelled glass, the waiting chairs and coat-rack, the pewter plant pots, were expensive and antique to Bennett's eye. No doubt there were such things all over the house.

Oh, there was a sweet deal in this, Bennett told himself, a very sweet deal. There was a ticket in it, perhaps some rich friends, some society gigs, some well-moneyed women to hump and sponge from, if he could play everything, so to speak, with the right kind of charm. Perhaps there would even be some fleshy relics from Turinelli's old crowd, the promise of renewed contacts. The potential that clung to the job, this simple task of piano lessons, made him nervous.

From a back room emerged the girl he had met the night before at the Tango, and



behind her a lady, not as old as Random, whom Bennett presumed to be the wife and mother.

"Hello there, Mr. Bennett," the lady said, offering her hand. "Could I take your coat?"

Absurdly, Bennett gave her his windbreaker. The need for a new wardrobe gripped him. He watched Mrs. Random actually trouble herself to hang the thing on a wooden hanger. *Perhaps*, Bennett thought for a moment, *I'm being made fun of*.

"This is my wife," the giant eventually said, "Ariel. Felicity you have already met. You may call me Arthur."

"Right," said Bennett. It was all highly uncomfortable for him, to say the least. He suppressed a colossal sneeze, the sinus pressure in his head popping with sudden clarity, though everything clouded over again just as quickly, rendering him dizzy, momentarily snow-visioned.

"Let's go into the living room here," Arthur Random said. "We'll get you a cognac for that cold."

"Thanks," Bennett said and followed Random wobbly into a large Edwardian living room. The sounds of a piano came from a very modern stereo system, though the recording itself, which Bennett recognized immediately, was old.

"Lipatti," he said, focusing.

"Shame he died so young," Random intoned. "There aren't enough recordings. But the current technology, I must say, is wonderful. I love it. Every day another resurrection, the old transfigured by the new. Lipatti is reborn with this stuff. And

Schnabel, we have Schnabel once again." Random's eyes glimmered over the machinery.

"There's some slight sorcery in it all," he said with a laugh.

"Right," Bennett said. "I guess so."

"Please sit, Mr. Bennett," Ariel Random said. "I'll get you your drink."

Bennett sat. He was surprised at how comfortable the rich brocade of the settee felt under his hand as he did so, expecting it to be stiff and coarse, in the way of grandmotherly antiques. Envy gushed through him.

"Nice place you got here," he said ridiculously.

Random ignored this. He took a cigar from a humidor on the table next to him and lit it, not offering one to Bennett, perhaps on account of his cold. Felicity had arranged herself on an enormous high-backed chair, was silent and anticipatory.

"I might as well get to the point, Bennett," Random said. "Felicity needs a piano teacher. The last one has moved on, and it's no great loss as I see it. He was a twit. As were the ones before. How we ever came to hire any of them, I don't know."

Mrs. Random returned with Bennett's cognac on a tray that included drinks for her husband and daughter. She placed it on the table beside him.

Random discussed his daughter's previous teachers, speaking humorously of maniacal Hungarians, suspected Nazis, and aging pederasts. He suggested that his daughter was no slouch, hobby pianist or not. They had chosen Bennett for his relative youth and down-to-earth approach, his adaptability in teaching and in life. How and what they knew of his life was a mystery to Bennett, but they couldn't know much, he figured, or he wouldn't be sitting here.

"We feel you won't be consumed with an end 'product'," Mrs. Random said.

"That perfect little prodigy, in the habit of some of the previous teachers. That is why we were interested in you. The other teachers had trouble putting all that aside, and suffered--episodes."

"Fits. Submitting to the caricatures of their profession."

"Musicians--no offense--can be strange."

"No news to me," Bennett said, summoning laughter from the old man.

"The high priests of art are worse, are frankly a pain," Random went on. "They expect everything to be thrown aside, devote your life to the instrument, martyr yourself to the cause, and all that. You have experienced that yourself, in your Mephistophelean Turinelli, I suppose. We're counting on you not behaving like a high priest. We'd hoped you'd be more of a friendly consultant, if you will."

"And the money will hold your interest," Mrs. Random added. "To be perfectly blunt."

At this, Random named a rate. Three times what Bennett had considered asking for. They were lunatics, of course. This crap about consultancies, youth, adaptability. Their money had accustomed them to having people to push around. Maestros Otto and Leopold had probably given Felicity a hard time, letting their exasperation be known in no uncertain terms, and the spoiled daughter had had them fired. Now the Randoms wanted a new yard-boy and had got hold of his name. And were offering him a hundred and fifty an hour. Bennett would try teaching a gorilla to play Mozart with its balls for that sum. Random outlined some terms. Lessons would be once a week. He was not to

be indulgent with Felicity, would work her the way he would any student. But there would be no echo of the raving maestros who'd come before him, no tantrums, breakdowns, flashbacks to some East European calamity. Felicity did not move a muscle on her chair as her father spoke of her.

Bennett smiled into the absurdity of the opulent room and raised his snifter. He couldn't believe his luck.

"So have we cast a bargain?" Random asked.

"To piano lessons," Bennett toasted.

The Randoms smiled back. "Piano lessons."

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"They're crazy," Bennett was saying over a beer to Percy Slouch, a near-imbecile who drunkenly imposed himself on Bennett and others at the Tango from time to time. Bennett was speaking more for himself than for his table guest's benefit. "They live in a fucking castle, no idea what to do with their time and money, they got this magazine girl for a daughter, want her to be some salon piano pet or something. I mean, it's a dreamland. He's a monster, the size of Frankenstein, dreaming of the good old days, doesn't have a care in the world."

Percy fingered a large wart on the side of his nose, saying bluntly, "Think you'll fuck the daughter?"

Bennett's head teeter-tottered on his neck, weighing the possibilities. "Wouldn't be the first," he said.

"They must like you," Percy said eagerly, "paying you all that money."

"They're just nuts," Bennett said. "That's the only explanation I have for you. All I did was walk in there spewing into a hanky like a consumptive wreck. Some audition."

"He-he," Percy snorted cluelessly, "some audition."

"I asked how they got my name," Bennett went on. "'I checked around,' the old guy said, that was it. *Someone* likes me, I guess. Maybe he conjured it out of thin air."

Maurice came sauntering over with Bennett's pig's knuckle special. "Going to play for us tonight, Bennett?" he asked.

"Just might do that, Maurice, by way of celebration," Bennett replied.

"Oh, something to celebrate," Maurice said, chuckling deeply. "So rare, so rare. Like your God-given talent. Just like you."

"Kiss my ass, Maurice," Bennett said, and Maurice chortled again.

Bennett poked a pig's foot with his fork. "Why do you serve up these body parts, Maurice?" Bennett asked. "I thought you fags liked real food."

"But Bennett, you eat here all the time," Maurice sallied. "We make it special for you."

"Right," Bennett said as Maurice walked away, "I feel pretty special here."

Maurice turned back for a moment. "You're such a brute, Bennett," he said good-naturedly. "You're like some Caliban blessed with the gift of poetry, and not a clue what to do with it."

Bennett made a guttural sound in response. Maurice left him. Another regular, a man people at the bar knew as Mad Harold, then spoke up from the table behind.

"So, Bennett. You got a good gig."

"That's right, Harold," Bennett said. "Sweet as all hell."

"Any chance of getting me in? Been thinking of teaching myself."

"Doubt it, Harold," Bennett said, and bit into a forkful of hoof. "They like their teachers to come from Planet Earth."

Harold was a fattish man of fifty or so who had convinced himself he was an unemployed Broadway singer and belted out show tunes in the subway for spare change. He would dress himself in an old but clean suit, stuff an ascot in his collar and a flower in his buttonhole and, looking a little like a drunk and pansified Oliver Hardy, trudge down into the resonant chambers of the transit system with his sheet music and stand, where he'd sing himself purple for the terrified crowds. Bennett knew Harold thought of the two of them as confrères.

"Who is it?" Harold asked.

"No one you would know," Bennett said. "Some rich people who live in Hillcrest. Randoms."

"Arthur Random?"

"That's right," Bennett said, surprised.

"See, Bennett," Harold said, "you think I'm a crazy old idiot, but I know stuff. Arthur Random. He's very rich. You used to see his name in the papers all the time. Then he dropped out of society. Sold off a lot of his businesses, married some young woman and had a daughter. It's been so long since I heard of him, I thought he was dead, you know. Or moved to Bermuda or something. They used to call him Prospero, I think, on account of his business magic, his way with money. The Duke of Milan. Interests

there, I guess."

"Well, he's still around." Bennett said, "and he's paying me good money to teach his lovely daughter her way around the piano."

"Nothing weird going on there, eh, Bennett?" Harold asked.

"Of course it's weird. He's paying me piles of money. Who knows, I might get more students out at Hillcrest, ditch my low-rent ones. My life is 'looking up. Haven't seen anything weirder since the last time I saw you sing."

Percy, who'd been concentrating hard on the conversation, said, "I never heard you sing, Harold."

Harold's chest swelled with the words of Oscar Hammerstein.

"No, Harold!" Bennett snapped. "Save it for the subway, for Christ's sake." He slammed down his fork. "Both of you. Shut up. Let me eat."

Percy took that as an insult and stumbled off to look for more hospitable company. Harold tried surreptitiously humming to himself, until sour looks from Bennett suggested he'd be better off quiet.

Perhaps his life was indeed looking up, Bennett thought as he chewed his food enthusiastically. Most of his life to this point was made up of the ghosts of things. A long disappeared ex-girlfriend, his mother on the other side of the country, Turinelli dead, terminated teaching contracts, a repossessed car, drained bank accounts, the abandonment of performance. Much of the thinking Bennett did about his life was more an avoidance of thinking about his life; it often became nervously incantatory, one almost meaningless word echoing over and over again in his mind: *forward, forward*. Forward to the next

rent cheque, forward to the next job, to the next piece of music, the next woman (always distantly forward of late)--to whatever tiny commotion his future might be stirring up for him. Occasionally at the piano this mutated somewhat pompously under the influence of music writers into *onward, onward*. Onward to a better life. No doubt about it, the Random job could be the start of that. Hang out with the rich, he was telling himself now. There was a wonderful biology to money, it reproduced itself like a happy virus, and it had a habit of spilling over onto bystanders (or those, anyway, close enough to dip their toe in the petri dish). The Randoms could be the way out of the hole, for all he knew. Perhaps there would indeed be more rich students. There could be money in art, Bennett was deciding, if you approached it the right way. The memory of Turinelli's righteous passion was long gone, Bennett's claim that he would trade his soul for his art an unremembered irony.

After dinner and a series of brandies, Bennett did indeed make his way to the piano. Maurice made his usual pontifical announcement--"We at the Tango du Chat are inordinately proud to present..."--as Bennett adjusted the bench under his bulk. Those who knew Bennett hooted encouragement and made sarcastic requests for Jerry Lee Lewis, Andrew Lloyd Webber. When Maurice gave the attention over to Bennett, the hushed opening strains of Schubert's final B-flat sonata, that ruminative opus written in the last year of the composer's life, floated throughout the bar. It was asking a fair amount for people to sit and listen to this in such a setting. But Bennett played with such grace and command, transporting the entire bar to a dream-like landscape of Methuselean forests and icy clear German streams, to corners of imagined bliss in a degraded city, and



desperate solitude in a crowd of mere, boozy acquaintances. Even the loudest of the drunks dared not utter a word under the weight of attentive silence that seized the room, perhaps even became reflective. Bennett ordinarily was the unlikeliest and most bitter of pined pipers, but now he was sharing something deeply personal, something beyond anything any of them would normally see of him. The first movement of the Schubert eased its way from key to key, atmosphere to atmosphere, over almost twenty minutes, until the coda evaporated, Bennett raised his head to signal the end, and the crowd, many of whom had been snubbed by Bennett in this very bar again and again, burst into adoring applause.

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Two days later, on a Thursday, Bennett was providing Felicity Random with her first piano lesson from the new teacher. He asked her to play something for him, whatever she had been working on, and she chose a Bach partita. She played very well, if somewhat under the influence of the old romantic Horowitzian school, all legato and concupiscent pedal, not particularly fashionable in the present day puritanism, though not offensive to Bennett. Her teachers had been old men, he knew without being told. Bach had not been played like that for years. He suggested they begin work on something very different, a Liszt *valse-caprice*. If she was to be a romantic, why not play the real romantic piano? Liszt was technically difficult--although Felicity had inherited the requisite large hands from her father--and cosmically silly at times, but he was fun to play. Just so there would be no accusations of frivolity, Bennett also suggested Scriabin. She could choose the piece. His student looked at him, her face writ with misgivings.

"Why not?" Bennett said, anticipating a question. "You can play a four movement partita. Why not four minutes of Scriabin?"

And so it went, after scales and arpeggios, runs in thirds and chromatic flurries, a regiment of drills to work on her speed and power. Bennett was as good a teacher as he was a pianist. Felicity seemed very comfortable with him by the end. He was not the brusque man one saw at the Tango. Once they had packed up the scores from the lesson, she asked him if he would play something for her.

He chose a bit of a show piece, a Scriabin *étude*. The piece showed a debt to Chopin, but suggested the more sinister, maniacal writing that was to come. The room burst with it the moment Bennett pounded out the opening phrases, the chords climbing urgently, the harmonic centre sent spinning away, then just as quickly settling back to a more delicate lyrical core before the music gushed in frenzy again. The moody shifting from delirium to tranquility in the piece, the abundance of notes and flip-flopping dynamics, forced the player to invoke lavish technique and control, and emotional intensity all at once across a brief two-minute span. Much of Scriabin, Bennett knew, was like reckless sex, in which it was possible someone might be hurt. Fucking in a lightning storm was how it had been described to him by Turinelli, though that would never have jibed with Scriabin's ecstatic religious fervour. He played on, his fingers sprinting along the keyboard. Very soon, the conclusion was beaten out in a grand diabolic flourish and the piece was over.

As Bennett got up from the piano he noticed that Arthur Random was standing in the doorway.

"Like Scriabin," Random said appreciatively, "you have a bit of the devil in you."

"It was wonderful," said Felicity.

"Yeah, thanks," Bennett said, almost gruff again now that the lesson and the performance were over.

"Maybe you'd like to stay for dinner, Bennett," Random suggested.

This offer changed his demeanour just as quickly. Bennett would indeed like to stay. There would be expensive wine he figured, something marvellous to eat. He agreed, then excused himself and took out his hanky to exude more of the stubborn illness.

"Can't shake it," Bennett said with a wan, apologetic smile.

"The sick starving artist," Random said. "A sad stereotype, Bennett."

"Yeah," Bennett said. It was the first time he found himself disliking the foolish old millionaire.

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Though he suffered twinges of guilt while he ate what others might have considered a pet, Bennett found the rabbit was delicious, even through the camouflage of his cold. They ate in a large dining room from an expansive oak table, ample wine and food set out across it in an impressive display of the Random's affluence. They live like this, every day, Bennett was thinking as he sipped on the *Pouilly-Fuissé*, washing down the last strip of braised endive, the last piece of bunny. Old Random had done most of the talking throughout the meal, quizzing Bennett on past accomplishments, making suggestions for his current health. Felicity, Bennett noticed, ate like a hound confronted

with a roast beef, a little shocking given her pretty face, her otherwise refined manner. Mrs. Random looked transported, drugged, as she forked the morsels that decorated her plate into her lipsticked mouth. Lunatics, Bennett thought, goddamned lunatics. These people were the reason revolutions were born. Some of his socialist-anarchist acquaintances at the Tango would have been aghast to see him. But what would they expect Bennett to do? Bomb the Random mansion? Castigate those who would pay him a hundred and fifty an hour for piano lessons, deliver lectures to them on social responsibility? Random probably donated ten times Bennett's yearly earnings to charity, loopholes be damned. Conglomerations of African villages had probably been fed on it. Things were not so simple as those drudges thought, life could not be reduced to political philosophy, and their ideals, anyway, were not Bennett's. Though there was the slightly distressing possibility that perhaps he, too, was some odd charity case, the pretence of piano lessons a way to lure him in without wounding what they took for his pride. For what reason, Bennett couldn't imagine. Some fantasy of recovering a dead son, some pygmalion diversion. Fantasize all you like, Bennett would have said, I can take it.

After dinner, they sat in the garden drinking coffee. There was a large patio, scattered with white iron furniture, and statuaries adorning the edges of the huge slabs of stone that made up the elevated terrace. It was a warm spring night. The surrounding tulips were engorged with colour, fleshy in their bloom. If Bennett could have smelled anything, perhaps he would have caught the scent of the flowers, the budding elms and willows, the shrubs along the walls of the house. Random spoke without looking at him, as if he might have been talking to one of the statues that kept an eye over the terrace

gathering.

"You're like me, Bennett," he said, "you don't have many friends."

Bennett felt he should protest this. But it was true, there were not many. Still, there were the people at the Tango. What made Random's declaration even more annoying was the fact that there might be no other Hillcrest contacts to make, no other families from whom to make money.

"I have friends," Bennett said.

"Yes," Random said, "I have friends, too, but real friends, I don't know. People you would trust with your life. For that, there is only my wife and daughter."

Bennett was silent, though refusing to be sullen, deciding to let the old man talk on. Every moment of his feigned attention was probably worth money. There was no harm in it.

"We live in a bitter, fickle world, don't we? An ugly, dangerous world. Years ago I resolved to have as little to do with it as possible. In some respects I disappeared, at least to my former associates and the people with whom I dealt in business. Perhaps it was a shock to some at first, but very soon no one missed me, as if I had died and mingled with the dust, though as you can see I'm still alive. That is the kind of world we live in. We can disappear and no one will notice."

"What about all those women who go missing," Bennett said. "They're on the news all the time. It's like an industry. People notice."

"Yes," Random said, considering this. "And they find them in lakes, buried in a neighbour's back yard, cast in cement on river bottoms. What a brave new world, that has

such people in it, eh? The most noble and the most despicable of us cross paths every day."

Mrs. Random came out with drinks. Bennett reached for a brandy.

"What are you talking about, dear?" asked Mrs. Random.

"Cruelty," her husband replied. "Loneliness. Amoralilty."

"Can we change the subject?" Mrs. Random said.

"Certainly, dear."

Felicity then came over and sat next to Bennett on the iron bench.

"How come you don't perform more, Bennett?" she asked.

"There isn't that much opportunity," Bennett said. "And to be honest, I have alienated some of the establishment."

"Did not press the appropriate flesh, perhaps," Random interjected.

"Something like that, I guess."

They went on chatting, the evening growing darker, Bennett growing drunker.

Mrs. Random left them. Felicity sat close to him, leaning her elbow on the back of the bench behind his neck, her right breast nuzzled against his upper arm. The old man behaved as if nothing was happening in that regard. Soon he, too, got up to leave Bennett and the daughter on the terrace, stopping at the door.

"You can spend the night if you like, Bennett. It is late and we have been drinking. Or we can call you a taxi. You decide."

He disappeared inside the house. Now his daughter truly pressed against Bennett, who could not fathom this growing affection, though she, too, had been drinking. She

began whispering to him, her mouth not far from his ear, breathing liquor and words across the side of his face. Whatever she said made little sense to Bennett, who could barely pay attention anyway, what with the drink and his cold and the drowsiness brought on by the dinner, and since the actual seduction, not its content, was all that mattered to him at the moment. When she finished her talking, Bennett was rendered helpless, as a wet creature she shaped out of her lips and tongue opened and closed at his ear, exhaling deeply then kissing then exhaling again in a calculated and overwhelming counterpoint to her hands which now roamed across his torso.

But when he moved to kiss her, it all stopped just as suddenly. She got up.

"It's late," she said. "Are you going to stay?"

This was ridiculous, Bennett thought. What business did he have here? And did Random know what his teasing daughter was doing?

"Yes," Bennett said, despite everything, "I think I will. I'm tired and it's a long way home."

"I'll make sure a room is set up," Felicity said, and then went back into the house.

For a room in a mansion it was surprisingly small and bare. A twin size bed with a dull brown metal headboard was shoved into one corner with an attending night table, a kind of vanity was set against the other wall. There was a small Turkish rug on the floor, worn out from some other use then tossed into this room, it appeared. The third floor window had no curtains and overlooked the garden in which he was earlier being seduced. He undressed and got into bed.

He was asleep before she got there. He woke up to the coolness her skin radiated

as she slid into bed with him, like some nocturnal apparition. He thought of Percy Slouch's obscene question, his obscene face, asking whether he'd fuck the daughter. He tried driving it from his mind, but could not, until Felicity, having prepared him, rolled on top, and Bennett grabbed her hips, began something that quickly turned to a frantic pounding.

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What woke Bennett next was shouting from the ground floor, the voices of two men. He had a glorious headache and a new fever that seemed to bring with it the odour of the infirm. For a moment, he was surprised to find he also had a bedmate, then remembered. There was a storm outside, the rain and wind that beat against the windowpane muting the voices that came from below. He crawled over the girl, pulled on his clothes, and went to see what was happening. When he reached the second floor landing, he saw old Random gripping a fire poker, and his heart dropped when he realized who the second man was. Mad Harold was done up in his subway recital clothes, a tubby, mentally ill prowler caught and now dwarfed by Random, who was enraged. Harold was clenching his own pudgy fists.

"I came a long way," he said, his voice rising.

"I don't care where you came from," Random shouted, "you will leave this house immediately."

"What the fuck is going on here?" Bennett yelled.

Harold looked up. "Bennett! Tell him! Bennett! Tell him I'm a singer. I can give singing lessons."



Random glared up at Bennett. "You really know this vagabond?"

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Bennett said to Harold.

"Bennett!" Harold pleaded. "I need the money, too. Tell him! You can tell him!"

"Get out of this house!" Random shouted again. "I will hurt you. I will beat you, I warn you."

"Harold!" Bennett snarled. "Get the fuck out of here. You crazy fucking moron."

Bennett's ears were humming. His headache didn't even pound anymore, just gripped him like a obdurate talon. His illness had taken on a new dimension, pneumonia, perhaps, he worried. And on top of it, here was Harold, ruining everything, all of Bennett's good fortune, brought down by a lunatic playing cat burglar.

"It's three in the morning, sir," Random growled. "You are an intruder in my home. I will beat you to death if you don't leave now."

"Bennett," Harold said.

Bennett said nothing. He was furious and sick. A hand on his shoulder told him Felicity was with him now.

"I'm calling the police," Random said and took a step toward the phone.

"No," Harold said and stumbled in the same direction.

And then Percy was there, too, holding some ornamental rubbish he was in the midst of stealing.

"Don't call the police, mister," he said, blocking the phone.

"Jesus Christ. You two stupid fucks," Bennett said, and began his way down the stairs. Why, at any sad point in his sad and miserable life, he had even spoken to these

two cretins was an infuriating mystery to him. At the moment, they represented all that was wrong with the world, his world, the world of troglodytes, buffoons, drunkards, and dolts, the common outside shit-strewn world.

"Thieves," Random hissed. "You bring thieves into my home."

"I didn't bring anyone," Bennett said, stopped on the staircase halfway. "Calm down. Let's call the police."

"No, Bennett, no," Percy said. "You're not calling no police."

"These are *friends* of yours?" Random demanded incredulously, the poker still pendulous and unpredictable in his grip. "*Tell* me."

"No," Bennett said, "no, they are not. They're morons from the bar, where Felicity met me."

"Daddy, please," Felicity said. She had come halfway down the stairs to where Bennett was standing, holding his arm with both hands.

"Put down that poker, mister," Percy said, trying very hard to be menacing without the benefit of a menacing weapon.

"How did they know where to come?" Random asked. "Eh?"

"I don't know," Bennett said. "They must have followed me, or tracked you down some other way. One of them used to read about you in the papers. That one," he said, pointing at Mad Harold.

The overwrought Harold smiled nervously, his face aglow with perspiration. "That's right, Mr. Random, sir," he said, "I know all about you, sir, have a profound and undying respect for the..."

"Shut your trap," Random barked, raising the poker.

Harold was silent, immobile.

"You don't want to be doing that, mister," Percy said, still in place, guarding the telephone. "You don't want Mad Harold bleeding all over your nice floor here."

"Well I do," Bennett said angrily, tramping down the rest of the stairs now and into the fray. "I'd like to see him split both your fucking skulls."

"Bennett didn't have anything to do with this, sir," Harold snivelled, "nothing to do with this."

Bennett stepped right up to Harold.

"Oh, that's so fucking considerate of you, Harold," he said, "explaining to Mr. Random I'm not a fat fucking waste of precious air like you."

He was staring directly into Harold's face as he said it. For good measure, and to accentuate his contempt and rage, Bennett walloped him across the side of the head, the stroke prompting Harold to action. He didn't even cry out, just bolted fearfully for the door, and instinctively, Percy fled with him, tossing behind him the glass bauble he'd idiotically captured in his search of the house, where it broke on the floor into hundreds of tiny shards. Both Bennett and Random hurried to the door to watch the two of them race across the grounds into the darkness.

Random turned to Bennett. The old man looked exhausted, his mouth half-open in a kind of silent beseeching sigh, some ecstatic fatigue. They stood there, silently, for a moment.

"Daddy?" Felicity whimpered from the stairs.

"Mr. Random," Bennett said, "put that poker down and we'll call the police."

Random set his gaze angrily on Bennett.

"Mr. Random," Bennett said. "It's over. You need to calm down," Bennett said.

"Yes, Daddy," Felicity said, "let's calm down. Let's call the police."

"Yes," Random said, "that's a good idea. Calm down."

He ran his left hand heavily through his hair.

"This is what happens when you get drunk and forget to turn the alarm on,"

Random said giddily. "Garbage like this sneaks into your home, to rob you."

"Let's call the police," Bennett said, moving back into the hallway. Random took a few steps toward him. He looked dazed again.

"Perhaps some piano, eh, Bennett?" he said suddenly, nodding to himself. "Some piano would do the trick."

Bennett was confused. "What?" he said.

Random drew nearer to him. "Play something for us, Bennett. Let's go into the studio. You'll play something."

"Are you out of your mind?" Bennett said.

"Play something, Bennett," the old man demanded.

Bennett looked at the daughter. She pointed with a nod of her head towards the study, her face wet with tears, as if to suggest that maybe it was a good idea. Random was guiding him with the poker towards the back of the house, and all three of them moved to the study. Bennett, fearful now for his own safety, went and sat at the piano, opened the lid of the keyboard.

"This is crazy," he said.

"Play," Random snarled, "or I'll break your fucking hands."

Bennett was momentarily at a loss for music as he contemplated the madman, thought of the two fools still escaping into the night. He sat in front of the piano, his hands readying themselves over the keyboard, but he was unable to think of a piece.

"Play," Random said.

It was Mozart that finally came to mind, a famous sonata, as pure a piece of art as Bennett knew. Purity, though, was moot at this point. Here in this prosperous madman's study was the final vitiation of Bennett's art. He tried to ignore the fever that had revived itself with fresh intensity, the odour--*that stench*, he thought--that seemed to be coming from him. He played the main theme, then went dutifully through the variations. At the end of the first movement, Mrs. Random came into the room and as Bennett noticed her he briefly wondered where she had been the whole time. Drugged, no doubt, whacked on some sleeping potion, sleeping through the whole thing. She didn't seem at all fazed by the spectacle of them sitting there in the study. By Bennett--in the throes of his pneumonia, his double pneumonia, his tuberculosis--whatever it might be didn't matter much to him now--Bennett, the house nigger, entertaining them in the wee hours of the night.

"I thought I heard music," she said.

They awaited the second movement, the minuet.

"Play," said her husband.

## The Aviary

Two weeks ago, a bald eagle perched on a bare branch of the elm at the edge of our property, its back to the house, facing Findlay's barley field. Luna, my wife, had seen it first and called me up from the cellar.

"Martin!" she'd shouted, "There's an eagle the size of a Volkswagen out here!"  
Then, "Omigod, the cat! Martin!"

I'd climbed the cellar stairs and stepped outside to look. The sun was shortly to begin its way down, ponderous and swollen out above the horizon. The hour seemed late for eagles (though this was only a guess). But there was the cat, shrinking towards the house, having just seen one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And there was the eagle, surveying the barley field--until the eagle's appearance, sovereign territory of the cat.

I made the rescue without circumstance, the cat happy to see me for once. All the while I had kept an eye on the large bird, who hadn't really been interested much, having earlier feasted on one of Findlay's sheep, most likely. It was a big and terrible creature, like a god swooped down to earth. Luna was upset, spluttering on about shooting it out of the tree, damn predatory fucker (the bird, that is), vainglorious totem of rotten, stinking America, why'd it choose our damn island, our damn farm. I must have looked alarmed

at this talk of hers. If vampires were declared an endangered species, she demanded as she grabbed the cat, would that stop me from pounding a stake through one's heart? My experience of vampires, I said, like my experience of bald eagles, was too slight to choose a course of action on pure indiscriminate impulse. She looked at me like I was mad.

"Who the hell are you?" she said. "Mr. Spock?"

Normally, Luna and I are pretty cozy. But the past couple months have seen a growing number of disputes, a chilling of the marriage bed. On occasion, one of us will sleep sulkily in the guest room or on the living room couch, defying all descents into the blubbering of pet names and general repentance until morning, when we are too tired to fight, when we remember that we love each other. I come down in the mornings to Luna's feet hanging over the arm of the sofa where she lies, her red hair piled over an oblivious dozing face. I might suck her small toes to wake her and we might make sleepy apologetic love. Or not. It might be instead that I wake from a dream in which I've contracted a new mutant tuberculosis to the cat--a Russian Blue named Rudy--hunkered on my chest and staring me to consciousness with eyes the size of cantaloupes. Feed me. Let me out. Clean my box. This kind of thing, the demands this animal has, makes children hard to imagine.

So when the eagle took off, my heart momentarily swelled with inadequacies, the freedom of eagles, God's tremendous beasts of the air, unfettered by terrestrial etc. The wing-span stretched to seven feet if an inch and its scaly talons would surely have sliced through the beloved cat had they got a hold of his royal highness's earthly husk. I wasn't the only one who'd hate to have had a thing like that ripping at my liver. There was a

quiver of cow flesh from Findlay's back pasture when the eagle flapped by. Or so you might imagine.

"Quite a sight," I'd said to Luna. The bird beat its wings against a sky like a bloodied peach.

Luna spooned some cat food from a tin. "What's to see?" she said.

There was a moment I got it in my mind to leave her. Her vision not reconciled with my own, her dreams contrary to mine, her lack of sympathy for eagles at cross purposes with my own. (My hatred of the cat.)

And in ambivalence, I imagined my departure.

What do you take with you when abandoning a wife? Should you have a destination, or should you simply pull out onto the highway in your Datsun half-tonne and stalk the tangle of roads to sanctuary? Should you leave in the middle of the night with Luna holding onto her pillow for dear life as she sleeps, or in the morning, with a picnic lunch in the passenger seat, and Luna hurling insults and wedding gifts at you as your truck wobbles down the driveway? What will you do when your heart breaks--and it will--at the sight of her grief, her rage, her indifference, her laughter, whatever it may be? And when you reach sanctuary, if you reach it, and wonder "From what?", what then? What, you might ask, do you really care about eagles?

Originally, Luna had been a tourist. She had come shopping at the home of a potter friend of mine and arts collaborator, Perry Callaghan, who ran our crafts business



from his farm. Some people considered Perry a little strange, an elfish leftover from a hippie era that had barely happened on the island, though they loved his pots, often sketched with echoes of a storybook world. He'd shown Luna how to throw a pot with his old kick wheel, the wet cylindrical vessel rising up from the fundamental lump of clay, merrily holding forth on the creationist connotations of this. Afterwards, I'd shown her the large dragon Perry and I had made and planted out on his back lawn, my metalwork frame, Perry's glazed ceramic scales, eyes, tongue. There were more abstract pieces of my own hanging on the outside walls of the barn (car-wrecks, Ma Callaghan had called them), big Kandinsky-like loops, slabs, and strips of multi-coloured steel and tin against the weather-worn grey wood. Beautiful, Luna said. And not the usual tourist fare (meaning, I presumed, the many incarnations of the freckle-faced Island heroine as coffee cup, marionette, tea cozy). She bought an Italian wine jug of Perry's and three small bird shapes I'd forged in iron, turned down our offer of a drink and climbed back into her car. Perry and I had returned to the workshop thinking little more of her.

She came again the next year, supposedly to buy one of the abstracts. They had haunted her all the way back home, she'd said. And afterwards she'd asked me out to dinner (These city women! Perry had cried with glee). We'd feasted on mussels and lobster at a wharfside restaurant and made love on the beach, fighting the night's chill of Atlantic winds on our backs. I'd run naked into the frigid ocean and come up plastered with seaweed like a drowned man returned from the dead. "I love this place," she'd said. "I don't think I want to leave." We were married within three months, the service held in Perry's backyard among the sculptures of dragons and giant fairy-tale frogs and car-

wrecks.

Two years ago.

First thing I did after the eagle incident was go to Perry's. This was a precautionary move. If upon leaving my wife I'd found myself rolling into some godforsaken burg halfway across the country, suddenly figuring out it was all a horrible mistake--my own ill-conceived equivalent of a hairweave or nineteen year-old inamorata--I'd have some time explaining myself to Luna. I'd seen Perry's own marriage disintegrate helplessly over mistakes like this. And like Perry said, the problem could be me or my wife, could be the foggy aftermath of too many paint fumes, a mischief-waging tumour, anything at all. A seismic ripple borne along from childhood might eventually fuck anybody up, he reminded me. With a trial run at his place, I could camouflage everything in the last fight Luna and I had played out (flying dishware, scurrying cat). Pretend to have been drunk for three days, say, seeking commiseration from my hippie friend before sobering up enough to skulk home.

I sat at Perry's kitchen table, sipping the hot cider he'd placed in front of me and thought of Luna. When we'd married, she had given up a good job in the big city to teach at a mediocre community college, to live with me on an Island whose community some would say was composed solely of cousins, in-laws, and retirees. We had moved her things 1200 miles. That two years later it might all have been for naught was not really thinkable.

There had been some adjustments, the city yielding to the country in her. It had

taken her a year to reckon with the rural night, the absolute darkness, the possibility of animals. Even now, it seemed nothing short of a chimney fire would send her outside after dusk. She still switched on all the hall nightlights before consigning herself to a bedroom in which she felt weightless when the bedside lamp went out, as if visibility bestowed mass. Shopping was initially akin to prospecting as far as she was concerned, until the proper stores were eventually found. Television was virtually non-existent ("We don't have cable out here," Perry told her, "we only got TFC." "What's that?" Luna asked hopefully. "Two fuckin' channels," he crowed.) And she had great difficulty with the church groups and petty puritanisms of some of the farm women, the "Repent!" and "Prepare to Meet Thy God!" signs along the small highways, the *patriarchy* of it all, she said, though soon found the Island boasted numerous feminist organizations, a lesbian publishing company, and would elect a woman to the top Island post six months after our wedding.

Naturally, there were delights as well, the food as fresh as can be, the magnificent silence, the landscape and beaches and ocean. The church ladies and farmers' wives were more often than not decent, shockingly strong women underneath their straitlaced exteriors. Luna had been quite happy until recently. Now I was screwing it all up.

And naturally, at a distance from her as I now was--if only a distance of ten miles--I began missing her immediately. The smallness of her, the warmth of skin. She bore my rag and bone shop scavengery with great humour. She made love with an almost frightening earnestness. She made more money than me. She was the one who had sacrificed. I had sacrificed nothing.

"What would you do, Perry?"

"I'd count myself lucky."

"I am lucky."

"One lucky sonofabitch."

"Lately I've been feeling less lucky, more like moving to the Yukon. At times, anyway."

"Bears in the Yukon. Bears and madmen."

"I'd buy a gun."

"You, with a gun."

"Maybe I should go on a short trip. Clear my mind."

"Walkabout, like."

"In the Datsun."

"Mm-hm."

"You'd keep an eye on Luna for me? Make sure everything's all right?"

"You think Luna would still be here?"

"Would you go, Perry?"

"Nope. I would not."

"What *would* you do?"

"Throw pots. Reflect at the wheel."

Which is when I started to build the aviary.

Mallet flying, Luna was pounding the chicken breasts flat for the paillards with

orange sauce. She had renewed an interest in cooking since leaving the city, and I was the happy recipient of an endless variety of culinary experiments. I sat at the kitchen table, sipping her homemade blueberry wine, watching the cat prowl the yard for field mice. He killed about one a day. A few weeks back he appeared on the deck with a dead partridge overwhelming his little mouth. Luna had had a fit. I had explained to her what I saw as the stupidity of local partridges, their seeming resentment of flight--toddling along in front of the half-tonne as I drove down the driveway, running from the cat. Stupidity, she said, was no excuse for showing up dead on her deck. Secretly, I cheered for the cat that time.

While Luna mixed the marinade, she broached the subject of what she called my disenchantment. Did I not love her? Was there some slut on the side? Had I succumbed to the selfish immature rutting that was the wont of shitheads like me the world round? Other like-minded rhetoric. Soon she was crying, the tears mingling with the orange juice concentrate and brandy. I reached my hand out from the kitchen table to open air, Luna with her back to me, her shoulders giving tiny uncontrollable heaves, the kitchen alive with the mint leaves she tore into bits and let flutter into the sauce.

"Maybe I've lost my mind," I thought out loud.

"Maybe?" Luna cried as if there were not a doubt.

"Perry suggested I take it out on my work."

"*Fuck Perry!*"

I tried to explain. "I'm building an aviary."

Spinning around, she took the glass casserole and flung it to the floor, brandy and

orange juice everywhere. I stood up, saying, "Luna," and she turned away again.

The truth is that after talking to Perry for a day I had started to believe it wasn't the marriage. I loved Luna. It seemed there was some more fundamental ruckus of the soul going on. As soon as the aviary entered my mind, I knew it had to be built, as if the project were a congenital looniness to be followed through at all costs. Everything that had slowly ushered in this little epiphany, the fighting and longings and conflicts of cosmology Luna and I were having, all these were mere symptoms. The real ailment had now erupted to the surface, inexplicable a thing as it may have been.

"A what?" Luna exclaimed.

"An aviary," I said.

"An aviary."

"Yes."

"Why?" She had turned to me now.

"Don't know, exactly. Feel it in my gut."

"The eagle," she said, a glimmer of understanding.

"The eagle," I said.

"You can't *cage* that thing."

"I'm not going to. I'm building an aviary."

She stared at me, the tears gone. "You need help."

She said that with such love I couldn't be sure how she meant it.

Birdhouse, birdsong, birdbath, birdcage, birdbrain, bird-dog, birds and bees, bird

in hand, bird of paradise, of passage, of ill-omen, birds of a feather, kill two birds,  
Birdman of Alcatraz, Birdland, Hitchcock's birds, William Byrd?

At night, alone in a jumble of quilts and blankets (Luna slumbering in self-imposed exile downstairs) with the high winds singing against the bedroom window, I fret about the aviary. I've fallen victim to compulsion, of that there seems little doubt. Perry calls it a transitional creative episode. Luna still suspects a marital crisis, and if it is not, it is provoking one. She becomes more irritable by the day, goes around the house breaking things, as if in answer to my own creative inclinations. Meanwhile at night I dream of birds being beaten against the window by bursting gales as if by a sadistic child, their clicking beaks pressed to the glass, their pebbly terrified eyes imploring rescue. Of the blankets fluttering around me with the palpitations of wings from birds I find littering the bed like vermin. One morning I wake up downstairs, on the floor propped up at the foot of Luna's bed in the spare room, cowed in a woolen blanket stripped from her array of bedthings. I leave before she sees me there.

She finds me in the living room, entranced by Allegri's *Miserere*. After making coffee, she demands to know the purport of the aviary.

"What does it *mean*?"

"Mean?" I ask.

"What's the *object* of it?"

"Object?"

"What will the thing *say* to people?"

It hadn't really occurred to me that people would require it say something. I hadn't actually imagined it as public. But of course it will be. A big crazy birdhouse in our backyard would bring a phalanx of observers, lined up for confrontation, demanding as Luna does now an explanation. This is what I tell her.

The aviary is to be thirty feet long, fifteen feet wide, twenty feet high. It will not be used to cage eagles, or other birds of prey for that matter. Materials will include fencepoles, copper plumbing pipe and chain link firstly, as well as old bed frames, ductwork, abandoned farm equipment, morsels of automobile, twists of aluminum siding. Also I will work extensively in wood for the first time, as the nature of birds requires this, and have enlisted Perry to help haul the remains of several large trees to the workshop, where I will smooth and carve and embellish them, to stand them in the aviary as perches. Other living trees will be enclosed upon erection (saplings, too, may be necessary in the end, will ensure the aviary has the potential for growth and change). After rustproofing, the whole enclosure will be painted with bright and rich colours: poppy, marigold, parrot, lapis lazuli, mulberry, canary yellow. Birdbaths and reservoirs will be set out, as well as an assortment of water droppers, feeders, seed trays. The whole will be catproofed (an eye here to his majesty), the chain link requiring entrance from on high. I haven't thought much farther than this, I tell her. Meanings have always been slippery things to me, grand applications and such forbidding.

"You won't tell me," she says and launches into marriage as imprisonment metaphors, the outward cage signifying the inward claustrophobia, and so on, to explain away the aviary. The idea had occurred to me, too, but rings hollow.



I don't really have an explanation for her.

"Sometimes," I say, quoting Perry quoting Freud, "a cigar is just a cigar."

Luna stares in disbelief. The treble lines of the Allegri soar almost beyond the music itself to a transcendent high C.

"Listen," I say. "Castrati might have sung those notes three hundred years ago. People do all sorts of things in the name of art. Am I being that terrible?"

She screams and leaves the room.

As it turns out, she leaves the farm, too. She's taken refuge at our neighbour Findlay's place, Ma Findlay relaying the information that Luna doesn't feel like talking to me, looking at me, listening to me. And who can blame her? says the old farm lady, with a goddamned fool husband like me ruining her life. I suppose I've had that coming. Still, after her daily and forthright rulings on the matter, Ma Findlay is partly sympathetic in her old-time way, bringing me biscuits and rhubarb relish, and checking up on me in the secret hope, I suspect, that she'll find my near-dead body in the pick-up parked in a sealed garage, surrounded by the viatica of self-inflicted death (notes, mickeys, pill packets). There's not much excitement on these farms and who can blame the inhabitants for savouring a little gossip and scandal, for dreaming they'll stumble upon some misguided wretch just in the nick of time, call the doctor, be the hero. Each time Ma Findlay pops her silvery head in the door and finds me alive, or steps into the workshop to see I haven't cut myself in half with the table saw, her heart might sink a little. I hate to disappoint her. So I tell her how I miss Luna terribly, how all I want is for her to come back. It's the

truth, and it pleases Ma Findlay to no end. "She'll come back when she's good and ready," she says, "if you're lucky," and shoves another basket of biscuits my way.

Perry says he doesn't want to be an alarmist, but you never know with women, he says. They can get an idea in their heads, and that's it, they're like a pit bull on a baby. No getting them off it till they're done. By the time Luna's done at Findlay's it may be too late, he says. Deep down, I don't believe that, and I don't think Perry does either. I still take time off from the aviary to make a peace offering, a gift, and Perry helps, too. It's Rudy the cat, of course, done up in black metal and grey ceramic, all looping tail and Egyptian eyes, not something I would have chosen to do. Luna's had to leave the real Rudy with me, on account of Findlay's dog, Jake, who can't abide cats (and who can blame you, dear, toothy Jake?). Perry serves as the messenger, getting word of the sculpture to Luna, since I can't say I trust Ma Findlay to do it right. I've planted the sculpture on the lawn, as we've done with others, as Perry has done with his dragons and things. The metal and ceramic Rudy is visible from the road, set at the front of the house like a giant sentinel mouse-killer. Every once in a while, I peek out a front window to see if Luna has wandered over, if she is driving by, to catch a glimpse of the offering. But if she has done so, I've missed it. A week goes by without a glimpse. That Perry could be right, that it could be too late--it crosses my mind each time I take a moment to peek up the road, and see nothing but the potato fields and an empty strip of grey asphalt, the cat, the metal one, looking out there, too, and waiting.

I've made a lot of things over the years. Perry and I earn our money from the

menagerie of doodads, pots and metalworks we make for the tourists, passersby, and exporters (who hawk our wares in craft shops across the country). Perry has his creatures, the odd fairy tale creations that inhabit his yard. He has a path made of glazed stones going nowhere, just a lash of colour embedded in the lawn, avenue to some other world. There's a gingerbread house made for his daughter who visits each summer, the building complete with concealed winking witch, a work that has nothing to do with his divorce, he'll tell you. I've got my barnhangings, my cubistic windmill, my Klee-like metal eruptions smiling at the neighbours who drive by my own farm. The house and outbuildings are overgrown with scrapshapes, ironworks, curios, stuff. We're not always sure why we make these things. There's an aspect of being born to it. Not why we make them; more, could we *not* make them. But the aviary is something altogether new. I know it, Perry knows it, Luna knows it.

Perry comes to watch and help. He sits on a tractor seat I've converted to a chair, his back against the workshop wall, his clay-spattered boots propped on an overturned rain-barrel. He sips on a glass of raspberry cordial cut with mineral water, and between bites of a sandwich asks me questions, such as, "What about lightning?"

"What about lightning?" I repeat.

"All this metal rising up, twenty feet high," says Perry. "like a lightning rod."

"You think so?" I say. For the first time my resolve to build the aviary is given a disturbing nudge as the world of weather impinges on the world of art.

"Be a question for an engineer or architect, I guess," Perry replies. "Don't know

enough myself. Mysterious thing, though. They talk about it having a finger in the creation of life on earth, you know. The formation of the right organic chemicals, amino acids and such. Understand lightning, and you might understand creation."

"Big thoughts."

"Big subject, science."

"You figure I'm into a mad scientist thing?"

"Could be you're just building a birdhouse."

And so on, through the welding and cutting and fitting and forging of the aviary.

"Magritte," says Perry, "would put eggs not birds in the cage."

"I am not Magritte."

"No, you're not. Roast chickens, maybe."

"No."

"Small delinquent children."

All of a sudden Luna is standing in the doorway, three cold lagers in hand, prettier than a roaring fire to a frostbit dog. It's been three weeks since I've I seen her, since the *castrati* incident and her angry flight from home. I nearly cut my thumb off for joy.

"If I had my way," she says, "I'd put you both in the damn cage and swallow the key."

I'm afraid to move Perry speaks.

"Following his bliss, like," he explains of me with a grin.

Luna pops open one of the beers, hands it to Perry.

"My ass," she says, but smiles nonetheless. She comes over to me, runs a hand up

the back of my neck into my hair. "He's nuts. I'll find an ear under my pillow next."

"Or a wing," Perry says.

They both laugh.

But the aviary feels right. I am sticking to my guns.

"The crane is here," Luna says from the top of the cellar stairs. For a brief moment I think she is speaking of an animal, a great grey bird tall as a six-year old child, on a fence stump out back, or performing its strange courtship dance in our yard while I emerge from the cellar, the lunatic St. Francis of Assisi come offering friendship, Dr. Doolittling my way across the lawn. But of course it is the machine Luna means, here to put the roof on the aviary.

"Almost done," she says as I meet her on the stairs. Her tone suggests some kind of test. That is not far off the mark, I decide.

"Almost," I say squeezing her shoulder.

"I want you back," she says. "You got me back. I want you." Looking into her eyes, I see the traumata of recent months, the fragility of the marriage hovering in the worried blue, my own wife infirm with fear and I have a hard time acknowledging my responsibility for this. Mad scientist's wife syndrome, she has. If she asked right now, I would abandon the project instantly, near completion as it is.

"It's not you, Luna," I say, and try to impart some faith in this with the pressure of my hands on her arms. Then I go out to meet the crane, Perry attendant beside the machine, the sun high and showering the fields with golden light, the two workmen like

two gruff and absurd altar boys awaiting our ministrations.

"Bring 'er round back," I decree.

The completed aviary has numerous admirers already, though few of them to this point are actual birds, even if, as Luna observes, a number of the farm women who come to see it--in contrast to their round and buttery sisters--are bird-like. Still, there have been some avian visitors, some finches, sparrows, blackbirds, and there will be more, once word gets around. It pleases me to see it standing there, it pleases Luna, now that it is finished (it distresses the cat--a final, unintended reward for me). Luna's tiny hand takes mine as we scrutinize it from the hummock of lawn behind the house.

"I like it," she says, her eye, perhaps, on the two bluejays nibbling from a hanging feeder.

"Me too," I say, and we return to the house.

Luna has prepared a dinner, a kind of celebratory meal, a gift for my finishing the aviary, and we've invited Perry, of course, since he's had a hand in it all.

Perry brings his own gift. It's a relief in clay, sand, and robin's bone of Icarus plunging from the sky. Indifferent farmers go dumbly about their work in the foreground, a scenario lifted from Breughel. Even Luna laughs. Perry points out that according to myth, Daedalus also dreamed up the potter's wheel. The coincidence of it all, he exclaims, was too strong to resist. The interference of art with life impossible to ignore.

And I thought I was building a sanctuary, a spa for the feathered tribes. I haven't become reckless with the exhilaration of flight. That's not what I've been up to.

In Breughel's painting, Icarus is rendered at the point of impact, his bare bloodless legs momentarily above water, his crippled body already drowning. He is a dribble of paint and myth in a vast rustic landscape.

## The Endurance of the Ruling Class

"As for rioting, the old Roman way of dealing with *that* is always the right one, flog the rank and file, and fling the ringleaders from the Tarpeian Rock!"

Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*



We were on the roof. A dozen of us, though more would arrive later. From our place there, we commanded quite a view, the city spread out before our eyes, the blue evapyeaan tickled by streaks of red from a setting August sun. Towering eruptions of glass and steel shone in the distance, where money was even now being made by the boatful. Some of us pointed out how beautiful, how pictureworthy the sun as we sauntered back and forth with our drinks in hand. The roof itself was accommodating, not only offering a good view, but equipped with a sizable wooden deck, padded deck chairs, small white wrought-iron and glass tables, a long barbecue and buffet, all of this encircled by bubbled glass skylights for the rooms below. Every once in a while,



someone would peek into one of the surrounding skylights, hoping to see something illicit, sipping wine, puffing French cigarettes. I looked around, at the magnificent sun, at the new garden furniture and the shiny barbecue smoking on the deck like a goat on a pagan spit. On the roof, all of us were closer to heaven.

At some point the hostess approached with another woman.

"Claude," the hostess said to me, "have you met Anja?"

Anja was a foreign consul's beautiful daughter. If she had suddenly shouted Jump! more than a few men would have leapt blissfully from the roof into the street below. I took her cool hand as we were introduced, admiring her against the blue and crimson of the evening sky and the buildings full of money.

The roof was fraught with promise.

\*\*\*

Claude is a provincial sensualist--it cannot avoid being said, in my view--and has a maddening inferiority complex that compels him to push his way into what he sees as *society*, as if this might better his chances for survival. He is suffering from heritage envy, so one can observe in him desperate, compensatory behaviour: amateur financial speculation, vivid daydreams of bulls and bears, haute-bourgeois decadence, opportunistic lechery and other characteristic habits of those envious of the ruling class. He is a born ladder-climber. Thus his presence on the roof. But where the others see the roof (and perhaps by some extension Claude himself) as a diversion from their everyday lives--and are in a very real sense slumming it--Claude sees the roof as a place of import and connections, where glorious lightning might strike at any moment, shower him with

gold ingots. He is like a deluded used car salesman at Buckingham Palace. When he runs his awful eyes over Anja, he thinks not only of the joy to be found in her taking him to bed, but of her father the consul and what that could mean, prospect-wise. It is not unlikely that Anja would bed Claude, but what he cannot see is its purely recreational aspect, and that he would be asked to leave quietly at four or five in the morning by the service exit. He is the equivalent of a sushi roll on a platter teeming with other helpless fish.

\*\*\*

"Who is that?"

"What's he doing with Anja?"

"Who does he think he is?"

"I've heard he sells things. Cars. Cabbages. Smoke alarms. Something like that."

"No!"

"That's just what I've heard."

"What's he doing on the roof?"

"Must have been invited."

"Maybe he's a friend of Anja's."

"He must know someone. How else would you account for him? Gate-crasher? Not likely. 'Invite him to the roof,' someone said. And here he is."

"Shmoozing Anja."

*"The people will always aspire to the position of their superiors. They will go to*

*great pains to imitate them."*

"No!"

"That's just what I've heard."

"So he's one of the people."

"Ogling Anja."

"There's an ill wind blowing. I feel it in my loins."

"I've had that before. 'Doctor,' I said, 'there's an ill wind blowing.' 'How does that make you feel?' he said. 'Bothered,' I said. 'Irrked beyond the measure of man.' He pried open another crate of prescription pads and wrote out a remedy to be filled by his resident chemist. Cleared it right up. There are still men of genius, no matter the word on the street."

"Someone should have invited *him*. Prescribed something for Anja."

"Taste, perhaps."

"'What's next?' you might ask yourself. Snakes and rabbits, frolicking in the dust."

"No!"

\*\*\*

I looked out beyond the roof at our surroundings.

"Should I get my camera?" someone asked.

There were a dozen wonderful shots from our place there, even without the fire-bruised sky or the possible depravities going on in the lofts below. Vicious gargoyles hung along the cornice of the adjacent building, scores of them staring across at our roofs

own gargoyles, like the advance-guards of two opposing armies trapped in stony stalemate. Green spires from a nearby cathedral stretched heavenward. The bank at the northeast corner of the block, its wide steps flanked by two imperial lions, its frontage trim and tidy from a recent sandblasting, was solid neo-classical stuff. Leaning out over the roof's edge, we could see the people, yell at them and make them wave. Click, click. A *vernissage* for the taking.

"Yes," someone said. "Get your camera."

There was music now, being pumped from some hidden stereo equipment, calypso and soca, and some of us absently swayed our hips. The aproned man at the barbecue was flipping the *tournedeaux*, basting the turkey breasts with a peppered coffee sauce. It was the good life up here, no doubt about that.

"Claude," Anja asked, "could you refill my drink?"

I asked for a champagne and a J & B at the bar. Waiting for the bartender, I plucked a piece of gravel from the roof and sent it sailing into the street as a random act of haute-bourgeois vandalism. The power you had from this roof.

\*\*\*

Claude's observations betray him: note the bank with its "imperial lions," the heavenly spires, the admiration for authority and power, the shameless epicureanism. He has a schizophrenic habit of shifting, consciously or not, between first person plural and singular. Is he unsure of his place? Is there geopolitical significance to the singular pronoun, a greedy co-opting in the plural? (A desperate need to belong, the legacy of parental neglect?). He's a poodle in a litter of Rottweilers. A waste of my time, really.

(He has also been unfortunately named. *Claude* itself is a fine, sensible French name, but our friend on the roof was cursed with a mother from America who insisted on calling him 'Clod'. How he has managed to get this far is unimaginable.)

\*\*\*

"His name is Claude."

"Clod?"

"That's what I heard."

"What kind of a name is that?"

"Who knows?"

"Obviously a misguided attempt, by using a foreign sounding name, to don the flowing mantle and curling laurel leaves of the great nobility. Probably his mother's fault. Mothers have always done that. Dressed their sheep in the clothes of the wolf."

"No!"

"So they say."

"Who?"

"The historians. The social anthropologists."

"Maybe he's a Marxist."

"What would he be doing here?"

"I've heard they sometimes like to infiltrate enemy camps. To keep abreast. Update their plans for the Day of Wrath and Rue. He *looks* like one. The ruddy complexion. The rabbinical beard."

"What about those shoes?"

"Fine-looking loafers."

"Italian from fifty paces."

"Shoots down my theory. And the Marxist's, it's true, have pretty much had their day."

"What a name!"

"*Tournedeau?*"

"Please!"

\*\*\*

Soon it was quite crowded on the roof. Entremont was there. Rapper Benjamin D. The editor of the social page and his girlfriend, an acrophobe for whom the roof was altogether an ordeal. Every once in a while, the editor would lean out over the edge of the roof, dipping the upper half of his body into the open space above the street. "See? See?" he said. This for the benefit of his girlfriend. "No problem!" She looked at me, as if to say, *One hump of your elbow will tip the bastard right over into the street.* Like brushing lint from the lapels of a dinner jacket. (Even the roof had its share of *hoi polloi*. I looked away.) Schifte the architect was there, admiring the roof, wooing the women. "It's a damned fine roof," he said. "And I should know. Damned fine women, too. Take my word." Soon many of us were drinking and eating with abandon.



Later we tangoed, and when that was done, I managed to insinuate myself into a garden-style *chaise-longue*, with Anja stretched across my lap. Brazen is the word mother might have used for her, but mother was from the Midwest and unfamiliar with the social niceties of running with the glitterati. Anja's tongue in my ear conjured whimsical thoughts of marriage. Was I happy! I thought of her father, the consul. The whiff of patronage blew gaily across the roof.

\*\*\*

What is Anja's place in all of this?

Is she merely a decorative nymph?

Is she a vegetarian anarchist, resplendent in an Armani dress, a mole in the grand garden of the bourgeoisie, ready to spring when the moment seems timely (she has yet to

touch the *tourneaux* and drinks champagne enough for a regiment)?

Will Anja bed Claude and do we need to know?

Does her father the consul consume six to eight complimentary vodka martinis a day, and at night does he frequent the *Whip and Tickler* across the river, where Tina and Boris bind him to a four-poster bed with jade satin ribbon, spread almond oil across his naked white billowing flesh and flagellate him with silken pantyhose, palm fronds, raven tresses cut from young Taiwanese virgins, etc...?

What are the conditions in which revolution can be taken as inevitable?

What would Thackeray have done with these people?

A vindictive old Testament deity (plagues of locusts, terrestrial flooding, confounding of tongues...)?

Is Claude an authorial surrogate?

What does this have to say about the author's psychology?

\*\*\*

"Look at him."

"Anja should know better."

"Dandling her like a young nymph in his lap."

"Her angelic buttocks tucked between the centaur's legs."

"Her coral tongue darting in and out of the hairy auricle."

"Her chemise wantonly loose."

"Her snowy hand entangled in his beard."

"Beneath the skirts, the delights of the magic grotto."



"The salmon fiend awakes."

"Oh, the proportions of the fiend!"

"Really?"

"*The people are said to be hung like horses.*' A compensatory measure, I gather."

"Amazing!"

"I wouldn't want to start any ugly rumours. But that's what I've heard."

"Concupiscence unleashed."

"Right here, on the roof."

"*Château Laffite?*"

"God yes!"

\*\*\*

There was some excitement when a strange woman managed to get onto the roof and stalked from group to group gushing threats and prophecies.

"When the revolution comes," she told us, "you'll be the first against the wall."

"Harsh words," someone said.

"Just you wait!" the strange woman hissed.

I asked her what she meant by that.

"Ho ho!" she cried. "Wouldn't you like to hear all about it!"

"A bit of a hot-head, isn't she?" someone said.

"Impolitic of her, too, considering the numbers. Awful things could be perpetrated--if we chose."

"The people were never ones for numbers."

"Numbers, as it were, haven't been their historical strength."

It was all diverting and *amusant* until someone offered her a *tournedeau* and she began screaming "*Power grows out of the barrel of a gun!*" at which point we had her escorted off the roof.

\*\*\*

You've done it now, Claude! Oh, I knew you were stupid, but "Ho ho!" They will lay waste to your precious roof, smite the imperial lions, string up your men of office, tear down the heavenly spires, burn the capital, all in a glorious insurrection. Oh, have you made my day!

\*\*\*

"What was that?"

"What?"

"That sound."

"You mean the sound of the smiting of imperial lions?"

"The swish and scuff of a hundred noose being drawn?"

"Yes. And that moment of darkness."

"You mean the shadow of heavenly spires falling swiftly across the radiant moon?"

"And that smell."

"The stench of the capital burning into the night?"

"Good God! The ill wind!"



\*\*\*

An angry crowd had gathered on the street below the roof. Some of us leaned out over the roof's edge to get a better look. Maybe a hundred people were down there, many carrying torches, others the steely implements of their various trades. The hot-head was down there, along with other self-important types, shouting through their bullhorns, decrying the roof as a stinking symbol of oppression, egging the people on in their rage. The society editor said we were in for it now. "No, no, no," said someone. "That's just the people. They do this every once in a while." "That's right," said someone else. "They're just blowing off a little steam. Gives them a warm, righteous feeling inside."

"But the torches."

"And the steely implements of their trade."

"The battering ram carved from the giant redwood, its carefully sculpted head bearing the bloody visage of an apocalyptic goat."

"The warhead borne by scores of tiny indignant harnessed children, and the mothers who sing '*Si tombent nos jeunes héros, la terre en produit de nouveaux contre vous tous prêts à se battre!*'"

Anja clung to me. This was better than I thought. Talk about being in the right place at the right time! An insurrection to quell! A consul's daughter to protect! Serendipity!

\*\*\*

No doubt you have seen films of angry torch-bearing villagers laying siege to the castle, demanding the universe be set right, the monster slaughtered, the evil doctor enchained, the turrets tumbled to the blackened earth. *Frankenstein* naturally comes to mind. Though to think of this in terms of the Frankenstein story, with its stern warnings about upsetting the laws of nature, would be perhaps to think in terms of the natural hierarchy of class, all the unrest being caused by Claude's presence on the roof, his clambering up the ladder of society as the primary cause of the insurrection, having upset the natural balance of the class system as a kind of monster himself. This would be grossly misrepresentative, of course, and unfair to the people, whose cause is just. Claude is simply in the *wrong* place at the *wrong* time. It is his own fault (and after all my warnings, the benefit of my experience) and he will die a horrible death along with the rest of the glitterati on the roof, impaled perhaps on the sharpened staff of the people, crushed by the resolute head of the apocalyptic goat, burned alive as the roof is

swallowed by the fiery kiss of the torchbearers, etc., etc.

\*\*\*

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Did you see something?"

"What?"

"That progression of men with huge black pots."

"You mean the boiling oil?"

"Was that what it was?"

"Probably."

"Is this Clod person behind it?"

"No, no, no. It's standard practice. You've never seen the boiling oil?"

"Never!"

"Or the molten lead?"

"Molten lead?"

"Might have been molten lead."

"Hot damn! Who are those people being dragged up to the roof?"

"Must be the ringleaders."

"What are they doing with them?"

"Hurling them screaming from the roof to their deaths. It's a tradition. *'The people have always been hurled screaming from great heights to their deaths.'*"

"Seriously!"

"That's what I've heard. Keeps 'em honest, they say."

"You'd think so! And what about the rest of the rank and file?"

"Flogging. Back to work on Monday for them."

"Top rate. Who do we have to thank?"

"The generals. But you don't really have to thank them. They really go for this flogging and flinging stuff. Put out the call for the boiling oil and they're positively cherubic. Rolling around with their tongues lolling and wagging, slapping their pudgy hands together in glee."

"I can see why!"

"Truffle?"

"Please!"

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The roof reaches unto heaven.

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Damn.

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"Hot damn!"

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*[Exuent].*

## Abaco

The money-grubbing people of Frankfurt were driving him mad. Jack said in his phone call, there would be unspecified trouble if he didn't leave immediately. Abaco--some paradise he'd heard of, some ocean gem--was the solution to our enduring problems, our respective existential shit-fits. As usual, Jack made blunt assumptions about the state of my life; as usual, he was more or less right. My own work dragged and sputtered, took me nowhere, it was true. I drifted in and out of the pages of magazines and newspapers, the only proof of my existence nestled in the bylines that accompanied my ever more infrequent articles, pieces on suburban calamities (the pesticide wars, the natural gas explosions, the disappearing children). Change was what we wanted, Jack said, a metamorphosis brought on by sun and sea. There was no choice in the matter: he was paying, I had no excuse, he said. So we converged on Abaco, he from the monstrous Frankfurt airport, me from a comparatively puny city terminal back home. There wasn't much to leave behind, unless you counted inanimate things: an apartment, an old Volvo, an obsolete and near senile computer bearing my latest article for *Suburban World* (violent crime hits the Elysian turf of the middle class). I do not care particularly about the world I use in my stories, as perhaps, a journalist should care, even if I had grown up in an earlier incarnation of that world. There was no wife or lover, no child, no sour-

faced boss to beg for a vacation. So I left.

And now here is Jack, across from me at the kitchen table of the rented condominium, a glass of orange juice in one hand, a Winston Light in the other, and the morning sunlight leaps through the bay window, berates us for a night of profligate Bahamian drinking. The top of Jack's head is like a scouring brush, its sides slicked dark with scented gel. He is saying to me through the many folds of his hangover, "I told you, Colin, it's paradise, it's our karmic due, I say," though paradise is probably elsewhere, as this particular day breaks.

He seems to need a dose of it nonetheless. The premature crow's feet at the edges of his eyes are deepening, for a man of thirty-three he is aging quickly. Jack lives life as if it were the finale of a Beethoven symphony. He drinks liquor the way the rest of us breathe air, falls in love twice a month, abandons it just as often. Sometimes I think if he is alive in ten years, it will constitute a miracle, will prove what he occasionally seems to believe, that he is indestructible. Despite all this--because of all this--we are the closest of friends.

Still, I haven't told him about the dreams. The floating dreams, the nightmares, the waking dreams. Weeks will pass without them. And they'll seize me again like a malaria, returning and returning.

When I tell Jack about these dreams, he'll probably sit there with his thin lips pursed for only a moment as the prospects run through his itinerant mind, dreaming up some palliative adventure. He will nearly get us killed, there will be no time to worry about dreams.



Since arriving in the Bahamas, I have also--astonishingly--met a woman, and perhaps was not so drunk as to send her bolting for the airport. Her name is Harry, short for Harriet, which she refuses to go by, declaring it a name for virgin aunties. She's British, a spoiled cabinet minister's daughter, and is pretty, I think, though her hair is plain and her teeth small and her hands ravaged by chronic nail-biting. She wore no shoes when we met and her feet looked as if each toe had been broken deliberately by a vindictive footbinder and never allowed to set properly. (I have heard of an arthritic affliction of the hands that attacks only Scots, curling their hands into dystrophic claws--perhaps there exists a similar affliction for the feet of the British.) Despite this, at some point we danced to the soca and calypso at the open-air hotel bar, Jack prancing like a stoned orangutan, Harry shuffling on her calloused crooked feet, me doing as good a job of keeping time as the rum would allow. "I'm having a brilliant time," she said into the humid summer air, "absolutely brilliant."

We've arranged to meet again tonight. It is at times like this when I wish some of Jack's blood ran in my veins, some of that charm, recklessness, abandon. It's possible I will even be in competition with him. It has happened before. In an absurd way, I can understand the cannibal tribes, eating the flesh of their elders and enemies, hoping to transfuse the essence of their courage and strength. Jack, unfortunately, would pass on a hangover that could cripple a rhinoceros. Perhaps, then, some sort of blood ritual.

It is good to be here.

\*\*\*

The cay where we are staying is a two-mile horseshoe, and the unending assault

of water, the push and pull of the sea, pries open this part of the island as if it were splitting some huge lithic fruit. At the southeastern tip of this horseshoe, rock and sand meet a full expanse of ocean littered only with a few outlying islands, tiny uninhabited lumps that have somehow managed not to be overwhelmed by the sea and driven underwater to disintegration. The brilliant green-blue water is shadowed in spots by distant coral reefs, closer tangles of blackish vegetation and clumps of dead sea urchins in the shallows, and by odd tide-shaped rocks, slumped in the wet sands like the half-drowned shells of large animals--prehistoric carcasses, absurd Caribbean elephants, or hippos, maybe. These boulders lead treacherously up onto the eastern tip of the horseshoe like a dissolving staircase, then settle into a natural fortification. Hundreds of little snails affix themselves to the pores and alveoli of the water-pitted rocks, and crabs rest between the crevices in small pools, in water drained of its ocean blue by lack of volume and a bottom of blank sand. We have beaten a picnic retreat here, are swigging Heineken in the summer sun, burning ourselves with Hawaiian Tropic No. 3.

Getting to the Point (as this place is so imaginatively called), we walked a mile along the beach, towards the end climbing through a driftwood forest of small trees that had collapsed into the sea where the beach narrowed to nothing, the trees washed marble smooth from the lapping water. We lugged with us a bag of food, a half dozen beer, snorkelling equipment, beach accoutrements. I expected a sudden lurching wave to leap up from the water and impale us on those trees whose branches had been whetted to lance points by the elements. I am nervous that way. Jack plowed on, oblivious. When we reached our destination, he tossed everything onto the sand, pried open two beers, sat in

the ocean. The sweat poured from me like I was made of ice, disappearing in the sun. I waded in up to my knees, took the beer he held up to me. Small fish came to nibble at the hairs on our legs, like incompetent comical piranhas, lightly tickling with their fish-mouthed kiss.

"Strange," I said. The fish were nearly transparent. There was a conspicuous absence of flesh at this place, everything seemed made of rock and water, even the living things were more shell than meat.

"This is the way to live," Jack said. "No Germans, no nothing around to bother us, not a soul in sight. Magical. Goddamn magical."

Eventually we made our way out to the furthest of the rocks. Jack paddled around in the water, an orange snorkel attached to his submerged head chugging along like a toy boat's smokestack, spurting water after each dive. He is like a child in a way, constantly on patrol for new things, fresh stimuli. In the past two years he has journeyed to Frankfurt, Amsterdam, sailed to the Antarctic in a converted Russian research vessel, watched whales off the coast of Newfoundland, herded reindeer in the North. He will work round the clock for months, accumulating a reserve of cash, then drop everything and fly to Malaysia. This is usually a stark contrast to my own existence, at least until that point where his nomadic exploits inevitably overtake it. I will sit at home, debating whether to cook chicken or pork, plunking out my magazine articles, waiting for some *incident*--the hit-and-run death of some promising child, the bludgeoning of a priest in his own parish--to initiate yet another tragedy-strewn essay. I receive phone calls from him, and end up in Kuala Lumpur, Nashville, the Bahamas. It has occurred to me that he is

like an editor doling out assignments in this way.

Jack tires quickly of the crabs and sea urchins and strips off the snorkel and mask, settling down on one of the rocks. It is as good a time as any to give him the news on the terrors of my sleep.

"Jack," I say, "I'm having these dreams."

And suddenly Harry is there, and the conversation is over before it begins.

"Hello there! Boys!" she calls back from the beach. "I've come to bother you!"

We are forty feet from shore on the outermost rocks.

"Who's that?" Jack asks.

"Harry," I say, wondering if he doesn't remember her. "We met her last night at the bar."

"Shall I come all the way out there, you bastards?" she shouts.

Her frequent curses and sarcasms flow melodically from her British tongue.

There is something about the voice, soothing and intimidating at the same time. Though I have never considered myself an anglophile, around her I will begin to think that if heaven is not peopled with voices from the Royal Shakespeare Company, there are certainly a good number from London. I swim back to shore, skitting along the surface of the water as quickly as I can.

She is dressed in a blue bikini, is berry-brown from the sun, having been on the island two weeks already. Her complexion will no doubt revert to its original London pallor once out of the tropics, the skin sulking in the perpetually overcast English climate. But she looks wonderful to me.

"Don't kiss me, you're all wet," she says after I clamber up on shore.

"How'd you find us?" I ask.

"Followed the droppings," she says, smiling in her wide arching sunglasses. "I wasn't looking for you, actually. I've always come here."

She has been visiting the island for years, staying at her parents' beachfront house down on the other side of the cay. She likes the Point because it gets her away from "all those awful fuckers on the beach."

"But now you two are here, all the magic's gone."

I look out towards Jack, who is now snorkelling back into shore, aiming himself at us. Honing in on the woman, perhaps.

"Do you have a cigarette?" Harry asks, and we walk back to our belongings in the shade of the trees.

The sand is strewn with clumps of dried sea grass and bundles of kelp, and momentarily seems to swell and shift in a couple of places as if the inanimate were suddenly coming to life, but with closer inspection we find it is only a congregation of hundreds of tiny hermit crabs we've set in motion, crawling over and around each other with the blind desperate confusion of a leper pit. When Jack comes up he has a giant in his hand. The crab is big enough to have taken on a two-pound conch shell as its home. Though it had withdrawn into the shell when he captured it, eventually it extends its legs out into the air. Jack holds the monster at arm's length. The spiny legs are the length of human fingers and search the air with gruesome stretches and crooks for something to hold, some hint of the waterfront it has been navigating moments ago. Harry cautiously

offers a finger, and as it hangs before the crab she turns to me and playfully says.

"Tremendous, isn't he?" Two thin legs quickly wrap round her finger and just as quickly let go, and the crab recoils frightened into its shell at a human's touch. Startled at first, Harry leans over further, her face a few inches from the shell still held in Jack's hand, whispering to the crab, "Silly bastard." Jack puts the crab back down on the beach, and it slinks slowly away towards the woods, to rest there in the shade.

"Magnificent," Harry says. "Reminds me in a way of my father. Crawling shyly out of the sight of humanity."

"Like Colin here," Jack says. "I have to drag him around the world, teaching him to live."

I protest, more to save face in front of the girl than because I disagree.

"He didn't seem so docile last night," Harry says.

"That was Captain Morgan," Jack says, "his alter ego."

"I will take them both," Harry says, and Jack laughs because I am beaming nervously as she takes my arm, life, as he would have it, forcing itself upon me whether I invite it or not.

\*\*\*

Harry has changed our plans for this evening, however. We were supposed to meet, but "some terrible lizard-like people" have shown up--"old beyond belief, hands like claws, tits like figs. The women are worse." Friends of her parents, she must "cavort about like a concupiscent au-pair for the evening." I am sad to miss that. The friends are there as a kind of support group, for her parents are recovering from a two-year ordeal in

the British press. Her father, it turns out, had been a senior minister in one the Thatcher cabinets, had at times been considered a successor, until a pregnant civil servant swelled into view and Fleet St. performed its usual gleeful vivisection, the scandal forcing him to resign (though some cheekily expressed the opinion that it was heartening a veteran was still out there fathering children). The marriage had collapsed. For two years, he had lived the life of the goat. Now there was reconciliation in the air. Harry's parents had come to the island home to repair their marriage, and it seemed to be working, leaving the press positively indifferent. Harry had flown in after a month, "to sunbathe and spread good cheer." The lizard people were presumably here to do the same.

I receive all this from Harry, who is remarkably forthcoming about her family mess, has even included a sister strung out on drugs, lost somewhere in the shadows of London. Having all the ugly details out in the open renders them less hurtful, she says. "Dirty secrets are like intestinal parasites, aren't they, wreaking havoc from within."

As for Jack, the sun is beginning to do him some good, creating an aura of health around his aging frame. Still, he wants to go off now in search of Jackson, an enormous Bahamian we encountered at the bar last night, and is hoping to buy the marijuana this behemoth promised him. "Nothing like a little herb for inducing transcendence," Jack opines. Harry seems excited by this prospect. I don't think I would buy anything from the imposing Jackson, whose blind, milky left eye adds horrifically to his three hundred pounds of malevolence. Transcendence, too, has always been a suspect notion to me and, anyway, the floating dreams are all the transcendental excitement I can handle.

After chatting and eating, Harry offers us a ride back to the condominium.

"A ride?" I ask, thinking of the treacherous stretch of our walk along the beach.

"Yes, a ride," she says. "I have a buggy. Through the woods at the dirt road."

She drives the gas-powered golf cart as if it were a sports car. Jack hoots approval from the back as she careens through the turns at the wildest of speeds for such a vehicle. Each time, I slide involuntarily across the vinyl seat, bumping up against her, and each time she shoves me back with surprising strength, laughing, grinning, and I am thinking, if I am not killed, I will consider proposing marriage to this young maniac. Why she seems to like me is inexplicable. The natural order of things would have her fall for Jack. But it is no surprise that I will soon be telling Jack that he was right, that this is paradise. bloody paradise.

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That night, I had one of the dreams. They always started off more like trances than dreams, beginning at a point between waking and sleep, some rogue alpha state in which my body would slowly change from something of mass lying exhausted in a bed, to an aerified shell that would rise up, helplessly buoyant. An initial dizziness and tingling at the base of my skull would announce that it was happening again, and each time, though I hated the dreams, I would surrender and begin to float. At first, everything was as it had been when I lay down to sleep. All the things of the surrounding room were in place, yet I was floating above the bed, rising irrepressibly towards the ceiling. Eventually, I would drift over to the door, which was always slightly ajar, and which I would always, stupidly, pull open, passing unaccountably into the hallway of an ominous building, its corridors painted antiseptic green and smelling vaguely of animals. From



there, I would travel quickly out into the streets, and time, which until this point had progressed more or less reliably, would begin to accelerate, or to blip in and out of existence. In seconds, I could be across town, without a memory of how I came to be there, not even a flash of the city from above. The dream could begin anywhere I slept, but if I was in the city, more often than not the acres of concrete and brick apartments blocks so familiar to me would give way to densely wooded areas, carved with fewer streets and dotted with fewer houses, small, dark and unknown towns of abandoned homes. I would enter one of the large blackened houses, pushing open enormous oaken doors and glide like a phantom into rooms that had few signs of recent use. The houses were inevitably big and bereft of life, but they were crammed with furnishings, rich with antiques and old, intricately patterned carpets and mildewed wallpaper, ornately carved woodwork, doorframes, and fireplace mantels, and the frieze and cornicework of the high ceilings were inlaid with dust. Heavy embroidered draperies hung shut at the tall windows, robbing the rooms of most of their light. Crystal and porcelain stood everywhere in the grey luminescence on the ledges, the cabinets, and the assortment of tables, and entire walls were lined with books enclosed in cases of walnut and glass, the latticework that framed the panes of glass thinly wrought and leaden. Occasionally, a chandelier or gas-lamp glowed dimly from the ceiling or a wall, and while I could make out most everything in the room there was little to see but the set awaiting the players.

What would end the dream would be a sense of panic, some hint of an inability to get back, as if my soul were about to be cut off forever from my body.

This time I had floated out of the condominium, across the harbour, which had

been transformed into a series of small dilapidated wharves, strewn with decrepit houseboats and grimy fishing vessels. The swollen carcasses of fish and other larger creatures bobbed on the water, and at the embankment on the other side I looked down to see the fearful body of Jackson entangled in seaweed, his blind left eye aimed up at me, like a tiny reflection of the moon above. I thought how odd to see an actual person. But I was quickly into the woods and on to another empty house. This one was like the others, packed with things yet devoid of life, its atmosphere yellowed and sepia-tinged with age, as if stained with years of tobacco smoke. I passed from room to room, still airborne, and saw photographs and gilt-framed portraits of people I did not recognize, and as always I waited for someone to come, perhaps one of the faces from the paintings, or the ghost of some old, ever-faithful servant woman. And then as always I was overcome with dread at the thought that I would not be able to return home.

I have to get back, I would tell myself each time.

Returning was a matter of fighting the dream from within the dream, something it seemed I could do only after the whole thing had effectively played its course. Pushing my way back out of the house, I rarely made it through the front door before waking. This time I opened my eyes to the darkened bedroom of the condominium and knew I was going to vomit. I raced to the bathroom, fell on my knees and embraced the toilet, and my stomach seized and released, contracted and expanded again and again, like the beating of some oversized bilious heart slung too low in my body. When it was done, I lay with my burning face against the wall, my skin gulping in its coolness. I wiped my mouth and soon began to feel better. Then Jack was in the doorway, asking me if I was

going to be okay.

"Jack," I said. "I'm having these dreams."

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"So," Jack says, pacing the kitchen with a spatula in hand, "you're all fucked up."

After being caught in flagrante delicto, I've kept Jack up to talk about my dreams. "Spill your guts," he joked. At the same time, we've discovered night creatures in the condominium, palmetto bugs the size of cigar butts, a spider like a large brown egg with limbs. Jack is dealing out death blows with the kitchen utensil to anything smaller than us that moves. While he is fascinated with almost any creature in the natural world, he cannot abide them in the place where he sleeps, and I can't really blame him. Though I am merely squeamish; he has been probed and bitten by a United Nations of fiends.

"All fucked up," I echo.

"Ever eat anything weird?" he asks.

"All the time," I say. "You've probably eaten weirder."

"Reindeer balls once," he tells me. "During population control. Should have seen the poor bastards when the iodine hit them between the haunches." He cut a palmetto bug in two with the spatula, scraping it onto the dustpan that served as the death cart. "But before these dreams. You're heaving after them."

"Nothing noticeable."

"Maybe you need a catscan, an MRI. Something hi-tech."

"Maybe I need some medication, some therapy."

"A lobotomy," he says, jabbing at me with the palmetto cutter. "They're probably

just crazy dreams. No cause, no meaning, no consequence. I dream about this lady on my Antarctic cruise all the time. She'd collapsed on shore while her landing party was off looking at penguins. I was on my way back in the dinghy with a bunch of the Russian crew, had my fill of subaquatic birds. One of the guides comes up in another boat, he's going crazy, begging for help with this lady, but the Russians don't speak English, they're looking at him like he's nuts. I'm hung over as all hell and do not want to do this, but I say, 'I'll go.' One minute later, I'm standing in the Arctic Ocean, holding the damn dinghy, and my boots are filling with water. He's dragging this two hundred pound Argentine woman into the sea. I look up on shore and the landing party's still admiring the penguins, they're all snapping pictures, it's like a surrealist movie, and this lady's had a heart attack, or dying of hypothermia, who the hell knows. We saved her, got her back to the ship no problem, but man. The part I dream is the penguins. Can't get them out of my mind. They're like cruise missiles when you get them in the water, you know, faster than all hell. That lady floating in the Arctic Ocean in her pink snowsuit. The penguins. All the time."

I try to imagine how this is like my dreams.

"I feel like I'm awake when it's happening," I say. "It's physical."

"I feel my feet getting cold," says Jack.

"I vomit after them."

"Got me there."

He finds the spider, trapping it in a box of Cheerios. We go out to the backyard and drown it in the harbour. The cereal floats ridiculously on the black surface of the

water. like tiny lifebuoys spreading out across the surface of the sea.

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By chance the next day, we met Harry's parents. They'd come down the beach to the hotel for lunch. The ex-minister was a tall white-haired man with a square head and protruding jaw, had turned dark orange in the sun, and crushed my hand in his own when Harry spoke my name. Jack addressed the man as "your eminence," which elicited laughter from everyone. Harry's mother, Evelyn, was a younger woman, from whom Harry had received her good looks. In fact, the daughter so little resembled the father, I wondered who was cheating on whom in the family.

"You are a journalist I hear," her father said to me.

"Of sorts," I said.

"I'll buy you lunch anyway," he said. "I hate them. Journalists, you know."

"I can imagine."

"Ours especially. They are like vampires. Worse. Maggots."

"Colin doesn't make enough money at it to qualify as a full-fledged maggot," Jack interjected. "He's pre-larval."

"Let's hope the metamorphosis never comes," said the minister. "Still, it is like my daughter to torture me."

Things were going swimmingly with the old fellow for me, and Harry kept poking me in the ribs as we walked up to the hotel restaurant to make sure I was as uncomfortable as possible.

"He's going to visit me in London, daddy," she said.

It was the first I'd heard of it, though I would go at a moment's notice.

"He knows about the quarantine, I presume," her father said.

"That is for pets, dear," Harry's mother said innocently.

"I know that, Evelyn."

Jack, naturally, loved every minute of this. So, too, did Harry, who perhaps treated it as some sort of test. By the time lunch was finished, I had suffered two hours under this man's disparagement. Meanwhile, Jack had curried favour as professionally as ever, as if he were the one and not me who might seek approval from the lordly father. Then, as we all walked back to the beach, Harry's father drew me back a few paces from the others, and was suddenly a different man.

"Harry will be furious with me if she finds out, but I must talk to you," he told me, his orange face reddening from the wine at lunch.

Harry, he said, had a heart condition, which was for the most part harmless and controlled with medication, though there had been a near tragedy when she was younger. She could lead a perfectly normal life, he said. He knew she would smoke the odd cigarette and drink the odd drink, and these were not real dangers in moderation. What he asked of me was to see she did not get involved with any hard drugs while she was with us. I assured him we were not the sort.

"Since the situation in the press," he told me, "I have no real claim to moral authority in this family, and am happy my daughter will still speak to me. We have lost one girl to drugs. That is largely my fault. With Harry though, it is different. There is cocaine that circulates on this island that could kill her. Harry is keen on spending time

with you two, and may encounter situations. She is adventurous, careless even, like your friend."

"I have no interest in cocaine," I said to him.

"Just in Harry," he replied. "I am not accusing you of anything. Merely asking you to be careful. You are all adults. But I don't want Harry hurting herself."

"Yes, sir," I said. "It won't happen."

"Here is some money," he said, pulling strips of the florid Bahamian currency from his wallet and pressing it into my hand. "You'll all go out tonight and enjoy yourselves."

I hadn't counted the money but it seemed to be over two hundred dollars. I tried handing it back. "This isn't necessary," I said.

"Perhaps not, but I like to think I have some control over the evening if I am paying for it."

"Right."

The old man then caught up to his wife, his hand resting on her shoulder as they walked. Harry fell back in line with me while Jack chatted up the minister and his wife.

"Did he offer you money to stay away from me?" Harry joked.

"Two hundred."

"You do come cheap."

"Am I really going to England?"

"Of course you are."

We spent the rest of the afternoon swimming and lying on the beach, drinking

drinks with comical names: Goombay Smash, Bahama Mama, Gwana Grabber. Then Harry and her family wandered home, Harry arranging to meet us later that night.

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Jack is explaining to me how Jackson has promised to take us to something called the Blue Hole, a natural curiosity further inland. He is drinking tequila and lime, has had quite a few of them already, on top of the liquor at lunch. A sort of cheerful drunken belligerence flashes its head. I mention Jackson's unusual appearance in my dream.

"A face like that, no wonder you dreamed about him," Jack says. "I expect nightmares any day now."

Why then, I ask, should we go to the Blue Hole with the man? He sells dope, looks like an angry bull with cataracts.

"He told me we'll never see anything like it," Jack says, settling the matter in his mind. "And it's just a little off the top of his personal stash he sold me. Nothing serious. Don't get your panties in a bunch."

I tell him what Harry's father has told me. Jack suggests the man may be full of shit, attempting to scare me off of his daughter.

"He is full of shit," I say. "but he isn't lying about this. He was very earnest."

"He's a politician," Jack says. "And he's rich. His daughter is slumming with a couple older boobs from Canada. Maybe he'll say anything."

Still, I tell him, I'd like to be careful.

"You're always careful," Jack says. "There's no fear of you not being careful. You don't have to come to the Blue Hole. You can stay behind. Maybe I'll go with



Harry."

Which will never happen, of course. Not in a million years.

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She'd died and come back to life. The heart condition had killed her at sixteen. For an entire minute she'd been given up on, clinically dead. The doctors had been offering their condolences to her parents, the minister and the wife he would cheat on. Her heart had stopped, they said. They'd tried everything, they said. Harry lying dead on the hospital table had heard them talking about her, declaring her dead, had heard her mother's sobs. She hadn't left her body. There had been no swirling tunnel-journey, no benign humanoid glow to greet her. She could simply hear them talk of her being dead. And then to the great embarrassment of the doctors, the machines started up again, and she'd come back to life.

"Just like that," she told me on the beach after the dinner and dancing.

"Resurrected."

We were sitting rather drunk in squat beach chairs with our legs dangling in the calm surf of high tide, which had by now settled in for the night. Jack had gone back to the bar, in search of wilder companions. Phosphorescent plankton clung to our shins and feet, and they shimmered like the limbs of ghosts under the water. The moon was high in its orbit and near-full, and the stars were many times those in city skies. There was a good light breeze which thankfully kept the mosquitoes off the shoreline.

Dead, I thought. It was very odd. Perhaps that was where the brashness her father had spoken of came from, for once you had been dead, and then returned to life, your

entire consciousness would be altered forever. It was likely you would live in exuberance or in fear the rest of your days.

Harry talked casually about the island. Time on the island, she said, was strange. There was little sense of chronology. She felt she was in a littoral zone, as far as time went. The days had an interchangeable quality to them, as if a calendar with only two sheets were needed, marked Sunny Day and Cloudy Day, and a clock that read only Day or Night inside the darkened air-conditioned rooms. Which day or night did not matter much. My own experience of it was very different. Time on the island was accelerating, racing towards our departure the next week. But it was quite possible, even likely, that for Harry all of this was a momentary thing, something that happened often to people here and more a result of the island than anything else, difficult to carry over into more than a moment, into the next day, the succession of days and their intransigent honesty. Two days apart would tell us we were undeniably strangers, that we shared a small awkward secret, a knowledge of what each other might do if suddenly freed of the daily plod of the calendar and given a small adjunctive flap of time, an appendant moment, for which we held no responsibility save any we might choose to carry back with us into a regular calendar of days and nights. Talk of visiting England, for all I knew, was just talk.

At some point, she stood up and to my surprise began to undress. She waded into shallow water and lay floating half beneath the surface. The phosphorescence that had played at the hairs on our legs now covered her entire body. She was aglow from head to foot as beads and gobs of light danced cerily along her skin, circled her breasts which

pushed slightly from the water with her breathing. There was no call to join her, no invitation to sex. She wanted only to lie in the water, surrounded by it and the numbing effects of the alcohol, while I kept an eye out for night creatures. She swirled her wrists and turned slowly under the stars like the second hand of a luminescent clock, while I sat beside her empty chair and watched on, worrying about her bad heart, and she sighed, saying, "Mother would be positively scandalized."

And soon I, too, began to float.

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Perhaps Jack has changed his feelings about creatures in the house, for there is a scorpion fish in the condominium.

It is an odd gift from a Bahamian boy he met on the beach.

"He came up to me with this glass of water. And there's this small fish in it. He caught it where people were swimming. He might have saved their lives, I don't know, it's small. Told me an adult scorpion fish can kill a man with a single touch. The toxin causes cardiac arrest in minutes. Wouldn't even know you were dying until you're dead. I nearly dropped the glass when he told me what it was. Thought maybe the thing would jump out like a two-inch kamikaze and kill me on the beach."

The thing is hideous, rust-brown and speckled, the size of an elongated golf ball, with tentacles drooping like whiskers from its face. Jack has transferred it to a bowl of salt water. Not surprisingly, when Harry arrives, the first thing she admires is the scorpion fish.

"Where'd you get this?" she asks.

"It was a gift," I say and she looks to see if I'm joking. "Ask Jack, it's his."

"I speared one once," she says. "Frightened the man who was skippering our boat half to death. His brother had been killed by a scorpion fish."

She taps her finger on the inside lip of the bowl, as if she were summoning a cat.

"Careful," I say, thinking of her heart, thinking of how I would explain it to her father.

She turns her head to me and smiles. "Just a fish," she says.

"I don't like it," I say. "Dancing with the devil, and all that."

"You're too uptight," Jack says. "That's your problem. That's probably what the damn dreams are, explorations. Gotta take risks, my boy. Life is no fun without risks."

"From a man crazy enough to walk home with that thing in a glass of water," I say.

"Exactly," he says.

"What about these dreams?" Harry asks.

"That's why he was hurling on the beach the other night. He astral projects in his sleep."

"I do not astral project."

"He thinks he's going nuts, but it's all in his mind."

"Very funny."

Harry looks confused. "You said it was an allergy."

But I am already thinking of the impending departure, of whether I can bear another story of a battered suburban housewife, looted shopping mall, abducted kid.

There is even more than Harry to leave here.

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The next day, Jackson arrives in the afternoon to take us to the Blue Hole. Harry is coming with us. She spent the night, insisting she could keep me from dreaming, which she did most admirably. Now Jackson examines her with his good eye, and I wonder how wise we are to be driving off into the woods with this man in search of geological oddities. Jack climbs up into the back of Jackson's gold pick-up, the peak of his baseball cap pointing backwards, his t-shirt fashioned into a tank top by the tearing off of the sleeves and collar, his freckles multiplying and congealing across his skin after days in the sun. He has become an aging teenager aboard a chariot. For all his talk of risks, over the past few days, he has grown more tame in my eye, and perhaps the edge I've ascribed to him all these years was partly imagined, the construction of a hero, a receptacle for my envy. Harry and I get into the cab of the truck with the elephantine Jackson, and we take off, Jack drumming on the roof, singing the reggae music he has heard at the bar. I am wondering whether Jackson should be driving, given he's partly blind.

"You're friend, he's funny," he tells me as the truck leaves the village and takes us inland. "He's all cranked up, living for two people."

"It's been like that ever since I've known him," I say.

"Wear me out," chuckles Jackson, who takes the space of two people himself in the cab.

The last thing we pass is the tiny village schoolhouse and then we're quickly into

island wilderness, a forest of scrawny trees and underbrush cut only by the narrow highway. According to Jackson, there used to be wild boar here, but they have disappeared, graced too many barbecue grills. I try to imagine these wild Bahamian pigs roaming the woods. They are as unlikely as our little expedition party. Jackson, though, seems friendly, and I am feeling guilty about judging him on appearance.

He leans over me towards Harry. "I know you," he says. "Your father's Mr. Conroy."

"That's right," Harry says.

"He helped my brother open his grocery. He's a good man."

"Yes," Harry says, "he can be. There are some people in England who would disagree."

Twenty minutes later we are there, turning off the highway into a strip of flattened grass and shrub. "Watch your head," Jackson calls out to Jack as the low-hanging branches of the trees whip against the truck roof. We drive in perhaps half a mile and Jackson stops the truck where the path has become unnavigable. "Almost there," he says. "Gotta walk the rest of the way."

We walk through the brush another five minutes and then come to a circular clearing, at the center of which is a raised mouth in the earth about twenty feet across. As we approach it, I see it is as beautiful as Jackson has said. The lip of the hole is smooth and shiny as a glazed pot, an iridescence of rust and ochre and black and sapphire, and until you actually put your face to it the water glows of blue sky, a perfect reflection.

"You gotta come at this time in the afternoon, or it's not really blue like it is now,"

Jackson tells us.

"You've never seen this?" I ask Harry, who has heard of this place but never been here.

Jack is circling it, evaluating it.

"Fresh water on top, salt lower down," Jackson says. "Go ahead, taste."

I kneel down, cup my hand and take a sip. Jack does the same.

"How deep is it?" Jack asks.

"Don't know," Jackson says. "People tried measuring, scientists and people. Couldn't tell. Sonar wouldn't work, and lines just tangled. Further down there's caves, more holes. There's been divers. One diver went down, didn't come up."

"Anything live down there?" Jack asks.

"Could be, way down in the salt, eels maybe. There's probably not much to eat. It's a petrified hole, sinkhole, volcano, or something."

"What would happen if I went in?" I ask.

"Nothing, probably," he says. "Women used to dip their babies in it. Thought it was good luck. My mother did it. Did me a whole lot of good, as you can see," and he laughs again. "One diver drowned, like I said. But people drown everywhere, every day."

So I am on the lip of the hole stripped down to my shorts, Jack encouraging me, bombastically ad-libbing on what he remembers of Empedocles on Etna, Harry teasing me about being swallowed by sea monsters, being swallowed by the earth. I draw the deepest breath I can and then dive into the gaping mouth. The water is cool, much cooler

than the ocean. The sides of the hole are craggy and sharp, quickly turn to grey as I continue down the hole's throat. Ten feet down there is already a small cave off to the left, and I swim deeper, my eardrums tightening, until there is no real shape to what is in front of me, only colour, darkening blue and grey. I remind myself where the surface is, tell myself it is time to turn around, then swim a little deeper. I am thinking of what the weather is like in England this time of year. Harry seems to honestly want me to go, and Jack has been feeding me his *carpe diem* routine, rip a page from my book, he tells me, throw it all aside and go. You've got yourself a rich resurrected girlfriend, he says, and you'll never get this chance again. Perhaps that is what the dreams are, too, some paranormal beckoning, some unconscious plebian questing call, though I am thinking, feeling, that they will not be coming again. There is a sense of control in this descent that I have not felt for a long time. Down in the hole I feel thrillingly amphibian, gills growing at my neck, and just about now, Harry is wondering where I am, wondering when I will surface--perhaps it will be night.