Nostalgia

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2004

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-91125-X
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-91125-X

ABSTRACT

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'Nostalgia' is a novel about a man, Malcolm Mole, who is forced to confront the memory of his wife's death. A gifted woman, but one who, from an early age had been made aware that her defective heart would claim her life before the age of thirty, Evelyn had lived her life recklessly, and died under mysterious circumstances.

The setting of the novel is fundamental to its meaning. Mole lives in a dilapidated manor house in Victoria, B.C. with his daughter and another man, Edward, who looks after the estate. Mole is as apathetic about the disintegration of his house as he has been about the disintegration of his health. Into this situation wanders a young man in search of himself who, by dint of his naïve curiosity, facilitates the reckoning, and healing, that Mole is attempting.

It is most certainly a novel is progress. Originally conceived as the first in a trilogy of novels about Victoria, B.C., beginning in the year 1840 with the colonization of Vancouver Island, and continuing until the present day, it is now my intention to condense that history into one novel, reincarnating the character of Mole three times, in different disguises. In this way, I hope to create not only a complex and enduring character, but very much a novel of place – the Eden, or Victoria, in fact, for which the contemporary Mole feels such nostalgia.

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Chapter one

From his study window, Malcolm Mole stared out over the meadow to the distant stand of third-growth Douglas fir. Twice his ancestors had logged the property, leaving only a few old-growth fir trees standing to re-seed the clear-cut, as was the practice in those days. Scattered through the forest were the stumps of ancient giants, from whose nutrient rich remains had grown the next generation, and the next, irrepressibly. And so everything, he thought, is destined to regenerate, in time. Though not without escaping violence.

His wife would be dead seven years in November - seven years! - which had always seemed to him the threshold of a man's inclination to mourn. He had lost his elder brother to the Great War, his mother to cancer, his father, the Brigadier, to alcoholism and excessive grief, but seven years after their deaths their memories had finally lost their definition, their ability to wound. Things had been different with Evelyn. Her memory was still razor sharp; and unable to cope he had turned, like his father before him, to the bottle.

He had loved her in a way he hadn't thought possible. Not for a man of his age who, after a series of soured love affairs, had forsaken all but the most casual acquaintance of women. A gentleman of adequate income, owing to the prescience of his forebears, he had been content to pursue his numerous passions - entomology, botany, mythology, to name but a few – in the ardent tradition of the committed dilettante, finding in each

discipline not only an opportunity to indulge the solitude he craved, but a genteel, and infinitely less troublesome occupation than marriage. Evelyn had been thirty-four years his junior, all of twenty when they had married; very beautiful; very kind, but with a defect of the heart that she knew, and disclosed to him, would more than likely be the death of her before the age of thirty. Confronted with Evelyn's infectious and formidable resolve to get the most out of her foreshortened life, Mole recognized how measured, dignified, but ultimately uninspired had been his own life and fell, quite hopelessly, in love with her. That he should fall for Evelyn Bedard was understandable; but that she, a young woman who could have charmed anybody, should return his affection was a mystery he had chosen not to contemplate. Until now.

Earlier that morning, Robert Coulton, his oldest friend and family doctor of nearly forty years, had told him in no uncertain terms that if he didn't quit drinking he would be dead within the year. He had somehow escaped hepatitis, and cirrhosis of the liver, but instead had drunk himself to something much worse. Mole had actually found the irony amusing. He had what was called cardiomyopathy, an enlargening and flabbiness of the right and left ventricles of the heart exacerbated by such wild irregularities of its beating it was conceivable he might drop dead at any minute. And so the haunting had taken its toll. By running from the memory of Evelyn's death he had brought upon himself, hysterically, the very symptoms that had carried her off.

Standing at the window of his study, staring out over the lay of his estate, he concluded that he would not drown his anguish any longer. If not for his own sake, then for Evelyn's he would oblige himself to remember, so that one of them, at least, could rest

in peace. Unfortunately for Mole, the thought of summoning up his memories from the darkness into which he had consigned them raised in his mind's eye violent images of predatory birds. They came howling out of thunderclouds to sink their talons in his scalp. They tore at his breast, at his genitals, and they tore at the soles of his feet; and like some befuddled, degenerate Prometheus, ignorant of the particulars of his crime, Mole knew they would dismember him before allowing his deliverance.

He turned from the window and sat down at his desk. He thought about how to begin. Shortly before meeting Evelyn, the study of butterflies and moths had been his most absorbing obsession; gathering dust along the shelves that lined the walls of his study, like a history of lepidoptery itself, were marshalled, in descending order of importance: the Minolta pocket binoculars; the Nikon F1 with its 100-millimeter macro lens and ring flash followed by the tins of naphthalene, the jars of cyanide, the killing bottles and the museums of pinned and dissected butterflies that were the amateur lepidopterist's secret shame. The times had changed. Alexander Klots and Samuel Scudder, the Audobon's of lepidoptery, had given way to the conservationists Robert Michael Pyle and Jeffrey Glassberg. Mole had been obliged to concede, though not without a certain nostalgia, that, for all but the professional entomologist, butterflies were now studied in the field.

Before him, on his heavy mahogany desk, stood the bottle of pills the good doctor had prescribed. Mole considered Coulton for a moment. He had been Evelyn's doctor also and knew more about their business than anybody else. Always discreet with each other, they had never openly discussed Evelyn or their marriage . It nevertheless occurred to

Mole that nobody but Robert could better understand his wife, nor his pressing need to confess. Ever respectful of his friend, however, he determined how to minimize Robert's obligation. From the drawer of his desk he took out a few sheets of blank white paper, a jar of India ink, and his taxonomist's fountain pen. He paused for a moment, and then bent his head to the page.

My dear Robert,

I am a fatuous man indeed. A hedonist. A man who was diligent once but who, by dint – I cannot say by virtue – of his profligate habits, has nothing more to show for himself than a ruined fortune, a derelict inheritance, and a daughter whose indifference to his person pains him more than if she were to show him outright scorn. I am a fool at heart and, surely, had I been born into a less profane age, would have been one of those jolly parasites who, by virtue of their ribald wit, would have scavenged his meals at the king's table. A slave to my appetites I would have retired, drunk and ungovernable, to bed down with the dwarves and carbuncled buffoons who rounded out the king's retinue; and there, upon the indignity of my dog's bed, would have quietly cried myself to sleep, as I have done these past seven years.

The alcohol has helped, but shall evidently be the death of me. I have not fared so well since Evelyn died, and drinking has been the placebo, albeit feeble, that has alleviated an otherwise annihilating darkness. But by drinking I have kept my memories secret even from myself, and I think you will agree, after this morning's proceedings, that I cannot

keep my heart a secret any longer. And so I must ask, my friend, though it pains me to obligate you, that you witness this, what I fear may be a rather lengthy, dyspeptic, and desultory confession.

I am determined, however, that you should not put yourself to any trouble. I cannot possibly expect, since I do not even know where to begin, that you should sift through the inchoate ramblings of a sick old man and feel at all obliged to answer. You are my oldest friend. That is enough. I need only the discipline of putting pen to paper; and, if you make no reply, I shall assume you have agreed to the conditions of this discourse. Be it known, however, from the outset, that I am very much afraid. Even as I write this, now, the harpy eagles of my grief come brandishing their talons, ready to tear what little integrity I have left to shreds.

Evelyn was extraordinary. Extraordinary. She put every one of us to shame. She lived so generously it was an inspiration. Certainly there were times when she was tired, even afraid, and her joie de vivre took a beating. But for the most part, she gambled with her fate in a way that left those of us with a far less delicate constitution overawed. But you were her doctor, Robert. You knew her as intimately as I. It was you, after all, who first disclosed to me her history. She had a congenital heart defect. She underwent an operation as a newborn and was warned not to excite herself unduly. Had she been born a decade later a new procedure, so they claim, would have prolonged her life expectancy. But nevertheless, she had been told from the age of seven or eight, as I recall, as soon as she was old enough to grasp its import, that her heart was unstable; that it might, at any given moment, simply stop. She had therefore reached the age of twenty reckoning every

spring to be her last. Many a soul would have swaddled herself and trodden carefully. Evelyn did not. She would sometimes stay awake for days, afraid of missing something, she would say, and then frighten me half to death by falling fast asleep for eighteen hours at a stretch, often in the most inconvenient of places. She once fell asleep on the ferry from Algeciras to Tangiers, and upon docking I was forced to pay four sturdy Moroccans to carry her to a hotel (belonging to one of their brothers, of course). Can we talk of the quality of certain souls? Or is there equality for all, and only circumstance raises one above another? Perhaps such speculation is redundant. Either way she was a rare and beautiful ocelot, Robert; a snow leopard possessed of a glow that I defy any man to have withstood. It was immeasurably erotic and yet, I thought, immeasurably innocent. Her heart, ever about to close, was open to every sensation.

There are times, when I think back, that I was terrified. Not that she might die one night from my slovenly embrace, or fall insensate from her horse, but terrified that she should live so sacredly, and that to call myself her husband I should have to do the same. For my part, I know that my better self has lived for the feeling of abandoning my fears and trusting implicitly in Fate. For most of us these moments are few and far between, more frequent in our youth when our inhibitions do not bind us and. We grow old and die anyway. It is inevitable. But a minute of pure unadulterated joy is worth a year of worrying and husbanding and, in that respect, although I was the elder, Evelyn had a lifetime on me at least.

I am a figure of ridicule, to be sure; a fond old man, you may say, who simply wanted to be young again; who sacrificed the dignity of his old age for a second chance at

paradise. But I fell in love, man. I fell in love. I was fifty-four years old and so bowled over I didn't stop to think. And, as I recall, there were times, when I basked in the compassion radiating from those very pale, china-blue eyes, that it seemed the fallen world indeed was redeemed and I was Adam admitted, blinking and astonished, into Eden once again.

When I was a younger man, I thought and felt that to live in regret of anything was a sin. But now, as a man having surpassed already his three score years and ten and with maybe days, weeks, or, as you informed me this morning, possibly only minutes left to live, I have such overwhelming regret I am swallowed by it. I am at a point in my life when I can truly say I'm not sure I did the right thing; that vanity was my first mistake, and that the consequences thereof have since tipped the scales towards wishing I had never met Evelyn at all. And not for my sake you understand, but for hers. I filched for myself a soul of such beauty, of such capacity for joy, and nailed it like a songbird to the wall...

He paused at this point, and looked up from the page. His choice of image was arresting. He glanced at his hand with detached curiosity, as if it, and not he, were the author of this missive. He could feel through his ribcage the quickened, still irregular beating of his heart. Calming himself by taking a few deep breaths, he determined to continue. He bent his head again to the page:

It must have become clear to Evelyn that I could not keep up with her because, not long after we were married, she decided she must find something to do; something to occupy her time and to save me, quite honestly, from the intensity of her regard. One autumn afternoon, on the way back from Thetis lake – [I remember delivering a disquisition, from the safety of the shore, on the nature of the Yellow Pond-lily and the unusual Broad-leaf Arrowhead (*sagittaria latifiola*) that is unknown elsewhere on the island, when Evelyn took all her clothes off and walked into the water. There she stood among the split and yellowing edges of the lily pads, beckoning to me. I felt like that terrified, goat-faced Pan in Bougereau's 'Nymphs and Satyr' being coaxed into the water by four giggling, plump, luxurious little nixies. Do you know it, Robert? It is a marvelous painting and may well, in its own way, suggest more succinctly than my clumsy words the fundamental nature of our relationship. The poor beast is being dragged out of his element (though not, we may conjecture, entirely against his will) by four enthralled nymphs who, indeed, look far too amused to use brute force. One is behind him, with her hand on the back of his head; another, with her rump thrust shamelessly at the viewer, yanks him by the wrist and right elbow down the slope; a third tugs his left arm, smiling mercilessly at his distress. And in that marvelous detail, rendered so subtly, of the fourth saucy, mischievous minx's hand grasping the satyr's horn - her face in profile, her left arm thrown over her head in wild ecstasy, you may infer the overwhelming erotic attraction of these creatures for one another. But I digress.] On our way back from the lake Evelyn spotted an owl on the side of the road. She persuaded me to stop the car. When we reached the bird we could see its wing was broken. I remember not holding out much

hope. We brought it home, and with no more medicine than a makeshift splint and the lending of her will, Evelyn brought the owl to recovery.

Releasing it in the trees five weeks later was something I shall never forget. We left the owl in its cardboard cage on top of an old tree stump. Evelyn and I stood back. The owl shuffled forward to the edge of the opening and blinked up and down at the forest. It seemed reluctant, as I recall, to leave its shelter. I was about to suggest that we leave it be when the bird, as if drawn into the air by some unseen string, suddenly rose and flapped over our heads. I remember clearly feeling the beating of its wings upon my face.

It was incredibly moving, Robert, to give life back to that animal. And then to let it go. As a doctor perhaps you understand this more acutely than I. As a naturalist I have spent my time pursuing insects, catching, shall we say, some dusky little Fritillary in the folds of my net, snuffed out her life and carried her home in a paper envelope in order to spread upon a board. (The thorax, incidentally, makes a very satisfying crackle as you stick a pin into it. At the end of my labours, when the specimen is successfully mounted, and I am sated in a way to which only a fine bottle of port or red Burgundy could compare, I have closed my eyes and lifted my fingers to my face intoxicated with the subtle perfume of butterfly wings, a perfume which varies with the species – lemon, or butterscotch, or custard, or a musky, sweetish odour I can only compare to a botrytis affected grape.) I have catalogued and dissected. I have labeled and displayed. But to suddenly find myself the caretaker of some animal's fragile life was a revelation.

But if I was moved then Evelyn was shaken to the roots, it seemed, of her being. The look in her eyes was quite remarkable. It was beyond desire. It was ecstasy, and then

above and beyond even that to something I doubt I shall be able to explain. It was like a momentary vacuum into which rushed every shred of purpose she had ever had. Within a week we had set up the animal shelter, and her energies found their outlet.

But it was also at that time I started to worry. Evelyn gave all of herself to those animals. It exhausted her. She became worn, thin, almost feral looking. She was unnaturally obsessed. It was a terribly injured wolf, eventually, that was the death of her. Or so I told myself at the time.

Now I suspect otherwise, though I tremble at the thought…

He paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead. A piercing wail had invaded both his ears. In his mind's eye, the harpy eagles bee-lined for his window, intent on shattering the glass and having at him. He breathed again, deeply, and through enormous effort managed to drive them from his mind. He was exhausted, but he reached once again for his pen. There was one more thing he had to say.

I must keep the worst at bay for the moment and change the course of my confession to my daughter, for there is another difficult issue, and one that I am also anxious to resolve. Thalia is a woman now. A full year out of boarding school and stuck here on this ruined farm with her father. She lost her mother at eleven, and may as well have lost her father too for all the help I've been. I'm seventy-five years old. What can I say to her? As if it were not difficult enough she has castled herself with an uncompromising manner. She has no interest in a social life, no interest in love. A number

of young men have worked here since her return, assisting Edward in maintaining his pigs and the animals that Evelyn left behind, but none of them has made any headway with Thalia. She belittles them as soon as they make an advance, and within no time at all they disappear. Edward doesn't pay them much, to be sure - we're all struggling to make ends meet here - but Thalia has a method of scaring her suitors away that, so far, is unchallenged.

I cannot help but feel somewhat responsible for this. And my hope is that now I am committed to remembering, I may also succeed in bridging the distance between us.

Until I find the strength to write again, I remain, as ever,

yours sincerely,

Mole.

Chapter two

She'd been lying awake since daybreak staring at the stain above her bed. Already the urine coloured water mark had blossomed from a corner of the wall to encircle the ceiling medallion, where the bare, exposed wires of the absent chandelier dangled like the pistils of a vicious looking flower. The dry months had halted its increase, but now that September had ended, the rains would return and the stain would spread, eventually cracking the plaster as it had in the dining room, in the cupola, and next door in the bedroom she had slept in as a child.

For a practical young woman – and she was, in many respects, a fastidious and diligent soul - her apathy at the slow disintegration of her home was out of character. Perhaps, she considered, like some princess in a fairy tale, she had fallen under some kind of spell. Or maybe she was more her mother's daughter than she knew for Evelyn, as she remembered, had certainly entertained some eccentric ideas. The driveway made a circle round an oak tree, for example, that leaned aslant the house at a tragic, near impossible angle, as if the architect had anticipated the demise of oak and house alike and positioned them both to lean on one another in old age. Evelyn had begged her husband not to trim it, or train it away from her windows. She claimed to be comforted by the sound of branches tapping at the glass, something Thalia, sleeping uneasily next door, had never understood. It had always scared the hell out of her as a ten-year-old. One night in a storm both windows got broken and again her mother begged to leave them be. Pretty soon the

branches started growing through the windows and ten years later, left unchecked, two sturdy branches eight feet long reached into the room like a pair of gnarled arms. Thalia had grown to depend on them. They made her feel safe, she conceded. Embraced.

Next door her bedroom was a wreck. The floorboards were covered with a velvety layer of dust and large chunks of plaster lay about the floor like continents afloat in a still, grey sea. She had moved into this, her mother's room, when she'd returned from school, and furnished it with her childhood dresser and vanity set. It occurred to her that if the ceiling were to collapse she would be forced to retreat again, like a refugee in her own home, into the drawing room, where her privacy would be compromised, or into sharing accommodations with her father, or with Edward which, inevitably, would be even worse.

The majority of her mother's stuff had been sold. Even the chandelier had been taken down and auctioned off. All that was left of Evelyn's eclectic acquisitions were the four life-sized *santos* and the *Mater Dolorosa* that still stood there, arranged in no particular order about the room. They were five crudely carved and plastered statues salvaged from a chapel in Sonora that her mother had loved and her father, despite the auctioneer's encouragement, had been reluctant to part with. Late Mexican baroque for the most part, they'd been fashioned in attitudes of arrested benediction, with their right hands raised, and their left hands clutching bibles or palmed open in a benign, accommodating gesture, the natural pigments of their habits and their cassocks and their painted eyes so clouded that they could have been disoriented blind beggars looking for the door. They were Ignacio, Francisco, Cayetano - with his Indian looking face - and Pedro de Alcántara in his cassock of ribbed silk and surplus of Cambric and Brittanny

cloth. But outstanding among them, by virtue of the artistry of her expression and her vestments, was the *Mater Dolorosa.* Wrinkles of consternation had been carved into her brow, and the considerable anguish fashioned into the angle of her mouth betrayed the presence of an accomplished hand. She wore an aureole and solid silver dagger, an exquisite satin dress and blue taffeta mantle with silver galloon braided loosely round her waist; and, upon her pleading, outstretched arms, Thalia had laid out her laundry.

She got out of bed and got dressed. From one of the branches she selected a red elastic, twisted and bound her hair on top of her head, then picked her way along the wooden floorboards to the dresser. "Step on a crack, break your mother's back," she whispered. "Step on a crack. Break."

At her dresser she poured water from a jug into a china bowl, replaced the jug precisely on its stain and stirred the water with her hands. The shock of the cold sent a shiver up her wrists and her shoulders buckled; it caused her to look up and see herself within the smoky mirror-glass, and she quickly turned away.

"*Amigos,*" she said. "*Queridos ciegos. Quien bailará conmigo?*"

She paused, as if waiting for an answer, her head tilted coquettishly to one side.

"Ignacio?"

She came forward. She stood before him. She was four inches taller and his fixed and wooden stare aimed at her lower lip exaggerated the impression of his modesty, as if he couldn't bring himself to look her in the eye. She smiled, leaned down and kissed him once on the top of his head, along the parting of his carved hair. "You have always been my favourite," she whispered, "Ignacio. For a holy man you dance like the devil."

She bent her knees and took him by the waist.

"They say you were a soldier. Before you took a cannonball in the leg and found God."

She lifted him an inch above the floor to prevent his feet and the hem of his purple cassock from dragging.

"And an inveterate ladies man, yes? But you can't fool me," she whispered, again. "It took a cannonball, Ignacio. A cannonball."

Placing her palm on his raised right hand she found the point of resistance and aped an Argentine tango, very slowly, to the music in her head; to the images in her mind's eye of smoky, low-ceilinged bordellos in Buenos Aires and the commerce of husbands and whores.

The crunch of gravel on the driveway brought her out of her concentration. It didn't sound like Edward's truck. She put Ignacio down and went over to the window.

Indeed, it wasn't Edward who climbed out of the pick-up. It was a boy, of about her own age, maybe younger, who stood there looking up at the house. She moved to the side of the window and watched him. He was tall and thin with an odd, angular kind of body that he moved with a fluid ease, like a girl, she thought. Like a dancer. He was carrying in his hand a newspaper that he glanced at once, before tossing it through the passenger window of his pick-up and turning once again toward the house. She hid herself and watched him.

Sullivan Rose was exactly the same age as Thalia, and he did move like a girl, or a dancer, though he wouldn't have thanked you for the comparison. Having grown up in a household of men his unmanly demeanour, through no fault of his own, had made him an object of ridicule. He was the youngest, by four years, of four brothers, but was the kind of kid who would never step down from a conflict, no matter what. By the time he was twelve his nose had twice been broken. He had more pride than common sense. When he decided to quit eating animals, at the age of thirteen, claiming it was immoral to eat anything you hadn't killed yourself, he had suffered the concerned incomprehension of his mother, the derision of his brothers, the outright anger of his father, and had gone a week without eating because the family would not honour his decision. His father, in a fit of rage, had once pinned him to the floor and forced a pork chop into his mouth, but he had quietly sat back at the table and spat it back onto his plate. Obliged to remain at table until his meal was eaten, they would find him sprawled among the cutlery in the morning, fast asleep. But he had beaten them. Eventually his mother, for fear of his taking sick, began to make him lentils and beans. His brothers began to leave him be. He had left home at the age of seventeen and, except for the odd letter to his mother, had not had any contact with any of them.

Sullivan was answering an ad that Edward had placed in the newspaper and was hoping that he'd found the right house. He took off his baseball cap and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he put his cap back on again. All morning the wind had been howling down over the Malahat, and the dust it raised in tornadoes, like so many

mischievous djinns, twisted into the cuffs of his new blue jeans and settled there. His raised his hand against the dust and studied the place.

It was an old, Victorian looking house with a stone foundation, high ceilings, double-hung windows and decorative wooden sheathing. Atop and to one side of the roof, like a tiara set askew, rose a five-sided cupola with a sag in its roofline and gaps under the eaves through which he could see pigeons flapping in and out. There were missing diamond and fish-scale shingles, the gutters were filled with grass and dandelion, and it looked like the garry oak islanded by the driveway had broken a window on the second floor and grown into one of the rooms.

There were two doors; one that opened on to thin air, its porch having evidently been removed; and another, painted blue, set demurely into the wall of a single-storied wing, upon which he knocked with an optimism bordering on hubris.

An old man answered the door and stood looking at him. He was sporting beaded moccasins, long-johns, a singlet with a red stain down the front and a Harris tweed jacket garnished through the buttonhole with a sprig of wilted parsley. "Hello - " Sullivan managed, before the old man snatched the pipe out of the corner of his mouth and slammed the door.

Sullivan flinched, and stood looking at the paintwork. It was cracked and weather-worn, and with the violence of the old man's salutation a few flakes had dislodged from the surface and fluttered to the sill like leaves. Sullivan tried the door again.

The old man opened it with a comparable violence and stood looking at him with an expression of unabashed horror. "What is it?" he said. "A sick hamster? You're moving to the mainland and your gerbil has no home?"

The old man didn't wait for him to answer. He leaned past him and saw his truck in the driveway. "No," he said, "you ran over a rabbit and you've heard we've got the wherewithal, is that it?"

"No, I..."

"Well we don't. We can barely feed ourselves for God's sake. Take your invalids somewhere else."

"You need help," said Sullivan.

The old man looked at him aghast. "How dare you," he said. "If we needed any help we'd ask for it."

"But there's an ad. In the paper."

The old man stared at him. "What are they saying about us?"

"Sorry?"

"In the paper."

"They're not saying anything about you in the paper. There's an ad. You need help."

The old man gasped and let out an enormous sneeze that bent him nearly double. He sprung back up again, brushing the thin white hair out his eyes in one motion and said, "You need the Keeper."

"Who?"

"Edward." The old man's face was scarlet from the effort of his sneeze. "Man that looks after the place."

"Thank-you."

"Don't mention it."

The old man flashed him a disarmingly cheerful smile, and then shut the door in his face.

Sullivan turned, bewildered, and considered climbing back into his truck. Through the wind he heard the click and stutter of a vehicle, a pick-up truck, that would not start. He followed the sound around the side of the house and saw a man dressed in dirty coveralls beneath the hood of a '78 Ford F-150. He walked over and stood quietly to one side.

"Hey," he said.

The man was peering deep into the carburetor and he didn't look up right away. After a while he stood up and wiped his soiled hands with a rag. He was tall and dark skinned, like an Indian, and he wore his ball cap low over his eyes. Sullivan figured he must have had some brutal kind of acne when he was younger because his face was heavily scarred. Either that or he'd been burned. Sullivan made a point of looking in his eyes. "I'm here about the job," he said.

"You got a truck?"

"Yeah."

"You got the job."

"Great."

"Got a canopy for it?"

"No."

"I can get you one."

"What's up with the Ford?"

The Keeper shook his head gravely. He crossed himself. "*In nomine Patris*," he muttered, "*et Filii, et Spiritus sancti.*" Then he unhooked the prop and let the hood slam shut. He looked over at Sullivan for the first time. He reckoned he was sixteen, maybe seventeen. He had that look of eagerness disguised with insouciance that many young men cultured. He was a good-looking kid with very pale, grey eyes and a mouth that belonged on a woman.

"Where's your truck?"

"Round the front."

He nodded. He laid the rag across the engine like a pall and made his way over.

Edward stopped short when he saw it. By its front end alone he had a good idea what it was. It was a 1952 Chevy 3100 painted with a pearl white basecoat and Valspar silver flames flickering back off the grille, along the hood and both doors, and it was beautiful. He took a closer look at the bodywork. He figured whoever had built it had slotted a new gas tank between the rear framerails because the old stock gas filler neck had been filled along with the holes that had held the old stock mirrors. New mirrors had been installed on both doors and the headlights and taillights were new also. The cargo bed was cherry wood held in place with stainless steel strips, and the cab was immaculate, but totally retro. Except for the bucket seats the dash - the steering wheel and the two

analogue gauges - looked original. The kid had rolled up in his father's prize possession looking for a job feeding pigs.

He was about to go and tell him it was sacrilege to haul livestock and feed in such a thing of rare beauty when he heard an engine turn over. He thought for a moment the Chevy had come magically to life until he realized it was the unmistakable choking of his own beat-up Ford.

He walked back and gazed, astonished, at the engine. It rocked from side to side in its casing and was turning over just fine.

Sullivan got out of the driver's side and came over, wiping his hands on the rag. The two of them looked intently at the engine.

"What did you do?"

"I whacked the solenoid with a hammer you had lying in the back. What is this thing, a '77?"

"A '78."

Sullivan nodded. "If you get dust or mud stuck under the casing the solenoid won't spin. Give it a whack it and it dislodges it. You'll need a new starter eventually."

Edward looked at him and blinked.

Sullivan shrugged. "My dad's a mechanic," he said. "And my dad's dad. He was a mechanic as well."

"Is that whose truck you're driving there?"

"No. That's my truck."

"That's not your truck."

Sullivan unhooked the prop and lowered the hood. "Yeah," he nodded, "that's what everybody says." Sullivan could feel Edward looking at him and it made him nervous.

"What you got under the hood?"

"Chevy Camaro."

"A 350?"

"Yeah. With an Edelbrock carburetor. But not just the engine. Its got a Camaro front clip and tranny. And a Camaro rearend."

"Independent suspension."

"Yeah. Slipped right into the framerails no trouble."

Edward nodded.

Sullivan handed him the rag. "So I got the job?" he said.

"Sure."

"When do I start?"

"You come back tomorrow."

"Okay." He held out his hand. "Thanks."

Edward nodded. They shook hands.

Standing at her bedroom window, Thalia watched him climb into his pick-up and pull away. He drove around the garry oak and glanced up on the way out, but through the foliage she was certain he couldn't have seen her.

She turned abruptly from the window and stumbled into the *Mater Dolorosa*. The statue toppled backwards and came to rest at Ignacio's feet. Arrested for an instant, Thalia felt her knees give way ever so slightly. She bent and brought the *Mater Dolorosa* to her feet, then stopped and stared again. Something in the way both statues appeared standing close to one another caught her eye, after a while she grinned, delightedly, and arranged them even closer.

Ignacio now stood directly to the left and behind the *Mater Dolorosa*, so his downcast eyes peered over her shoulder and his left palm held her buttocks. Stepping back she found it radically transformed their expression. The saint's eyes became full of false piety. They were calculating, indifferent to her tears, and the Holy Mother remonstrated now for altogether different reasons. She looked desperate, and afraid, like a child bride on her wedding night.

Thalia let out a short laugh. She took her laundry from the Mater's arms and folded it and put it in her dresser. Then she made her way downstairs.

Chapter three

Mole was sitting at his desk, preparing to begin again his confession, when he heard a knock upon the door. Without waiting for an answer, Thalia poked her head into his room. "You hungry?" she said.

"No. Thank-you." Mole looked up from his desk. She seemed about to say something more, but she did not.

"Good night, then," she said.

"Good night."

She shut the door. He could hear the sound of her footseps down the hallway. A little later he heard her leave her room, pass his doorway on the way to the bathroom and turn on the tap. She brushed her teeth and rinsed and passed his doorway once again. Then it was quiet. He took up his pen and bent his head to the page.

Dear Robert, he wrote, added the comma and then paused, holding the fountain pen close to the paper, on the next line down. He sat arrested for several minutes, then put his pen away. It wasn't coming. He reached into his inside jacket pocket for his tin of Erinmore, stuffed the bowl of his pipe and sat smoking. The leather creaked beneath him as he leaned back in his chair. When his grandfather had purchased the land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1878, there were only three other settlers in the vicinity: John Todd, Samuel Newton, and John Wark, each with a thousand acres. At that time, there was no road past Brentwood Bay, and it wasn't until 1890, when the West Saanich

road opened up the tip of the peninsula, that his grandfather began building the house. Much of the land had been sold before he, Malcolm Mole, was born. But even then, in the thirties, when he was a boy, he remembered walking for more than an hour without leaving his family's land, and all the way into Sidney without seeing any other structure until the outskirts of the town. It was so quiet then, the only sound other than eagles mating in the spring, or Canadian geese in late summer was the honk of the Cy Pecks's foghorn on its way to Fulford Harbour. People thought if you had land you must have money. But it wasn't the case. The land he was left with was Agricultural Reserve and all but worthless. The house would cost as much to fix as it would fetch. And besides, where would they go with a yard full of wounded animals; with a pair of wolves, with two injured otters, and a blind eagle down in the barn? The poverty had once been an affront to him, but he no longer cared. He would shuffle off this mortal coil soon enough. At least Thalia wouldn't inherit any debt.

Mole drank the last of his tea cold in the cup, re-lit his pipe and then rose from his chair. He turned off the light and leaned back and sat smoking in the dark. The money was already dwindling when he met Evelyn. It wasn't for that, at least, that she had married him. She used to listen, enthralled, to his tales of North Africa where, as a young man, he had traveled extensively. He had described to her the plaintive, aching melody of the call to prayer amplified over the rooftops of the city, and the way in which it always seemed to reach beneath the surface of his mind. He had talked to her of textiles, of architecture, of the psychedaelic patterns of intricately laid mosaics and hidden water gardens; and he had beguiled her with descriptions of the sand dunes in the south, at the edge of the

Sahara, that rose golden and ochre out of the barren terrain above fecund oases and where, first thing in the morning, from the top of the dunes, and for only a few minutes, the rising sun transfromed the desert into sharp fins of pink sand and deep black shadow that spread out for miles like cut sailcloth. When they finally went, before Thalia was born, Evelyn had waited with baited breath that first night in Asilah for the sound of the *muezzin*. And when the call finally came, at first light, the *muezzin* had hacked and sputtered his way through the chant, projecting into their bedroom the amplified cacophony of his terribly clogged lungs. They had laughed until their ribs began to hurt.

Mole looked down at his pipe. The tobacco was all turned to ash. He tipped out the bowl into the glass ashtray on his desk, then rose to the window and stood looking at the night. "Oh Evelyn," he said.

Chapter four

They were standing by the slaughter-house waiting for the shot. Mole was drunk and his daughter was ignoring him. Sullivan stood uneasily between them. He couldn't stand the sight of blood. Nowhere in the job description did it mention he'd be killing anything.

"I've got it," said Mole. He'd been standing deep in thought for some time. "Atalanta, that's the one." He sidled up to Sullivan and took him by the arm. He reeked of alcohol, tobacco smoke and chicken shit, and his gin blush in the biting cold had deepened to a shade of vermilion. "There was a King in Arcadia," he said, "whose wife could sire him only daughters."

"Father, please," said Thalia.

Mole dropped the corners of his mouth and feigned defeat, but when she looked away he elbowed Sullivan in the ribs and motioned at his daughter with his chin. "But the king, of course," he whispered, "desired a son to succeed him." He peeked over Sullivan's shoulder and drew him aside. "So when his wife became pregnant for the fourth time he had high hopes. But alas," - the old man clasped his hand theatrically to his heart - "she gave birth to another girl and the fool, in his rage, cast the babe out on to the hillside to die." He gestured expansively, a passable thespian, and Sullivan studied the meadow where the old man had motioned as if the infant might be conjured upon the grass. As if

his words and gestures might accommodate such magic. "Cast her away to the wolves," Mole continued, but a riflecrack halted his monologue.

"It's down," said Thalia.

Sullivan, bravely, followed to offer a hand, but without turning around to acknowledge him she hauled opened the low, sprung door of a motley-looking shack hammered up out of mismatched planks and salvaged plywood, ducked inside and let the door slam shut behind her.

"Four of them," said Mole.

Sullivan circled back to stand beside him. "Sorry?"

"Daughters." He beat the ashes from his pipe on to the heel of his hand, reached into his Harris tweed jacket for his tin of Erinmore, stuffed the bowl, and searched his pockets for a light. "Blast," he said.

"What?" Sullivan was jumpy.

"No matches."

The door swung open and Edward came out ass-backwards dragging a barrow by the hooves. There was room enough in the low, narrow doorway for only one body at a time, and when the hog was through, Thalia overtook him and relieved him of one of the hooves. They heaved the animal up a rise in the meadow and dropped it with a slap on to the grass.

"But the little girl was lucky," said Mole, "because a hunter found her wailing on the hillside and took her home. And under his tutelage she became an unsurpassed huntress."

Thalia supported the small of her back with her palms and stretched her spine. "Who are you talking to?" she said.

Mole shrugged. "I'm talking to anyone who'll listen." He looked at Sullivan and winked. "Fleet of foot and accurate as any man with a bow and arrow," he said, and sucked on his unlit pipe.

Edward took a stockman's knife from the pocket of his anorak and straddled the hog. He lifted its chin off the ground and with one swift stroke severed its jugular from ear to ear and stood back to watch the blood run down the grassy slope and pool in a hollow at the bottom of the rise. Then he wiped the blade along his trouser leg and put it back into his pocket.

"Thalia," barked her father. "I need a bloody match."

Thalia tucked her hair behind her ears with a gesture of exaggerated elegance and turned very slowly towards him. She blinked once. "What's the magic word?"she said.

Mole snatched the pipe from the corner of his mouth. "Please," he mouthed, obsequiously. "Memsahib, I need a bloody match."

Edward stepped forward and handed him a box of Redbirds. "Here you go, old man," he said. "Hang on to them."

"You're a gentleman." He put the pipe in his mouth and struck a match but a gust of wind extinguished it. He struck another, cupped his hand around the flame and brought it quickly to the bowl. The tobacco glowed and a thin blue smoke disappeared into the wind. The match had gone out but Mole shook it anyway and he puffed on his pipe with an air of grave contemplation. "But Atalanta angered Venus, the goddess of love, because

she was too proud to take any man as a lover. She disdained all who tried to claim her by challenging them to a footrace and chopping off their heads if they lost." He emphasized the violence by making an axe of the edge of his hand and chopping at the air. "Which they inevitably did," he continued, "the poor sods, because the girl was just too quick for them."

Sullivan looked at Edward and nodded at the pig. "How long does it take?"

"What?"

"The bleeding."

"Oh, not much longer."

"Until you hear a gurgle," said Thalia. "And bubbles appear at the cut."

Edward smiled. He looked at Sullivan. Sullivan turned and watched Thalia, who would not look at him. She pinned her hair up with a clip and studied the hog.

After a while the bleeding stopped. "Here's where we need you," said Edward.

Sullivan nodded and shuffled reluctantly forward.

"He's a big boy."

"Yeah. So what do we do?"

They dragged the carcass to a scaffold erected next to a vat of cold water. With his pocket-knife Edward made two vertical cuts just under the rear hooves and picked with the tip of his blade until two thick white sheaths of tendon showed like lengths of electrical chord. Behind each one he slid the twin hooks of a singletree, hitch-ringed in turn to a fence stretcher. Then together they lifted the carcass to a workable height and lashed the pulley rope to the scaffold.

"Until a certain young man came along whom Atalanta rather took a fancy to."

"What the hell are you on about, Father?"

"A little Greek mythology," said Sullivan, and slapped the pig on its ham. "For the sacrifice." He looked everywhere but at the gash in the pig's throat.

"Roman, actually," said Mole. "But I'm sure the Greeks told something similar."

"Well it couldn't have taken place in Arcady then, could it?" said Thalia.

The old man smiled and puffed his pipe. He looked up at Sullivan and winked. "I didn't think you were listening," he said.

Edward kneeled in the grass and made a deep incision round the base of the barrow's skull. When Thalia passed him the heavy bladed knife he sat back on his heels and offered her the honours. She glared at him and he grinned, slid his tongue into the gap between his two front teeth, then took the knife and began hacking at the vent in the hog's throat. After a while he put the knife on the ground, and with a series of twisting movements wrenched the head completely off and tucked it under one arm like a football, the easier to relieve an itch on the end of his nose.

The aptness of this episode was not lost on Mole, who was alternately chortling and coughing and yelling "Off with their heads, off with their heads" and decapitating imaginary suitors with the edge of his hand.

"Here," said Edward. He handed the head off to Sullivan, who took it gingerly by the ears and stood looking at it. There was a hole just above and to the left of its right eyelid where the bullet had entered its brain.

"You put it in the cooling tub."

"Okay."

"Any time you're ready."

He looked up at Edward. Edward nodded at the vat. Sullivan crossed to the cooling tub and dropped the head into the water. It sank at first, and then bobbed back up to the surface like an obscene apple.

"Until a certain young man came along whose name was?" Mole waited for Sullivan to answer. "Whose name was, something or other. You missed your cue," he whispered. "And this fellow incurred the favour of Venus who boasted a foolproof scheme."

Edward made a circular cut below each of the rear hooves and then another, longer cut down the inside of each leg to its anus and around it. Then, with the knife between his thumb and forefinger, he worked the blade between muscle and skin, with Thalia pulling on the hide as it peeled loose.

"Venus gave him three golden apples plucked from her temple's orchard on Cyprus and told him to throw them in front of Atalanta as they raced. The Goddess guaranteed that she would stop to pick them up and by the end of the race would be so loaded down with them that she would lose."

Edward worked quickly, and efficiently, with Thalia keeping a steady pressure on the hide. And when he had finished and made a circular incision just through the skin at the tail-head, Thalia kneeled and tugged the hide of the ham off in one piece.

"So the race began," said Mole, "and Atalanta went into the lead, though with a heavy heart. For secretly she loved this young challenger, and prayed that she might

actually lose. But her pride got the better of her, or the challenger was a tortoise because he struggled right off the bat, until he tossed the first golden apple."

Edward made another long incision from the barrow's anus along its belly to its severed neck, and started cutting, scraping, and working down the hide. He took his time around the flanks, where the hide was thinnest, explaining so to Sullivan who was paying more attention to Thalia. The sight of her on her knees slowly peeling back the hide had distracted him and he'd had to turn away, horrified by his incipient erection.

A sudden gust of wind nearly bowled the old man over and he staggered and held his arms out for balance. Sullivan hurried to steady him, but he'd already regained his footing and nodded, and waved, to indicate he was okay. "And sure enough," he continued, "Atalanta stopped to pick up the apple and the young man raced into the lead. But she caught him up. So our hero threw the second golden apple and she stopped, persuaded by the glint, and lost the lead again."

The old man stopped to light his pipe. He stood on one leg and knocked out the ashes on the heel of his boot to prove he still had his balance. Sullivan acknowledged his dexterity with a nod and the old man responded with a self-assured wink, rummaged a while in his pocket, displayed the box of matches as if he'd conjured a rabbit from a hat, and began again the pantomime of trying to keep a match lit in the wind.

"Hey," said Thalia.

Sullivan turned. He faltered as she thrust the hide toward him and it slipped out of his grip. "Shit," he said, and gathered the fatty heap up off the ground. It was warm, and

slick, and much heavier than he had imagined. He carried it quickly to the vat and dropped it in the water where it wrapped itself around the head and hardened like icing on a cake.

"Okay," said Edward. He placed an old tin washtub under the severed neck. "Here's the fun part."

Sullivan wiped his hands on the back of his jeans and turned around. He could feel his stomach turning over.

First Edward cut around the tail and pulled it from the carcass like a plug. Then starting at the anus he made a long downward cut the length of the body and bent and picked up the heavy bladed knife. He nodded to Thalia, who walked behind the hog and took a hoof in each hand, and while she yanked apart its hind legs Edward took aim and split the pelvic girdle with a single stroke.

Sullivan winced, and looked up at Thalia, who had chosen this moment to catch his eye. Edward stood back and handed her the knife. Then retrieving the pocketknife from his jeans he slid his first two fingers into the body cavity either side of the blade and drew the skin away from the viscera the whole length of the cut. He muttered something to Thalia who brought him a short handled axe and a hammer, and he kneeled again before the hog, collapsed the breastbone, and then laid the tools aside and began freeing the viscera from the carcass with his hands.

Mole inspected the ashes in his pipe and beat them out. He appeared to be in deep contemplation. "But need I say she caught him up again," he said, "this noble huntress, and the young man began to doubt the efficacy of the plan. But his fears were all in vain, being so favoured by the Goddess, and she persuaded him to throw the final

apple. The apple tumbled deep into a ravine and Atalanta couldn't help herself. She clawed her way down the thorny bank and by the time she had retrieved it the young man had crossed the finish line first, to the accolade of all the spectators."

The majority of the viscera spilled out of the cavity in one large mass and slapped into the washtub like a full stop to the old man's sentence. Sullivan stood looking at it while Edward cleaned his knives. He felt his stomach roll over, violently, broke into a cold sweat and turned and vomited. With his hands on his knees he coughed and spat and then he vomited again.

When he'd done he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his jacket and turned around. All three of them were watching him, expressionless.

And then after a while, Thalia began to laugh.

Chapter five

The Eastlake porch that had once framed the main entrance had been dismantled and removed, and Edward had boarded up the vestibule fearing the old man, in a fug of liquor and despair, would forget about the phantom entrance-way and fall out of his own front door. The back door was the house's common entrance, and it opened directly onto a kitchen lit by a large picture window that looked out over the drive.

Thalia came downstairs in search of breakfast. She found her father sitting beside the window reading the Peninsula Review. On the table in front of him was a chipped and mismatched burgundy Royal Daulton saucer and Spode tea-cup, decorated respectively in gold leaf and a rococo landscape of shepherds and blue ruins. There was a teapot wearing a raggedy tea cosy, a sugar bowl cast in celebration of the Royal Jubilee, and a golden apple sitting on a white ceramic dinner plate. "Listen to this," her father said: "'Marjorie Burns of Deep Cove was this year's winner of the Peninsula Community Association's Nimble Fingers competition. She successfully crocheted a tea cosy in a mere forty five minutes, shattering the previous record held by Elly MacIvor of Sidney, who last year took an hour and five to do the same.'" The old man glanced over the top of the paper at the table. "Perhaps we could inveigle Marjorie to nimble us up one of those cosies, what do you say? Ours looks like it's on its last legs."

Thalia was standing over the table staring at the apple. The old man glanced over the top of his glasses, shook the paper stiff and continued. "There's more," he said.

"'Oly Svensen, of Svensen Brothers Farms Ltd., the winner of last year's biggest pumpkin competition, appears to be in the running again. Last Ocotober his pumpkin weighed in at a whopping nine hundred and eighty seven pounds. 'We named it Agnetha,' said Oly, 'after my mother who just passed.'" The old man let out a short laugh. "When asked what he was going to do with his pumpkin, Mr Svensen said: 'I don't know. I guess we're going to make a lot of pumpkin pie.' Bloody hell." The old man turned the paper round and laid it on the table for her to see. "There's a war going on somewhere I'm sure of it, and all we have to report here from paradise is the winner of some old biddy's knit-a-thon, and the girth of Oly Svensen's monstrous vegetables."

"Fruit," said Thalia. "Anything with seeds is a fruit."

The old man looked up at her and blinked. She was still frowning at the apple. He drained what was left in his teacup and winced. "We need sugar," he muttered.

Thalia sat down at the table. She couldn't tell if it was made of wood, or wax, or if it were a real apple, painted gold. She wanted to pick it up and look at it but she did not. "Sugar," she said, flatly. "What else?"

"Oh, I don't know. A chateaubriand would be nice. With a decent Pauillac."

Thalia drew a breath, about to say something, but her father anticipated: "I don't know anything about it," he said. "It was here when I came down."

She nodded, calmly, got up from the table and walked towards the door.

"Thalia," said Mole.

She turned.

Mole couldn't quite find the words.

"Yes?" she said.

"How are you?"

She looked at him as if he were behaving strangely – as indeed he was. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I mean how are you?" He smiled pathetically. She looked shocked.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said.

Her expression changed again to one of profound confusion, or maybe distaste. Mole wasn't sure which.

"Why now?" she said.

Mole didn't know what to say. He hadn't told anyone about his heart. Conscious of his failure, a wave of sadness and shame overcame him and he turned back to the table. He heard Thalia open the door and walk outside.

When she was gone he sat there for a while staring absently at the apple. It was a failure seven years old, and unforgiveable. He should consider himself lucky, he decided, that she tolerated him at all. Thalia had been the one to find Evelyn dead. He'd been away on a field trip at the time. She was only eleven years old and it must have been horrifying. And what did he do? He packed her off to boarding school on the mainland. Of all his failures since Evelyn's death, this may have been the greatest.

She passed beneath the kitchen window walking tall and erect, with a calm determination and a confidence in her stride he'd had no hand in. She carried her sadness in the slope of her shoulders, as her mother had done. It was a weight he feared that in the end would bury her. He reached for his teacup but his hands were shaking badly and he

spilled tea all over the table. He went to the sink for paper towels but he could find none. He looked in vain in the drawers for towels. There wasn't even a rag under the sink. The tea was dripping over the edges of the table onto the floor. He turned around once, in the middle of the kitchen, and then simply stood.

Chapter six

Edward had an arrangement with some restaurants in town. He supplied them with the garbage cans and they filled them with foodwaste, reducing their own disposal bills and feeding his pigs for free. He needed Sullivan to pick up the full cans, replace them with empty ones, and then drive back out to the farm, every morning. The deal was Sullivan lived rent-free down in the basement and Edward covered food and gas. If there were ever any surplus from selling shoats at the auction, or a hog to the butcher, then Edward would throw him a few dollars. In the meantime Sullivan got to hang out with the animals.

Sullivan had made his rounds and returned. It was nine o'clock in the morning and the hogs were lined up. There were fifty of them, give or take, crammed largest to smallest, beginning with Adam, the original breeding boar, then the butcher hogs and breeding sows, then the barrows and gilts down the end of the line waiting eagerly with their tails twitching and their black, unfathomable eyes fastened on the buckets in the back of the truck. Sullivan and Edward were smoking a joint before breakfast because Edward, who had grown a few plants over the summer, had just harvested and was anxious to try them. He took a long drag of the reefer and passed it on. Through his teeth he sucked a quick rush of breath to drive the smoke into the bottom of his lungs and then exhaled slowly. A plume of blue smoke unfurled and disappeared into the wind.

Sullivan licked his finger and dampened the joint where it had started to canoe, then brought it quickly to his lips. He pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and squinted as he took a drag. "Wake and bake," he said, his lungs bursting with smoke, and passed the joint back to Edward.

Edward didn't take it right away. "Look at that," he said, and nodded at the hogs. "Just like good Catholics at mass."

Sullivan nudged him with his elbow and Edward took the joint. He took another lengthy haul and hung on to it, exhaled, smoked again, and then passed it back.

Sullivan had still not exhaled his last hit. He carefully received the joint and then let his breath go. The rush of it made Edward turn. "Squeezing everything out of it, are you?" he said.

Sullivan nodded and looked at the roach. He offered it back, but when Edward declined he took his car keys from his pocket, squeezed the end in between the tips of two keys and smoked the roach down as far as it would go.

When it was done he shimmied off the tailgate, opened the driver's-side door, dropped what was left in the ashtray and came back to take up his place again. He could feel Edward's eyes upon him as he settled into his seat. "Thrift, thrift, Horatio," he said. He'd heard the old man say that.

Edward looked over the lot. "I want you to look at the daylight on that boar," he said.

Sullivan nodded, gravely. He looked at the boar and he looked at Edward. They sat there for a while in silence. "What do you mean?" he said, eventually.

Edward turned to him. "Huh?"

"Daylight?"

Edward turned back to the hogs. "The distance between his rear hooves. If you can see daylight hog's got a good respiratory tract."

Sullivan studied the hog in question. "Oh," he said. "I was looking for the... I was looking at something else. I'm really stoned," he said.

The hog lot was situated on the edge of seven acres of Douglas fir and cedar forest. It sloped from north to south and the gradient was supposed to ease the drainage but it didn't. It was half a square acre of mud and shit six inches thick and the animals penned therein looked nothing like the pink and hairless Lancashires of picture books.

Edward turned and slid the first available bucket off the truck and opened the lid. Then he leaned and spat. Inside were some burgers and fries, potato skins, some calamari and shepherds pie from the local brew-pub that he kept aside to feed the shoats. They had to be penned and fed separately from the others or they wouldn't eat at all. He reached into his inside jacket pocket for his Player's. "So where are you coming from, anyway?" he said.

"What do you mean?" Sullivan was paranoid.

"I mean where were you living, before this?"

"Oh. Lesquite," said Sullivan.

"Oh yeah?" Edward flicked the lid of his cigarette packet open and selected one. He lit it and looked at the end, then exhaled slowly. "What were you doing there?"

"Growing pot."

Edward looked at him. "No."

"Yeah."

"How much?"

Sullivan looked over the clearing. He jutted his chin at the lot. "About that much."

"That much? That's half an acre."

Sullivan nodded.

"Outside?"

"Yeah."

Edward took a long pull and exhaled slowly. "So what happened to that?"

Sullivan turned and slid a can off the back of the truck. He shook his head. "You're gonna laugh."

"Why?"

"You just are."

"I won't laugh."

Sullivan leaned and picked a twig up off the ground. He snapped it and threw both ends at the hogs. "The deer ate it," he said.

"The deer ate it. All of it?"

"About three weeks before harvest."

Edward laughed.

Sullivan shook his head and slid another bucket off the truck.

"So why don't you go be a mechanic? It's good money."

"I told you. My father's a mechanic. My grandfather's a mechanic." He shrugged. "There has to be more to life than that. Sticking your head into an engine nine to five."

Sullivan looked over the lot. Edward smoked and watched him. "You couldn't stay on Lesquite?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "I don't like the smell of patchouli." He could see that Edward didn't understand. "You know, the whole hippie thing."

Edward nodded. "So what is it you want to do?"

"I don't know. This is a start."

"How's your stomach?"

Sullivan blushed. "Yeah. I know. There's a reason my grandad got into mechanics."

"This place is a dead end anyway," said Edward. "The old man's going down."

"What about Thalia?"

"What about her?"

"Wouldn't she want to run it?"

"Run what?"

"I don't know. There's a lot of land here."

"Yeah. We should grow weed."

Sullivan nodded. "Then let me give you some advice."

"Build a fence?"

"Yeah."

Sullivan turned and slid a third bucket off the truck. His thoughts were still with Thalia. "How old is she?" he said.

"Who?"

"Thalia."

"Eighteen."

"She looks older."

Sullivan hauled a can on to his back and made his way down the slope. As dry as the last two weeks had been there was still mud down the end of the pen, both inside and outside the enclosure, and carrying the cans made for hard work. Edward leaned against the truck and watched him. In his borrowed gumboots and a red mackinaw he looked like some kind of discount Father Christmas. The kid could be making twenty-five, thirty bucks an hour easy. He stubbed his half-smoked cigarette out on the sidewall of the truck and slid it back into the packet. "You'd better clench your toes," he heckled, "you're gonna lose those boots."

Sullivan was sweating by the time he made it down the end. He shrugged the can off his back and stood awhile. Along the fence were half a dozen old ceramic bathtubs spaced a few feet apart. With one hand on the bottom of the can and the other gripping the rim, he used his legs to lift a can on to the crest of a fencepost and balanced it there. He tipped and landed more than half the feed into the last tub and struggled to keep the rest from toppling out. He laboured up to the next one and tipped in the remainder.

He dropped the empty bucket beside him and watched the hogs. The butchers, dissatisfied with their smaller portion, bullied the smaller barrows and gilts aside. Squealing with indignation the barrows and gilts circled behind to the tub the butcher hogs had abandoned; but after a while, the butcher hogs returned and they all traded places again like participants in some atavistic game of musical chairs.

When the hogs were done he headed back up to the truck and unloaded the other four buckets, spread three of them as evenly as he could and then waited for Edward to return. He needed help with the last bucket. It held foodwaste from a popular Italian place in town and was too heavy to lift on his own. There was food enough stuffed into it to feed a half-dozen hogs, but Edward insisted the breeding boar get all of it.

Edward came back with the empty can and stacked it beside the others. He lifted the lid on the last can and stood looking into it for a long time.

Sullivan had been stretching his back and when he glanced over he could see that on top of the mound sat a Manhattan cheesecake, untouched. It was a Puccini's specialty. They were famous for them. This one was only just past its prime. Sullivan leaned in and sniffed it. "There's nothing wrong with it," he said.

Edward took a last drag on his cigarette and flicked it into the mud. "You got a knife?"

"I don't know."

They stood looking at the cheesecake.

"We should save it," said Sullivan.

"The whole thing?"

"Take it up to the house."

"You don't want some right now?"

"I don't have a knife."

"We don't need a knife."

"Well how you gonna cut it?"

Edward unbuttoned and rolled the sleeve back on his anorak.

"You're not," said Sullivan.

"Watch me."

Edward scooped a substantial handful of the cheesecake and stuffed all of it into his mouth.

"Good?"

Edward nodded.

Sullivan reached and scooped some of his own, from the other side, and the two of them stood staring at each other with their mouths overfull trying to swallow. When Edward shoved another handful in his mouth before he'd even finished chewing Sullivan laughed and sputtered a gout of white curd that landed on the collar of Edward's anorak.

Edward quit chewing and looked at the curd. Then he looked at Sullivan. He grabbed a fist-full of the cake and threatened to throw it. Sullivan backed away, with his hands up, muttering something incomprehensible and Edward let it go, but Sullivan ducked. The cheesecake separated overhead and spattered the hides of the feeding herd who inhaled it off each other's backs. Sullivan motioned for a truce, still sucking cheesecake from his teeth, then reached into the bucket. Edward watched him. He grabbed

a fistful of lasagne and threw it at the hogs, and dug for a slab of focaccia and threw that too. He found melon, and prosciutto, and threw all of it until the pigs were whipped into a feeding frenzy. There were hogs pursuing one another through the mud and others running after themselves like circus clowns, endeavouring in vain to reach the cheesecake plastered to their hides. It was a rare sight, and Sullivan stepped back to view his handiwork with the deepest satisfaction.

Edward whistled and nodded at Adam. The boar had stood his ground the while and didn't look the slightest bit perturbed. As if he'd learned to gauge the weight of the Puccini's can by the decibels it sounded as they dropped it off the truck and knew it was full to the brim.

Edward motioned at Sullivan to give him a hand and together they hauled the can on to the fencepost. The cheesecake was no longer worth saving. They tipped the feed on to the platform where the boar held sway and Sullivan set the bucket aside.

The boar ate with amazing speed, defending his territory with short, sideways thrusts of his tusks at any other hog that got too close, and when it was over, and the other hogs had congregated to scavenge any remaining scraps, he shambled away to sleep it off in peace.

Edward had finally cleaned the cheesecake from his teeth and he reached and shucked another cigarette from his pack. He lit it and stood smoking thoughtfully. "Nothing to do all day," he said, "but eat pasta and fuck your grand-daughters."

Sullivan thought about that for a while. "What happened to Eve?"

Edward bowed his head and crossed himself.

"What she die of ?"

Edward took a long drag on his cigarette and blew smoke through the fence.

"Childbirth?"

"Nope." Edward nodded at Adam. "A broken heart. The bastard."

"It's a man's world, huh?"

Edward nodded. "Amen."

The hogs had calmed down and gone about their business. The odd one or two still nosed at the troughs but the majority were either lying down or sniffing at each other. "Did you notice," said Edward, "before they started climbing all over each other, if the hair on their backs had been mussed up?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean have they been playing hard to get or has he mounted them." He didn't wait for Sullivan to answer. He leaped the fence and sidled up beside a sow. When he leaned on her back her tail came straight up and her ears began to twitch.

"I think she likes you," said Sullivan.

Edward squatted and peered between her hind-quarters. "I didn't think so," he said.

"What?"

"If he'd done her there'd be a plug."

"A plug."

"Yeah. To keep the jizz from spilling out. It has an odour."

"No doubt."

Edward smiled. He looked around at some of the other sows. "All in the nature of the vocation," he said.

"Sniffing a pig's cunt."

Edward hopped the fence again and turned and looked over the lot. "Well that's it," he said. "We're taking them to town."

Sullivan was quiet for a while. "You're gonna slaughter all of them?"

Edward sniffed. "No. We'll go to Drifter's. Have a coffee."

"What?"

Edward turned and looked at him. "You got a hearing problem?" He turned back to the hogs. "Yep," he said. He stacked the last bucket beside the others on the truck. "It's time for a little variety."

Edward took off his anorak, hung it on the hat-stand behind the door and slid into a booth by the window. Outside, in the parking lot, the breeding sows were corralled in a trailer hitched to the back of the Ford. Before entering the restaurant Edward had persuaded Sullivan to join him in courting them. They had circled the trailer, leaned in through the slats and with low voices alternately muttered obscenities like a stream of not-so-sweet-nothings poured into a whore's ear. He claimed it was all part of the ritual, and had scolded Sullivan for laughing.

Edward laid his hat on the table and overturned his coffee cup. The waitress came over with the pot and filled his cup. He thanked her, picked up his spoon, and stirred his

coffee thoroughly though he drank it black and without any sugar. "What about your friend?" said the waitress.

Edward looked over her shoulder at Sullivan. He had stopped beside the till, picked up a newspaper and was deep into a story on the front page. "You want coffee?" he called.

Sullivan glanced up from the paper. "Tea. Thanks." He kept on reading.

Edward looked at him for a minute. Then he turned to the waitress. "He'll have a tea," he said.

"What kind of tea?" said the waitress.

"What kind of tea you want?"

Sullivan let out a short laugh. Something in the story he was reading had amused him. "Uh, lemon zinger. Please."

Edward looked at him again. Then he turned to the waitress. "He'll have whatever the hell that is," he said.

"You want menus?"

"No. Thanks."

Sullivan shook the paper stiff and came to the table and sat down. "Listen to this," he said: "Mr. And Mrs. Ball of Jackson, Wyoming, lost their three year old short-haired Chihuahua, Raul, when a bald eagle snatched him from the deck of Princess Ship Lines 'Elora', on its three week long Alaska cruise. Fluffy, or Fluff, to her friends, said: 'It just came out of nowhere. I'd only turned my back for a minute.'" Sullivan looked up

at Edward. "Her name's Fluff Ball," he said. He turned the paper and showed Edward the photograph. "Look at the old man's face."

In the photograph, Mr. Ball was shown standing behind his wife with a reassuring hand upon her shoulder. His wife was wiping a tear from her eyes with a kleenex, while the old man's mouth showed the unmistakable beginnings of a grin: 'Arthur Ball - We're going to get a German Shepherd next time' - read the caption.

Edward handed the paper back. "I got a buddy," he said. "Dan. He's a cop. Said he pulled over a mini-van doing one-seventy on the Coquihala. On the back of it was a bumper sticker said: Another Indian Van." He smiled, and took a sip of his coffee. "Big native guy in the driver's seat grins and says, What seems to be the problem, Officer? Dan asks him his name. Peter, he says. Peter what? Peter Rabbit, he says. Dan says okay. Who you got in there with you? Peter points to the guy in the passenger seat and says, that's my brother Jack, and back there's my sister Barbara, but everybody calls her Bunny."

The waitress came over with a pot of hot water and a bag of orange pekoe. Sullivan stared at the tea bag and was about to say something but the waitress turned away.

He took a long look around the restaurant. Kitty corner from the till was a 'McClary's Famous Kootenay Stove', and an old Hamilton Beach milkshaker on a shelf overhead with a 'retired' sign pasted to it. There were antique tins along the ledge beneath the windows: Fry's cocoa, Bird's custard with its red, yellow and blue bands, and one by

his elbow that read Shing-u 'Freedom' vegetable chow-mein, with a caricature of a buck-toothed coolie standing on a railway track with a pick-axe.

In the booth at the end of the line sat an enormous man in overalls. He was sitting with a little girl whose back was turned. She wore pig-tails tied up with two ribbons and a blue gingham pinafore. The big man's head was three times the size of his companion's, his teeth had large gaps in between them and his eyes, set a hand's length either side of his nose, aimed in different directions. He looked like the giant come down from his beanstalk.

Three booths in front was an old man asleep over his coffee. He wore a greasy looking Macintosh and yellow baseball cap with the words NO NAME emblazoned on it in black letters. When the waitress came and filled his cup he woke up, smiled, and when she'd gone he nodded off again. Sullivan stared at him for a long time. After a while the old man opened his eyes and caught him looking. Sullivan quickly turned away.

Edward had been reading the paper and shaking his head. He folded the pages together and laid them aside. "I don't know," he said.

"What don't you know?"

Edward shook his head again and didn't answer. The waitress came over and filled his coffee cup and winked at him. She'd touched up her lipstick and donned a pair of feather earrings that fluttered when she flicked her hair. Edward smiled and watched her as she walked away.

"We should take this paper with us," said Sullivan. "Give it to the old man."

"The old man doesn't need any more bad news." He picked up his spoon and stirred his coffee.

"What happened to his wife?"

Edward brought the coffee to his lips and blew on it. "The old man," he said, and shook his head. "Reminds me of my grand-dad, Edgar." He turned and looked out of the window. "Died in hospital when I was a kid." He sipped a little of his coffee and set the mug back on its dish. "I was there when it happened. The window was open in his ward and the Salvation Army band was playing. We'd passed them at the entrance on the way in. Oompah, pah, something or other." He stopped, lifted his coffee cup and drank. "He'd won a goldfish for me at the carnival that summer. Shooting metal ducks, or rabbits or something, I can't remember. Anyways, I named it after him. We sat beside his bed for an hour or more and he never came to. Just lay there with his mouth open. After a while the nurses took my mother aside and I was left alone with him. I'd brought Edgar with me."

"Wait."

"In a little plastic bag."

"Edgar was your grand-dad."

"And the fish. Edgar was the fish." Edward glared at him. He took another sip of his coffee.

"So what happened?"

At first Edward didn't answer. The cloud cover had passed and the sun was beginning to show again, casting the shadows of the ketchup bottle and sugar dispenser across the table. He settled his coffee cup back on its saucer. "I took the fish out of my

pocket. Out of the bag. Put it in his hand and closed his fingers round it. He held it for a while and I think he tried to say something. Then he let out one long breath and died. Right there in front of me. I often wonder what the nurses thought when they opened up his fist."

The waitress came over with the coffee pot and Edward winked and shook his head. She didn't bother offering Sullivan any more hot water.

"So what did he die of?"

"Hmm?"

"Edgar. I mean your grand-dad not the fish."

Edward looked at him. He could see him trying not to smile. "His liver." He squinted.

Sullivan nodded gravely. He sipped his tea and avoided Edward's eyes in case he laughed. "His liver," he repeated. "Did he drink?"

Edward drained the last of his coffee in one long gulp and slammed the cup back on its saucer. "Like a fish," he said. "You little shit. Let's go. Those pigs should be itchy by now."

When they turned between the gates and jostled down the driveway it was well into the afternoon and the sun slanted sideways through the trees, leaving long shadows behind them as they passed. They drove the sows down around the house to the lot and unloaded them and waited to see what they would do. Adam mingled and sniffed, chased one or two of them around the perimeter, but the sows would have none of it. Sullivan

watched Edward. He'd wedged his boot into a notch on the fencepost and was watching the proceedings with great interest.

After a while one of the sows trotted up and presented herself. Adam didn't mount her right away. He waited to see if she would run. When she stood her ground he climbed up on her back and laboured with apparent disinterest, as if it were an obligation long bereft of any pleasure. The sow was half his size and she struggled and squealed underneath him, bleeding where his trotters gashed her hide. Edward turned to Sullivan and smiled.

"Don't say it," said Sullivan.

Edward grinned and slid his tongue into the gap between his two front teeth. Then he leaned and spat. "Nothing like a little variety in the afternoons," he said.

Chapter seven

The old man was sitting on the top step of the loggia tossing corn to a skein of injured geese and ducks, a brood of abandoned Moran hens, a peacock and a three-legged rabbit, gathered together one and all at the bottom of the grey stone steps like acolytes of some new religion. He was delivering with gusto a lecture on the butterfly family *Nymphalidae*, in particular the *Nymphalis Antiopa*, or Mourning Cloak, that overwintered in Victoria but, for reasons he elucidated, at length, was not as common in other parts of Canada. When he gestured with his hands all heads turned. When he spoke they paid attention or appeared to, at least; which, in the wasted years since his wife had died, had become enough for Malcolm Mole.

Behind him the disintegrating house endured. The shingles facing south were cracked and weather-worn. They curled up at the edges like old paper. The double-hung windows were opaque, the roof was rotted, and in a high wind the chimney had been known to relinquish its bricks. None of which the old man noticed.

The loggia itself was a patio of quarried stone capped with an Italianate balustrade and amphora shaped flowerpots that played host to no cultivated strain of flora. A balsam had sprouted in one of the amphoras and shattered it. Its roots clung like talons to the balustrade. Through the uprights snaked the remnants of a blackberry that had groped all the way up to the house then, finding nothing more to climb, had doubled back and now lay in grey and brittle coils across the flagstones. Mole reached into the bucket and

tossed his audience some corn. They flinched for an instant as it landed like hail among them, and then bent their heads to the meadow. He reached into his inside jacket pocket for his flask. When he was still a boy his father would take him hunting up on the Malahat. He remembered shooting five deer between them in one day, three bucks and two doe that they strung up on a makeshift scaffold while they ate. His father had taken a photograph of young Malcolm Mole beside the fire, grinning over his bowl of porridge with the deer forming a grisly backdrop. When they'd taken the roll in to get it developed the man at the camera store had handed them back and said, there's one hell of a picture you've got amongst those. He opened the envelope and took out the hunting shot. Malcolm sat grinning. The deer hung upside down behind him. Aside from the evident joy on his face it seemed an ordinary shot. Then the man pointed to something in the trees behind the fire. In the branches of a cedar, maybe ten paces back, waiting for his chance at the carrion, was a mountain lion perched along a limb.

That photo epitomized the island as he knew it. Much of it was still wilderness even now. Every year a hungry cougar wandered into town and got trapped in a back yard in Fairfield, or James Bay, and once, even, a few years ago, in the parking lot under the Empress hotel. The very fact that big cats still showed up in the city was a guarantee that things were pristine somewhere, though looking through the trees that bordered the eastern portion of his property, at the recent developement whose lights he could see after dark, and the increase in aeroplanes passing overhead, it seemed to him that it was fading very fast. He remembered when black bear were a common sight south of Cowichan, when the Malahat highway was no more than a logging road. It wasn't even

paved after Hillside avenue then, and getting to Goldstream was a day's journey. Those old photographs of Emily Carr sitting on the stoop of her well established caravan with her dogs at her feet and her easels and the monkey on her shoulder were no joke. Goldstream was where you went to get away from it all. Now it cost you two dollars fifty to park and, in a week or so, when the salmon began to run, they'd be turning vehicles away. He took a long pull on his flask and smacked his lips, took the bucket and slung the contents all at once. The corn made a broad yellow arc that dropped among the injured ducks and geese. They crouched and were silent, then they bent their heads to eat.

"Mr. Mole," said Sullivan.

Mole turned.

He'd come through the house from the kitchen with a loaf of something cut up into uneven slices. He stepped through the French doors and stopped. "May I join you?"

The old man waved the flask expansively. "Be my guest," he said. He was dressed in gum boots and long-johns, a baggy v-neck sweater and his tweed jacket, threadbare at both elbows, and in this shabby *deshabille*, with his ruined house around him, he resembled the lord and master of a family of squatters. He made way for Sullivan on the steps. "You see these two," he said, pointing to a pair of palsied mallards, both with limps and feathers missing, "Young woman brought them in one day. Said her Boxer'd caught them coupling." The mallards watched him with their swivelling eyes, waiting for more grain. He pursed his lips and studied them. "I called one of them *coitus* and the other *interruptus*. But I'm damned if I remember which is which." He reached into the inside

pocket of his jacket and retrieved his tin of Erinmore. He stuffed the bowl of his pipe and lit it and sat smoking thoughtfully.

"What's with the rabbit?"

"Ah, Consuela."

"Consuela?"

"Sad story. Got her leg caught in the cage. Owners never noticed. Said they thought she was depressed. Wouldn't hop over to the food dish. Said they went away for the weekend and when they came back she'd gnawed her leg off."

Sullivan sat down beside him and studied the rabbit. She was nibbling contentedly at a romaine lettuce leaf. "What did they do with her foot?"

The old man took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at him. "Well how the hell should I know?"

Behind him a pigeon flapped out of the cupola, then two more. The three of them fluttered down to land amid the ducks and geese and join the feed.

Sullivan turned and looked up at the house. It seemed unnecessarily tall, the pitch of the roof unnecessarily steep, considering the acreage they had to work with. "How old is it?" he said, "This house."

The old man smoked. "Eighteen ninety two."

Sullivan nodded. "It's so...tall."

"Supposed to be. All emphasis on the vertical in those days. Bloody upright and religious. High ceilings, double hung windows. Stolen from Italian villas, with a little

gothic mixed in. Suited the upwardly mobile merchant classes." The old man smoked and watched the ducks. "A l'orange," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Les canards. Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind. When I was a boy I shot pheasant. Stringy little buggers but you hang them for a week or two they soften up alright. Best one I ever had I forgot about. Strung it up in the barn and left it so long it fell off its own neck. Found it lying in a heap beneath the beam. Lucky the rats didn't get it. Meat was black. Cooked it up anyway and believe me," he took the pipe out of his mouth and brought the tips of his fingers to his lips.

Sullivan nodded.

"And the venison." The old man put the pipe back in his mouth. "Raised them once. Kept twelve bucks in a pen. Twelve feet high. Aluminium thing like the wolf pen. Rutting season one of them gets its antlers stuck in the fence. Poor bastard. Eleven other bucks had their way with him. Literally buggered him to death. Legs splayed out sideways. Horrible mess. The Brigadier was so outraged he shot the lot of them. Two of us culled and skinned them in the field. Took almost all day but it felt like no time at all we were so drunk with it. Hauled out the heart of the biggest one and ate it. Very bloody day." The old man shook his head again. "Ate venison until we were sick of it. Ate it raw."

Sullivan nodded, sufficiently horrified.

The old man took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at it. The mist had extinguished his tobacco and he scrutinized the inside of the bowl with a look of chagrin upon his face as if therein were hid some evil spirit bent on robbing him.

"So this, uh, 'save the animals' thing," said Sullivan, casually, "that wasn't your idea?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. Evelyn's"

"Evelyn," he echoed.

The majority of the ducks and geese had wandered off. The few that had stayed picked absently at the grass and found nothing. Sullivan picked a twig off the patio and snapped it. "Evelyn was your wife."

The old man didn't answer.

Sullivan picked with his twig in the gap between two patio stones. "So, what..." he hesitated, "I mean...oh, never mind."

The old man turned and looked at him. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's alright. Well, she was young when she...she was younger than you."

The old man shook his head. He turned away and sat motionless for a long time, cradling the pipe in one hand like some fledgling he had rescued and gazing through the mist that hid the distant meadow and wrapped itself around the poplars like a scarf. He didn't answer until his audience began to disperse. He quietly tapped his pipe on the top step. Finally he said that she had been thirty-four years his junior but that it didn't matter because she could easily have been that much older. He said that love was not only blind it was deaf and dumb as well, and that the senses ministered to it, not the other way

around. He said he'd always known she'd only ever been a visitor, at best, among them, and that those to whom Grace had distributed her gifts in more equal measure, or not at all, had been left behind to wonder at the logic of her birth.

Sullivan had quit picking with his twig while the old man had spoken, and when he'd done he started up again. "I'm sorry," he said.

The old man turned, violently. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You don't know the meaning of the word."

Sullivan straightened up and squinted at the meadow. The majority of the ducks and geese, the peacock and the hens had hobbled off. Only a few stragglers remained. "I think I'm in love with your daughter," he said.

Mole acted like he hadn't heard. He reached into his pocket and produced a pewter flask. With the pipe hanging sideways from his mouth he screwed the cap off the flask, snatched the pipe out of his mouth and drank, then passed it on. "If you think you are then you are," he said.

Sullivan took the flask but didn't drink. "So I have your permission then?"

"To do what?"

"You know."

The old man looked horrified. "You can't mean you want to marry her?"

"No, no. I just mean," he shrugged, "You know. If we got together and stuff."

The old man cast him an incredulous look. "You idiot," he said, and snatched the flask out of Sullivan's hand. He took another pull and screwed the cap back on the flask and put it back into his pocket.

Sullivan bent again and picked with his twig, and when the old man said no more he sat up straight and flicked the twig away. A hopeful mallard gabbled at it. Sullivan searched the steps for stray corn. He turned around and found the day-old loaf and picked up the dish and offered some to the old man. "Banana bread?" he said.

"Ah. Thank-you. I think I will." He chose the thinnest of the uneven slices and ate.

The mallard raised its neck in expectation. And then after a while it limped away.

Chapter eight

Dear Robert,

Since you have made no reply to the letter I sent, I shall assume you have agreed to the terms of my proposition, and I may continue this confession with your blessing. It has been a week since I have written. I have been drinking. Forgive me, but it doesn't fall to every man to kill a genius...

He stopped, struck again by what he'd written. If a certain phrase remained locked in his brain (or his hand, as the case may be) and never came to light would it still be true? Or was it only when printed on the page, in black India ink, that the words took on any authority?

Certainly he was not blameless. But neither, he knew, did the burden of Evelyn's death rest with him alone. He turned back to the letter.

...My greatest fear is this: That at some point in the weeks leading up to her death I let her down in some final, unforgivable way. It's a terribly hard thing to explain, and I would forgive you for thinking me not in my right mind, though as I write this, now, I feel more lucid than I have in a long time. We had a certain, I don't know, meeting of the minds. Quite literally, sometimes. Evelyn once passed an entire sentence to me without opening her mouth. And I mean the words, you understand? The words. Not just an emotion. We

would even dream the same dreams, from time to time. There was something about it that was not of this world. Or so I thought then. Now I think that everything belongs. The same god that made the genius made the fool.

What I am trying to say, in my own befuddled way, is that she came to depend on me for my understanding, I suppose, as much as I coveted her for her enthusiasm, and her youth. I knew what she was. [I remember the first night we spent together, when I became enraptured with the peculiarity of her scapulas, whose two lower corners closest to the spine protruded abnormally as if, I half-joked, she were incubating wings, or had simply unhinged them, perhaps, and hung them up somewhere before coming to bed.) She had a mortal fear of being abandoned by me. Why, I don't honestly know. But she had the animals, you see, to keep her company, and it became easier for me to get away. I have always coveted my own company. One of the things I love so much about entomology is the absolute solitude it requires. Both in the field and at the workbench.

But this is the thing; the animal shelter was in full swing, and Evelyn was in her element. For the time being it seemed her energies had been absorbed by caring equally, and with no apparent favouritism, for whatever was brought to us. People would leave animals on the doorstep. One morning we woke up and discovered a peacock. The next day an old golden retriever to which I grew quite attached, and it to me. Damn thing used to follow me everywhere, dragging its bad leg behind it. He had a cyst on his left rump the size of a basketball. Quasimodo, I called him, and buried the old boy myself. I suppose his owners didn't have the heart to put him down or, maybe, as Edward suggested, the word had gotten out that we were more than a shelter; that we were, in fact, a brand of

animal-soul holding station, and that Evelyn was its priestess. It's psychopomp. All of which seemed too romantic, too grandiose to me. We were more like a dumping ground for those who had abdicated responsibility for their family pets, or the crippled animal they had picked up on the road and either couldn't, or wouldn't, care for themselves. When we became overwhelmed and I suggested to some people they take their wounded raccoon home themselves, more often than not they would make some excuse and climb sheepishly back into their car. There were animal graves everywhere then, all through the woods. We took to burning them after a while they were so many. Edward was a busy man. I'm certain it wasn't what he signed on for when he first came here, but he never left us. He's with us still, as you know, operating a pig farm down in the woods, helping to maintain our ALR status and keep the taxes to a minimum. I think perhaps he has no other home. He was as stray, and just as wounded, I would guess, as any of the animals we sheltered. To this day I don't know where he came from, or what it was that drove him to volunteer with us.

But again, I digress. Evelyn, as I said, divided her energies equally between all. There had never been any hierarchy. Not until those wolves arrived. There was something about them that captured her attention - an attention that soon became an obsession. Looking back I'm not surprised. She was half-wolf herself, I think, Evelyn.

When she first got her hands on them Evelyn kept them together in the basement. She said that to separate them would halve the female's chance at survival. But after a while, the male fell sick, though neither Evelyn nor Edward could find anything physically wrong with him. They decided between them to take the male outside, and let

him have the run of the acre or so of woodland beside the driveway. Edward erected a pen with the help of locals from the Tseycum reserve. They were as anxious as anybody to see a real wolf.

The male recovered, but the female was in danger. She had lost a lot of blood; but worse than that, her wounds kept her from eating. She was seventy pounds when she arrived, and lost another ten before Evelyn could get any food into her. Her vital signs had all but ceased. Edward had argued - I heard them once - that even if the wolves were to recover they could never be released, not without taking them deep into the Khutzeymateen, not without waiting until spring, and not without keeping it a secret. He'd argued that even if the she-wolf were to live she was a wolf nonetheless, and that if she had been able to speak she would have bargained for death over captivity because death, as Evelyn herself, he said, had once convinced him, was nothing if not another kind of freedom.

But Evelyn wouldn't let the she-wolf go. She slept beside the cage for the first three weeks. After that she slept inside it. We would wake up in the morning and find her curled up with the she-wolf in the straw. Edward said he couldn't believe what he was seeing, that she was losing herself to this animal, and said as much to me. My answer, Robert, was that obsession was always believable, that my wife thrived on its vicissitudes, and that she'd be back among us soon enough.

She died inside that cage. The wolf recovered.

All of which brings me to the excruciating truth of why I so easily dismissed Edward's alarm, and the way in which, I think, I ultimately let her down. But I find I

cannot bring myself to face it. Not yet. I feel my nerve begin to falter. Until I can find the strength to continue, then, I remain your grateful and most penitent friend,

Mole.

Chapter nine

Thalia sat at the kitchen table with her eyes closed, hands crossed in her lap and her shoulders relaxed. No apples on china plates today. She'd seen him since and not mentioned the first one, so she figured he'd given up.

And just as well.

Morning sunlight through the picture window warmed her face and neck, and she thought about the summer just passed. Already it seemed like a long time ago. She had skipped her graduation and come home right away, anxious to be done with her childhood, and had passed the summer to herself. She would ride her bike into the Highlands and swim at Pease lake, then take the trail down to McKenzie bight and fall asleep on the beach. She would climb into the Partridge hills and, from the height of a bluff, look down upon the birds of prey circling beneath. A few times she had rented a kayak at Brentwood and paddled down Finlayson Arm. She'd seen seals rise out of the water with salmon in their jaws, watched kingfishers catching grilse. She'd seen a bald eagle dragged chest deep through the water until it rose with slow, belaboured wingbeats with a ling cod in its grip. And she had been happily, blissfully, alone. The long days leaving ample time after the animals had been fed to ride off on her bicycle and be free.

A scratching at the back door brought her out of her thoughts. She got up from her chair and crossed the kitchen. The peacock was standing on the back steps, and when she

opened the door it hesitated, as if awaiting permission, tilting its head from side to side. "Well come on then," she said. "I'm not leaving the door open for you."

The peacock picked its way cautiously across the terracotta floor, as if the tiles were thin ice, hopped on to a chair and inspected the kitchen table. Thalia sat down beside it. A few grains of dropped sugar glittered in the light like diamonds and the peacock leaned in sideways to pluck them one by one from the formica tabletop, without making a sound.

Her fondest memories were all of a piece. Always she was outside, doing something active, and always blissfully by herself. The only memories to rival these were the ones she had of Mexico, and of spending days with her mother without the old man around. Leaving her father in San Miguel they would ride burros together into the mountain towns, small whitewashed settlements with a single church, a cantina, an old hacienda, perhaps, on the outskirts. She remembered vividly the children in the rutted streets, dressed always in the cleanest clothes, the mangy slat-ribbed dogs and cats, the well at the centre of the plaza around which the women would gather in their black rebozos to gossip and wash their linen, the women among whom her mother felt so utterly at ease. They seemed to share some unspoken covenant those women, her mother, as if their secrets, their superstitions translated seamlessly between them.

But the last time they'd been in Mexico her mother had left her alone, with her father, to spend three days to herself. He was an old man even then, and when they went out together at night into the plaza in San Miguel to eat chiles rellenos and take their ease among the orange trees, the cool and fragrant evening breezes, the *camareros* would call

him *abuelo* – grandfather - and neither one would contradict them. They would say very little, and when they did it was like throwing their words over a great distance and waiting, listening for echoes. It was only when the old man told her stories that the distance closed, as if he were not really saying them at all but awakening their narratives inside her own head. They would finish their dinner and the old man would begin, smoking his apple-wood tobacco, telling stories of heroes and gods; fabulous animals; tales of war and abductions; of love that was bloody and families that were torn apart by jealousy, or fate. Sometimes he told stories about Mexico, and those she listened to intently, her eyes searching the plaza for the faces that mirrored the ones in her mind's eye.

But all the while she missed her mother, and badgered her father constantly for her whereabouts, whyabouts and whenabouts, and her father would answer her in Spanish: *En las montañas. Por que necesita la soledad.* And, *no te preocupes*, Thalia, *regresa pronto*. She will be home very soon.

Sitting at the kitchen table still, with her eyes closed, Thalia recalled, for the first time in years, that evening when her mother had returned. She remembered how they met with a formality that belied their deep attachment, with a chariness that seemed odd to her even now. The old man had stood up to receive her and they had kissed each other on the cheek. He'd pulled out a chair for her and called to the *camarero* for more wine. For an hour or more, Thalia had watched them circle like animals, furtive and uncertain. And it was only now, eleven years later, now that she could recall more than her own grief, that

she remembered the peculiarity of that rendez-vous, the secret and intimate temerity that it was pointless now to talk about.

She opened her eyes. The peacock stood all but motionless on the table. Only its eyelids blinked.

"Did you know," said Mole, "that the mating season of the Indian peafowl coincides with the monsoons?" He had wandered quietly downstairs and had lingered unnoticed in the doorway.

"For God's sake, Father, don't do that."

"What?"

"Sneak up on me like that."

The old man acted like he hadn't heard. "The locals interpret their mating call as a sure sign of rain."

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long." He unstuck himself from the doorjamb and came to the table and sat down. He squinted and searched, in an exaggerated manner, between the peacock's legs for golden apples. "I had a presentiment that day. I felt, I don't know. Emotional."

"What are you talking about?"

"I believe he's come here to save us."

"Who?"

"Sullivan."

"The only thing around here needs saving is this house."

The old man nodded. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you. I had a photograph. Of your mother. I believe it was the only one I ever kept. I left it in my study drawer. Do you have it?"

"No."

"But you don't even know what it is. I caught her coming through the French doors one day. Out of the rain. In April I think it was. She didn't know I was there."

"I have another one, somewhere. Of you and her on your horses."

"Hmm."

Thalia got up from the table and made to leave.

"Thalia."

"What?"

"No man is an island, you know."

She regarded him without expression. "I have everything I need."

Mole continued with his line of reasoning. "You must not be so uncompromising," he offered.

"Why not?"

"Because you shall end up alone."

"I'm happy that way," she said, and made again to leave.

"I abandoned you, Thalia," he blurted. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged.

"We spent your summers together, did we not?"

Thalia let out a short laugh. "No." She turned to face him full on. "I remember coming home that first summer. I got my period. I had absolutely no idea what it could be. I thought I was sick. I was so scared. I thought it had something to do with Mom dying, that maybe I was bleeding for her."

Mole collapsed into his chair. He could feel his daughter's eyes boring into him. "But how could I have helped you with that?"

"You couldn't then. You can't now."

"Thalia-"

"Don't you dare."

"Please."

The peacock hopped off the table on to the bench, then on to the terracotta tiles and made its way over to the door. Thalia opened the door impatiently and ushered the bird outside.

"I've invited him for dinner. Thanksgiving."

Thalia didn't answer. She rummaged in the fridge for the otter food.

"All four of us."

She shut the fridge and made her way over to the coat rack. She took her anorak from the peg and walked out.

The otters were waiting when she came down from the house. She climbed the gate, as usual, instead of opening it. They had been known to ambush her and if they got out it was a production to coax them back in again. She dropped on to the other side and

crouched and petted the bitch. She had rolled on to her back and was wriggling in the mud. Under-sized and freckled as a leopard on her belly, she'd been damaged like her sibling by run-off from the pulp mill up at Cowichan and couldn't shed her juvenile coat. If either one of them stayed in the water too long they caught hypothermia. They'd had them nearly five years, and before the old man could afford to fence in the lake they'd lived inside the house, sleeping in Thalia's bed and swimming in the bathtub. The dog reached for the kidneys that she'd tucked between her knees and she stood and raised them out of reach and spoke to them both in a sing-song voice, telling them they'd have to wait. That she'd feed them when she got to the gazebo.

They were kept in a lake made by damming the creek that surfaced in the wolf pen. The lake was a perfect oval, tapered at each end by a meniscus of lilies, and with an island in the middle like the pupil of an eye. The otters had built their holt above the waterline and made a mud-slide of the bank. The grass above the waterline was pocked with spraint. There was spraint among the mud along the edges of the lake and along the rotten timbers of the bridge that led to the island and five-sided gazebo. The odour of it was unmistakable. It was a sharp, hot, particular stink she always linked to seaweed, having smelled it for the first time in the inlet where otters would make their holts in October under summer cabins, boat-houses, or in abandoned cars and trucks.

She trod the timbers very carefully, keeping only to the joists, and trying not to trip over the otters. She leapt the last three planks and landed on the bank with a slap, climbed the slope up to the summer-house, and when she stepped through the doorway found, on the one Adirondack chair, another golden apple with a leaf still attached to the

stem. She swung around and searched the edges of the lake, her stomach in a knot. The otters pawed frantically at her knees. She couldn't remember telling him how often she fed the otters, or even if she fed them at all. She fumbled with the plastic the packet of kidneys were wrapped in and set them on the ledge. The otters jumped up and attacked them, seizing them between their paws and chewing with the sides of their mouths and their eyes closed.

She sat down on the edge of the gazebo and listened. Something broke the surface of the water behind her; she gasped and turned, too late, catching nothing but a ripple that spread in concentric circles toward the edges of the lake.

Chapter ten

Edward wiped his boots on the welcome mat, unlatched the back door and stepped into the kitchen with a cleaned and scalded suckling pig slung from his index finger. He had it by the gash in its throat and when Mole turned from his chopping board Edward raised the carcass much as a fisherman might display his winning catch.

"Very nice," said Mole.

"You said about fifteen pounds."

"I did."

"You want it now?" said Edward, with a thrust of his arm that set the pig a-swinging.

"Um, no room at the moment. Just lay him on the kitchen table there."

Edward did as he was told. As he settled into a chair Thalia slipped through the swinging door and stood looking at the pig. Then she looked at Edward. Edward winked and fingered the gash in its throat.

Ignoring him she went to see what her father was up to. He was sporting a pinafore frilled at the edges like a French maid's *tablier,* and adorned with little blue cornflowers. On the front, in a curve across the breast an iron-on 'mother' had been loosely stitched and long since fallen off, leaving a relief of unfaded cornflowers where the patch had been. She found him dicing dried apricots and adding them to sherry. "What are you doing?" she said.

"Ah, you're just in time," He put down his knife, wiped his hands on the apron, and handed her a brioche and a bread knife. "I need this cut into twelve even slices, and lightly toasted."

Thalia put the brioche and the bread knife back on the counter. "You've got to be kidding."

Mole set the bowl of sherried apricots aside and checked his watch. "Damn things need at least eight hours to soak," he said. "Couldn't find fresh apricots anywhere."

Thalia glanced over the counter. Beside the Tio Pepe was a bottle of Verdehlo Branco Madeira, a Pouilly-Fume, an Auxey Duresses *vieilles vignes* Burgundy, and a Barsac.

"Pass me that pig, will you, there's a good girl?"

"We can't afford this."

"We can't afford macaroni and cheese."

"We could eat three months of macaroni and cheese on what this cost us."

"And then where would we be, hmm? Stupefied with tedium and poor taste. I'd rather starve."

"What did you sell?"

"I didn't sell anything. I cashed my pension cheque."

Before Thalia had a chance to vent her exasperation Sullivan barged in through the back door. He nodded to Edward, said a sheepish "hey" to Thalia, and for the old man produced about two ounces of chanterelle mushrooms.

"Good lad," he beamed. "A little Madeira, some fresh leeks, broth, butter, fresh pepper and chives..." His enthusiasm tailed off into mere gesture as his vocabulary proved inadequate. He simply shook his head and made a low, guttural sound that sounded half like laughter and half like a warning, as if what he had in mind was intoxicating, dangerous, liable to incite importunate acts of passion.

"How do you know those things won't kill you?" said Edward.

"I used to pick them for a living," said Sullivan. "Chanterelles and a few others of the more magical variety." He grinned, and glanced up at Thalia. She looked at all three of them as if they were mad. "You spent a month's income on one meal."

"Oh, for God's sake, Thalia," scolded Mole, "It's not a meal, it's a Thanksgiving dinner. Where's your sense of ritual?"

"It's a waste of money."

"Wasted only on you."

"So what do we live on the rest of this month?"

"Well I don't know, Thalia, you could always get a job."

"And you could always sell some land."

"Now you are being ridiculous. You want some insensitive developer hacking up your ancestral estate to raise a bunch of pink-stuccoed condos you can see through the trees like a... like a goitre," said Mole, with disgust.

Thalia stared hard at her father. He was implacable. She turned, brusquely, and disappeared through the swinging door.

Sullivan watched the door swing to and fro until it settled and she was gone. The old man took a bag of blanched almonds from the pile of groceries on the kitchen counter and began slivering them lengthwise. "She'll be back," he said. "She can't help herself. Here." He thrust the brioche at Sullivan. "I need twelve even slices, lightly toasted."

"How much it cost us?" said Edward.

Mole waved this away as if it were of no account. "Lay them on a cookie sheet and toast them in the oven," he said to Sullivan.

"Well that settles it. We go to Whippletree tomorrow."

"What's that?"

Edward didn't answer. He sat looking pensively at the pig.

"What's Whippletree?" said Sullivan, again, lining up the brioche with the knife.

"The auction," said Mole. "Cut it in the middle first and then divide the halves."

While the brioche was toasting Mole cracked a dozen eggs, separated the yolks and dropped them into a large mixing bowl with a cup of sugar. He coarsely chopped eight ounces of Callebaut chocolate, shovelled the chunks into a metal bowl and placed it in another, larger one filled with hot water. He then combined three cups of whipping cream with a cup of milk in a pan and set it on the stove at a low heat.

Sullivan had been watching the brioche intently, determined not to burn it. When both sides were toasted he arranged them in a baking dish, in two overlapping rows, as per the old man's instructions, who in the meantime had whisked the hot cream into the eggs and sugar, skimmed off the foam, and then with a pinch of salt and a teaspoon of

vanilla mixed everything together with the chocolate. He was murmuring softly to himself as he worked, and from time to time glanced up at the clock over the stove. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and in the interests of co-ordinating all three courses, he had disciplined himself to abstain from the sherry and Madeira until noon.

He elbowed Sullivan aside and poured the chocolate mixture over the brioche, covered the dish loosely with plastic wrap, placed another, smaller dish on top and then laid the sherry and Madeira bottles lengthwise in the second pan in order to weigh it down. "One hour," he muttered, glancing again at the clock.

"Until the bread soaks up the chocolate, eh?"

"That too."

Edward had quietly made himself a cup of coffee and sat back down at the table. The suckling pig reposed before him like some defunct ventriloquist's puppet.

"How much do you get a head?" said Mole, as if he had read Edward's thoughts.

Edward shrugged. "Twenty-five, thirty. I can find a dozen, I guess."

Thalia swung open the door and came to the table and laid twine and two knitting needles beside the pig. "So what are you stuffing this thing with?" she said.

"Ah, ha," exclaimed Mole, rummaging among the stack of groceries. He turned to her with a bag of Granny Smiths, a peeler, and a paring knife. He handed the peeler to Thalia and the paring knife to Sullivan. "Apples," said Mole, "peeled, cored and sliced."

Sullivan and Thalia sat down without looking at each other. Edward quietly sipped his coffee.

Mole washed and thoroughly dried the pig by patting it with paper towel. He mixed salt, pepper, and thyme together and rubbed the inside of the cavity. "'Cos I've got you," he sang, horrifically out of tune, "under my skin." The prunes he'd been soaking he transferred to the stove and began cooking them. Then he started on the dishes. "'Cos I've got you, deep in the heart of me."

Thalia got up from the table and found a large bowl to collect the peeled apples. She placed it between them and returned to work. Sullivan was having trouble with his paring knife. He was cutting too deep and removing large coils of flesh before correcting himself and beginning again at another point. When he'd finished his first apple it was half its original size and gouged all over. He put it sheepishly beside Thalia's in the bowl and reached for another. Edward nearly sputtered his mouthful of coffee when he saw it.

"You killed it," he said.

Thalia looked into the bowl.

Sullivan put his apple in front of Edward and handed him the knife.

Edward shook his head. "I cleaned the pig."

Thalia reached and seized the apple. "I'll peel them," she said. "You can core and slice them."

"On the table?"

Thalia shrugged. "Sure."

Edward drained his coffee and got up.

"You're not going?" said Thalia.

"What?"

Thalia and Sullivan glanced briefly at each other, and then quickly looked away.

Edward poured himself another cup of coffee and came back to the table.

Mole stirred the prunes and checked the status of the brioche. Sullivan and Thalia worked intently, in awkward silence, until Sullivan piped up: "So we're going to Whipping tree tomorrow."

He said it neither as a question nor a statement, but left it hanging somewhere in between.

"Whippletree," said Edward, "not whipping tree."

Thalia let out a short laugh. She covered her mouth with one hand and tried to stifle it. Sullivan blushed. Edward quietly sipped his coffee. Thalia looked up at Edward, but Edward wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I'd sacrifice anything come what might for the sake of having you near, in spite of a warning voice..."

"We went to Whippletree last year, didn't we?" said Thalia, addressing Edward. "Great fun. I was the only woman there, at ringside anyway. My favourite part was when they brought that stallion out, do you remember? Beautiful thing. Big. Black and shiny. Arabian, if I remember correctly. Now I don't know," she continued, expertly peeling the apples, "if it was the excitement of the lights, or the crowd or what, but he started getting hard and, oh my God...His prick was about four feet long, swinging back and forth beneath his belly like, like some giant pendulum." She let out another short laugh. "All those men in the pit suddenly went very quiet." She finished the apple she

was peeling and handed it to Sullivan. "I turned around to watch the crowd's reaction. Only the women knew where to look."

Edward drained his coffee and put the empty mug back on the table. "It wasn't an Arabian," he muttered.

Thalia laughed. "Whatever."

When they were done the old man transferred the apples to a pot and cooked them in four tablespoons of butter. He combined the apples, prunes and almonds, and set them aside to cool.

"What else?" said Thalia.

Mole thought for a moment. "That's it for now," he said. "I'm doing baked yams with cranberry sauce later, green beans with Roquefort and walnuts, and a spectacular fresh chanterelle and Madeira soup." He winked at Sullivan.

"What time is dinner?"

"Oh, let's say six, shall we?"

"In here?"

"No, no, in the drawing room. We'll carry this table in. Make a fire."

Thalia nodded, turned and disappeared through the swinging door without a word.

Sullivan stared blankly out the window. He heard Edward get up, rinse his mug in the sink and step out the back door.

Mole was stirring the stuffing and purring softly to himself. He checked the brioche, took stock of his remaining tasks, and then brought the pig back to the table. Sullivan turned. The gash in its throat looked like a second smile.

Mole spooned the stuffing back into the apple bowl. Under his arm he carried tin foil and a raw potato, both of which he placed in front of Sullivan. "Here," he said, "crumple tin foil round his ears, curl his tail with the knitting needle and then foil that too. I'll stuff the little bugger."

"What's the potato for?"

"To hold his mouth open. When he's cooked you take it out and replace it with an apple." The old man grinned. "All we need is deerhounds to throw our bones to."

When the pig was stuffed Mole skewered both ends of the opening and laced the knitting needles together. He tucked its front and hind legs forward and bound them while Sullivan lined a roasting pan with foil. They lifted the pig on to the pan, arranging it diagonally until it fit, and turned the foil up loosely round the edges. Then they set the pig aside.

"Job done," said Mole. He checked the time.

"How long does he take?"

"About four hours."

Sullivan nodded. "So six, you said?"

"Yes." The old man reached for the Madeira. "Got a dinner jacket?"

The drawing room was the only quarter of the house to have not succumbed utterly to the auctioneer. The mahogany sideboard and corner cabinets, along with the Waterford crystal decanters, glasses, and the silver tea service that had once been locked inside them had been among the first things shipped to Sotheby's. But unlike the dining

room, from which even the wainscotting had been pried, the integrity of the drawing room was otherwise intact. The fire grate was late Victorian cast iron, from the Victoria Foundary, hooded with a moulding of two long-tailed songbirds serenading one another over a clam shell at centre. The tiles either side of the eighteen inch opening were comparatively rare, eight by four inches apiece of pale lemon yellow with a wildflower pattern in lavender and green that continued unbroken from the lowest tile, at the level of the grate, to the highest, two inches beneath the first bevelled recess of an iron fire surround that was topped, and flanked, but not altogether swallowed by a mahogany overmantle. Either side of the fireplace the wainscotting began. Above it the walls were papered with William Morris's Marigold pattern. Mole's grandfather had imported it from Staffordshire in 1891 and it had kept its colour very well. The vertical meander of its slender petals and leaves drew the eye upwards to the frieze and cornice, then to the spandrels and ornamental plaster ribbons that ran around the perimeter of the ceiling.

Mole wedged himself into the creased and buttoned leather chesterfield that faced the fire and took a long pull of Madeira, directly from the bottle. He belched, begged pardon, wiped his mustachioed mouth with the back of his hand and stared into the yellow lickings of the fire. Evelyn had been a marvelous and enthusiastic cook, and preparing a meal had been one of their favourite pastimes, especially in the winter, when the rains would keep them from saddling their horses or walking in the Partridge hills above Finlayson arm. Their meals had been sacraments between them, an assurance that all was well, and that it would always be so. Sitting in the drawing room now, alone, with a suckling pig in the oven but no Evelyn to share it became too much for Mole. He felt

himself begin to sweat. He drank heavily from the bottle and lay back; and after a while he fell asleep. He did not dream.

Thalia had retreated to her bedroom. She had rearranged her dresser, swept the floor and dusted the *santos* before lying down. After a while she also fell asleep. And Edward, not ordinarily an afternoon napper, after feeding the birds down in the barn, had collapsed upon his bed also and closed his eyes. Only Sullivan was awake. He had taken the old man seriously about dressing for dinner and driven into town to go shopping, a task that would occupy him for the afternoon.

Slowly the pig roasted in the oven, releasing its juices. The odour wafted through the swinging door into the hallway, up the stairs, along the corridor into Thalia's bedroom, on along to the end of the hall and up the narrow shaft into the attic, then out the holes under the eaves where the wind pulled it apart like cotton wool. And more than three miles away, on the Tseycum Reserve that bordered the farm, where Sullivan had poached his chanterelles, a brindle mutt dozing outside his owner's house raised his muzzle and sniffed at the whiff of roasting flesh that crept beside and weaved itself into his doggie dreams.

At four o'clock Mole awoke, sober and visibly shivering. The fire had gone out. The late October afternoon had grown cold, and the drawing room was like a mausoleum. He reached immediately for his bottle of Madeira and took a long pull.

At the same time Edward came up from his basement, Thalia came down from her bedroom and the two of them met in the corridor at the bottom of the stairs. They heard

the old man moaning, followed his voice and discovered him on his knees in front of an unlit pile of paper fumbling with a box of matches. Distress was written on his face. "Go and sit by the stove," said Thalia, in a resigned tone. "We'll look after the fire."

Mole struggled to his feet and handed her the matches. He dragged himself like a shipwrecked sailor along the corridor, leaned on the swinging door and nearly fell into the kitchen.

Sullivan was seated at the table. He stood up when he saw the old man stumble and hurried to steady him. Mole pointed feebly at the bench and indicated that he wanted it moved. "What do you want?" said Sullivan. The old man gestured at the stove. Sullivan dragged the bench beside the oven and Mole slumped on to it. He wrapped his arms about himself and stared through the glass at the pig.

Sullivan put his coat around the old man's shoulders and the old man attempted a "you're a good lad", but the words wouldn't form. They came out as a barely audible, inarticulate groan.

Sullivan put the kettle on and watched him. Despite his shivering he managed still to bring the Madeira to his lips and drink without spilling a drop.

When the kettle was boiled he made tea and handed a mugful to Mole who was evidently beginning to thaw. He accepted the tea reluctantly and sipped it slowly, methodically, as if he were keeping time. "Did you know," he said, "that when Shackleton's ship got caught in the Weddell Sea they made camp on the ice and drifted with it for sixteen months, living almost entirely on seals and penguins?"

Thalia and Edward came in before Sullivan had a chance to answer. They picked up the kitchen table and carried it through the swinging door, ignoring them both, and after a while returned to gather cutlery, dishes, and glassware. Thalia picked up the Burgundy and looked at it. "How long do you want this to breathe?" she said.

"Which one?" Mole didn't turn around.

"The others are white."

"Don't worry about it."

Thalia put it back on the counter. "The room will be ready in ten minutes."

"Jolly good."

She lingered until Sullivan looked up at her, then disappeared again beyond the swinging door.

"Mr. Mole," said Sullivan, "you've got an hour and a half. Did you want any more help in the kitchen?"

The old man looked up at the clock and then returned to his tea. He let out one long sigh. "Yams," he said, eventually, "I need you to peel me some yams."

By six o'clock Mole was in fine form. He had made the soup and yams, prepared the green beans, collected the juices from the suckling pig to make a simple sauce, and polished off the bottle of Madeira. He took a quick inventory of his preparations, slipped his pinnie off over his head and made his way upstairs to change.

He came back down dressed in slacks that he no longer filled, and so to keep them from falling down had looped his old school tie, M.C.C. style, through the belt-buckles. He wore a white shirt and cravat, and in lieu of the smoking jacket that he'd counted on

but hadn't been able to locate, he sported a decidedly shabby-looking burgundy brocaded dressing gown fastened with a tassled rope that dangled round his knees. And slippers. He sauntered languidly downstairs and made a casual, dignified entrance into the kitchen where Thalia and Edward were seated, and went immediately to the freezer for ice. "Martini?" he said.

"Good God, Father."

Edward hid his mirth by turning to the window.

"You look like..."

"Hugh Heffner," said Edward.

Mole did not dignify their impertinence with a response. With an air of practised elegance he made martinis in a tupperware pitcher, strained them unequally into four mismatched glasses and brought them over to the table. "Where's the boy?" he said.

Edward shrugged. Thalia had lowered her forehead to her hand and closed her eyes.

"Oh for God's sake, Thalia, don't be so twee." He raised his glass to Edward, who he could see had at least changed into a clean shirt and jeans for the occasion. "Some of us," he said, "still think it appropriate to dress for dinner."

"You're dressed for bed," said Thalia.

The old man sipped his martini and scrutinized his daughter. "Since you evidently wear the same thing waking or sleeping, I hardly think you're qualified to ascertain the difference."

Edward looked up at the clock. "It's after six," he said. "Knowing him he's already sitting at the table."

Mole nudged a martini toward his daughter. "Well then I suggest we go and find out."

Mole held the swinging door open and followed them down the corridor, sipping his martini as he went. When Edward and Thalia entered the drawing room they stopped, speechless, and the old man had to squeeze in between them to see. Sullivan stood up awkwardly and cleared his throat. He had not only found a second-hand dinner jacket at the Salvation Army but had purchased an exquisite, if slightly outmoded suit cut by Anderson and Sheppard of Savile Row that fit him perfectly. At his throat he wore a black silk tie, knotted for him by the sales lady and which, for fear of not being able to repeat, he had cut at the back and re-fastened with a safety pin. On his feet he wore a pair of patent leather shoes in which the firelight flickered, and standing beside the Chesterfield in the still grandiloquent setting of the drawing room, he could have been a gentleman adequately bred to the rituals of decorum.

Mole could manage no more than a few inchoate exclamations of glee. Eventually, after admiring Sullivan from all angles, he handed him a lukewarm martini and declared a toast to those who, in an age of fast food and forgotten ceremony, still knew how to dress for dinner.

Thalia was obliged to raise her glass, though she refused to look at him. When she and Edward had first come in, and Sullivan had stood up and smiled at only her, she knew

that he'd made the effort not for her father's sake but for hers, and to her great dismay she nearly wept.

Mole insisted that Sullivan sit at the head of the table. He placed Thalia at the opposite end and Edward in between them, with his back to the fire. The table had been placed in the middle of the room with a sheet thrown over it for a tablecloth and was laid with mis-matched glassware and assorted knives and forks. Earlier, Mole had bewailed his forgetting to buy candles, and while he was out Sullivan had decided to supply them. At the Salvation Army he had bought fourteen candle-holders, at a quarter apiece, and, unaware of its significance, a menorah that he took for a funky candelabra to which he had given pride of place on the dining table.

"So what are we celebrating," said Thalia, settling into her seat, "Hanukkah or Passover?"

"Don't be ignoble, Thalia," muttered Mole.

"I'll bet this is a first. The only time in history a menorah and a suckling pig have graced the same table."

"Why have you always go to be such a bitch?" said Edward.

Thalia was too shocked to answer at first. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

"What difference does it make to you?"

"Now, now," said Mole.

Thalia fixed her eyes upon her father. "Would you like to remind him that he lives here by our charity or shall I?"

"If I left tomorrow, missie, this place would fold."

"Don't be ridiculous. We wouldn't eat pork, that's all."

"That's enough, Thalia. You're upsetting our guest." He smiled at Sullivan. "I am of the opinion," he said, "that there is only one way to settle differences of this kind, and that is with a drink." He reached for the bottle of Pouilly-Fume.

Sullivan understood at once that he was very much an outsider even among a family of such eccentrics; that the currents of animosity, loyalty, and troubled love ran as deep as they did in his own household, and suddenly his dinner jacket seemed absurd.

Thalia reddened and stared hard at Edward. "Missie?" she said.

"Just so everybody knows," said Edward, "I let the butchers and breeding sows out earlier, for the acorns and crabapples. So don't be surprised if they show up on the patio out there."

"Crabapple jelly," said Mole, "now that would have been an excellent accompaniment. Evelyn used to make excellent jellies."

At the mention of Evelyn's name the table became silent, as if the saying of her name alone were like a summons. Sullivan glanced briefly at the three of them. Thalia was staring at her plate. Edward looked at his empty wine glass. The old man was struggling with the cork.

Thalia suddenly got up from the table and left. Only Sullivan looked after her. Intimating that she would not return this time, Mole popped the cork and did not fill her glass. Then he left the room also. Sullivan asked Edward if the old man had gone to get Thalia and Edward said no.

Mole came back with three soup bowls on a tray. He had overfilled the bowls and spilled them as he set them down, sloshing the creme fraiche and chive garnish to one side. He served Sullivan first, then Edward, then he set his own bowl down and composed himself. He raised his glass, made a Thanksgiving toast to the pig and to the company remaining at table. Edward and Sullivan raised their glasses in silence. Taking advantage of his platform Mole began to wax poetic. He said that the sharing of food was more than communion; that eating in itself partook of life's central mystery. That life should feed on other life was both the pain and the joy of existence, and that although the two seemed rarely to exist in equity there was justice yet, on a scale that men simply couldn't fathom. He said that every mouthful was an affirmation of this mystery whether taken unconsciously or not, and that it was a testimony to the best in men that food should be honoured with art. Finally he said that food and love were One, then he raised his glass again and drank. They ate in silence.

By the time the soup bowls had been cleared, the suckling pig - on a platter with an apple in its mouth, cranberries in its eyes and a parsley necklace - had been carved and distributed (to all except Sullivan) with the yams and green beans, and all had been eaten with the Burgundy, Mole was too full and too drunk to stand. He had gorged himself to the point of profound indigestion and his gluttony had made him belligerent. Edward had already tried to clear his plate, been insulted and had left, taking his own plate with him.

Mole leaned heavily on the table with his glass in his hand. He was staring at a point somewhere beyond the edge of his plate, upon which a portion of suckling pig and some yams remained uneaten. Sullivan watched him. He was muttering something under

his breath that sounded like both a prayer and a complaint but Sullivan didn't ask. He had eaten more than his fill also and was content enough to sit and keep an eye on him.

After a while, the old man raised his head and let out a primal yell, more animal than human, that tailed off into a fit of laughter that in turn became soundless though his face remained in thrall, like a ritual mask. He gasped for air and then came out of it.

"Would you like to smoke a joint, Mr. Mole?"

The old man looked at him like he was a stranger. "What are you doing here?"

Sullivan shrugged. "Waiting for a slice of bread pudding."

As if in answer to Mole's impromptu Tarzan call the butcher hogs and breeding sows had found their way on to the loggia, as Edward had predicted, and were jostling their snouts against the glass. The commotion caused the two of them to turn. "What the bloody hell?" said Mole.

"The hogs," said Sullivan.

"Well let them in for God's sake."

Sullivan couldn't tell if he was joking.

"I said let them in."

Sullivan did what he was told. The hogs came sniffing around the old man's legs and sniffing at the table. "I don't know, Mr. Mole."

The old man slapped a sow on the back. "What do you want from me?"

Sullivan thought he was talking to the pig.

"I said what do you want from me?"

"Who?"

"Who do you think?"

Sullivan quietly came back to the table. "I don't want anything from you, Sir."

"Get out of here."

Reluctantly Sullivan began to leave. He reached for the platter but the old man commanded him to leave it. One of the hogs had raised its front trotters on to Thalia's chair and was sniffing at the table. "What about the hogs?"

"Get out."

When he'd gone Mole sat awhile in silence. The hogs had become restless and were bumping him under the table. One of them had found a dropped yam and was defending it viciously. Mole drained his glass. He reached for the bottle of Burgundy and drank what was left. Then he collapsed on to the table.

It wasn't long before the hogs found their way to the food. By pulling at the table cloth they toppled Sullivan's plate first, and then succeeded in pulling all the food, along with Mole, on to the floor. Mole awoke, briefly, and then passed out again among the cutlery.

The suckling pig lay upside down and at first the hogs only sniffed at it. They nudged it from one to another like a soccer ball, and then after a short while, they ate it.

Chapter eleven

"So why don't you like her?"

"Who?"

"Thalia."

"Who says I don't like her?"

"You called her a bitch last night."

"She is a bitch."

They'd been on the highway for an hour already. It was raining. Sullivan was driving the Ford. Edward was slumped into the passenger seat, half asleep.

"So you don't think I should ask her out."

Edward didn't answer.

"You think I'm stupid."

"Yeah."

"You don't think she's worth it."

Edward settled further back into his seat.

"I think she's worth it." Sullivan steered into the passing lane to overtake a semi- and then settled back again into the speed limit. "Why doesn't she get a job?"

"For God's sake."

Sullivan glanced at him. Edward shifted irritably and turned his shoulder to the door. "She's already got one," he said. "Who do you think cleaned up that mess last night? You see the room this morning?"

"No."

"It's like nothing happened. She either had to carry him or drag him up the stairs. Said if he'd passed out on his back he would have choked."

"Lost his dinner, eh?"

"Yep. Lost his dinner. Pigs ate that too, apparently."

Sullivan leaned over the steering wheel and squinted down the highway. "I really wanted some of that bread pudding. What happened to it?"

"Don't know. Take the next exit."

"If you're going to lean against that door you might want to lock it. I think the hinge is busted."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"That's alright."

Sullivan flicked his blinker on and squinted through the window for the exit sign. It came upon him quicker than expected and he had to turn sharply when he saw it.

Edward's eyes blinked open. Sullivan glanced at him. "The windshield wipers," he said. "They don't work so well."

Edward quietly reached behind himself and locked the door.

"What happened to his money?"

"He lost it."

"How?"

"Spent it." Edward shifted. "Lost some of it on the stock market too."

"So it wasn't his money she married him for then?"

Edward didn't answer.

"She liked his table manners, maybe."

"No," said Edward. "It was his clothes. Hands down. She married him for his wardrobe. What's wrong with the windshield wipers?"

"Don't know."

Five minutes off the highway they turned into the Whippletree Auction and pulled into the loading bay around back. They were third in line behind a semi- and a two-ton van with a bumper sticker advertising 'Praise Radio 101: Jesus is listening.' Sullivan wound down the driver's side window and leaned out. "Is that thing full of livestock?"

"What?"

"That semi-"

"Sure."

Sullivan sat back and scratched his head. He turned and looked into the back through the sliding glass window at Edward's dozen shoats.

"They'll sell," said Edward, as if he'd read his mind.

Sullivan nodded.

"Pig's a pig. People will try and flog a legless hen down here. One man actually tried to sell a dead horse. Dragged it out with a tractor claiming it was tired from the journey. It's a circus."

"They don't look so good."

Edward turned and looked into the back. The shoats lay in the hay all but exhausted from inhaling stale air. They were breathing very rapidly and the inside of the canopy windows sweated. Edward doffed and adjusted to cover his eyes the green and yellow John Deere cap he'd worn especially for this occasion, and settled back into his seat. "We'll be there in a minute," he said.

Sullivan cut the engine and got out of the truck. It was raining intermittently and the air was full of the sounds of livestock and the sweet and sour smell of excrement and fresh hay. A man in a Buckerfield's feed-cap and lamb-chop sideburns nodded gravely to him as he passed. Sullivan watched him stop and exchange words with the driver of the two-ton, then carry on down the end of the semi- where a group of other men, all outfitted likewise, with their sideburns and their matching mackinaws and caps, like advocates of some Cowichan-Valley-Chic, stood watching the unloading of some thirteen dozen hogs with grim interest. Sullivan turned and looked into the cab. Edward was asleep already. His folded arms rose steadily up and down upon his chest and his mouth hung open. Sullivan quietly eased the windows back on either side of the canopy and waited. After a while the fog on the inside of the windows began to evaporate and one by one the shoats got back on to their feet.

He walked up beside the trailer to get a closer look, found some room down the end of the fence and watched a man dispatch his hogs by their hooves, or ears, or by kicking them down the aluminum gangplank as if he was unloading luggage. At the bottom of the gangplank the hogs were piled up on top of each other, panting and salivating. One by one, as they recovered enough oxygen to stand, the added weight of all the hogs unloaded after squeezed them through a gate into a long, dark chute that ferried them into the holding pens.

Sullivan studied the men. The men studied him back. He was horrified but he willed his face not to betray it. After a while he walked back to the truck. The man in the bumper-stickered van regarded him without expression.

Sullivan climbed in beside Edward and held on to the wheel to stop his hands from shaking. "Well," he said.

Edward grunted.

"I'll tell you something."

"Hmmph."

He wound the window up to stop the rain from coming in. Wind smeared the raindrops sideways down the glass. "I need a hat," he said, finally. "I feel naked around here without one."

"So what is he carrying?"

"Pigs."

"What kind of pigs?"

"Unlucky ones."

Edward waited.

"I don't know."

"They look like ours?"

Sullivan turned and studied the hogs. They were thin, feral looking and filthy from the quagmire they were penned in. "No," he said.

Edward crossed, and then re-crossed his ankles. He lay wedged between the seat-back and the passenger door with the John Deere cap over his eyes and the collar on his jacket turned up. He sniffed, and wriggled himself further into the corner. Then he cleared his throat. "Pig's a pig," he said.

When it came their turn the hogs were not at all reluctant to unload. They trotted down the two-by-ten into the chute like a group of sun-seekers disembarking from a charter flight. The men along the fence made very little comment and Edward was worried. At six weeks old the shoats were premature for sale. The mud and the hair they had already sprouted wouldn't put these farmers off - it wasn't so unusual to pen your hogs outside - but it wouldn't fool them either. "Let's go," he said. He shut the tailgate and the lid on the canopy and got back into the truck.

The inside of the auction house was an amphitheatre of tiered bleachers rising from the arena to within twelve feet of the aluminum ceiling where a pair of enormous fans rotated, very slowly, throwing shadow after shadow over the waiting crowd like the passing of a magic wand. "Find us a seat," said Edward. "And don't wave at me. I'll find you."

Sullivan squeezed in near the top of the left hand rise beside a score of short-sleeve-shirted Mennonites and their bobby-pinned and headscarfed wives. The women were bent over their knitting and the men sat up very straight, with their sons, like themselves in miniature, beside them, watching placidly the godless in the bleachers beneath them sucking candyfloss and chili-dogs and yelling at their children to behave. There was a carnival atmosphere, lorded over by the auctioneer holding forth in some dialect of his own invention. Sullivan sat squarely on his hands and avoided looking at him. After a while Edward settled in and handed him a coffee. "They didn't have any jasmine, zinger, whatever the hell," he said.

The auctioneer stood on a raised wooden platform in between a pair of swinging doors. The livestock were driven blinking from behind the left hand door and herded through the other one when sold. The auctioneer wore a long white coat, and his assistant in the ring wore a grey one. The assistant wore the collar of his coat turned up and affected a swagger accented by a walking cane that he swung with a limp-wristed flick, and with which he was more than liberal when herding livestock through the ring. "Next up," announced the auctioneer, "a fine pair of Nigerian Dwarfs. These goats are fine breeders, ladies and gentlemen."

"Nigerian Dwarfs," said Edward. "What is this a pet store? Next he's gonna bring out a Tennessee fainting."

The Nigerian dwarfs sold for twenty dollars each.

"Next up," said the auctioneer, "three Tennessee Fainting Goats, ladies and gentlemen..."

Edward threw his hands up in the air.

"What's with the fainting?" said Sullivan.

"They fall over," said Edward, "stiff as a board. For no reason." He shook his head. "Who said God doesn't have a sense of humour."

The Tennessee Fainting Goats sold for the same and were herded out. After that the ring was momentarily empty. The auctioneer leaned in to confer with his secretary and she handed him a long sheet of paper. He studied it carefully and then returned to his podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, with emphasis, and then paused for effect. He placed the sheet face up on his lectern and smoothed his hand across its surface once, then again for good measure, then he lifted up his head. He began by praising the animal's pedigree, citing its blood-lines to the first Angus imported to Ontario by William Brown in 1876, and beyond to Angus Doddies and Buchan Humlies, who in turn had borrowed Robert Bakewell's expertise to raise the first Angus cattle in the fields of Aberdeen. He spoke of those unseemly herds of longhorn raised by Moors on the plains of Andalusia, and of Charolais' whose likenesses were fashioned into Roman figurines, and of their ancestors driven by Huns on horseback across the plains of Hungary. Finally he brought to mind the primeval aurochs painted on the cave walls of Lascaux and evangelized over the power such animals had held over the minds of men since time immemorial.

Somewhere in the bleachers a child cried out for his mother and was hushed. The men at ringside stood motionless with their elbows and one foot up on the fence like

arrested morris dancers, their hands dangling loosely in front of them. Slowly the ceiling fans turned.

"He used to be a minister," said Edward, in a low voice. "Got caught balling the sexton's wife. In the graveyard."

When the auctioneer's assistant swung the door back the bull would not move. All anybody could see for a minute or more was a black head and horns lifted in bas-relief from the darkness of the holding pen behind it. At length, and after much cajoling from some unseen men with two-by-fours, the bull lurched into the middle of the ring and stood. Some of the men at ringside shifted their weight and leaned in to confer with one another. A ripple of a whisper passed through the crowd. From the bleacher behind him, Sullivan heard a Mennonite claim the bull was spent, that he was old and long out of commission and that anyone could see that even from this distance. Sullivan turned. The man's lips were tightly pursed and his eyes were afire, like some Old Testament prophet.

Edward let out a short laugh.

"What?"

"Look."

The auctioneer had been gesticulating to his assistant, but his assistant had pretended not to notice. He had passed behind the bull and was standing within leaping distance of the fence.

"He's trying to get him to turn around."

"How come?"

"So everyone can see his balls."

A tall man in a tassled doe-skin jacket sat down next to them and slapped Edward on the back. "How you doin'?" he said. He shook hands with Edward and nodded at Sullivan. Edward introduced them. "So what do you think of that, son?" He spoke slowly, with a subtle drawl, like an American.

"Well, if I was buyin'," said Sullivan. He shook his head. "I don't know. Looks like he might be spent."

The man eyed him suspiciously. Then he leaned in front of Edward to address him. "Let me tell you a story." He jutted his chin. "Two bulls in a field," he said. "A young one and a old one. In the next field over a herd of big-eyed Friesians winking at them over their shoulders," - he made a gesture with his index finger like the swinging of a pendulum - "swishing their tails from side to side. Young bull says, would you take a look at that? Elbows the old one in the ribs. What say we run on over there, jump that fence and fuck a couple of 'em. The old bull yawns a great big yawn and licks his lips. I got a better idea, he says. Why don't we walk on over there, untie that gate and fuck 'em all." The man was looking right at him, expressionless. Sullivan didn't know whether to laugh or not. Then the man's face cracked into a massive grin, and he settled back into his seat. "So how's the old man?"

"Not so good," said Edward.

"He's not over it yet?"

Edward sat looking at the ring as if he hadn't heard the question. He'd been with Evelyn to Whippletree one time to buy a breeding boar and sow. In the parking lot two dogs had decided to fight and their owners, either for the sport of it, or knowing better

than to get in the middle, had let them fight. Evelyn had seized the pepper from the concession stand, run over, and by shaking the pepper on their noses and seizing each by its collar had succeeded in separating them. She came back with a gash in her hand that she washed and bound simply with a rag torn from her dress. Then they went on inside the auction house. It was the look in her eyes that he remembered most. The fury contained, as if she'd taken on the anger of the dogs themselves and swallowed it. It had made him feel ashamed. "No," he said. "He's not over it."

The price of the bull rose to two thousand dollars. Everybody watched the ring. The bull had shifted of its own accord and stood placidly with his back to the crowd, engaging the auctioneer, as if to seek this master of his fate face-to-face. "I want you to look at the balls on that mother," said the man.

"He is a little thin in the haunches."

The man waved this away as if it were of no account. "Horlicks used to have a bull of that pedigree," he said. "Kept him eight years. Got all thin and ragged and he thought he was through. Old man Bartholemew bought him for a song and got another four years out of him. See, he knew Horlicks was greedy. Knew that bull had been servicing a hundred head all by himself. So Bartholemew gives him a rest, feeds him up good, keeps him upwind of the cows for a while and the bull looks like a champion."

Somebody bought the bull for four thousand dollars.

"Horlicks was so pissed he hasn't spoken to him since," the man continued. "Well," he said, "I do believe my swine are up." He got up and nodded to them both.

When he'd gone they sat there together for a while in silence. Edward kept his eyes on the proceedings. After a while he shook his head and sighed. "If you was buyin'," he said.

Sullivan looked down at his hands.

Edward's pigs were unmistakable. They were so filthy the auctioneer had to check with his secretary to confirm they were indeed Yorkshires. He began the bidding at twenty a head and nobody took it up. He encouraged, and cajoled, then dropped the price. Edward raised his hand. Sullivan looked at him, astonished. "What the hell," he said.

Edward hushed him up. "Sit up straight."

The bidding went once, then twice at fifteen, and for a moment Edward felt a panic wash across his face and neck. Finally somebody raised the stakes.

He settled back into his seat and took a deep breath. The bidding went steadily up until the price for each was just shy of the standard. Then something remarkable happened. On the going twice the stakes were raised again. He leaned and looked into the pit for the bidder, scanned the crowd for the fool and, finding no-one, turned around to look. He saw Sullivan sitting bolt upright with his arm raised high.

"Going once," said the auctioneer. Edward stared at Sullivan in disbelief. He sat tall and straight with a grim and determined expression on his face.

"Going twice..."

Edward closed his eyes and buried his head in his hands.

"Twenty-five, from the fence."

Edward looked up in time to see a man down at ringside lower his hand.

"Thank-you, Sir. I have twenty-five a head from the fence, anything up on twenty-five? Going once," he pointed at Sullivan. "Going twice." Sullivan paused, shook his head and settled back.

"Sold for twenty-five a piece, along the fence, thank-you, gentlemen. Next up..."

Edward took his hands from his face and looked at Sullivan. He was leaning with his elbows on the vacated bleacher one row back, one ankle atop the opposite knee and with a grin on his face the size of Texas.

"Sweet Jesus," said Edward.

Sullivan winked at him and cleared his throat. "I do believe you owe me lunch," he drawled.

Chapter twelve

Dear Robert,

I had an uncle, the Brigadier's brother, who was driven mad by his devotion. He loved his wife also, you see. After she passed, this uncle of mine drifted aimlessly from place to place, from one menial job to another, with his whole universe strapped to his back. He was not a large man, Gordon, and the rucksack he carried nearly eclipsed him. Inside that pack, among other things, among all the other paraphernalia that he feared to leave out of his sight lest the devil infiltrate it, he carried a jar full of swampy-looking water that he claimed was the soul of his wife. He declared that only on his deathbed would he pour the water out, and only then upon the earth under which he would rest so their souls would be sure to cleave together again and rise into paradise. Or bleed into the soil and feed the crocus he'd requested to be buried with, which, in his mind, was another kind of paradise, and sufficient unto them.

He was struck by a car somewhere in Wyoming and, as far as I know, his wishes were never fulfilled. His story strikes me now as one of the saddest I have ever heard. He was robbed. All that matters, I believe, is not that we are among the living or the dead, but that we are prepared to transubstantiate. Nothing would be so pernicious as to have to return and suffer this same fate again.

Evelyn was no shrinking violet. She was not a virgin when we married, nor did I want one. My vanity, at least, did not require her to be chaste. Does that surprise you,

Robert? Would it surprise you more to learn that there were times during our marriage that I suspected her of adultery but said nothing? She was most certainly discreet if, indeed, she was deceiving me. And besides, any husband of whatever age may consider himself a fool if he thinks that his wife covets only his attention.

But none of this alters the insidious fact that in the months leading up to her death I was convinced she was visiting, regularly, with another man. And although I have always considered myself a libertine, I found myself succumbing to jealousy. Thalia was eleven by the time those wolves arrived. We had been married nearly thirteen years. We did not often sleep together. I counseled Evelyn as to the wisdom of this since making love, I claimed, only put her heart at risk. But that was nothing but cowardice on my part, for I could not bring myself to admit that I was not as potent as I once had been; that I was, in fact, at times quite impotent, and I knew that to endeavour to satisfy a woman and fail was far worse than abstaining altogether and hiding behind some excuse. I withdrew my love slowly, by degrees, until, having taken my affection for granted, without it she seemed rootless, afraid, and in a confusion not unlike the one in which I found her thirteen years previously, when we first met in the waiting room of your surgery.

I suspected Edward. It made the most sense. They worked together day after day. They were about the same age. I heard them bicker in a way that only lovers do. And when I was away, which, towards the end, was quite often, they would have had ample opportunity. I don't suspect Edward anymore. I believe that he loved her, but for that I

can forgive him. Everyone did. What matters now is not so much who it was, but what that person knows about those last few days of her life.

Perhaps, after all, her heart finally gave in. That would be the doctor's explanation, would it not? Or perhaps, as I think Edward would have it, Evelyn's soul passed into the body of that wolf. Either way, there is more to the story than I can relate. But to entertain that story I must first entertain my own and, as I write this now, I am coming to realize what I must do.

He paused at this point, suddenly conscious of the burden under which he was about to place his friend. He put himself in Coulton's position. A letter of this kind would place any relationship under the greatest possible strain. Coulton knew him better than any man alive and they loved one another as, he believed, only men do: At a certain remove; by never trespassing on the sanctity of one another's liberty, even if that liberty, in the opinion of the one, were to lead the other man astray. In order to unburden himself once and for all, he would have to risk dismemberment. He would lock himself away and face his harpy eagles by himself.

He read over his letter and observed, with a trace of amusement, how his confession had become less and less prolix; the volubility of his earlier pronouncements foreshortened, he conjectured, by the need to apprehend his truth as rapidly as possible. He added a coda, then he put his pen away. He folded the letter and slotted it into an envelope. Across the front he wrote Coulton's name and address and laid the envelope aside. He decided he would wait a few days before mailing it. In the morning, however, he

would walk into town and pay Coulton a visit, if only to see his trusted friend's face again.

He stood and stretched his limbs and, feeling suddenly light-headed, steadied himself by gripping the edge of his desk. His heart was beating less erratically than it had in a long time.

Chapter thirteen

Bob Coulton was a large, stalwart, bespectacled man of fifty-eight with a full head of wavy, flaxen-coloured hair that he parted at the side and brylcreemed daily, whether he left his lodgings or not. He had a habit of gazing at his patients, with his piercing blue eyes, over the tops of his glasses that had stiffened his neck into a permanent stoop. He had officially retired, early, three years ago, at the age of fifty-five, but still consulted with occasional patients. Malcolm Mole was one of them.

He had been raised in Nottingham, England, the son of a lace merchant. He had become a registrar at Hammersmith at the age of twenty-three and appeared destined for a promising career. But a number of the surgeons at that prestigious London hospital, with their supercilious airs and appalling bedside manner, had rubbed his democratic sensibilities the wrong way. They treated their patients, and in particular those of the working classes, with disdain and, in some cases, as no more than guinea pigs. They recommended unnecessary surgery for the sake of experiment, confident that the poor soul, when informed, would not dare to argue with a doctor's authority. Coulton found himself lingering in the wards and encouraging the sick to refuse certain procedures and, after a while, adroitly, before his superiors caught wind, he quit Hammersmith and decided to set himself up as a G.P. Soon after that he answered a call for doctors in Canada, and ended up on Vancouver Island. He had never once been back to England and

was, it could be said, like many of his countrymen abroad, all the more an Englishman for it.

By all accounts he was a vigilant and fastidious man, who played the piano beautifully, who was not afraid to be blunt with his patients and who never was negligent or supercilious. His one indulgence was the races. Even as a student he had gambled his tuition at Headingley, and upon moving to the island had quickly established himself at Sandown as the track's official doctor. Upon his retirement, at the surgery he shared with four other doctors, he had not hung a likeness of himself, of himself, as was the custom of former practicing G.P.'s, but instead had hung upon the wall a portrait of a horse.

There was no doubt his motives, as a young intern, were to help his fellow men. But over the years his noble intentions had eroded and, towards the end of his career, growing ever more impatient with hypochondriacs, alcoholics, smokers, and those who, in an outright affront to his plain dealing and deliberately unsentimental manner, were afraid to squeeze a splinter from their own fingers, Coulton had become a bit of a cynic. He devoted more and more of his time to horses, and to gambling, and, having never married, spent most of his time at the racetrack.

This impatience with his fellow human beings was, he thought, along with a confirmed respect for the privacy of others, what he had in common with Malcolm Mole. If pressed, Coulton would have had to admit that his friend, at face value, was not his sort of bloke. Mole had been sent to England for a public school education. He was, or certainly had been, very wealthy. He had never worked professionally and, even though born in Canada was, like many of his generation in Victoria, an incorrigible snob. But they

relished one another's opposition. They were like exiles from two warring countries, or classes, who delighted in continuing the fight.

Reading over the last of Mole's letters, Coulton had felt very ill at ease. He sensed his friend was heading down a dark and troublesome path. Mole was not responsible for Evelyn's death. She had always had an erratic and malfunctioning heart. It was a wonder that she had made it to twenty, the way she had lived, and a miracle that medical science could only shrug its shoulders at that she had survived childbirth and lived on to thirty-five years of age. But it wasn't only his friend's self-inflicted guilt that worried him. It was the fact that he seemed hell-bent on examining everything about that time in their lives – a time at which he, himself, was a not infrequent guest at Mole's estate – and there was one thing in particular that he didn't want to talk about.

On a cold October morning, then, two weeks after their last consultation, Coulton was not entirely surprised to hear Mole's familiar and musical knock upon his front door. When he opened the door he found Mole standing at attention, like the Brigadier who had fathered him, but looking decidedly more shabby than usual. He was wearing still his old Harris tweed, his v-neck sweater, and his trousers bunched about his waist and belted with his old school tie, but his hair was in disarray and he was three days unshaven. He looked like he might have crawled out of a bush. Peering over the tops of his glasses, Coulton looked into Mole's eyes. He had the ephemeral look of a man already half-dead. He'd seen that look a thousand times in the eyes of dying patients. It was a look from which there would be no return. He smiled and bade his friend enter.

"Malcolm you look dreadful," he said, flatly.

"Good morning, Robert."

"To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"To my impulse to go walkabout, as our friends down under would put it."

Coulton turned, and made his way down the corridor to the kitchen. "Would you like some tea?"

"Only if you're making it."

"One lump or two?"

"No sugar for me, thank-you, Robert," said Mole, patting his waistline. "I'm on a diet."

Always the same ritual – only if you're making it, and one lump or two no thank-you, Robert – it was, under the circumstances, and considering the fact he was so thin Coulton thought a gust of strong wind might have bowled him over, quite absurd.

One of the things that annoyed Coulton whenever they were together was the fact that he couldn't help but imitate his colleague's way of speaking. In his mind his thoughts arrived in a neutral enough, though Nottinghamshire-twanged accent, but as soon as he opened his mouth he accented his syllables with an Oxbridge inflection. It infuriated him, but he seemed powerless to do anything about it. He felt the same old aggravation as he plugged in the kettle and retrieved the Teltey's tea bags from the jar.

Mole followed Coulton into his kitchen and sat down at the table, tired from his walk over the fields. Coulton lived three miles away, in a Georgian house along Patricia Bay. It was modest and clean, separated into well-proportioned, well-lit rooms, and its

only architectural flourish was an entranceway of semi-circular stairs, painted red, and a front door with an eyebrow window above it.

Coulton made a point of not mentioning the letters. They talked of Sandown and the jockey whose collarbone Coulton had mended, and they touched on Mole's illness though not for long. Mole knew that Robert had no patience for his drinking and wanted to avoid any unpleasantness at what might prove to be the last time he would ever see him. Coulton handed him a mug of tea and gestured at the parlour. It was a given that they should play a game of chess.

It was a grey day and, despite the very large picture window that offered an unbroken view, over the West Saanich road, of the float-plane station, the ocean sciences centre, and the wide sweep of Patricia Bay, it was dark enough in Coulton's parlour that he turned on a pair of table lamps before taking his place at the gaming table. The chessmen were ebony and ivory, fashioned in the classic Staunton style, and had once belonged to the Lieutenant Governor. Coulton had once treated his gonorrhea, and between them they had managed to keep the bad news from the Lieutenant Governor's wife, who also was Coulton's patient. The Governor had rewarded his discretion with the gift of a chess set. Coulton took a pawn in each hand and hid them, briefly, behind his back. When he held his arms out Mole chose the left one and they turned the board around.

"Ebony for me then, Robert," said Mole. "You know what this means, of course."

If Mole ever won, which was not often, it was because he played with black. He had a way of mounting an unorthodox attack, often sacrificing one or two pieces to gain his

initiative which, when it came off was spectacular, but when it failed resulted in a quick and decisive trouncing.

Coulton smiled and took a sip of his tea. He was not to be ruffled by Mole's braggadocio. A gambling man he was, but when it came to chess he played the odds, mounting his initiative with logical manoeuvres and waiting for his opponent to make a mistake. "It means, Malcolm," said Coulton, calmly, that you intend to throw your pieces at my feet, as usual, and gamble on a lack of vigilance."

"In through the back door comes the blackguard, Robert."

"But only," Coulton riposted, "if he finds the door unsecured."

Coulton opened with the Queen's pawn and Mole countered with the Queen's Indian defense. On his fourth move Mole *fianchettoed* with his bishop and with his sixth Coulton castled on his King's side. Familiar with a number of such openings they had moved their pieces rapidly, and only after Coulton castled did Mole take a moment to consider. He moved his queen. Coulton hunted her immediately. "I've always thought you moved your queen too quickly," said Coulton. "She is vulnerable, Malcolm, this early in the game."

"Vulnerable perhaps," answered Mole, "but impetuous, Robert, with no use for modesty. She could stand beside her King no longer."

It was an odd comment, Coulton thought, and seemed to hang between them in the air. He was unsure of his friend's intention, and it threw his game off, temporarily. Nevertheless, six moves later, though he sacrificed a bishop and offered Mole a passed pawn, Coulton pinned Mole's queen with his second bishop.

Mole leaned back and let out a long sigh. "Robert," he said, "I do believe you have captured my queen."

Coulton drained what was left of his tea and placed the mug back on its coaster. "Indeed, Malcolm. I do believe it's not the first time."

Mole nodded gravely. He considered what to do. "Then I think I shall place you in check," he said, and moved his knight accordingly.

Coulton leaned in and inspected the board.

He moved his king out of check and forced Mole to contemplate again the imminent capture of his queen.

Mole pursed his lips and thought about it. Then he changed tack. "Tell me something, Robert," he said.

Coulton kept his eyes upon the board.

"You've remained a bachelor all this time."

Coulton shifted uncomfortably, as much from the break in decorum as the line of questioning. Mole was not watching the board. He was watching him.

"Was there never anyone you might have considered for a wife?"

"There was one, yes," said Coulton, concerned to deflect attention from the truth by appearing to accede to his friend's request for information. "Although it saddens me to talk about it. I do believe it is your move."

Mole leaned back to the board and considered his options. He was going to lose his queen. But he noticed that by not doing the obvious and, at the very least, trading his queen for Coulton's bishop, he could gain some positional strength by taking the

unorthodox option. He was content, however, for the time being, to let his friend wait. "Tell me about her," he said, "if I may be so bold." He advanced with his second knight upon Coulton's king.

Coulton didn't take Mole's queen right away. He considered the implications of his opponent's move. He leaned and examined the board. "A young woman came to see me once," he said, "for a check-up. She was a lovely young woman. Unmarried. With a certain sadness, I suspect, from disappointments in the past. I sensed that she was fond of me also. I discovered a lump in her breast. But I was not vigilant. I did not follow up. It was her time of the month and back then, well," he hesitated, "women were not as well informed either. It could have been simply her period. But I did not follow up. The next time she came to see me the cancer was irreversible." He moved his hand toward the board, then drew it back.

"You were afraid you loved her, then?"

"Yes." said Coulton. "I loved her. But what a terrible husband I would have made."

"You have always been so fond of women. And they of you."

"Precisely why I never married." Coulton reached again for his bishop. He took Mole's queen and placed her beside his other captured pieces at the side of the board.

Mole leaned in and took Coulton's bishop with his pawn and they examined the board once again.

"You are not alone," said Coulton, "in letting a good woman down."

It was the first time he had made any mention of his friend's confession. "Forgive me for pressing you, Robert." Said Mole.

Coulton simply nodded and made his move.

Mole looked at the board for a long time. "And there was never any other?" he said.

"No," replied Coulton.

Mole steered for the endgame, and it soon became clear that he planned to advance his passed pawn. Coulton counted the moves, and calculated that with his own queen still active he could check-mate his friend one move after Mole's pawn reached his own rank, thus nullifying the threat of the advance. He made his move with confidence.

"What do you think," said Mole, "a patient wants when she consults with her doctor?"

Coulton found the 'she' disconcerting. "She wants a pill, Malcolm," he replied.

"Hmm. And what if the pill doesn't work?"

"Then you give her another one."

Mole advanced his pawn down the board. "I disagree. She wants to believe."

"In what?"

"In her own salvation."

"Then she should find a priest."

"Ah, but Robert," said Mole, warming to his theme, "what have you become if not a shepherd, now that the flock is blind to god?"

"A monkey could perform a G.P.'s job, Malcolm. It's either a sore throat or something gastrointestinal and the same few prescriptions do the job. The majority of them heal themselves. With their own immune systems." He was beginning to grow impatient, anxious to deliver the coup de grâce.

But Mole was unruffled. "Then a placebo is often all they need?"

"Perhaps, yes."

"Precisely. They believe. It is an obligation for which I do not envy you." Mole moved his pawn to the penultimate rank.

Coulton continued to mount his attack down the flank. When Mole moved his pawn into place, Coulton leaned back in his chair, assured of his victory. "You have little respect," he said, "for medical advancement, Malcolm. You'll be wanting your queen back, I presume?" He plucked her from the pile of captured pieces.

Mole leaned back also and sighed. "And you, my dear friend, have little respect for my game. No. I would like instead a knight. If you would be so kind." He smiled.

Coulton stopped and inspected the board. He saw instantly the result of Mole's decision. By choosing a knight black leaped white's defence and simultaneously mated his king. His own move for mate was rendered obsolete. Astonished, Coulton sat back in his seat. "Confound you, Malcolm. You have outdone me."

Mole smiled. "Ah. Robert, let a sick man have his victory. You've been outdoing me for years."

"I am glad to have seen you," said Mole. "I hope I have not disturbed the equanimity of your afternoon."

"Shall I drive you back?"

"No. Thank-you. I believe I shall walk."

"As you wish."

Mole made his way into the hallway. At the front door he turned. "What do you think about metampsychosis?" he said.

"I don't think about it, Malcolm," said Coulton, peremptorily.

"Hmm. A recondite subject, to be sure. When we die we die. Is that it?"

Coulton inclined his head in agreement.

"But if you could trade places with anyone, or anything, who, or what would it be?"

"I don't know."

Mole nodded. "I should like to exchange with a bird," he said. "Nothing grand. A common chaffinch would do." He smiled. He reached for the doorknob.

"Allow me," said Coulton.

"Thank-you, Robert."

"I should like to see you, Malcolm, as a patient, in a week or so. Have you followed my advice?"

"And quit drinking? What have I got left?"

"Shall we say next week, at this time?"

"If you insist."

"I shall come to you, then"

"A housecall?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

"Until then," said Coulton.

Mole nodded.

Coulton watched through the door as Mole walked on down the drive.

Chapter fourteen

Edward and Sullivan had been all day repairing a section of the roof and then had taken dinner at Drifter's. Afterwards, Edward had persuaded Sullivan to drive them into town, in Sullivan's truck. He'd said he was feeling lucky and wanted a drink. They made quite the entrance in the Chevy. The parking lot was full and a number of men and women were outside the front door smoking. Everybody stared. Three men in matching jackets came over and admired their ride, looking to Edward for the low down, who shook his head modestly and referred them to Sullivan. Sullivan held court for a while, eventually popping the hood and lecturing at length, gesticulating at the assembly and the engine while the men nodded. One of them offered to buy Sullivan a drink.

Soon after, they entered the pub and took off their coats and hung them on a rack along the wall. It was Friday and the pub was in full swing. Edward ordered bourbon with a beer back. "You want a beer?" he said. "Let me buy you a beer." He turned to the bartender and held two fingers up.

Sullivan eased himself on to a bar stool and took a look around. Above the mirrored back-bar, pinned up next to the 'CRD No Smoking sticker', was a sign that read "where cigarettes burn, pub owners earn". In the mirror, over the heads of the seated patrons he watched a mustachioed man enraptured by a 'Virtual Fishing' video-game. The man cast into the screen with his rod and fought a chinook salmon with all the requisite

finesse and body-english, bending at the waist and reeling in the fish with his elbows held high. When he'd landed the thing a cartoon salmon appeared on the screen and belched his winnings.

Edward tapped him on the shoulder and handed him a beer. Sullivan raised the bottle in salute, tipped it back and drank almost all of it in one long chug. Edward regarded him without expression. Then he turned to the bartender and ordered him another one.

A woman down the way fell off her barstool and her companion made no effort to help. She struggled to her feet and held her palms out to the barstool, apologetically, as if it were some angry thing in need of pacifying, and then gingerly settled back into the seat. Sullivan turned, grinning, but Edward was already studying something in the mirror. He downed his bourbon and chased it without taking his eyes off what he'd seen and then turned. He nudged Sullivan in the ribs, and then made his way over to a group of women seated at a plastic patio table. A tallish man took his place at the bar.

Sullivan felt immediately ill-at-ease. He wasn't sure if Edward had intended for him to follow. From the corner of his eye he saw the man beside him wipe the grime off the sides of his nose with his fingers and stir the three inches of foam on top of his beer. Miraculously it disappeared. The man turned to Sullivan and nodded. Sullivan nodded back. His face was heavily scarred, like a prize-fighter's. His nose was spread across his face and he sported an ill-fitting glass eye that stared slightly off-centre, lending him a cross-eyed look. The man caught Sullivan staring and stared back. Then he offered him his hand. "Albert," he said.

"Sullivan," said Sullivan.

"You don't mean me no harm, do you?"

"No."

The man nodded. "What are you drinking?"

Sullivan held up his beer.

"I should be drinking from the bottle," said Albert. "Cheap draft gives me the shits."

Sullivan shifted uncomfortably on his bar stool and took a long swig of his beer. The man was still looking at him drunkenly. He made a noise that sounded like some kind of bird, a percussive clack and whistle from the back of his throat that made Sullivan turn. "Middle-of-the-island-where-the-snow-falls," he slurred. "Albert's what the preacher called me. Same one that fucked me up the ass."

Sullivan didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," he offered.

The man shrugged. "Long time ago. You Catholic?"

"No."

"That's good."

Sullivan took a swig of his beer.

"What's your name again?"

"Sullivan," said Sullivan.

The man nodded. "You Irish?"

"No."

"Knew an Irishman once. Merchant seaman. Told me a story. Said he'd left his girl in Ireland with a tin ring. Said when he come back, if she's still wearing it, he'd make it

a gold one and marry her. He stays away three years, and when he comes back he takes the ring off her finger and polishes it. Ring been gold the whole time."

"Good story."

The man nodded. "Left him six months later. Took the ring. You married?"

"No."

"That's good."

"You?"

"Hmm?"

"Married?"

Albert shook his head and took another pull. "Quit looking. Figure if it's what you got coming you may as well sit still. It'll come to you."

A huge muscle-bound man waddled past with his girl, taking up a lot of room. Albert looked disparagingly over his shoulder. "Muscle beach," he said. "Fight guys like that all the time. "Hey, muscle beach," he called.

The big guy turned. His girlfriend clung nervously to his bicep. Albert grinned and raised his glass. "I don't give a shit," he said, and turned back to the bar.

The band had completed a set and were putting their instruments down, drinking beer and talking to the women. And in the silence that followed, before the canned music kicked in, Albert leaned in closer, took Sullivan's hand and said: "White men did this to me." He turned Sullivan's hand over, popped his eye out of its socket and placed it in the middle of his palm. The space it had vacated folded over with a grotesque wink. The glass eye looked like a child's marble. "Three of them," said Albert. "Ambushed me on a street

corner. Kicked shit out of me so bad my eye fall out. Walked around a half an hour eyeball hanging on my cheek. So they say."

Sullivan offered him his eye back but the man didn't take it right away. He looked at him a long while with his one good eye, then took the glass one back at last and slotted it back into its socket. "You don't mean me no harm, do you?" he said.

"No."

"That's good." He drained what was left in his glass and searched the bar for the bartender.

Edward came over and nodded to the man. They exchanged a few quiet words. Albert leaned around Edward and gave Sullivan another look. Sullivan kept his eyes on the crowd.

Edward bought a beer for Albert, ordered another bourbon for himself with a beer back and stood looking at the room. "Angelina over there wants to take your skinny ass home," he said. He finished what was left of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "So does Albert."

"What?"

Edward grinned. "Don't worry," he said. "I told him you were spoken for. But Angelina on the other hand."

"Which one is she?"

"The heavy one."

"They're all heavy."

"I told her I'd have to tie a board across your ass make certain you don't fall in. She didn't like that." Edward paid for his beer and bourbon and stood sipping the liquor from his glass with his pinkie raised.

"I got a story for you," said Sullivan.

"What's that?"

"Later."

Edward sipped his drink. One of the women beckoned him from the table. "I told you I was feeling lucky," he said.

"She's enormous."

"Yeah," he nodded, absently.

"What's her name?"

"Huh?"

"Enormous."

"I don't know. She's new in town."

Sullivan turned and shook his head, woefully.

Edward cast him a pitying look. "Son," he said, "you live here long enough you'll know that new is all it takes." Edward grinned and raised his beer. "Besides. Take a look at my face. No I don't mean it literally, I know you already have." The band had started up again with a slow blues. "You think I had much luck with women ever? Only woman showed any interest in me until I was thirty was Evelyn. Mrs. Mole. And no we never did," he smiled. "I was too scared. Of her, you understand, not the old man. She had a way of looking at you went right to your soul, as if it hadn't of mattered if I'd of

resembled something straight out of Star Trek, which I damn near did at the time." He shook his head and raised his beer in a silent toast.

"Is Thalia anything like her?"

Edward turned to him and smiled. "Enough," he said.

"You ever wanted to leave?"

"Leave the old man?"

"Yeah."

"Where am I gonna go?" He ordered another two beers. "I think it's time to make my move," he winked. "Don't wait up."

When last call was called and the lights came on the majority of the women scuttled out of doors into the less unforgiving light of the parking lot. Edward's date clung to his arm like he was a winning lottery ticket and was leading him over to her coupe. He turned to Sullivan and grinned lewdly.

It was a beautiful night. Unseasonably cold for the end of October it had snowed, briefly, while they'd been inside the pub and then the sky had cleared. The scope of it was amazing. Sullivan stood there for a long time looking skyward until the drunken oaths, the fare-thee-wells, and the sound of engines revving disappeared and he was left alone. He thought about what the old man had told him, about love as something inevitable and indifferent to age. He thought about how a blind man might fall in love. He imagined himself kissing Thalia on the lips and he disagreed with Mole that thinking something made it so. Between the thought and its fulfillment shit happened. And not least of many obstacles was the fact that Thalia didn't love him back. He climbed into his

truck and started it up. Somebody down the block, in a souped-up Chevy Nova, did a doughnut in the road and his passenger wound down his window and yeehaaa'ed.

When he arrived at the gates to Mole's estate he turned his headlights out and let the starlight guide him. He rounded the last curve in the driveway and rolled up under the oak and turned the engine off and sat. He glanced up at Thalia's bedroom windows and wondered if he'd ever stand up there beside her looking down.

It was bitterly cold. He climbed out of his pick-up and quietly shut the door. The snow lay untouched all about. He blew into his hands and began walking to the back door when something in his peripheral vision made him stop. When he turned and looked head-on at the wolf pen there was nothing to see. He turned again toward the house but then he changed his mind. He crept over to the side of the wire mesh fence and crouched, drove his hands deep into his pockets and waited.

After a while, the wolves appeared. They crept out of the underbrush with tentative steps and stood sentinel in the clearing. In the blue and silver light they looked like story-book beasts, half silver themselves; and beginning at the base of his skull and extending the length of his spine he felt a tingle that was not a wave of fear, but a shiver, as if there were hair on his back also and it was hackling. The wolves turned, abruptly, and disappeared into the brush.

When they came again they were chasing one another over the frozen ground, spiraling on their hind legs and kicking the snow up round about like fine dust and burying their noses and rolling in it. They would carry on a while and then stop, stand, look away in pretended disinterest, and then take up the chase again making oddly childish, high-

pitched whines, with their breath rising behind them in the bluish light like souls escaping. Sullivan shifted to ease the pressure on his ankles and they stopped. The male became rigid. He tested the air with quick, lifting motions of his muzzle, sorting and discriminating from the tapestry of odours the one that did not belong. He discovered Sullivan where he crouched; and the female, a distance apart and with her back to him, not knowing what her mate was looking at, or why, suddenly turned and stared also. The male let out a low woof. The female circled nervously behind and then returned to stand beside him. Then they disappeared into the brush.

That night he dreamed he'd been sentenced to feed a pack of wolves held captive in a large warehouse. On his shoulder he carried a hundred-weight of entrails in an apparatus like a bricklayer's hod, and the desert path he was obliged to tread was attended on both sides by the leering visages of his accusers: dark-skinned men with teeth gone missing, and women in mourning shawls who spat in his path or laughed, with their wide-eyed children clinging fearfully to their skirts. He reached the door alone and stood. The mob fell silent behind him. A bead of sweat fell from his lip and evaporated as it hit the desert stone. Suddenly the door unlocked, slid open, and from all four corners the wolves came forward to greet him. He tripped over the threshold and spilled the contents of the hod across the floor, and as he lay sprawled on the floor among bones and blood soaking into the dust he heard all around him a human laughter. They jeered and ridiculed him in some idiom that at first seemed foreign, unfamiliar, yet which he found he well understood, as if at one time he had spoken it himself. The wolves came toward him not

on all fours but on their hind legs, like men, to welcome or devour him he couldn't tell. But as they neared the roof blew off the warehouse, the walls collapsed, and the wolves scattered over the desert that gave way to great plains of long, flowing grass, where buffalo panicked and stampeded in a shudder of hooves and chaff. He shadowed a wolf to the edge of a dense, dark wood, where a buffalo had separated from the herd and stood heaving and panting in the noon-day heat with its tongue lolling sideways from its mouth and the froth bubbling on it, and there seemed to pass between them, both predator and prey, some unspoken protocol, some ritual understanding of the dance they were engaged in as if the outcome were an honour to both species. As if in some other place and time they had met before, though in opposing roles, and this bloodshed was to be their reunion. The wolf sat looking absently at the prairie. The buffalo stood looking at the wolf. They could have been partners in some atavistic minuet awaiting the conductor's baton. And then, spurred on by some hidden signal, the wolf attacked, dragging the buffalo down by its throat and the buffalo bellowing and heaving and rolling the whites of its eyes and nearly crushing the wolf beneath it as it fell. And when it lay dead the wolf reared up on its hind legs and hurled itself repeatedly up under the buffalo's ribs until it seized its liver and dragged it out upon the grass.

Then a figure walked out of the trees. A man whose face was featureless, dressed in black, to whom the wolf offered the prize. The dreamer gasped behind his camouflage of grass and the wolf, by some unseen locomotion, breached instantly the distance between them and bared its bloodied muzzle in his face.

The sound of Edward's boots on the basement stairs woke him. It had already been light out for an hour. When he was dressed he went into the hallway and poked his head around Edward's door.

Edward was sitting up on the edge of his bed. His head was bowed and he sat with his hands in his lap like a man at church. He looked up, briefly, saw Sullivan standing there and then looked back at his hands. He shook his head gravely. "I don't know," he said.

"What don't you know?"

"I don't know."

"I'm heading off right now. Want to come?"

Edward looked up at him weakly. He looked like he hadn't yet slept.

"Get some breakfast?"

Edward looked back at his hands.

"I'll bring you a muffin," said Sullivan.

"I walked all the way home."

"She didn't offer to drive you?"

"Didn't wait to find out."

"How bad did she look?"

He shook his head again. "The full light of day can be hard on a woman."

"You gotta leave while it's still dark out."

Edward nodded.

"Still," said Sullivan.

"Don't say I told you so."

"Okay."

"And don't say whatever else either."

"You mean there's nothing like a little variety?"

"Yeah that."

"Okay."

Edward looked at him. "Well go on then."

"I'm going."

"Get the good stuff."

"Okay."

Chapter fifteen

The butcher in his blood-stained apron waved a blood-stained hand at Sullivan as he pulled up in the loading bay among the empty dairy crates and flattened cardboard boxes. The butcher was standing out back smoking a cigarette. Sullivan stopped his truck and got out. "It's getting cold enough to snow," he said.

The butcher looked at the end of his cigarette and shook his head. "These people don't know snow." He took a last drag and flicked the butt off the back of the platform.

Sullivan climbed the concrete steps and stood next to him. Beyond the plexi-glass partition hung up in strips like a bead curtain, he could hear the voice of a cashier on her cell-phone and further on, the sound of cleaver hitting butcher's block. "We used to dig ourselves out of our own front door," said the butcher. "Every winter. Snow never left the ground for six months. Spring would come. Eventually. And two or three drunks would show up in the slush. Passed out in some snowbank back in January."

"Nobody missed them?"

The butcher laughed a short laugh and picked at his fingernails. "You never been to Loon Lake, Saskatchewan have you?"

"No."

The butcher nodded. "Don't know what we got for you today," he said. "But help yourself."

Sullivan divided the plexi-glass and made his way through the warehouse to the butcher's work-room. Beside two walk-in refrigerators was a waste bucket full of scraps of fat and bone and chicken skin, some fish-heads, tails, fins, and whatever else had been out front but hadn't sold. He would have to dig through the bones to find the good stuff and sometimes if there wasn't any he would just take the bones. Today he found only some trim and a beef tenderloin, gone vaguely green. He pulled the plastic grocery bags out of his pockets and rolled back his shirt-sleeve, wrapped a bag around his arm up to the elbow, held his breath and started digging.

After a while, the butcher came in and looked at what he'd got. He shook his head. "It's been a good week," he said. "You got eagles right?"

"Yeah."

"Wait a minute."

The butcher came back with two whole salmon and handed them over. "Here," he said.

"You're kidding."

The butcher shrugged. "They'd be in that bucket by the end of the day. How many have you got?"

"Three."

"Hey, Larry," called the butcher. "Come here a minute."

Larry came into the back wiping his hands on a soiled white rag. He stood well over six and a half feet tall and had to duck under the lintel of the door. His hands were as big as dinner plates. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," said Sullivan.

"Tell him about the eagles," said the butcher.

The cashier had finished her call and sidled over to see what was up. Sullivan felt suddenly self-conscious. "Well, we've got three of them," he said. "Two with broken wings."

"They can't fly?" said Larry.

"No. We keep them in the kiwi orchard. Under netting so the predators don't get them."

"Where'd you get'em?" said the butcher.

"People bring in animals all the time. Mr. Mole, old man that owns the place, said he opened his back door one morning and found a blind eagle standing on his doorstep. Like he'd knocked and was waiting to come in."

"You got a blind eagle?" said Larry.

"Yeah."

"A bald eagle?"

He nodded.

The cashier's cell phone rang but she didn't answer it. She took it out of her pocket and turned the ringer off. Sullivan glanced round at his audience. Then he looked down at the floor. He took a deep breath and thought about how the old man might tell it. After a while he looked up and said that it was a sad story, difficult to tell. He said the blind eagle lived down in the barn in a cell with one small window in the wall. That all day long the eagle faced that window like he was waiting for something, and stayed perfectly

still on his arbutus branch like something stuffed, although it was evident he was very much alive. And that anybody could tell as much by standing next to him. He said the eagle would never eat with a witness. That you had to put the mouse beneath his beak to let him know that it was there, then trace the curve of his breast-feathers and leave it in front of him on his branch. And then you had to leave. He said he'd waited once for half an hour and the eagle hadn't moved. That he'd even tried to trick him by leaving and then sneaking back in again, but nothing. Ten minutes later he'd return and the mouse would be gone and the eagle would be standing as before. Edward said he'd seen him move once. He said this one time, in the spring, a mating pair had passed over the barn, circling and calling in their very particular, high-pitched, skittery kind of cry, and the old eagle had blinked, opened his throat and cried back to them. Edward said he'd filled the cell with such a din he'd had to leave to save his ears.

The cashier took out a packet of gum and unwrapped one. The butcher looked down at the floor. He shook his head. He said he wasn't sure it was altogether right keeping a bird like that alive.

"Yeah," said Larry. "But how you gonna do it?"

The butcher shrugged. "Same way you kill a chicken."

Larry shook his head and said he didn't mean that. He said how could you bring yourself to do it.

Sullivan bent and picked up his bag. "I got to go."

The cashier turned and walked away.

"Thanks for the food."

The butcher nodded.

On his way back out of town Sullivan was worried. He had a cargo bed full of buckets of pig food but nothing again for the wolves. Edward had told him that wolves could go days without eating and that pretty soon the salmon run at Goldstream, with a bit of careful poaching on their part, would provide them with food for a month. But still.

He'd been twenty minutes on the highway in the slush when he saw something up ahead, just off the soft shoulder. It looked at first like a wet and crumpled cardboard box, but as he passed it he could see clearly what it was. He pulled on to the side of the highway and stopped the truck, then backed slowly down the soft shoulder, stopping whenever a car came into view to let it pass. When he reached the carcass he flicked on his hazard lights and stepped out of the cab.

The deer had been struck some time in the night and been thrown on to the grass verge. Its neck was swivelled back at an unnatural angle and its tongue stuck out woodenly. Sullivan forced himself to look at it. He crouched beside and looked into its eyes. There was no light in them. He stood up and looked around, as much to settle his stomach and take a few deep breaths as check for cars. A few of them passed without taking any notice and then a pick-up slowed down. He nodded at the driver and waved to say he had no trouble and the driver nodded and drove on.

He stood and watched the pick-up turn the corner and then opened up the flap on the canopy and looked into the back. There was no room for the deer between the garbage cans and not enough between the closest two cans and the tailgate. Neither was there room between their lids and the roof of the truck. There was only one option.

He opened the passenger door and turned and took a long look at the deer. Glancing once again down the highway, to make sure the coast was clear, he bent and hauled the animal by its shoulder pits up to the edge of the door. He laid its head upon the floor-mat and thought about it. After a while he walked around to the driver's side and climbed in.

Kneeling in the passenger seat he bent and tried to drag the deer in by its neck, but its hooves got caught in the door. He leaned and collapsed its front legs and then tried again, with much the same result. Eventually he climbed over top of the deer and got behind it and lifted it up by its shoulder pits until it sat on the asphalt with its hooves out in front of it and its head to one side. He slid his boot under its butt and heaved it upwards in one motion so its hind-quarters rested on the seat. He shouldered its head and stuffed its front-quarters in until it sat upright with its legs sticking out the door. Then he took a rest. It was cold but he was already sweating. Another car passed without incident, but he began to no longer give a damn. So long as it wasn't the police. He caught his breath and then leaned in and buckled the seat belt around the deer's belly. He collapsed the hooves again, two at a time, and then turned the deer so it faced forward, with its back legs bent at the knees up under the glove box and its front legs straightening themselves again, slowly, and eventually coming to rest on the dashboard. Satisfied, he shut the passenger door then walked around, quietly triumphant, to the driver's side.

He drove on, timing the left-turn arrow off the highway so he wouldn't have to stop in traffic, but manoeuvred the corner too fast. The deer's head rolled and slammed against the glass. He flinched, and took his foot off the gas. Then he reached and patted

the mule deer on the thigh. When he turned again the mule deer's head rolled toward him. He glanced at the deer and then back at the road, then back at the deer again. Up ahead a woman and child were walking towards him on the side of the road and when he passed them he looked in the side view mirror and saw the child turn and point and her mother take her hand and carry on. "Don't look at me like that," he muttered. "I'm not the one who ran you over."

He pulled up before the back door and cut the engine. The old man was standing on the steps, inadequately dressed for the temperature and sucking on his pipe as if the fire in it would keep him warm. He raised his chin in greeting and then gestured at the oak. A scrawny-looking pig was rooting under it, truffling up the tulip bulbs and daffodils Evelyn had once planted.

"What's with the runt?" said Sullivan, climbing out of the cab.

The old man snatched the pipe out of his mouth. "Name's Baldric," he said.

Sullivan nodded. The old man smoked.

"Family palmed him off on us this morning. Told me he was cute enough when he was little but had grown too big. Imagine that. I tried to tell them he wouldn't get any bigger."

Sullivan shook his head, gravely.

"Not to mention he's ruining my flowerbed."

The door behind the old man opened and Edward stepped out. "What's with the runt?" he said.

"Name's Baldric," said Sullivan.

Edward picked a wad of something from between his teeth and looked at it. "That's wolf food, then."

"You'd better not."

Edward looked the old man over. "You're gonna catch your death."

Mole had stogged his long-johns in his boots and wore nothing over top except his v-neck sweater, backwards. He struck a match and re-lit the tobacco in his pipe. "I promised the children they could visit him."

Edward looked at Sullivan and then back at the old man. He looked at the runt.

The old man smoked. Edward leaned and spat. "So what have you got this morning?" he said.

Sullivan walked round to the passenger side and opened the door. Garrotted by the seat-belt, his grim and unexpected company hung half on the seat and half off it, with its legs buckled up around its ears.

"Jesus Christ," said Edward.

Sullivan nodded. "So what do you think?"

"Did you shoot her?"

"No I didn't shoot her. Found her on the side of the highway."

Edward came over and looked at the deer. He reached in and handled her belly. "She's pregnant," he said.

"Even better," exclaimed the old man, "Like one of those candies with the soft centre."

Sullivan reached in and touched her. Her belly was very firm, and swollen.

"Deer don't rut this early," said the old man, dismissively.

"I'm gonna need a hand," said Edward.

Sullivan stood looking at the deer. "I want to do it," he said.

Edward reached into his shirt pocket for his Players. He shucked one out and lit it and exhaled a long plume of blue smoke. The last guy he'd hired had shown no more than a cursory interest in the wolves, and the guy before that even less. They'd been ex-cons, both of them, and not looking for anything but a way back into the world. They'd moved on when they'd found something better. With Sullivan it was different. He took another drag on his cigarette and looked at him. Sullivan was waiting for his blessing. "Well then you're gonna need my help," he said. "You can't throw that thing over the fence."

"No." Sullivan unbuckled the seat-belt. "I'll open the gate." The deer toppled halfway out the door and he dragged it to the ground.

"You'll open the gate."

"Yeah. I'll dump it through and see you down there in a minute." He gestured at the wood-lot where the hogs were penned. He straddled the deer and squatted on his heels and paused there for a while.

"Internal bleeding," the old man said. "Deer don't rut this early."

Sullivan nodded. After a while he hugged the animal around its ribs and stood.

"Make sure you shut the gate," said Edward.

"What?"

"And don't look them in the eyes."

Sullivan wavered for a moment contemplating this advice. The mule deer's head had toppled to his shoulder. From a distance they could have been lovers in a drunken embrace, or partners in some bizarre, mythological *danse macabre*. He squatted, then hefted the deer on to his shoulder and staggered back under the weight. He squatted again, hefted it to get it balanced, and then turned and nodded to them both. The old man raised his pipe.

When he made it to the gate he was all but exhausted. He quickly knelt and shrugged the deer off his shoulders and knelt beside it for a long time waiting for the pain to go away. The gate was baled with wire at the top and bottom and secured with a chain without a padlock. They figured nobody would steal a pair of wolves, and unless the wolves themselves learned how to untie the wires they weren't going to get very far. The concrete slab across the threshold and the electric lead around the inside perimeter stopped them from digging their way out, and the fence itself was sections of twenty by fourteen foot aluminum mesh secured by solid cedar piles.

When Sullivan had recovered he unlaced the chain first, struggling with it where it twisted, then climbed the gate and untied the wire at the top. He put the wire in his pocket, leaped down and knelt and untied the wire at the bottom. If they hadn't smelled the deer already they would have heard the noise, but still there was no sign of them.

He opened the gate and dragged the deer to the entrance. He intended to leave the carcass just inside the door and then retreat, but a sudden, overwhelming wave of nausea made him stop and kneel over the deer. He felt his stomach pitch and turn and he dry

heaved once, and then once again before the feeling passed away. The sweat ran slowly down his spine. He had focused his eyes on the earth to better settle his stomach and when he looked up he saw a wolf, half camouflaged by salaal, standing, watching him from the edge of the clearing, no more than twenty yards away. "My god," he said.

The wolf's ears pricked at the sound of his voice.

He looked away. A bead of sweat fell from his temple and wetted his cheek. When he wiped it with his sleeve the wolf crouched. He lowered his arm slowly and it stood again. In his peripheral vision he could see the amber colour of the wolf's eyes and he wanted more than anything to look at them. He slowly stood and dragged the deer over the threshold. The wolf ducked back into the salaal.

Inside the pen the air was highly charged. If the night before he'd been shocked at the energy they seemed to emanate, today, as he stood within their territory, it was tactile. But it wasn't a fear that washed over him. It was something more akin to lust. He wanted more than anything to be next to them.

He'd been following Edward's instructions and been looking everywhere but directly at them, or rather, where he sensed they were behind the salaal, looking out at him. But he had not shut the door. After a while they came again, both of them, and he found he could resist their eyes no longer. He looked up. They were still a good twenty yards away but he heard a low, guttural growl so clearly, so close beside him it was as if another wolf had shadowed him and leaned in, on its hind legs, to whisper something in his ear.

"Look away," urged Edward, "for Christ's sake."

When Sullivan blinked and saw one of the wolves advancing he slowly backed away. Instinctively he knew better than to turn, and he looked steadily at the ground keeping the wolf in his peripheral vision. Edward ushered him out the door and quickly shut it. Thalia was standing beside him with the chain.

By now the second wolf had come forward and the two of them wasted no time in attacking the deer. They hurled their weight onto its hindquarters, ripping it until the force of their jaws moved the deer forwards. It shifted on its axis until their backs were turned, and Sullivan could see clearly how they'd split the thing open and were gouging great mouthfuls of gralloch and flesh, and their muzzles, when they raised them to swallow, were covered with blood and their teeth flashing white underneath them. Sullivan had to turn away. "They changed colour," he said.

"They what?"

"His eyes. They turned yellow when he growled."

"She," said Edward.

Sullivan looked at him. Edward held out his hand for the tie-wires, and when Sullivan handed them over Edward climbed the fence, re-tied the wire around the top and then dropped and secured the second one around the bottom. Thalia stepped forward and fastened the chain. She would not look at him.

"Did you know that?" said Sullivan.

Edward leaned against the gate and looked into the pen. He took off his hat to smooth his hair back and then put it back on again. "I know better than to look them in the eyes," he said. He glanced at Thalia.

Thalia looked directly at Sullivan. "Do you know what would happen if those wolves got out?" It was a question intended rhetorically, for she gave him no time to answer. "They'd be dead within a day. Seven years we've fed them, and kept them, and you come out of nowhere like some… hero, or something," she said, with disgust, "with your flames on your truck. And with God knows what to prove." She turned, abruptly, and strode back up the trail to the house.

"I left the door open," said Sullivan.

"You left the door open."

Sullivan glanced at Edward but Edward would not look at him. Sullivan turned and squinted into the sun. Behind him he could hear the pop of the wolves' jaws, the sound of bones cracking, and the low, guttural noise they made as they ate.

"The Bella Coola believe that someone once tried to change all the animals into men," said Edward, "but succeeded in making human only the eyes of the wolf."

Sullivan looked at him, astonished. "Say that again."

Edward shrugged. "It's just a story," he said. "Somebody told me that once."

Chapter sixteen

Sullivan and Mole were sitting on the top step of the loggia. Sullivan was trying to get the old man to eat. For nearly a week, the old man had no more than picked at his food, drinking only strong tea and alcohol. He hadn't bathed, or shaved, or changed his clothes in even longer, and amid the stench of stale sweat and cheap booze he smelled no better than a homeless alcoholic.

The old man considered the meadow. The grass was ankle-high all the way to the creek and brittle with frost. It was early enough in the morning that the sun had not yet melted it. It sparkled in the light like broken glass. The ducks and geese had flattened themselves an impromptu auditorium before the steps, with pathways trampled either side, through which they made their exits and their entrances. He had been tossing them maize one small handful at a time, methodically, as if it were some kind of meditation.

The old man considered the meadow, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Observing him, Sullivan concluded there were now two old men to reckon with; the one who went about his daily chores, and the other, insensible old man who was not looking at the meadow at all, whose attention was absorbed utterly by something only he could see.

"Edward told me a story," said Sullivan.

The old man snatched at something in front of him and missed it, evidently. Sullivan tried to see what he was snatching at but there was nothing there.

"Melusina," barked the old man.

"No," said Sullivan, "It was one about the wolves."

"Paracelsus put his finger on it. Reasoned that she was an essence, only, without soul or body in the human sense."

"Who?"

The old man stared at him. "Melusina. She was fairy folk. Roland of Poitou found her bathing at the fountain of the Fays, in the forest of Colombiers." He reached into the bucket and threw a handful of the maize with a disdainful flick of the wrist, as if shaking something undesirable from his fingertips. "An essence that could only achieve final humanity by cleaving itself to... to some poor sod. In this case Roland of Poitou, who when he saw her at the fountain fell instantly in love. The fool. Melusina agreed to marry him on one condition: that he never disturb her on a Saturday, no matter what. No problem." The old man pursed his lips and made a leveling gesture with his hand as if the matter were beyond all debate. The ducks and geese and Baldric, who had found his way round the side of the house, followed the motion of his hands and searched the air in vain for maize.

Sullivan waited to see if he was finished. But the old man cleared his throat and continued. "And for a while they lived happily. Roland let her be on Saturdays and all went well. But misfortune struck, for every child that was born to them was deformed in some way, either mentally or physically. And one in particular - Geoffroi with the boar's tusk jutting from his lower lip, following a quarrel with his brother, Freimond - set fire to the abbey of Melliers, where Freimond had taken refuge, and succeeded in burning alive his brother along with a hundred monks."

Mole reached for his tea cup and held it up about to drink, but then continued: "Anyway, one of Roland's cousins poisoned his mind with the objection that such a child could not rightly be his legitimate offspring, to be so uncivilized, and that somebody must have cuckolded him. 'Saturday,' exclaimed Roland, and said no more about it." The old man yawned, rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and made to lift his tea cup, but continued again, summarily, "So he connived to interrupt her the following day to find out if his insinuating cousin was correct. He stole into her room and hid himself behind the arras. Poor Melusina never suspected a thing. She took her bath, as she was wont to do, lathering herself in the steamy water, groaning softly with delight, which was all too much, of course, for jealous Roland. He stormed into the bathroom full of mad accusation and Melusina, when she saw him, shrieked like a banshee and leapt out of the window, leaving her footprint on the windowsill, condemned to fly through the air in pain until the Day of Judgement."

Mole lifted his tea-cup and drained it. His gullet rose and fell like some exhausted albatross. "She was a serpent you see," he said, "from the waist down."

Sullivan had only been half listening. When the old man snatched again at something in front of him he decided to ask him what he was grabbing at.

"Butterflies."

"Butterflies?"

"Monarchs. Everywhere."

"Well if you grab at them like that you're going to squash them."

The old man fixed his bloodshot eyes upon him. "You're right. I need a net."

"You don't need a net. Here." He handed him the plate with the toast and honey. "Dip your finger in the honey and hold it out. They'll come to you."

The old man did as he was told. After a while an enormous grin lit up his face. He let out a short laugh.

Sullivan got up and made to leave.

"Does she love you?" said Mole.

Sullivan sat back down again. "Thalia?" He pursed his lips and stared absently at the flagstones. "I don't think so," he said.

Mole nodded.

"Where did you get those wolves, Mr. Mole?"

At first the old man didn't answer. He stared unblinking at the meadow for a long time. After a while he said, "Hope."

"I beg your pardon?"

"They found them in the mountains east of Hope."

"Who did?"

But the old man simply shook his head and wouldn't say.

"Are you going to eat your toast, sir?"

"What?"

Sullivan nodded. "Your toast."

"No."

Sullivan reached for the plate and ate both slices. They sat together for a while in silence.

When Sullivan had gone, Mole gathered the bucket and went down to the basement by way of a flight of stone stairs beside the loggia. The door was difficult to open for the leaves and debris that had blown down the stairwell and settled there, but he could haul it open just enough to squeeze through. Beside the door stood the gunney sack of maize, and above it, hammered into the wooden mullion between the greenish panes of glass was a nail upon which he hung the bucket. He stood over the sack of grain and stared absently at the glass. They had traveled to the mainland, he and Evelyn, to pick up the wolves from a vet who had agreed to kennel them. They met the rangers who had tracked them into the mountains and brought them in. The rangers told them it had been an easy track. It had snowed the night before and they'd just followed their footprints, and the blood-trail, in the snow. The female had been shot in the mouth raiding livestock. She had lain down to die in the snow and her mate had not left her. There was blood on his coat too, but it turned out to be hers. They figured she had tried to drive him off, but he hadn't gone. They found him sitting just out of her reach. They said when he saw them the male stood up. They said he didn't growl or raise his hackles at them as you'd expect. He just stared. The rangers said they'd stood there for a long time staring back, with their rifles raised. Then they'd lowered their rifles, every one of them. They had wives themselves, they'd said.

With his eyes closed Mole folded back the opening of the sack and sunk his arms up to the elbows in the grain. The shock of the sensation stopped his tears.

Chapter seventeen

Sullivan and Edward were working together on the Ford. Edward had been out to the salvage yard to try and find a new starter but had come back with calipers instead. The guy at the yard had told him he'd give him a call if he found the right starter. The calipers weren't perfect but were a damn sight better than what they'd been driving with. Edward had backed the Ford into one of the barns, beside Sullivan's Chevy, and between them they'd already jacked up the front end, removed both the front tires and the old worn out calipers and pads. Sullivan was re-packing the bearings on the rotors with disc brake grease while Edward sanded the worst of the rust off the brake drums and then sprayed them with a few coats of black paint.

They sat back and waited for the paint to dry. Edward smoked. Sullivan sat against the carriage of his Chevy with Allen bolts for the new calipers and a jar of anti-seize. He was lubricating the threads on the bolts. "We should lower this puppy while we're at it," he said. "Give it some custom wheels and a set of Pirelli Scorpions."

Edward sucked on his cigarette and grinned.

"It's not that hard. Cost you about two hundred dollars."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. A couple of dropped spindles at the front, two lowering blocks at the back and you've got it. Wouldn't even take me a day."

Edward took a long haul and blew smoke up at the roof. Sullivan was still bent over the bolts, greasing them carefully. "Think about it," he said. "Maybe you wouldn't have to borrow the Chevy to get laid."

"You little shit," said Edward. "I don't need no Chevy. I got something else."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What's that?"

"Animal magnetism." He took another long haul on his cigarette.

Sullivan nodded, gravely. "So what was her name, anyway?"

"Who?"

"That animal you attracted at the pub."

Edward looked at the tip of his cigarette. He took one last drag and then stubbed it out in the dust. "You little shit," he said.

When the paint had dried and the Allen bolts were properly greased, Sullivan prepared to install the new calipers. Edward sat beside him, watching. Sullivan placed the caliper over the rotor and aligned the boltholes. He inserted a bolt and called for a ratchet. "That story you told me," he said, "about how the eyes of the wolf turned human. Was it the old man who told you that?"

"No," said Edward, handing him the ratchet. "Evelyn told me that."

Sullivan slotted the ratchet over the bolt head and started cranking. "What do you make of it?" he said.

"The story, or the fact that she told me?"

Sullivan stopped cranking for a second. Then he started up again. "The story, I guess."

"I don't know." Edward handed him another bolt. "She was out there, eh. She could tell by just touching an animal if it would live or die. I seen her. She could even give the time. Next day. Day after. I asked her once how she knew and you know what she said?"

Sullivan finished tightening the bolt and turned to look at him.

"She said there was a point at which this world touched the next. And she was sitting at it."

Sullivan put the ratchet down. He watched Edward shake his head, as if he still could not believe it. "How did she die?"

Edward shrugged. "Maybe she didn't." Sullivan was looking into his face, with a concentration that Edward found discomforting. He knew, or guessed, at what he must have seen there – the deep disturbance of an emotion that could find no outlet. He had said too much. His jaw hardened against the emotion as if against great pain. "I like to think she's living with Elvis somewhere," he said. "In Memphis, maybe."

"At Graceland," said Sullivan, relaxing his stare.

"Yes," Edward smiled. "At Graceland."

Thalia stood perfectly still before her bedroom window. She was wearing the same long sweater and leggings as always, the same thick woollen socks. Her hair was loose and fell about her shoulders. Except for an almost imperceptible quiver of her lower lip her

face was expressionless. The freckles the sun raised every summer on the bridge of her nose and that spilled onto her cheekbones had faded. Her pale, pale skin in the pewter light of a sunless November dawn looked almost translucent, like skimmed milk. She could have been one of the statues she stood amongst so wooden was her pose, except that her eyes gave her away.

A shiver in each liquid surface and her eyes released their tears. They fell from her jaw to the floor and darkened the boards beside her feet. What she was looking at was wedged into the fork of two branches, just out of arm's reach. It was the third and final golden apple, and he must have climbed the tree some time in the night to have left it there.

Thalia heard a knock upon the door. "Yes," she said, flatly, without turning around.

"Thalia?"

It was him. Her knees buckled and she came to. She hurriedly dried the tears from her eyes. She deked in between the statuary to the door and opened it. Sullivan lowered his eyes when he saw her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Shall I come back?"

"No." She opened the door even wider.

Sullivan stepped inside. He stopped short when he saw the *santos*. "Thalia," he said, "these are..."

"I know. They were my mother's."

He walked up beside and inspected one of them. Francisco. Through a chip in the plaster in the back of his head he could see all the way to the wood. The plaster on his cheeks had cracked like sizing. He looked at Ignacio and the *Mater Dolorosa*. He noticed the position of the saint's hand. He looked at Thalia but she offered no comment. She was looking away, shaking slightly. He had never seen her so discomposed. "I was wondering," he said, "if you'd seen your father lately? He hasn't been around in a while."

"He's up in the cupola," said Thalia. "He doesn't want to be disturbed."

"He hasn't eaten in a week."

"That's nothing new."

Sullivan nodded. He looked down at the floor. "Well," he said. "I don't want to disturb you." He turned and walked quietly to the door.

Thalia came forward, as if to stop him. "But you love me," she blurted.

Sullivan turned.

"You love me. You love me." She pointed at the apples she had placed along the window ledge.

Sullivan didn't know what to say. He looked toward where she was pointing and saw them. Then he saw the third one in the tree. "Thalia," he said.

"Yes."

"I didn't do that."

She felt her knees give way again. "You what?"

"The apples," he said. "If that's what you mean. I didn't do it. I'm sorry." He stepped out the door and shut it quietly behind him.

It took a little while to sink in. He walked quietly downstairs and down again to the basement, where he found his keys, gathered together his few possessions, and went out to his truck. He started the engine and pulled out of the barn but then stopped. He sat looking up at the house with the engine idling. He turned on the radio, and then after a while he turned it off again. He let out one long sigh. He was trying to feel sorry for himself but it wouldn't stick. He felt not so much betrayed as simply outdone, and a gathering respect began to take hold of him. It was not only respect for Edward's gesture, the simple beauty of it, but respect for the fact that Edward had waited so long to make his move. He was still subtly outraged at the fact that Thalia was no older than him – it offended some obscure sense of ownership he felt over girls of his own generation – but in the end he came to accept as truth the old man's notion that love must be indifferent to age. He looked out through the windshield at the sky. It was starting to rain. He shifted the truck into reverse and backed into the barn.

Thalia, meanwhile, stood looking at the door through which he'd gone. On the driveway, outside, she could hear an engine trying to turn over. It sputtered and clicked but wouldn't start. She heard somebody get out of the driver's side and pop the hood.

She ran to her door and in a blind rage bounded down the wraparound stairs. She ran on along the corridor, burst into the kitchen through the swinging door, out of the back door and down the steps and caught Edward shutting the hood of the truck. He was carrying a hammer in his hand.

Edward knew instantly what it was about and he braced himself. He threw the hammer onto the grass verge and wiped his hands. Thalia paced back and forth before him

like an animal in a cage. She tucked her hair behind her ears and glared at him. Then she paced again.

After a while she threw herself at him and kissed him hard upon the lips. Edward stumbled back into the truck and his baseball cap fell off. Thalia pushed him and stepped away again. They faced one another. "You stink," she said. "You stink like cigarettes and pig shit."

Edward aggressively jutted his chin, and from deep within the back of his nose and throat emitted a passable facsimile of a low, porcine grunt.

"I hate you," she said. She ran at him. She kissed him again and then slapped him. "I hate you. I hate you. I love you."

They went down to his room in the basement and made love.

"You must have climbed the tree," said Thalia.

With his little finger Edward reached inside his lower lip, drew it out and looked at it. He was bleeding. "I've been climbing that tree for a long time," he said.

Chapter eighteen

The cupola was a pentagonal room twenty-three feet in diameter. Except for the one solid wall that fastened it to the roof, it was wrapped in glass and wooden mullions so thin the sunlight, when it shone directly level, at sunrise and sunset, erased them altogether in a blaze of light. It had never held much in the way of furniture, and at present was emptied of everything save a dozen emerald-green Tanqueray bottles placed to catch the rainwater falling through the roof. There was a pile of old magazines stacked in one corner, an easel propped against the wall, and beside it a wooden bench upon which Mole sat listening to the sound of the rain with his eyes closed.

He was shaking uncontrollably with *delerium tremens*. His eyes were closed because he'd already hallucinated. He'd seen a harpy eagle with its stiff-legged, military stride stamp across the floorboards towards him with its beak aimed at his heart. A wingflap in the rafters and he looked up, suddenly. A brace of pigeons on a cross-beam shuffled sideways like a chorus-line. Each one squeezed in turn into the angle of the slanted roof, flapped around to the beginning of the line and began again, pointlessly. He yelled at them to stop it for the love of God but the pigeons persisted, and when he cast about for something to throw at them he toppled one of the Tanqueray bottles and watched, indifferently, the water pour out of the neck and stain the floorboards like a dark flower. He lay down on the bench and fell asleep.

He woke with a ravening thirst. For a moment the cupola was quiet. Without opening his eyes he cast about the floor for a bottle of rainwater, found one and drank a deep draught. He'd not been the one to find Evelyn dead, but had been obliged to identify her, officially. It was a formality that he'd found not only devastating but absurd. They didn't deem it necessary, apparently, to escort him to the morgue, slide Evelyn out of the wall on some refrigerated tray and lift the sheet like they did on t.v. Instead, they'd handed him a polaroid, a piece of cheap and glossy photographic paper that held within its three- by-five-inch frame the last image of his wife that he would ever see. He'd sat across from a grey-suited coroner in a grey office holding the polaroid upside down until he'd summoned the courage to look at it.

He'd watched his father, first, and then his mother waste away in hospital beds and knew that her portrait would be anything but flattering. But when, eventually, he turned the polaroid over, the shock jolted him so deeply that it registered beyond his ability to assimilate, and so took on a life of its own. Those first few days of November had been warm, unseasonably so, and nobody had found her for three days. In the polaroid her mouth was open and her eyes were closed. Her head inclined slightly to one side. Her skin, from her eyebrows either side of her nose and across one cheek, was purple, like a birthmark. Her lips were swollen and her nose misshaped. She looked like she'd been beaten to death.

Among his memories of Evelyn it was this that he needed, above all, to exorcise, and he had run himself ragged for seven years sprinting in the opposite direction, only to run into it now, as if he had, in fact, been running toward it the whole time. He lifted again

the bottle of water and drank. The liquid revived him enough to try standing and he tottered unsteadily on his feet with a wretched smile upon his face and his arms held out for balance like a high wire clown. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced, a passable Ringmaster, "And now for the moment you've all been waiting for..." He shuffled to the window and stared out over the fields. In his mind's eye the harpy eagles made a bee-line for his breast and he made no move to avoid them. They flew right through the window, smashing the glass into a thousand pieces. He fell to the floor and lay holding his head. It felt like the roof was caving in.

Which indeed it was. A panic of wingflap and he looked up. The roof had finally given way under the weight of the rain. He stood up and considered the hole. It was big enough to fit his head and shoulders through. He dragged the bench beneath the hole and climbed on to the arm of it; and like some accidental shaman penetrating seventh heaven, he stretched his neck and blinked at the uninterrupted view.

At his left, beside the chimney, Evelyn was sunning herself on a cheap red and white striped deck chair. She was wearing a blindingly bright, butterfly patterned mu mu that she'd shimmied up above her thighs. She was smoking a cigarette and drinking margaritas from a goldfish bowl.

"Oh, hello, darling," said Mole, casually, "I was just thinking about you."

"Malcolm, for God's sake, what are you doing here?"

"I don't know. The cupola finally caved in."

"Well you startled me."

"Sorry."

Evelyn took a drag on her cigarette and flicked ash into the chimney. "They told me you had some more time yet." When she reached over the side of the deck chair for her margarita, butterflies lifted from her mu mu and fluttered while she sucked on her curly-wurly straw. When she replaced the bowl on its coaster and lay down again, they settled back into the pattern of her dress. They were a species that Mole did not recognize.

"Since when did you start smoking?" he said.

"Since it didn't make any difference to my health. Besides, it keeps the mosquitoes away."

"Mosquitoes? I thought they'd be denied paradise at least."

"Everyone is welcome here, Malcolm. So long as you followed your own nature. She's very particular about that. And don't let those J.W.'s fool you either. The lion does not lie down with the lamb. It's terribly violent."

"Oh, jolly good. I won't have to become a vegetarian then."

Evelyn pulled out a reflector and placed it under her chin. The butterflies lifted, and then settled again. The old man watched her. Evelyn smoked.

"Well, forgive me the obvious question, darling, but how exactly did you die?"

"Oh, Malcolm you said it yourself," she answered, patting her heart. "I was ever the visitor."

"Yes, but. Well, seeing you now... I suppose it means we're all only visitors, really."

Evelyn turned suddenly towards him. The deck chair creaked precariously beneath her. "You see, that's the remarkable thing. We're visitors in both places. Except for the

angels, of course, who are not plump and cherubic by the way. Androgynous, yes, but lithe like circus acrobats and tattoed blue all over. It's a great misconception that anyone is obliged to be born again. They're lining up for it, the gamble notwithstanding. I'm on the waiting list myself."

"The gamble being, I suppose, that you cannot request to be the Maharajah?"

"Well of course. You don't even get to choose your sex."

Mole nodded.

"And you're born forgetting where you've been." Evelyn shook her head and took a last drag on her cigarette. "Fate is a bastard angel, Malcolm. Entirely without conscience."

Mole pursed his lips and nodded again. "Well, then," he said.

Evelyn settled back into her chair.

"There is something else I've been meaning to ask you."

"Ask away," she said, reaching once again for her enormous margarita.

"Well, I was wondering, you know, if it's alright with you, if I could forget about it now. If I could forget about you." He paused to consider her one last time. "It hurts."

"Malcolm I wish you would, honestly. Maybe then I could afford a decent bloody deck chair. It's a strain on both of us, you know."

At the end of the corridor, past the old man's study, was the narrow shaft that accessed the cupola. The light from the landing window failed halfway up the shaft. At the top of the ladder it was dark. Sullivan had taken an orange and a bouquet of marigolds

he'd found among the pig food and, in spite of Thalia's admonition, had decided to go and see how the old man was doing.

He tucked the orange into his pocket and began to climb. The ladder creaked beneath him. There was room enough on each rung for the toe of his boots only, and he ascended very slowly, with the marigolds in one hand and the other braced above him on the rungs. When his head struck the underside of the trapdoor, he stopped and listened. He could hear the muffled sounds of pigeons cooing, the occasional wingflap, and what sounded like a xylophone hammered haphazardly. With his free hand he knocked upon the door. There was no answer. He knocked again. After a while, he eased the door open a few inches and looked inside. At eye level with the floor he could see only the butt ends of a bunch of green bottles. He could make out what looked to be the legs of a church pew against one wall, and a pile of rotten roof shingles beside it. He knocked once again on the door.

"Do as you will," said the old man.

"Mr. Mole?"

He climbed higher until he was bent double under the trapdoor and then slowly stood up. The squeaking of the pulley rope silenced the birdsong for a while. Then it started up again.

Mole was standing naked by the window with his long-johns wrapped sweater-like around his waist, and with the legs dangling down in front to hide his manhood. Some time over the past few days he'd smeared himself with bird shit and ashes like an Indian *sadhu*, and was covered head to toe in a grey-white paste. The hair on his head and his

two-week-old beard was brittle with it. He looked at Sullivan and smiled. Beneath the rafter the pigeons favoured most he'd scraped ashes and their droppings together and added water. A small cone of fresh paste remained. Not knowing what to do, or say, Sullivan offered him the flowers.

"Marigolds," said the old man. "Thank-you." He looked at them for a long time. He held them out at arm's length, then brought them very close, burying his nose and face into the flesh of them. Then he sat down on the floor, and slitting the stems of seven with his fingernail and threading them together made a chain that he placed around his neck. Another one he snapped off just below the head and tucked into his hair, beside his ear. And the last one he thought about for a while. Then snapping off the flower he separated the folds of flesh around his belly and placed it in his navel.

"We've been worried about you," said Sullivan. "You haven't eaten anything." He held up the orange, and then sat down himself among the bottles and rolled it across the floor.

"Thank-you," said Mole, stopping the orange with his feet. "I was getting a little peckish." He picked up the orange and began peeling it very carefully, smelling and inspecting it every so often, until he liberated the peel in one long orange coil that he placed on his head like a crown. He split the fruit and offered half to Sullivan. Sullivan declined. "You must," said the old man, unequivocably.

The rain had stopped suddenly and the sky had cleared. Pillars of sunlight began to slant through the windows and. Sullivan reached and took his half from the old man's hand. They sat and ate together, the old man chewing very slowly with his eyes closed.

"I saw my wife again," said Mole, casually. He drove his thumb between two segments of the orange and brought one to his mouth. "And I'm glad," he said, between chews, "because the last time I saw her she looked awful."

Sullivan watched him while he ate. The old man swallowed what was in his mouth and licked his fingers.

"How long ago was that?"

"Seven years."

Sullivan nodded. "So what happened?"

Mole shrugged. "She had a bad heart. There was nothing anyone could have done."

"Did you know that when you married her?"

"Oh yes."

"So what ails you, Mr. Mole?"

The old man paused, with one finger still in his mouth. Then he drew it very quickly from his lips with a loud sucking sound. He opened his eyes and smiled at him. "I thought you'd never ask," he said. He popped the last of the orange segments into his mouth and wiped his hands on his long-johns. "She was seeing someone else. Someone she saw in secret."

"Every Saturday," said Sullivan.

"Oh, at least."

"A serpent from the waist down."

"No," he said. "Not a serpent. Just a woman. With a penchant for middle-aged men," he muttered.

"Who was it?"

The old man yawned and the paste on his face began to crack. "Robert," he said.

"Who?"

"The doctor."

Sullivan nodded. The old man smiled. "He must have suffered also. Still is, I'm sure."

"You could help him."

The old man looked at him aghast. "Why on earth should I do that? He was screwing my wife." He laughed, and fell into a paroxysm of coughing that toppled the crown from his head.

When he tried to stand the marigold fell out of his navel and he stumbled as he bent to pick it up. Sullivan hurried to steady him. "That's the first thing you've eaten in a week, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Come on. Did you want to get cleaned up before they see you?"

"I suppose. Although I'd rather not come down at all."

Sullivan took hold of the old man's arm and lifted him to his feet. His flesh was loose, and cold, and when he put his arm around his waist he felt he could have carried him down the stairs on one hip. "Here," he said. "Let's put your clothes on first." He led him to the bench and sat him down.

Sullivan looked discreetly to one side while the old man untied his long johns and slipped into them. When Sullivan handed him his shirt he took the marigolds from around

his neck, reluctantly, and turned and laid them ceremoniously on the bench. Sullivan laid his orange crown alongside it. "That's good enough," he said, when the old man had buttoned up his shirt. "I'll carry your jacket to the bathroom and you can wear it once you've showered."

"Oh no," said Mole, "I shan't wear these. I have a caftan the British Consul once gave me in St Lucia. Brightly coloured thing. Horrible really, but I've never worn it."

"You think you can handle the stairs? I'd better go first."

"No, no, I need you behind me," he said. "So I don't turn around."

Sullivan lifted the trap door by its pulley-rope. The lead weights made a thud as they struck the floor.

"Sorry?"

"Never mind."

Chapter nineteen

Coulton took his raincoat from the standing rack, put it on and threw open his front door. It was raining so hard he could barely see the seaplane base across the bay. It coursed out of the drainpipes either side of his entranceway and splashed mud up the sides of the stairs. He turned his collar up and made his way quickly to the mailbox at the end of the drive. He opened the sprung flap, groped inside, and tucked a pair of envelopes into his jacket pocket before turning back.

He shook off his raincoat under the porch and opened the front door. He took off his shoes and left them on the rubber mat and hung up the coat on its hook. Only then did he look at the letters. One of them was a cable bill and the other was a letter from Mole. A third one. The other two were filed away inside his office. He left the cable bill on the table in the hall and proceeded with the letter into the kitchen. Then he came back for the slippers he'd forgotten

He put the kettle on the stove and sat down. When he and Evelyn had embarked on their affair it had been only the consummation, he reasoned, of something that had started long before. He had never imagined that by casually telling Malcolm Mole about her he would lose his opportunity to pursue it. She and Mole had met in his waiting room by accident. She was taken, so she said, with his sense of humour, and that was that. But during that long Indian summer, seven years ago, when he had visited the Moles almost daily, he had found an opportunity to renew his advance. Mole was quite often away at

that time and, under the aegis of inquiring after her health (she was not eating well and was struggling somewhat obsessively, as Mole had indicated in his second letter, with a dying wolf, of all things), he found his advances were returned. The sex itself, as he remembered, was nothing to write home about. She seemed to want only that he lay his full weight upon her before, during, and after, as if she needed pinning to the ground; a request to which, of course, he did not accede, fearful of her heart failing beneath him and his carrying her death upon his conscience forever.

Behind him, on the stove, the kettle began to whistle. He got up from his chair and removed it from the element. He poured the water into a small pot and came back to the table. The letter lay before him like something alive. Something unpredictable and dire. Their conversation over chess that day had been unsettling, but ultimately inconclusive. He didn't know what Mole might have discovered. He didn't know if Edward ever knew. Maybe Thalia had seen them together one night. He sipped his tea and warmed his hands on the mug. Then after a while he put it down. He opened the letter.

When he'd read almost all of it he paused, and looked up. Absorbed in Mole's remarkably candid confession, he hadn't noticed that the rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and sunlight had begun to flood his kitchen. So Mole didn't know. He didn't know that he'd been the one, and he didn't know what had happened at the end. Making love to Evelyn had been so much the sweeter for the larceny. It was a feeling he likened to betting on a young horse, at forty-to-one, and watching him come in at the head of the pack. It was only when it was over that he realized what he'd lost.

But towards the end he'd got scared, and for good reason. If Evelyn had impressed him as a rare and beautiful animal, as Mole had put it, he hadn't been prepared for her to smell like one. She was living, as Mole had said, inside the cage with that wolf. She wouldn't wash her hair or change her clothes and she soon took on the appearance of some sort of sibyll. Her eyes, and by extension her entire face became dark, smouldering, as if she were in the grip of lust. Her conversation became laconic and strange. She was falling to pieces and it frightened him. As her doctor he urged her to seek help. He persuaded Edward to watch her. But as her lover he decided to withdraw. They made plans to see each other one evening. He was to proceed into the basement and wake her up. She wanted to make love in the basement, in the cage, in fact, but he never honoured their agreement. He stayed home. Next thing he heard she had died.

He sipped his tea again, and then read the coda that Mole had penned.

...But to entertain that story I must first entertain my own and, as I write this now, I am coming to realize what I must do.

You are my oldest and closest friend, Robert. I cannot lie to you. I do not know if I shall live to continue this confession. The obligation under which I place you is more than can be fairly asked of any man. I trust that you will not try to dissuade me from my course, and you may rest assured that your obligation ceases to me upon receipt of this letter.

But my obligation to you, my dear friend, for being the silent and sympathetic witness of my grief, shall be eternal.

Yours sincerely,

Mole

Coulton stood up quickly and rushed into his office. He took his leather medical bag from beside his desk and then hunted for a book along the shelf. When he'd located the book he rushed into the hallway, seized his keys from the table in the hall and made his way outside to his Buick.

Thalia sat before her dresser contemplating her own image in the mirror. She had brushed her hair, carefully, for the first time in weeks, untangling the elf-locks that sex had left her with and then, by easing the stool away from the dresser and dropping her head between her knees, had backcombed it, for fun. When she'd sat back up straight and thrown her head back her hair had stuck out almost horizontally from her head and looked like candyfloss. She'd been staring at herself for a minute or more, trying to decide what she looked like, when she heard her bedroom door opening. Expecting Edward she turned, coquettishly, to welcome him.

But it was her father who poked his head around the door. He had bathed, shaved, brushed his hair back from his forehead, and wore upon his gaunt, terribly pale face an expression of the profoundest tranquility, like an idiot savant, and almost immediately Thalia began to cry. She cried so suddenly, and so voluminously, that the tears seemed

not to belong to her at all, as if some other being of perpetual grief had taken up residence behind her eyes.

The old man slipped inside and quietly shut the door. He looked at his daughter for a long time, offering no consolation until her tears had run their course, reckoning that his interrupting sooner would not only be unnecessary, but unwelcome. Grief, he had recently come to realize, and the way in which a person came to satisfy it, was as precious, and as individual, as her own soul.

When she'd done he went over to where she was sitting and pressed her head against his belly. The gesture caused another wave of tears. He lifted up her chin and looked at her. Her pale and fine-boned face, delicate as it was, was so overwhelmed by the halo of hair that she almost disappeared beneath it. Her eyes were red from crying and her cheeks were wet. "Goodness me," he said, "you look like..."

"A dahlia?"

He nodded. "Alright."

She buried her head again into his caftan.

"I hope you don't mind," he said, "but I wanted to see these again." He gestured round at the *santos*.

"I don't mind."

He held her for a little longer and then he eased her face away.

Mole walked up beside and stood toe to toe with Francisco, looking very carefully at his face. "I remember this one very well," he said. "Francisco, isn't it?"

Thalia snuffled and nodded her head.

"I remember when we found him, on the road to Guanajuato. We'd stopped in at some out of the way settlement so you could use the bathroom but there was none. Not for the public anyway. Fearless as ever you walked up to a very derelict looking hacienda on the edge of town, the kind of place that at one time would have been a landowner's mansion, knocked on the door and asked the woman who answered in your terrible Spanish if you could remove their toilet."

Thalia laughed, and had to find something to wipe her nose with.

"That woman was toothless, do you remember?"

"Yes."

"All bent over like a fairy-tale witch. She invited all three of us in, took you by the hand and led you to the bathroom and her husband, or her son, perhaps - he seemed to be younger than her - showed Evelyn and I into the courtyard. In the middle of it was this enormous fig tree with an emaciated cat lounging in its shade. It was January and swallows were roosting there. There must have been hundreds of them. And standing next to the cistern, as if he were the guardian of some sacred font was Francisco here, faded by the sun and covered in bird shit. I was embarrassed when your mother asked to buy him but they didn't seem to mind. Nice people. Very poor." The old man cocked his head and looked Francisco in the eyes. "I don't know if a hundred dollars was enough but it was all I had on me at the time. Your mother asked them where it came from but they didn't know. They were squatting there, probably. There were signs of more than one family. Anyway, Francisco became ours. Your mother's. The old woman offered us lunch. Do you remember?"

"No. All I remember is the bathroom. They had a telephone directory for toilet paper. I wiped my bottom with Flores."

"Flowers," laughed the old man.

"I remember Guanajuato, though. And San Miguel. I remember sitting under the orange trees in the square."

The old man nodded. He could sense a flood of questions coming.

"There's something I've wanted to ask you."

"Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course not."

He crossed the room and sat down heavily on the edge of her unmade bed.

"Do you remember one night, in San Miguel, after Mom had been off by herself somewhere – "

"There was more than one night."

"The two of you acted like strangers. It was so weird. So formal. Where had she been, do you think?

The old man had been looking at his hands while she had spoken. He waited to see if she had anything more to say and then he looked up. From where Thalia was sitting it looked like the answer he was looking for might be written on her bedroom wall. He smiled, wearily, and then thought about how to begin. "The short answer," he said, "is that I don't rightly know."

"You never asked her?"

"I never asked her. I wasn't all that sure I wanted to find out. Looking back I suppose she might have had a boyfriend. She didn't deny herself much, your mother."

"I don't think she had a boyfriend."

"No?"

"No. At least she showed no interest in men while we were together."

"Well then. Maybe she just needed to be alone. God knows I need it myself from time to time."

Thalia went to her dresser for tissue paper. "I never liked my boarding school, you know." She sat back down upon her chair. "All those women in one place. The humiliations were not even subtle."

"I thought it would be for the best."

"For whom?"

"For you. I wasn't only thinking of myself. You had a decent education, at least."

"And now we're destitute."

Mole allowed a half smile to pass across his face.

"What's so funny?"

"This house," he said. "These branches. The animals. All of it. We should start a circus."

Thalia blew her nose on a tissue and looked around for somewhere to dump it. "So long as I get to wear sequins," she said.

Mole eased himself off the edge of her bed and stood.

"There's one more thing," said Thalia.

"Yes."

"I was the one to find her."

"Yes. I'm terribly sorry about that. You want to know how it happened -"

"No. I just wanted to say there was no violence in it. She was curled up with that she-wolf like a child."

The old man gasped, and a sob rose from his throat like a songbird escaping. It fluttered twice, three times around the room to dry its wings and then settled on the shoulder of the *Mater Dolorosa.*

When he came downstairs into the kitchen he heard a car on the gravel outside. He glanced at the calendar over the sink. It was five days ago that he'd mailed his last letter and unless it was somebody bringing them an animal he knew who it would be. He sat down at the table and waited. He heard Coulton's Buick come to a stop, the car door open and close, and the sound of hurried footsteps on the gravel. Coulton knocked.

"Come in, Robert," said Mole. He stood up.

"Malcolm," said Coulton. He shut the door. He laid the book and his leather medical bag on the table. "I am glad to find you in good health," he said. He was still a little out of breath.

"And you, my friend, are you well?"

"Tolerably, thank-you."

"Tea, then." Mole moved over to the kitchen counter.

"Only if you're making it."

Mole filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. He came back to the table and sat down. "Is this for me?" he said, reaching for the book. It was an illustrated Bouguereau.

"Not exactly," said Coulton. "There's something inside it that belongs to you."

Mole opened the cover and began to leaf through the pages. "So you are aware, then, of the incomparable 'Nymphs and Satyr'?"

"Very well," said Coulton.

It was in between two pages of text that Mole found the photograph. It was the photograph of Evelyn that he'd lost. Curiously enough, Evelyn had not been photogenic. Not one of the portraits he'd made had managed to capture her particular charisma, and this one was no exception. She looked beautiful still, but without the astonishing aura. It must be, he thought, owing to his mediocrity as a photographer. "Thank-you," he said. "I've been looking for this."

He got up from the table and went over to the stove. The kettle had boiled. The pitch and volume of the whistle was deafening, but he made no move to silence it right away. After a while, he removed the kettle and turned off the stove. "I want you to tell me you were in love with her," he said, pouring water into the pot. "Falling for Evelyn I can understand. Tell me you were in love with her, Robert."

Coulton raised his head and looked out of the window. His eyes had begun to fill with tears. "What else do you call it," he said, "when it only happens once?"

Mole brought the teapot and the mugs to the table. He sat down. He closed the pages of the Bouguereau, still with the photograph within them, and slid the book back

across the table. "Your story, then," he said, without looking up, "of the young woman who came to you, who died of breast cancer, that was a lie?"

"Yes."

Mole nodded. He poured tea. "Is there anything you can tell me about those last few days? Anything at all."

"Thank-you," said Coulton, reaching for his mug.

"Don't mention it."

Coulton drank. Slowly he began to regain his composure. "Only that she deserved better," he said.

Mole nodded. They were silent for a long time.

Mole became engrossed in the pattern of his caftan. After a while he reached for the hem and found the maker's label. "Well I'll be damned," he said.

"What?"

"This caftan," he answered, inspecting the label more closely. "Damn thing was made in Taiwan."

Coulton took a sip of his tea. "It's very becoming, nevertheless," he said. "I especially like the embroidery, there, around the neck."

"Rather psychedaelic, isn't it? How's the track been treating you?"

"Haven't been all week."

"You do surprise me."

"Do I?" Coulton laid his mug down on the table. "I've had a lot on my mind."

Chapter twenty

Sullivan woke at dawn and knocked quietly on Edward's door. There was no answer. He tried again, with more gusto. They had agreed to drive out to Goldstream and gather salmon for the wolves. Unless you could prove you were Native, it was illegal to fish them while they were spawning, but Edward had assured him that he knew a spot far enough from the lodge that the staff wouldn't notice, even if they were to show up early. Mole had agreed to go with them. Sullivan called out Edward's name but still there was no answer. He opened the door. It had been a week since Edward and Thalia had gotten together and Edward was looking more and more ragged every day. Yesterday he'd found him asleep at the table, sitting upright with his coffee mug in hand. His eyes, when he'd lifted them, had the look of a man hanging desperately to a cliff edge.

Sullivan closed Edward's bedroom door and went upstairs. He made tea for himself and waited. After a while he heard somebody shuffling down the corridor and, from the carriage of the footsteps, expected the old man. It was Edward, however, who pushed his way through the swinging kitchen door and sat down immediately at the table. He blinked at the clock and then blinked out the window. Then he folded his arms in his lap and leaned forward with one long sigh.

Sullivan quietly sipped his tea. Edward's skin was bloodless and his eyes were red. He looked like a man just resurrected. Sullivan made coffee and placed a steaming mug in front of him. Edward nodded, weakly, but didn't reach for it. Neither of them had yet

spoken. It was Mole who broke the silence, strolling casually into the kitchen and then stopping short on his way to the sink to search his pockets for something. The day before, when he'd expressed an interest in joining them, Sullivan and Edward had persuaded him out of his caftan and back into his tweeds, but in honour, evidently, of the morning's activity he'd donned a pair of safari shorts, rolled his socks up two inches beneath the knee, and pulled on a pair of olive green Wellington boots that he'd mended with duct tape. "Blast," he said, "I don't have a light." He looked to Edward, who had raised his head once and then dropped it again with no comment. "What the bloody hell's wrong with him?" said Mole.

"Um, got stuck into the bourbon last night, Mr. Mole."

Edward looked up at Sullivan. Sullivan smiled, thinly, as he quietly sipped his tea. Implied in his lie was an understanding that Sullivan had no hard feelings; and it was for this, as much as keeping Mole in the dark, that Edward was both grateful and filled with respect. Their eyes met briefly, and then both looked away.

"Been drinking have you? Damn fool," he added, rummaging through a kitchen drawer, "that bloody stuff will kill you. Aha!" He raised a box of matches triumphantly and tucked them into the pocket of his shorts. "Ready when you are."

Edward reached weakly for his coffee. It had cooled sufficiently for him to drink it in large mouthfuls, and by the time Mole had slipped into his barbour and Sullivan had laced up his boots he had finished it and managed to stand. "I'll drive," said Sullivan. Edward nodded. He took his coat from the rack and stepped into his boots.

On the bench seat of the Ford, Edward sat wedged in the middle, propped up between Sullivan and Mole. He'd roused himself a little since they'd first left the house but the drone of the engine and the sound of the wheels on the wet surface of the highway had sent him to sleep again. When they entered the Malahat drive and the road narrowed to two lanes through the canyons, Mole, who had been quiet and contemplative for some time, suddenly lit into song. The melody itself, had he sung it in tune, was sweet enough. Not only was he evidently tone deaf but had been blessed, or cursed, as the case may be, with a stentorian tenor that only served to amplify his appalling pitch. Edward woke up with a grimace.

"An old man came court–ing me," sang Mole, "Hey ding doorum down,

An old man came court–ing me, me being young, An old man came court–ing me,

Fain would he mar–ry me. Maids when you're young ne-ever wed an old man."

Edward groaned, softly.

"For he's got no faloorum faliddle aye oorum,

He's got no faloorum faliddle aye ay,

He's got no faloorum, He's lost his ding doorum,

So maids when you're young never wed an old man."

"Where'd you get that one, Mr. Mole?" said Sullivan, in an attempt to get him talking again.

"Sang in a Gaelic choir once. Bloody good laugh. Took themselves far too seriously. Kicked me out in the end."

"For what?"

"Found out I couldn't sing."

"Oh yeah," said Edward, "how long did that take them?"

Mole ignored him.

"We're getting close," said Edward. He raised himself and paid attention to the road. "Just around the next corner."

Sullivan glanced in the rearview mirror and began to slow down.

"Here," said Edward.

On the side of the highway was a pullout that looked like the entrance to an old logging road. Sullivan parked the truck and they got out. Edward opened the flap on the canopy and handed out plastic bags. They could hear the river through the trees. There was a rich smell of rotting leaves and fungus and occasionally a whiff of rotting salmon. They had arrived at the perfect time. Within three weeks the stench would be overwhelming and the salmon so rotten they'd be hardly worth poaching.

Edward led the way down a trail through a stand of giant cedar and maple whose steering- wheel sized leaves littered the ground. The slowly increasing light resolved the forest into its perspectives. It was fecund almost beyond belief. The moss was four inches thick, at least, along the trunks of the maples, and high up in the canopy, small ecosystems unto themselves, sword ferns and red currant grew from the thick, spreading branches. The forest floor was covered with mushrooms. Mole had always been humbled

by Goldstream. Wedged in between the shadows of Mt. Finlayson and the Malahat, at the tip of Finlayson arm, the trees grew taller here than they did even five kilometres further south. Except for a few isolated pockets, it was not until you got over the Malahat, either north towards Cowichan, or west into Sooke that the cedar again grew so large.

Edward reached the river first. The shore-line was littered with their carcasses, and still they came en masse. That their skin should burn and their insides rot in the very water into which they were born, and that they should return at all after four years of freedom, was both appalling and profound, and it always moved him. He watched them in the dying light thrashing in the shallow gravel washes, half out of the water, their muscled, gunmetal-coloured backs like polished stones a man might walk on to reach the other side. Because of their late start he'd been anxious to begin, but now that they were there he was content to stand and watch for a while. It was Mole who began gathering first. He selected only dead salmon, and instructed Sullivan to do the same. When they'd gathered what they could at the foot of the trail, Mole wandered off downstream. Sullivan followed Edward up a ways to a shallow bend where the spent fish were piled up like a log-jam.

When their bags were filled, they hauled them back up to the truck and then went looking for the old man. The sun was up and Edward was anxious to leave. They followed the course of the river for a quarter of a mile or more until they found him. At a broad and shallow section of the river, where the sun streamed in pillars through the trees, Mole was standing facing the sun, thigh deep and naked in the middle of the river with salmon

thrashing in between and either side of his legs. He was quietly smoking his pipe with his eyes closed.

"He's naked again," said Sullivan.

"Again?"

"Mr. Mole – "

Edward restrained him. "Leave him alone for a minute," he said.

His clothes and boots and three bags of salmon were hanging from an alder branch beside the riverbank.

Mole was oblivious to their presence. He had let his senses become glutted. He had learned in his life, and not least from Evelyn, that awareness was a thing of the body; and his mind, insomuch as it was inseparable from his senses, was at its best observing, with equanimity, the intoxicating odours of decay, and the slick, muscular feel of salmon sliding past his thighs on their way to procreate and die. He also knew the moment would not last. He was shivering and his heart was thumping wildly, erratically. The cumulative force of the water had begun to unsteady him. He was losing his grip on the riverbottom. He opened his eyes wide and was blinded. The sunlight was magnified by the surface of the river and the polished backs of salmon either lingering in the eddies, undulating slowly, or exploding in a streak of light and white water. He held his arms out for balance, but as he turned for the bank he lost his footing and fell sideways. Salmon scattered outwards like a small explosion.

"Mr.Mole," said Sullivan.

The old man surfaced a few metres away and slowly got back to his feet. Aware, for the first time, that he was being watched, he held himself as casually as he could. He made a point of checking the inside of his pipe. Slowly he made his way over. His lips and the tips of his fingers were blue. "If I'd known I was going to take a dip," he said, "I would have brought a towel." He was shivering, violently. "Bit crowded anyway," he added.

Sullivan and Edward helped him back into his clothes. Edward carried the bags of salmon while Sullivan assisted the old man. He was shaking still and had become very quiet. When Sullivan asked him how he was doing he appeared not to hear.

They got him back to the truck and sat him in the middle and piled their overcoats on top of him. Sullivan started up the truck and turned the heat on. Then he shut the doors. Edward had lit himself a cigarette and was leaning against the front of the truck. Sullivan hugged himself against the cold and leaned in beside him. "Did you know he was hung like a Shetland pony?" he said.

"No," said Edward.

Sullivan nodded. "That must have been it then."

"What?"

"Why she married him."

Edward took a long drag on his cigarette and blew smoke through the trees. "Nah," he said, "I still say she married him for his clothes."

"What if he's got hypothermia?"

"I should say he almost certainly does."

Sullivan looked in through the windshield. The old man was still sitting upright. "We should take him in."

Edward nodded. He took a last drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out.

Mole woke up in a ward on the fifth floor of Helmcken hospital. The windows of the ward faced east, and with his eyes still only half-open, the morning sunlight glistening off the stainless steel and clean white sheets of this still recently built hospital was blinding. He was content enough to close his eyes and feel the weightlessness, surrounded by his pillows and the half-drawn curtains that he took for mountainous clouds, and himself as some abandoned balloonist, content to let the breezes drive him where they may. The pair of nurses who approached his bed and spoke to him sounded so far off they could have been swallows. They kept talking, and their voices came closer. Then one of them touched him. "Mr. Mole," she said.

Mole didn't answer.

"Mr. Mole." She touched him again.

The old man raised his head and squinted at her. "Are you tattoed?" he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

He looked at the nurse's bare, white arms and then collapsed back into the pillows. "Bloody hell," he said. "Where am I?"

"Helmcken hospital."

The old man groaned. "Helmcken knew my great-grandfather. Tried to run Augustine Mole out of town."

"You have a visitor," said the nurse. She walked away.

"I must be alive," muttered Mole, "the irony is excruciating."

"How are you feeling, Father?"

Mole took a deep breath. "Lethargic," he said.

"I'm not surprised."

"My left shoulder hurts. And my back."

"You had a heart attack."

Mole pursed his lips and nodded.

"I talked to Dr. Coulton. You didn't tell us you were ill."

Mole didn't answer.

"Well, anyway, you've got to take it easy for a while. Coulton said you stopped drinking."

"Yes. But I'm thinking of starting again." He shifted to ease the pain in his shoulder. "I thought maybe they'd lend me one of these," he said, gesturing at his intravenous rig.

"They're keeping you in for a while."

"What for?"

"They're afraid you might have another one."

Mole nodded.

"Edward sends his regards."

"They brought me in, did they?"

"Yes. Oh, and Sullivan sent you this. She lifted a large, wide mouth mason jar from her carrying bag and placed it on his bedside table.

"What is it?"

"It's a fish."

"A what?"

"A goldfish."

"Bloody hell."

Thalia took out the small plastic bottle of fish food and placed it beside the jar.

"Where is he?"

Thalia hesitated. "I don't know. He left this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not living with us anymore."

Mole turned away. He began, quietly, to cry.

Thalia touched his hand. She said she'd check in on him later, then she left.

Later that day, Mole called for pen and paper.

Dear Robert,

It behooves a man in my position to culture something of detachment. I am told my life hangs by a thread. And yet I find, as I sit here in hospice, that I am still beset with passion. I hang on, perhaps, for one more taste of earthly pleasure. One more taste of bitterness and pain. Hospital food is not fit for dogs, Robert.

The thought of passing on with a belly full of bland, uninspired, institutional fare dismays me more than I can say. For with what else but his last meal shall a poor man pay the ferryman? Bury me with a bottle of claret for God's sake, and remember me for the unrepentant sensualist that I am, for I do not wish to row myself across that blasted river.

I have made my peace with Evelyn. But I have not, it seems, arrived at any reconciliation with myself. My satyr's heart has always been at war with what I call - after Abraham Lincoln - the better angels of my nature. Those angels have spoken to me in my solitude, and I have lent them my ears up to a point. But always do I drag myself, in *flagrante delicto*, back into the brothel of my appetites. I am reminded once again of my sojourn in Fez, not with Evelyn this time but as a young man. For I remember finding in that city, in the brotherhood I discovered between the profane and the sacred, the quintessence of my dilemma. A more sensual experience a man cannot have than wander the *souqs* and alleyways of Fez. And yet it was there, in a place I came upon by accident, that I found the very imago of my soul. One afternoon, having no idea into even which district of the city I had wandered, I came across a quite remarkable oasis. I was stumbling through a dark, covered alleyway when I saw a long rhomboid of light crossing the cobblestones up ahead. When I reached the light and squinted at its source I saw a small square, no larger than this hospital ward. In the centre of this square stood an enormous tree supporting on its long, spreading branches a flock of noisy starlings and offering its shade to the merchants who sold their wares, or plied their trades, in small shops set up along three of the walls. I do not recall anyone actually buying anything from them. The fourth wall was a high one, with narrow, castle-like windows and a forbidding,

institutional kind of countenance that I later learned was one side of a mental hospital. A pale-skinned, red-headed Mussulman had set up shop beneath this wall and appeared to be hawking things of absolutely no utility – a few broken nails, a gutted wireless, a single shoe. Up above him, wedged into the turrets of the asylum were the enormous nests of storks, and once, when I was sitting there beneath that tree, one of their occupants returned with great palaver, and settled awkwardly.

The caffuffle of that busy, intoxicating city was blocked by the walls of that enclosure and drowned out by the sound of the birds, and I struggle to explain what a feeling of peace overcame me. It was like I had blundered into the very centre of a living and exquisite mandala. In the midst of this intense and perfect solitude, a butterfly (that I have since come to identify as *Zerynthia rumina africana*) alighted on the trunk of the tree, sensing, I like to think, that by settling next to me it might escape the predations of the birds in the branches overhead. I studied that insect very closely – the cinnabar, black, and yellow crenellated wings, the eyespot above each slender black tail – all of it adding up to such an image of paradise, I thought, that I think I could be forgiven for wanting to remain there forever. And indeed, I left only because the merchants closed their shops at sundown and ushered me back out into the passageway. The next day I retraced my steps, and the next day, but I never found that place again. I have been looking for it ever since.

Let me be plain; by fixing upon Evelyn the burden of my better angel's expectations, I sinned not only against Evelyn, but against my own self. If she were here, benevolent songbird that she is, she would say, no doubt, that she made her own choices,

that the life she lived with me was full enough, and not without its freedoms. But in the end, Robert, we live, and we die, alone, and it is only to our own conscience that we owe a reckoning. I sought to recreate Eden with Evelyn. I looked to her as my saviour, when I should have looked first to myself. It might even be said that I didn't love Evelyn at all.

I have come to see, now, by way of this confession, and by your sympathetic witness, that paradise itself is not so different from where we live; here, upon this green and violent earth. But I have also become convinced, my friend, that paradise is for visiting, not for living in; and now that my eyes are open I believe it is time for me to go. If not my heart, then my pen tells me so.