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Min-mei
and
The Geigenwerck

Steven Keen Uriarte

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of English at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

February 1991

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ISBN 0-315-64683-7

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ABSTRACT

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The Geigenwerck

Steven Keen Uriarte

The thesis includes one novella and one short story, both sharing a backdrop in which Orientals interact with Westerners. The stories deal with the spiritual and cultural dilemma of modern humans who are seen, not as the culmination of some prefigured plan, but as a species in a never-ending process of evolution. People struggle to come to terms with the ghosts of their past -- as individuals and as humans -- assessing the meaning of their inheritance. Thus evolution is viewed subjectively, at a personal level, rather than with deliberate rationality.

The short story, Min-mei, is about a Chinese peasant girl who comes to Japan and finds herself trapped in the mizu-shôbai or 'water trade,' in which sincerity and innocence are commodities as marketable as sex. Min-mei's refusal to go back to China, added to the loss of identity she suffers from denying her peasant background, transform her into a caricature of her real self. The story calls into question the viability of authentic human experience amidst the systematized workings of civilization.

The novella, The Geigenwerck, takes place in Rome, where a Japanese cellist comes seeking an audience for a musical instrument of his own invention. Here he befriends a group of Westerners. During a rainy afternoon spent in the crypt of a monastery and, finally, stranded in a café, all of the members of the group offer truths and counter-truths about their individual lives and ideologies; thus they reveal whether they are doomed to self-destruction or able to make the evolutionary leap required in order to survive themselves.

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MIN-MEI

Nothing as romantic as destiny brought Min-mei and Bartholomew together; only found objects and unwanted trash. How I knew Min-mei, myself, had more or less to do with trash as well; but the life she would ultimately lay waste was Bartholomew's.

We met one spring evening at a station of the constabulary known as a 'police box' in the core of an embryonic metropolis in northern Japan. I had come to report a stolen bicycle, and was kindly attended upon by an Officer Koizumi, who led me to a tiny room which normally must have served as a detention cell. There, he left me to fill out a stack of official forms.

Though I had lived in Japan for seven years and could get by in Japanese, I found the language of the forms so incoherent that filling them out was no easy task. Worst of all was the part where I had to estimate the value of my bicycle. I was totally at a loss. The fact that the thing had been pieced together from junk (with my own two hands, no less) made it priceless as far as I was concerned. Admittedly, being an obsessive scavenger, my opinion was biased.

It was none other than me, after all, who had furnished a whole apartment in junk -- the same apartment I shared with a lovely young Japanese wife whom I adored -- despite her embarrassment over my weekly, sometimes nightly, expeditions to a notorious dump known as Shinju-gai on

the outskirts of our city. It was in this wasteland of awesome extent that every expendable household item, of every brand known to humankind, lay buried, waiting to be extracted. Here were the fruits of a consumption boom, the likes of which no other civilization had ever known. All across the country were homes so congested with creature comforts that their inhabitants had no choice but to throw away anything slightly used, to display their material assets out on the curb at night.

Granted, I never took much interest in trash till I came to Japan. Here, it became a full-blown obsession. In my expeditions to Shinju-gai, I saw myself as a pioneer in the discipline of garbology, seeking insight into human behaviour by analyzing what people threw away. Just as primitive man left a clue to his character in his neolithic trash, I believed that the character of the present-day Japanese would be realized thousands of years from now when garbologists sifted through that dump and discovered how proud a civilization existed -- that one thing they took pride in was the wealth of garbage produced by their way of life.

Back again in the hot stuffy room with my stack of official forms, I continued pondering the value of my bicycle, while devoting half my attention to an array of footprints -- a vestige of petty criminals and drunks -- up and down the walls of the cell and, remarkably, on the ceiling. The kind Officer Koizumi had left the door open, sparing me from a fit of claustrophobia. Now a commotion

outside the cell left the inestimable value of my bicycle up in the air. Through the door came a hulking, moon-faced fellow in a snow-white shopkeeper's robe with a young girl in tow. He scowled absurdly, bringing to mind an albino bull as he charged up to Officer Koizumi's desk with the girl, whose wrist he gripped so hard that she wailed in pain. He told her to sit, but evidently she failed to comprehend his rustic dialect, for she stood there, open-mouthed, trembling in fear. When he shouted the same command a second time and pointed at a chair in front of Officer Koizumi's desk, she at last understood. She took a seat, tentatively, on the edge of the chair, peering across the desk with imploring eyes.

As I worked my way through the stack of forms, I couldn't help overhearing everything that was said. I learned that the girl had been apprehended for stealing a portable TV set from what she claimed she had mistaken for a pile of junk on a nearby curb, awaiting a garbage pick-up. The brawny fellow, as it turned out, owned a second-hand shop around the corner. Because of a massive surplus of stock, half his wares had been jettisoned from the shop and displayed on the sidewalk.

I noticed as well that, although the girl was Oriental, she spoke only basic Japanese, and with a heavy accent to boot. She suddenly burst into tears, and, after a moment's pause, began to explain that she was a poor exchange student from the People's Republic of China. She

lived with her brother, Zhou, who was studying engineering at the prefectural university and devoted all his free time to repairing broken-down TV sets and household appliances, which they sold for a pittance to junk shops in order to supplement their meagre student grants. Who could afford to be proud when survival was at stake!

It is impossible to relate the feeling with which she told her story. She soon had the shopkeeper melting in tears. In the end, he not only dropped the charges but begged her forgiveness for all the trouble he had caused. He then shrank out the door of the police box, wiping the tears from his swollen cheeks with the snow-white sleeve of his shopkeeper's robe.

One seldom witnesses real human drama as pure as I witnessed that afternoon. It was a wonder that Officer Koizumi himself didn't give way to tears. While he apologized for the inconvenience, he said he would have to detain the girl further because she wasn't carrying any alien registration. The problem, however, was soon cleared up when Officer Koizumi phoned her brother and asked him to bring her papers down to the police box immediately.

Meanwhile the girl would have to wait. Officer Koizumi served her some tea and brought her into the cell where she sat at the table with me. We smiled at each other, both embarrassed over the scene that had just occurred. I was happy to find her less shaken up than I had expected.

She'd never met a Caucasian before...or so I guessed, since she was so curious and wasted no time in finding out what I was doing in Japan. It didn't seem to disappoint her that I was merely technical writer for a pharmaceutical company. When she found out that I was Canadian, she bombarded me with questions -- in Japanese, for she spoke no English, nor could I speak a word of Chinese. From the start, she addressed me by my first name, Gary, which, much to my distress, means 'diarrhea' in Japanese.

Her name was Min-mei. She came from the countryside near Harbin in Northern Manchuria. She had been in Japan about half a year. In another month, she would start a course in agronomy at the agricultural college. It was her first time out of China, and, except for her elder brother, she didn't know anyone in Japan.

Was Min-mei beautiful? I shall not versify about her cheekbones, ears, hands and feet. She did wear pigtaails behind her ears. Her eyes were dark -- actually black -- with short but copious lashes, and, though she lacked the epicanthal fold on her upper eyelids, there was a distinctive Mongoloid slant. When she smiled, there were dimples in her cheeks. She was modestly dressed in a pleated skirt and matching jacket of some indefinite colour, which I will call Manchurian tartan for lack of a better name. Her outfit, while not exactly threadbare, must have been bought from a thrift shop or handed down through a long line of older sisters.

An hour had passed by the time her brother rushed in the door. He had taken a train all the way from Matsushima. Min-mei burst into tears at the sight of his face, and began to deluge him with apologies in Manchu. He couldn't have been more understanding, given the circumstances. He didn't say a word about the inconvenience; he said he had had to come into town for a lecture anyway. Having checked Min-mei's papers, Officer Koizumi said she could leave. With a smile and an unceremonious handshake she bade me farewell and left with her brother. Through the window of the police box, I caught a glimpse of them parting, hurrying off in opposite directions.

After a moment, I finished filling out the last form and glanced at my watch. I had less than five minutes to catch my train. I gave Officer Koizumi a start, dumping the stack of forms on his desk. Having promised to call in a day or two, I left the police box and dashed for my train. I arrived at track number two of the Tohoku Senseki line, to find my train already loaded and about to pull out of the station.

The conductor's whistle blew. I thrust my briefcase forward, jamming the closing doors, and barely managed to get aboard. After squeezing my way through the crowded vestibule, I threaded my way down the aisle; it was in a state of bedlam because it was the eve of a national holiday; the train was packed with hundreds of boys and girls.

At the end of coach number one, I found my fraternity sitting in a row on their usual bench. It was purely by

accident that our fraternity existed. We were brothers insofar as none of us was Japanese. I might add that we all lived at various stops along the Tohoku Senseki line.

A woman had never joined our group. Through the years our group had changed times without number as members came and members went after gaining some degree of affluence, in exchange for some degree of alienation, in a country where foreigners seldom had a chance of fitting in. There were two exceptions: myself and an Englishman named Bartholomew who worked as an interpreter for a private consulting firm. We were more or less fixtures in Japan.

For now, in addition to Bartholomew and myself, our little fraternity on the Tohoku Senseki line included three others: a Swede named Kurt who did medical research at the university hospital, and a couple of nightclub performers -- an Indonesian named Mulyawan and a Filipino named Ed, both of whom masqueraded as Mexicans every night in a showband.

When they saw me approaching, Ed and Mulyawan moved apart on the bench to make room for me. They were on their way to work and had on their native Mexican costumes. Just now, I found myself trapped in the middle of an argument about ideal feminine beauty, (a favourite topic among our group) the point of contention being whether the TV celebrity, Yūko Tanaka, had the ideal face, as Ed claimed, or an overly mongoloid face (like a wooden Kokeshi doll) as Mulyawan said. All the better, as far as Kurt was con-

cerned. He had travelled the length and breadth of China and often boasted of an affair he had had with an Inner Mongolian milk-maid who, in spite of reeking of yak butter, had been an unforgettable beauty. I had opinions of my own, having just met Min-mei; but, being married, I thought it better to keep my opinions to myself.

Not until the subject of ideal beauty and Yûko Tanaka had nearly been exhausted did Bartholomew start to speak; rather, he launched into one of his monologues, which I would have ignored as usual, except that I was struck by some incongruity between the gravity of his voice and the fact that he was missing a prosthetic tooth: an upper incisor which he had lost that afternoon while bolting down lunch.

That a phony like Yûko Tanaka could show her face on TV and be taken seriously was an insult to human intelligence as far as he was concerned. Life was so conventionalized in Japan that people didn't know the difference between bad acting and real human drama.

I couldn't catch anything but the gist of Bartholomew's monologue. He was unsurpassed when it came to choosing the most inopportune moment to make a speech. At present, no single voice could be heard for the roar of hundreds of boys and girls chattering at once. It was sheer pandemonium. In a moment of relative calm, Bartholomew shouted:

"And Japanese television is crawling with Yûko Tanaka clones. As actresses go, there's not one that could out-

shine a third-rate bar hostess."

He was wincing, for much to his anguish a group of high-school girls in the aisle (all Yûko Tanaka fans, I imagined) kept stepping painfully on his toes in the fury of trying to talk all at once. They wore navy-blue sailor suits, the uniform of an all-girl's private school.

A look of Buddha-like composure came over Bartholomew's face just then. His foot -- as if of its own accord -- zeroed in on the shin of the girl with the loudest, most strident voice and gave her a kick which sent her reeling across the aisle without so much as a syllable lost.

"As you know, the ideal of Japanese life consists of cultivating the virtue of sincerity," said Bartholomew. "Anybody that's been to a hostess bar knows how much value the Japanese actually place on sincerity. Where else on earth is love for sale? Not cold, heartless sex, but the groveling female adoration that we men find so gratifying. Never mind that you have to pay for all this sincerity. Just indulge your masculine ego, gazing into the adoring eyes of your very own Yûko Tanaka; if she's sincere enough she might even allow you a feel!"

Bartholomew folded his arms and assumed a worldly-wise sneer. He wouldn't have looked any less engaging with his finger up his nose. He never wore anything but the finest English brand names, but on his scarecrowish frame the impression was closer to poverty than affluence.

He was prematurely grey from the stress of life -- the constant effort to keep his sanity in a land where he had no hope of gaining a niche. In truth, he couldn't have fit into any kind of picture except for one his own creation. Seven years earlier, he had come to Japan and fallen in love with the subtlety and beauty of the culture. Into the picture, he'd painted the ideal Oriental, a young girl named Haruko, whose innocence and sincerity only existed in his own imagination. He couldn't have dreamed at the time that his love would end in self-pity. Having settled down with Haruko -- after years of frustrated waiting and reams of paperwork -- he managed the nearly impossible feat of becoming Japanese...at least on paper. Then came a divorce and three years of lonely embitterment.

I had been to his office several times and seen on the wall above his desk a theatrical Nô mask. It wore on its face a look of consummate desolation. Whatever comfort Bartholomew got from that mask was beyond me. It might have said more about his character than all the nonsense that ever came out of his mouth.

A sudden commotion came over the mob as the train came grinding to a halt. The aisle quickly cleared as the doors of the train disgorged hundreds of boys and girls onto the platform of Tsutsuji-ga-oka station. Out on the platform, waiting to board the train, was another disorderly mob dressed in the black regulation uniform of an all-boy's senior high school. The aisle being clear for the moment, I stretched out my legs and gave a sigh of

relief. I gazed out the window at the hills of Tsutsuji-ga-oka covered with white rhododendrons in bloom. It was then that I heard my name being called:

"Gary-san! Gary-san!"

On the facing bench across the aisle I saw Min-mei. With a whoop of joy, she jumped to her feet and ran over to greet me. I made room on our bench for her, and proceeded to introduce her to everyone in our group -- last of all, Bartholomew, who huffed and looked heaven-wards when I introduced him by his nickname. As he had told me a thousand times: he would not have anyone calling him Bart because it rhymed with fart.

Before they could blink, everyone in our group was smitten with Min-mei. Her name meant 'beauty of the dawn,' according to Kurt, who knew a smattering of Chinese. When he sang a line from a Japanese love song -- Eyes that could only belong to the beauty of the dawn -- Min-mei gave a shriek of laughter. Except for Bartholomew (whose eyes were glued to the window), everyone showered Min-mei with the most outrageous compliments on her face, her hair, her complexion, her smile, her suit of Manchurian tartan. Because our unifying language was Japanese, which we all spoke with different degrees of proficiency and with different degrees of tact, we said things we wouldn't have dreamed of saying in our mother tongues.

Strange to say, what began as a game soon became obsessive. Each of us pinned his own conception of ideal

Oriental beauty on Min-mei, as if we were each creating a Min-mei of our own. We were falling in love with her. To her credit, Min-mei took it as a joke. When nothing was left of her to flatter, Ed resorted to singing the praises of her bookbag. She held it up, laughing:

"Not this! I found it in someone's trash!"

It wasn't just any schoolgirl's bookbag but one of natural tan. Almost flawless, it must have been polished by a good arm with plenty of mink oil. Min-mei confessed that she and her brother Zhou were obsessive scavengers. All but Bartholomew confessed the same obsession. In no time, our group was absorbed in discussing all the treasures we'd ever looted from neighbourhood curbs or the city dump.

Bartholomew, who worshipped brand names, who refrained from junk-collecting with a vengeance, found himself shut off from all this chatter about the treasures to be gleaned from Japanese trash. He had often accused us of having lost all self-respect; he never missed a chance to remind us that we had stooped not only to working for the Japanese but to scavenging Japanese trash. The poor devil, I thought -- not to know the joy of finding a pearl in a rotten oyster, a gem in a pile of broken bricks, a genius hidden among weeds and bushes.

For one who never failed to distinguish himself as a skeleton at the feast, he was amazingly well-behaved on this occasion. For once, he didn't make a single disdainful remark to spoil the mood. His attention never strayed

from Min-mei, though he couldn't bring himself to look at her directly; he kept his eyes riveted on the window: not on the green fields of rice in the twilight but Min-mei's reflection in the glass.

As twilight was always a fleeting phenomenon on the west coast of Japan, it was dark by the time we reached the next station. So engrossed were we in our talk with Min-mei that the train had been at a standstill at least a minute before we realized that we had arrived at Shiogama.

Ed leapt to his feet and seized his trumpet from the overhead luggage rack; he handed Mulyawan his guitar. They flashed a couple of perfect white-toothed smiles at Min-mei as they flew for the door. They were both handsome fellows and made an impressive sight in their native Mexican costumes. I wondered if Min-mei might take a liking to one of them.

Pulling out of the station, we saw from the vantage point of a rail bridge, overlooking Shiogama, a huge neon sign. It flashed: TORRE AMOR. I pointed it out to Min-mei, explaining that it was the club where Ed and Mulyawan and their mariachi band, in the guise of Mexicans, sang and danced their way into the hearts of a Japanese audience every night.

Bartholomew kept up a pretence of gazing out the window at the sign. Against the darkness of the night he must have seen Min-mei's reflection even more clearly now. Soon the sign was gone and the landscape passed dimly in

the night. It was then that Min-mei said out of the blue that she was crazy about mariachi. A force from my gut made me say that my wife was also crazy about mariachi. My wife had doubtlessly never heard of mariachi.

The next stop was Kurt's. Then came Min-mei's. Before she got off the train, she bowed deeply and smiled at Bartholomew and me. On account of his missing tooth, Bartholomew barely returned a tight-lipped smile. He returned a bow that was more like a tic than a farewell. In some way, this failure decided the character of their relationship: Bartholomew was the one who would worship Min-mei the most, yet be the least able to show it.

From then on, our group met with Min-mei almost every night in coach number one. We hovered around her, gallantly offering her our seats when the train was crowded; we learned to greet her in Chinese; we bought her presents and paid her the most fantastic compliments, so sure were we that she wouldn't take them to heart.

Once, she invited us all to her house in Matsushima. She had boasted that she could feed everyone on a single chicken. Except for the bones she threw nothing away, and even the bones she discarded grudgingly after boiling every last nutrient out of their marrow into a soup.

She lived with her brother, Zhou, in a small wooden house on the edge of a graveyard where hundreds of ravens congregated, scavenging fruit and rice cakes left by pilgrims at the tombs of their ancestors. Zhou was five

years older than Min-mei. There was a raw-boned look to his face which emphasized his deep, sensitive eyes. In a month, he would graduate with a doctor's degree in electrical engineering, then go back to China where he would oversee the construction of a hydroelectric power dam near Tientsin. After four years out of China, he was anxious about getting back to his wife and children; he was no less anxious about leaving Min-mei to fend for herself in Japan.

Their house was completely furnished in junk. That a couple of chronic junk collectors like Zhou and myself had never met at Shinju-gai was incredible. He showed us his prize possession: an astronomical telescope which Min-mei had snatched from somebody's curb for Zhou's thirtieth birthday. As ill luck would have it, the thing was too big to take back to China.

After dinner, Zhou brought out three bottles of Chinese saké which he had been saving for the occasion of leaving Japan. It was potent stuff, and we were all in our cups before long -- all but Min-mei, who wouldn't touch a drop.

She announced that she would perform a number on a battered old accordion which she had found two weeks before at Shinju-gai, then launched into a lively, hopping polka-mazurka, conjuring up the dancehalls of Vienna and Budapest. She swayed the instrument to the rhythm, beaming us all a dimply smile. Kurt kept time, tapping chop-

sticks on the table. Bartholomew too kept time with the pounding of his heart as Min-mei's hands squeezed the bellows, forcing winds of ecstasy through the depths of his being, turning his soul inside out. No one noticed how badly she actually played. By the time she had finished the polka-mazurka, I was a little more in love with her myself.

Ed then fetched his trumpet from the entrance hall and Mulyawan fetched his guitar; they accompanied Min-mei, playing the well-known mariachi Adelita. Then the three accompanied Kurt as he sang a lively rendition of Santa Lucia in Swedish. Finally, to everyone's amazement, Bartholomew too let loose and sang the Japanese jazz song Tokyo Blues.

At the end of the song, Min-mei clapped elatedly. The rest of us clapped and cheered -- not so much for the song as for the fact that Bartholomew hadn't spoiled the mood. According to Min-mei, Bartholomew sang even better than Yasuhiro Sato, the hottest pop idol of the day. Bartholomew must have taken this flattery to heart, because, after blushing ridiculously, he sat in the corner, gaping at Min-mei like one possessed.

All that summer, we met almost every evening in coach number one. Bartholomew claimed that he had a special relationship going with Min-mei; she had told him in confidence that she would never go back to China; it made her flesh creep to think of returning to the collective farm

in Manchuria where she had seen her own parents starve to death in a famine. Nor did she want to stay in Japan. What was worse, she couldn't tell Zhou the truth for fear that he'd put her on the next plane back to China.

One night, in the wake of a drinking binge, Bartholomew broke down and confessed to me that he was in love with Min-mei. He gasped: "I've never seen such a smile!" Min-mei, in her innocence and sincerity, was the personification of all that was Oriental, untainted by Western materialism.

Bartholomew started teaching her English conversation on an informal basis during our nightly commute. He gave her a Chinese-English dictionary. He never admitted it, but I knew he had visions of taking Min-mei back to England as his wife.

Summer turned to autumn. On Bartholomew's instigation, I invited Min-mei to go mountain walking to Sakunami hot spring, promising autumnal tints and chrysanthemums in bloom. She agreed to come. We planned to meet at the central bus station. On the morning of the hike, Bartholomew showed up wearing a pair of Italian mountain boots, which he'd found in his neighbour's trash...or so he claimed. Kurt nearly died laughing:

"Come on, Bart, those boots are brand-spanking new! I'll bet you just bought them at Fujisaki and roughed them up with a hammer to give them that weathered look."

Bartholomew rolled his eyes but kept his silence.

Min-mei never showed up. Nor did she show up in coach number one the following Monday. No one knew what had become of her. We tried to get in touch with her, but she had no telephone. Every day for a month, Bartholomew wore his battered mountain boots with the same faint hope of showing them off to Min-mei.

One night, the train was especially crowded. I was standing alone in the aisle, and spotted Min-mei sitting nearby. She was looking intently at the backpages of a women's magazine with innumerable ads for hair-removal gadgets and bust developers. She gave a start when I whispered:

"Anything new in the trash?"

She smiled weakly and shook her head. Her face looked tired. It was the first time I had seen her wearing rouge. There were two blue ribbons in her hair, which she never stopped fussing with as we spoke.

"We've all been worried about you," I said. "We've been wondering what became of you!"

She had picked up a terrible virus after her brother went back to China, she said. She had been bedridden for a week. While I wondered how this excuse accounted for a whole month's disappearance, the train arrived at Min-mei's station, and again she disappeared.

Another night in early winter stands out in my mind. I had been to a cabaret with Kurt and Bartholomew. Board-

ing the late express on the Tohoku Senseki line, we found Min-mei sitting in coach number one. We barely recognized her at first. She had on a black leather miniskirt and a blue satin blouse; her face was thickly and meticulously made up. Kurt commented wryly that she had become quite the chic young lady. I thought she was trying to look Caucasian. Gone were the pigtailed. Her hair even seemed a shade or two lighter. There were shadows under her eyes. She had an air of apathy. As we spoke she kept nodding off asleep. Kurt asked her where she'd been keeping herself. She said she studied late at the library every night.

I hadn't the heart to tell the others, but I knew for a fact that she'd taken up bar-hostessing. A week or so earlier, I had been to a bar with a Dr. Kimura, whose research in endocrinology was being funded by my company. I had translated into English his groundbreaking study on glucose intolerance in the mole; it had just been approved for publication by a prestigious British journal, and he invited me to his favourite hostess bar to celebrate.

From the moment my hostess and I were introduced, I gave myself away as a beginner. There she was, being paid to gratify my male ego, to make a believable show of enjoying my company, and there I was, trying to get to know her as a person. Dr. Kimura, meanwhile, sat nearby, lightly pawing his hostess and putting away a great volume of whisky and soda. He proved to be quite adept at this soft-

core form of adultery. As for myself, I couldn't even go through the motions; the point of the whole thing eluded me.

Further down the bar, an unoccupied hostess brooded, waiting for a client. I saw at a glance that it was Min-mei. She didn't see me. She suddenly leapt to her feet with a whoop of delight -- not for me but a slick-looking fellow who came strutting into the bar. He wore a double-breasted suit and the trademark pinch-perm of a yakuza -- a traditional Japanese gangster.

As soon as they sat in the corner, the yakuza snuggled up to Min-mei, who beamed with the admiration of a schoolgirl meeting her idol. She giggled charmingly as his hand crept up the inside of her thigh. Much to Dr. Kimura's distress, I told him I had to be on my way; I left the bar in a daze.

In the weeks that followed, I made a point of not telling the others what I had seen. I knew how Bartholomew felt about bar-hostessing: on the scale of sincerity, it was three or four notches below prostitution. More than once, I had heard him say:

"Any bloke that can lay out a hundred quid for some cute little empty-headed fool to laugh at his jokes and allow him a feel is not a man!"

At any rate, I kept my mouth shut. It wasn't my duty to shatter his image of Min-mei as the personification of all that was Oriental, untainted by Western materialism.

Not until the night of the Emperor Showa's demise did I catch up with Min-mei again. It was a typical Saturday night, except that, in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion, the neon lights that decked the rows of Turkish baths and nightclubs throughout the downtown quarter flashed with but half their usual force; the pachinko pinball halls refrained from blasting their military music into the streets.

By the time we had left the bar, it was too late to catch the last train. The streets were lined with salary-men clad in blue suits, teetering on the curbs, following a night of heavy drinking. Like Bartholomew and me, they were all intent on hailing a taxi and getting home to a scalding-hot bath. Since it was drizzling and bitterly cold, we had to take shelter in a phone booth to wait out the crowd. By a stroke of luck, it was one of those spacious booths, with a wooden frame painted red, only to be found in the downtown core.

I was sore at Bartholomew for having made us miss the last train and gotten us stranded here. Back at the tavern, he might have kept drinking toasts to the death of the Emperor Showa and the 'Age of Enlightened Peace' till the cows came home if I hadn't dragged him out of the place. His contempt for the Emperor was in keeping with his contempt for monarchs in general. Just the same, he had often claimed, without any sense of self-contradiction, to be a descendent of the Stuarts, the rightful

heirs to the British throne. For the past month or so, whether from a lack of self-esteem or a genuine sense of superiority, he had gotten into the habit of asserting his blue blood whenever he got a chance. That night in the phone booth, he flung the door open to roar at a mob of inebrious salarymen who came staggering our way:

"All hail, Bartholomew, that shalt be King hereafter!"

One of the salarymen stopped to pee against a tree, another to throw up in the street. The rest of the mob waited nearby, clutching each other's sleeves to keep from falling all over themselves in a mound on the sidewalk. One of them spotted us in the phone booth and called to the others:

"Hora! Chugoku-jin da! -- Look at the Chinamen!"

Everyone laughed uproariously.

"You can talk all you want about Japanese courtesy," sighed Bartholomew. "But, after seven years in this country, I see only neon signs and gadgetry -- and mobs of barbaric drunkards dressed in blue polyester suits -- puking, hawking and leaking in the streets! How's that for a sweeping generalization? No one with any love for this country would say such a thing."

It hurt to see Bartholomew pressing his cheek to the window, gazing out at the salarymen. I knew that he would have given the world to be one of them; that, despite all his efforts to be Japanese, he was doomed to be a perpetual outcast.

Turning away, for the first time I noticed that the phone booth was littered with handbills -- specifically, advertisements for call girls -- each being a résumé of sorts, including a photograph, telephone number and personal statement. Most of them catered to customers wishing to live out specific fantasies.

For example, the stewardess: she was shown in uniform, complete with an ascot tie and an irrepressible smile; her blouse was open and a rosy nipple stood out as she walked down the aisle of an empty jetliner, pushing a cartload of hot and cold beverages.

Then, there was the nurse: she appeared in a sterile white dress with an equally sterile expression on her face; flat-chested, she held in one hand a blood-pressure cuff, a pus basin in the other.

For those with more esoteric fantasies, some handbills portrayed the woman as a whole person. One featured a lovely, young woman with pigtails and the chestnut-brown kimono of a traditional peasant girl. It was captioned: Woebegone country girl whose parents forced her to marry a man who mistreats her.

Another one featured a well-bred, stoically smiling woman of thirty or so. She knelt in submission on the floor. She had on a frilly powder-blue pinafore and wore her hair in a bun. It was captioned: Young widow who just got over the loss of her husband who drowned in a boating accident.

My favourite, a miniskirted creature in knee socks -- virginal, yet by no means a virgin -- looked into an open door with a nymphlike smile. She was flanked on either side by a suitcase. Below was the caption: Your long-lost cousin from Sado who shows up unexpectedly at your door.

Bartholomew noticed me smirking and glanced at the clutter of handbills. "If you should wonder how they concocted the myth of Japanese sensuality--" he began to say; but he didn't finish the sentence; one of the handbills had caught his eye: it showed a schoolgirl in a sailor suit, sitting dreamily on a rug with her legs apart, one hand pulling her skirt up, the other hand creeping under her panties. I saw the pigtails; oddly, I saw the old bookbag lying on the rug; I saw eyes that could only belong to the beauty of the dawn.

Bartholomew didn't say a word. He wore on his face a look of consummate desolation -- just like the Nô mask I'd seen on the wall above his desk.

We didn't see Min-mei in the flesh again till the winter was almost through. Except for Bartholomew and me, our whole group on the Tohoku Senseki line had left Japan. We were in the vestibule of coach number one. It was crammed with passengers. If not for her bookbag, I wouldn't have recognized Min-mei at all. She looked ten years older. It crossed my mind that she had developed some sort of chemical dependence. She smiled stiffly, with no expression in her eyes, when she caught me watch-

ing her from across the vestibule.

We exchanged a few words, as if to keep up a front of civility, much like strangers with no intention of ever seeing each other again. She was candid and distant at the same time. She had found a job and dropped out of the agricultural college. Who cared about soil management anyway? Her uncle, a party official in North-east China, who had stuck out his neck to get her a visa to study overseas, was fuming now, and, of course, demanded that she return to China at once.

But she wouldn't go back for anything. She was horrified of the countryside; she was disgusted by the filth; she hated anything that reminded her of it -- including Matsushima and the hovel where she had lived for the past eighteen months. She had her heart set on an apartment in the city.

Strangely, her words had no impact on me. I nodded mechanically. Yet, I felt like a wounded soldier, who watches in disbelief as his own intestines spill out before his eyes. Min-mei was wearing her hair in a bun. I saw the fringe of a powder-blue pinafore creeping below the edge of her raincoat. There was something of the well-bred widow about her.

As for Bartholomew, it was as if he didn't see her, as if the part of his brain that knew Min-mei had been surgically removed.

The last time I saw her, I was alone in coach number one. By then Bartholomew was gone. He had turned his back upon Japan and found a job in Tibet, where I hoped his mountain boots would serve him well. Myself, I was here in Japan to stay. I couldn't imagine another place on earth with such a wealth of trash. And though I never did get back my bicycle, I had pieced together a new one from the ground up.

It was spring. On the hills of Tsutsuji-ga-oka the rhododendrons were back in bloom. But it was too dark to see a thing and I was too tired to look out the window. For the fifth night in a row, I'd stayed late at the office, translating from Japanese into English Dr. Kimura's breakthrough study on cretinism in the fruit bat.

I had dozed off, but awoke a few minutes into the ride and spotted Min-mei. She was sitting alone in an open compartment of two facing benches across the aisle. She was fast asleep. From my seat a few rows away, I observed her for a while. Her face was more haggard than ever before. She had on a chestnut-brown kimono, belted with a narrow sash. Her once proverbial pigtailed were back. I wondered why she would want to impersonate a Japanese peasant girl. Then the train rolled into Shiogama; a trio of middle-aged men came aboard.

From the cut of their suits and their air of esprit de corps, I took them for executive salarymen with lavish expense accounts, from the upper echelons of some stodgy establishment such as Tohoku Electric. They staggered down

the aisle, half-singing, half-slurring, a lewd rendition of Adelita; they had apparently been to the nightclub Torre Amor where Ed and Mulyawan once had performed.

At the sight of Min-mei, the trio fell silent; they seemed to be drawn to her by a force beyond their control; in spite of the coach being almost empty, they crowded into her compartment. She woke with a start to find the man beside her tugging at one of her pigtails. Min-mei slapped him on the wrist and started to flee. But a second man jerked her back by the sleeve of her kimono.

"Sit down!" he said. "We're not going to hurt you."

"We just want to chat with you," said the third.

She sat down grudgingly, creasing her brow. Three faces aglow from a night of carousing surrounded her. Owing to the inalienable right of the Japanese salaryman to dispense with self-control when under the influence, the trio gave the impression of being much more tanked than they really were. The one who had tugged Min-mei's pigtail addressed her with amazing eloquence:

"I confess, when I came aboard and saw you sleeping here, I thought to myself: 'She's the living image of my first love!'"

"That's strange," said the second. "I could have sworn she was my long-lost cousin from Akita."

"I could have sworn she was my mother!" said the third.

Min-mei replied that she was merely the wife of a

Yamagata carp farmer -- one who mistreated her at that. If she could have her way, she would leave him this very night. By ill luck, she hadn't a yen to her name. She burst into tears.

In addition to Min-mei's new persona, there was a coyness about her I hadn't seen before. Whether or not her story rang true, it never occurred to the tanked-up trio that she was anything but Japanese. They seized the chance to engage in a moment of real human drama: they showed a genuine sense of pity; they even shed a few genuine tears. In lieu of offering food and shelter, they tried to console her in her misery: they showered her with compliments on her face, her hair, her complexion, her smile, her chestnut-brown kimono.

When nothing was left of Min-mei to flatter, they praised her bookbag. It was the same old bookbag as always -- the one thing she loved too much to part with. She held it up, crying:

"Not this! I found it in someone's trash!"

I couldn't help but recall our meeting in the police box one year before. Who could have dreamed at the time that such an implausible fate awaited Min-mei? She smiled no longer; no dimples appeared in her florid cheeks; in fact, her cheeks were no longer florid but deathly pale. She was, indeed, a weebegone country girl.

THE GEIGENWERCK

Rome, Eternal City, Fountainhead of Western Dogmatism....
This story is true. It need not take place in Rome any more than in Yamagata, but I am a slave to facts.

I stood on the Ben Trovato bridge, aloof to the drizzling rain. I sighed more than once -- a waste of breath since not a soul was near enough to take pity on me. Leaning over the parapet, gazing down on the Tiber River, I watched cold drizzle making goose flesh on the water. I trembled and, strange to say, I panicked: I thought my brainchild was expanding -- bursting the seams of its carrying case; so I gave it a kick for reassurance. It wasn't expanding. In fact, it had already shrunk in my mind to half its size. In a word, I imagined that my brainchild had taken on a life of its own.

Perhaps this hallucination arose from my inability to believe that the real world existed outside Japan. Though I was the half-breed son of a Swedish mother (who died giving birth to me) and a Japanese father (a well-known psychopathologist) who raised me single-handedly, I had never had cause to venture far from my hometown, Yamagata, let alone venture across the globe. My only exposure to the West had been through music. My brainchild was actually a musical instrument born in northern Japan. At the time, I was teaching violoncello in the faculty of music of a women's junior college; and though the days were long, between my professional obligations and frequent

appearances with the Yamagata Philharmonic Orchestra, I pursued my avocation -- transforming dilapidated instruments into musical mutations.

It is no secret that an instrument glued together from mass-produced parts cannot be the equal of one created by the lone artisan who will not be satisfied with his work until every last detail has been perfected. While my countrymen were mass-producing pianos and violins and toying with integrated circuits, I was a lonely individualist, labouring in secret. I craved the warmth of age-old pine crafted in the distant lands of Europe. It was the protoplasm of my imagination -- so inviting to the touch, I would sometimes find myself caressing it as one caresses another living creature. As it happened, the muggy climate of Yamagata had proved disastrous to instruments built in Europe. I had a whole graveyard of ruined instruments at my disposal.

The first few musical mutations miscarried in embryo. Then came a six-stringed cello, which turned out to be a flat failure. In the opinion of Fräulein von Helslope, the assistant to the resident conductor of our orchestra, it was a throwback to the viola da gamba -- three-hundred years obsolete. She tried to convince me that I was labouring in vain; she accused me of living in a dreamworld. True, I hadn't the least idea of what I was trying to create. I had only the urge to procreate something nonhuman, higher, nearer perfection, out of the bones of old instruments.

At last, the unforgettable morning dawned when my brainchild came into the world. It mimicked the euphony of a sextet of viola da gambas exactly. Unsure what to think of my creation, I sought an audience with my mentor -- the conductor of our orchestra -- Maestro Spawnstretto.

For the occasion of the most unnerving recital in my life, I had transcribed for my brainchild Chabrier's Es-paña. Up to the end of the performance, Maestro Spawnstretto listened stone-faced. Fräulein von Helslope slouched behind him, braiding his silvery tresses into a ratty pigtail...out of boredom, I presumed. Then, to my shock, the two exploded with applause.

The next day, my photo appeared on the front page of our town newspaper. I was invited to play my brainchild on a local TV program. I was recognized in the streets. Almost overnight, I became the most eligible bachelor in our orchestra. For a man who had spent some thirty years learning to make himself unobtrusive, it was more than I could have dreamed. Even Fräulein von Helslope swooned in my presence.

Just when I might have fallen prey to the illusion that I was someone of importance, Maestro Spawnstretto took me aside. True, he admitted, my brainchild was nothing less than a breakthrough; it crashed through frontiers of music and feeling that he had hitherto thought impregnable. It would reshape the world of music. But it was too avant garde for a piddling town like Yamagata. The

only thing to do was to go to the birthplace of civilized music; there, he insisted, the climate was favourable to introduce my creation. So it was that I left for Europe, packing my brainchild in a carrying case resembling a portmanteau.

Then came frustration: at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique of Paris, I was refused so much as an interview. The problem was a letter of introduction from my mentor. It seems that Maestro Spawnstretto had once been their choir-master, that is, until he fled the city, leaving their cymbalist, Mademoiselle Ternie, in a delicate condition. Naturally, my brainchild and I were chucked out into the street.

At the Mozarteum in Salzburg, too, I was visited by the former sins of my mentor. It seems he had once been their organ instructor -- until taking flight with their charming young harpist, Anastasia, wife of the legendary Konzertmeister, Gustavus von Helslope. Before I could flee, the latter cracked me over the head with his fiddle-bow.

Then came Rome, the crossroads, the turn of events that would decide the fate of my brainchild. If there was any place where the climate was right to introduce my creation, it was here -- the very birthplace of the viola da gamba. Now I revert to my introductory words: I stood on the Ben Trovato bridge, aloof to the drizzling rain. While I busied myself with hallucinations of my brainchild taking on a life of its own, the clock struck twelve -- the

appointed hour of my recital at the Conservatorio. Having persuaded the director to allow me a recital, it only made sense that I should show up. After all, it wasn't just any fool that won an audience with Arturo Vertigoni, the most sublime conductor in Italy. What held me back was not fear that Maestro Spawnstretto's sins would visit me, nor that my brainchild would be a flat failure. What held me back was the fear that my brainchild would capture universal acclaim.

As a boy growing up in Japan, any inclination to make myself the centre of attention was bred out of me from the start. Right now, were I not a slave to facts, I would end this story and start anew, relegating my brainchild and myself to total oblivion.

From my lookout on Pont Ben Trovato, I squinted through glasses flecked with drizzle. I spied Tiber Island upriver, swathed in a gauze of therapeutic mist while the traffic roared past it on either bank. Thinking back to Yamagata, it seemed as if a thousand years had passed since my stint as an overnight sensation. There was nothing left to do; only to wallow in the luxury of standing undisturbed in my very own puddle in the rain; so ten minutes passed.

Still watching the river, I suddenly felt a hand seize my shoulder; it gave me a start; instinct caused me to raise my fist as I turned to find a little man in a raincoat looking up. An oily black hairpiece camouflaged

the bald pate of his head. He broke into a carnivorous smile. I don't know how to express the impression he made upon me. There was something monumental in his ugliness.

"Allow me to introduce myself." His words came out in a small croaking voice. "I am Piccione Viaggiatore -- professional guide of this glorious city." He seized both my hands and shook them vigorously. It would later occur to me that I'd been mistaken for one of the thousands of Japanese tourists who flood the city every day -- after my carrying case (with my brainchild as its cargo) had been mistaken for some sort of designer luggage.

He took a board out from under his raincoat, unfolding it twice to reveal a collection of ghastly photographs from the burial crypt of the Atracura monastery. "Ecco!" he croaked: "Behold!" Then he solemnly listed off the highlights of a tour which would be conducted in English that day. After seeing the Atracura monastery, our group would be the honoured guests of Caffé Campo Santo. Over espresso (with compliments) we would have a chance to meet international celebrities.

"International celebrities?" I sighed in disbelief.

"Don't you know that movie stars abound in the sidewalk cafés of Via Veneto?"

I confessed my ignorance. Hoping he would go away and leave me alone, I promised to meet Piccione and his group at one o'clock sharp at the Basilica of the Atracuras. Alone on the bridge at last, I started to worry about the effect of the rain on my brainchild. Having

suffered hallucinations of its expanding and contracting and taking on a life of its own, I was compelled to seek out shelter.

I soon found myself at an open-air market where most of the vendors had closed for the day. Beneath the canopy of an abandoned fruit stand, I opened the carrying case. My brainchild seemed to be perfectly fine. I tested the keys for reassurance and played an impromptu tarantella.

Out of nowhere, a crowd appeared; they began to gather around the fruitstand. At first, I thought they were merely curious. Then it hit me that most of them were standing bareheaded in the rain. They were all in raptures. I didn't dare to stop the music. I stepped up the pace of the tarantella. The whole crowd was beaming and tapping their toes. I half expected them to break into couples and start a gyrating dance to the sextuple rhythm. Instead, they threw money. Piles of it. They must have taken me for some sort of hurdy-gurdy man of the Orient.

I panicked. I shut my brainchild into its case and fled the fruit stand, leaving a crowd of sorry faces behind and the devil knows how much money on the ground. Again, I found myself in the rain with nowhere to go. I gave up thinking. I let my feet carry me where they would.

Beyond the huge skeleton of a dying chestnut tree on Via Veneto, I found the ancient limestone basilica. It was

surmounted by a tall sooty belltower, so dilapidated that I expected it to crumble to dust any minute. Its old iron door was approached by a stairway of stone steps sunken from the relentless tread of human feet through the ages. I tried to shake the rain off my coat, but it was no use. I was thoroughly soaked. Strange to say, when I raised my trembling foot to mount the stairs, I felt the warmth of the sun on my back; the clouds had surrendered a crack of sky; the sun came beaming down through the drizzle. It glittered in puddles on the steps; through the skeletal branches of the chestnut tree, it cast a silhouette on the vast facade of the basilica -- like a network of veins shooting up from the earth to the heavens.

I carried my brainchild up the stairs and through the door. It was one o'clock. Inside the vestibule there stood a group of a dozen people in raincoats. The floor was swamped beneath their feet. Standing off to one side was a slender blonde who must have been about thirty years old. She wore a pale-yellow, hooded raincoat. I thought she was beautiful.

"It was so good of you to come!" croaked Piccione. He waved me over to the group. The others made room for me in the puddle. Without looking up, Piccione said: "You are just in time." He was perched on a high granite ledge with his back to a stained-glass window. He was clipping his fingernails. I paid him his ten-thousand lira fee.

"I'm afraid there is one man yet to arrive," he sighed impatiently.

I nodded and glanced at the blonde. She stood, hands on hips, staring out of a grille window in the door.

Suddenly, Piccione clapped his hands. "Well, now," he said. "Shall we begin?" Jumping down from the ledge, he made a surprisingly impressive splash in the puddle. "We cannot let one man keep us waiting all afternoon!"

"Oh, wait!" said the woman. Her eyes were still riveted on the grille window. "I can see a man coming this way! I see him limping up the footpath -- a yellow-haired man with a handlebar moustache. Now he is coming up the stairs." She heaved open the heavy iron door. "Here he is."

Piccione dropped his nail clippers into his pocket and said to the newcomer: "You have kept us waiting, my friend."

The newcomer stood before us on crutches, wearing a groin-to-toe plaster cast. "I'm so sorry," he said.

"Very well," said Piccione. He clapped his hands again. "Shall we get underway?" He forced open a pair of tall oaken doors and crossed the threshold of the basilica, while the yellow-haired man with the handlebar moustache smirked behind his back.

With eyes looking heavenward, crossing himself, Piccione waved us all inside. He smiled religiously with his mouth twitching at the corners. We followed him into the empty gloom of the cathedral. The only sound was a spatter of rain leaking down from a crack in the high domed ceil-

ing to the floor. We huddled together.

"Ecco!" croaked Piccione. He raised a hand, pointing his quivering fingers to somewhere behind our heads. All turning around, we saw a gilded portal sculpture above the door. The face was encrusted with peeling gold. It seemed to glower upon our group, pronouncing judgment on one and all. "Shall we bow our heads in humility?" Piccione said. "Our golden friend above the door is Matteo da Brivido -- founder of the Order of Friars Minor Atracura -- engenderer of the glorious legend!" The twitching smile returned to his lips. His tone grew more soulful: "It was in the year 1525 when Matteo, a humble friar, declared his life aspiration -- to reinstate literal observance of the Franciscan Rule of Life."

I turned and spied Piccione reading straight out of a travel booklet. Flipping a tattered yellow page, he continued:

"God sent Matteo a vision. It was in a humble cabbage field, during the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, that the ghost of Saint Francis descended from Heaven and said: 'Go, Matteo, and restore my Rule of Life which, as you see, is well-nigh in ruins.'"

Turning abruptly, Piccione clapped his hands. "Come along!" he croaked. Leading our group toward the chancel, he continued: "Matteo believed that the habit worn by his contemporary friars was a travesty of the one Saint Francis had worn. He vowed to amend that blasphemy. So it was that he fashioned himself a tasseled hood, grew a beard

and went about barefoot. Soon he was joined by countless disciples. The Atracuras were born! The rest is history, my friends."

Our procession went listlessly down the centre aisle. As I followed behind the blonde, I thought I heard a sigh of frustration. The tail of her raincoat whisked against the wooden pews. Her eyes skimmed coldly along the stone walls. She smiled obscurely. I couldn't tell why; there was nothing to see but a row of six Gothic arches spanning each side of the nave.

We drew up before a worm-eaten altar. Piccione flourished his hand as he thundered: "Ecco!" Whatever he said about the antiquity of the altarpiece escaped me. I was too busy watching the blonde; she continued smiling to herself as Piccione ran his fingers over the mangy altarcloth. Soon the group proceeded along the communion rail, past the choir stalls, and a little way down the right aisle. For a moment, the girl and I lagged behind.

"What do you think of the Cathedral of the Atracuras?" I asked.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," she said with the same obscure smile. Then she continued to follow the others, passing two miserable confessionals into a side-chapel. Gathered around a holy water stoup, they watched Piccione caressing the pale-blue marble. Waiting behind, I put my brainchild down on the floor. My arm was numb. I was in the process of surrendering to the gloom of the

cathedral, when I heard a voice from behind:

"You and I weren't born to be mindless followers."

Turning around, I found no-one behind me. A fart erupted from one of the pair of confessionals. The door of the priest's compartment came open. The yellow-haired man with the handlebar moustache emerged. He hobbled over to me on crutches.

"What were we born to be?" I asked.

"Anything -- just as long as we don't wear tasseled hoods or follow that charlatan."

"You mean Matteo da Brivido?"

"No, I mean that shitty little dwarf."

"Piccione?"

"Who else!" He sat down on my brainchild, farting again. His plaster cast stuck out hugely in front of him.

"I should warn you," I said. "I've heard that wearing a hat in church is forbidden." He had on a crush-proof Dacron fedora. He suddenly jammed it down to his ears and said:

"The Pope wears a hat in church!"

"So what?"

"And the Atracura monks wear their tasseled hoods!"

"Yes, but we're only laymen."

He gasped: "Ah-h!" -- feigning sudden logic, and jammed the hat into his pocket. He didn't try hard to conceal his hatred for the church. He was in the middle of telling me what a bunch of crooks the clergy were, when our group came marching out of the chapel and proceeded

down the side aisle. We saw Piccione pointing up at a pair of soaring trefoil arches where the nave bisected the transept. He crossed to the opposite side of the transept. There, he herded the group inside. At once, they passed through an old iron door.

The woman hesitated, glancing back at my moustached companion and me. She called over her shoulder:

"Aren't you coming?"

"Of course!" I said.

We went down the aisle and into the transept, at the back of which we followed the others through the old iron door. On the other side, Piccione led the way down a winding staircase of stone. In spite of his crutches and heavy cast, my companion kept pace with the rest of the group. Halfway down the stairs, Piccione pointed to a door; on the other side, he said, was a secret passage leading to the quarters of the monks.

"I'll be damned!" laughed the yellow-haired man. He made a vain attempt to force open the door with a crutch. He said: "Imagine how much celibacy goes on in there!"

"Hush!" Piccione snapped. Then he whispered mysteriously: "We are now descending to the crypt. And there, my friends, lo and behold, we shall cast our eyes upon the relics of four thousand souls, all arranged in geometric motifs and images."

Despite Piccione's introduction, I had no idea what to expect. Did the crypt represent some sort of monkish

ancestor worship? Did it render some sort of immortality to those forbidden to reproduce themselves in the usual way? Piccione led us to the bottom of the stairs, where he stopped with a solemn look on his face. He unlocked a heavy iron door encrusted with rust and herded us into a whitewashed corridor. There we were greeted by a funereal droning, piped into the bowels of the crypt. It was an Atracura chant.

We all stood aghast, facing seven tombs with arcaded fronts and elliptical ceilings. The mouth of each tomb was blocked by a wrought-iron palisade. We gathered in front of the nearest tomb. Inside was a skeleton sporting a faded red habit, including the distinctive tasseled hood of the Atracuras. It shouldered a scythe and stood in the midst of a sea of shinbones and vertebrae.

Piccione extended his arm in an awesome sweep. "Behold! He stands before you my friends; the grimmest of all Grim Reapers!"

The yellow-haired man exploded with laughter.

"What?" Piccione gasped. "You dare make a mockery of Saint Leo?"

"A saint?" said the yellow-haired man. "I'm sorry! I had no idea." He jammed his fedora back on his head.

Piccione proceeded to the second tomb in a huff.

The woman remained at the first tomb, scrutinizing Saint Leo. "I wonder," she said, "if Saint Leo would really have wanted his corpse dressed up like this."

"Don't be so naïve," said the yellow-haired man.

"This rat-hole never produced a saint." He farted, sitting again on my brainchild. After a moment's pause, he asked me: "Why do you carry this mammoth suitcase wherever you go?"

"It's not a suitcase," I said. "It's a musical instrument. My own invention. I wouldn't dare let it out of my sight."

He got up and patted me on the back; he was a great admirer of Japanese ingenuity, he said.

Down the corridor, Piccione began another harangue at the second tomb. Once more, he flourished his arm, as if to move the heavens.

"A fine waste of time this tour has been!" said the yellow-haired man. "All to fill the pockets of that shitty little dwarf!"

"I'm not wasting time," said the woman. "I would have come here even without Piccione."

"Why? To see Saint Leo?"

"Actually, I came here out of scientific interest." After a pause, she added: "If you like, we three can desert Piccione."

She promptly led us past the second tomb where Piccione was clutching his heart and croaking: "Let he who has seen a finer mural relief of vertebrae stand before me. I will gladly kiss his feet!"

In front of the third tomb, the yellow-haired man and I stood, breathless. The blonde waved her hand in the air

and shrieked: "Behold! The skulls of a thousand souls unabashedly stare you in the face!"

It was a macabre scene, indeed: an untold number of grinning skulls had been assembled, forming three shrines at the back of the tomb. In each shrine a skeleton stood intact in its habit, clutching a crucifix.

"Can it be?" said the woman. She stared at the back of the tomb, with her mouth agape. "Such a glorious frieze of clavicles...that is, 'collarbones.'"

After a pause, she sniffed at the ceiling: "A rather uninspired helix of ribs; albeit, handsomely arranged in the brocade style."

Then, hands on hips, she knitted her eyebrows, sizing up the two lateral walls. She cocked her head for a moment and shrieked: "Bravo! A brainstorm! A chef-d'oeuvre to purge the blackness from our hearts!"

I watched in amazement. My yellow-haired friend nearly wet his pants. He had to cover his face with his hands to control his laughter.

"You must be blind!" the woman said.

I couldn't see anything but a hexagonal arrangement of various bones.

"Just try to appreciate the subtlety of the embossment -- the fine angularity of the scapulae -- I mean, 'shoulder blades,'" she said.

"We are trying," said the man with the moustache. "If only we were as sensitive as you! Tell us how you got to such a level of artistic cultivation."

"Strange you should call it artistic cultivation," she said. "It happens that I am an orthopaedist. Though I've never been one to brag, I will not deny that I graduated summa cum laude from the highly prestigious medical school of the University of Iceland...." We stared at her in disbelief. From her too-perfect English and her lack of the slightest accent, she might have been taken for a grammarian.

"You're an Icelander, then?"

"Well, yes, although I was born on the Isle of Surtsey, I'm an Icelander, so to speak."

As Piccione approached from the second tomb, the Icelander led my moustached companion and me away from the third. She swept directly from the fourth to the fifth tomb and paused to look over the bars of the palisade.

"Aha!" she shouted, pointing at one of the lateral walls. "Do you see that formation of patellae -- I mean, 'knee caps'?" They formed a six-pointed star of Solomon. "What an excellent example of basso-rilievo -- or 'low relief sculpture!"

She pointed at the rear wall of the tomb where several hundred pelvic bones were piled in a mound. It was a representation of Calvary. On three crosses atop the mound hung the relics of three nameless pygmy monks.

"What a fine example of alto-rilievo -- or 'high relief' sculpture!" she said. "Notice the three-dimensional fullness." She paused, her eyes searching back and forth.

"Then, of course, there is mezzo-rilievo -- or 'middle relief' -- which falls roughly between high and low. It's a pity -- I can't seem to find an example of it in this particular tomb."

She swept aloofly past tomb number six. I watched as she made for the seventh tomb. She was very slim and carried herself with deliberate grace. Her breasts didn't seem to sway at all. I followed behind.

The yellow-haired man called after me: "Wait!" He remained at the sixth tomb, cackling, and pointed his crutch across the palisade to where a half-dozen skulls formed a column against the wall. On the crown of each skull were graffiti in Latin, which must have been some sort of revelation of monastic drollery. Scrawled on the topmost skull was the phrase: Dum spiro, spero (While I breathe, I hope); on the second: Spero meliora (I hope for better things); on the third: Sic transit gloria mundi (Thus passes earthly glory); followed by: Hoc erat in votis (This was what I prayed for); and lastly: Disjecta membra (Scattered remains).

Reaching over the bars of the palisade, the yellow-haired man nudged the end of his crutch against the crown of the topmost skull, the one that said: 'While I breathe I hope.' The Iclander called from the seventh tomb:

"Both of you, come at once! I've found a splendid example of mezzo-rilievo here in a frieze of fibulae and tibiae!"

"Come on," I said to the man with the moustache. He

had discovered that by jabbing his crutch at the skull he could make it wobble back and forth.

"So, what do you think of the orbs on that blonde?" he said. "Mezzo-rilievo or alto-rilievo? It's hard to say when she's wearing that mackintosh.

He gave the skull such a violent jab that it broke loose, toppling off its column; it plunged to the floor and shattered to bits. "Shit!" he said. "I hope it wasn't a saint."

I had a look down the whitewashed corridor. Piccione was at the fourth tomb, waving his hands -- so taken up in his own pyrotechnics that he hadn't heard a thing. "Let's go!" I said.

My companion hobbled after me to the seventh tomb, wearing a smirk so wide that the handlebars of his moustache obstructed his vision. "Well, now," he said to the Icelander. "Won't you show us this splendid example of mezzo-rilievo?"

Once Piccione had finished the tour, we rejoined the group, filing out of the crypt and up the winding stairway of stone. We paused in the vestibule, where an Atracura monk (the only live one we would see that day) bade us farewell. From the gloom of his tasseled hood, his watery eyes never blinked. He held a collection box in his hand. On a wooden stand beside him were several stacks of records entitled 'Unforgettable Atracura Chants.' The Ice-

lander bought one, causing our yellow-haired friend to be convulsed with laughter. No-one but me would sign a petition for the canonization of brother Matteo da Brivido -- 'engenderer of the glorious legend.'

Piccione gave the friar a pat on the back. Heaving open the heavy iron door, he led us down to the edge of the street. More than half our group seized the chance to escape. Crouching through the relentless drizzle, the rest of us followed Piccione unquestioningly to Caffé Campo Santo. Its vacant tables awaited us on the opposite side of Via Veneto.

Unlike the better sidewalk cafés, it had no canopy. Only umbrellas. They blazed in conflicting colours, tilting in all directions. Out of a doorway concealed by a curtain of beads, a spindly waiter appeared. He wore a crimson waistcoat and bowtie; clenched in his fist was a dirty rag. He grunted: "Benvenuto," and set about wiping the rain off the nearest table. He laid down a less than spotless tablecloth, and darted back inside through the curtain of beads.

The remaining five of us sat at the table in silence. We kept our raincoats buttoned. A few minutes later, the waiter returned with a tray perched high on his fingertips. He set on the table five cups of espresso and vanished again.

Having drunk his cup in a single gulp, Piccione stood up, rubbing his hands like a mosquito and said: "My dear friends, I regret to tell you that some unexpected busi-

ness has come up." He bowed at no-one in particular and left without further ado.

The yellow-haired fellow sat sulking; he groaned as a spout of rain came leaking down from the tattered umbrella onto his head. Then, shifting his chair to the right, he planted himself, plaster cast and all, close beside the Icelander. He farted loudly and mumbled something to the effect that the local diet didn't agree with his digestion. The girl pulled the hood of her raincoat over her head. We sat in embarrassed silence, trapped beneath the leaky umbrella. Once in a while, some poor soul scurried past us in the rain. We sipped our espresso, avoiding each other's desolate eyes; so five minutes passed.

More than anyone else, I felt increasingly ill at ease -- my worst fear being that none of the others had ever met an Asian, let alone a half-caste -- that they were as ill at ease as me. In order to make myself less noticeable, I tried to focus my energy on recording in minute detail every coffee stain and cake crumb on the blue and white checkered table cloth -- as if it were a battlefield, over which I would have to crawl to save my life.

At last, the Icelander pulled back her hood and said: "Aren't we happy? Perhaps the Crypt of the Atracuras has dispirited us."

"On the contrary," said our companion, "we're merely tongue-tied because we're full of the Holy Spirit." He started to laugh, but was soon diverted, tugging at the

sleeve of the one other member of our group -- a swarthy fellow who was rising from his seat. "Are you leaving so soon?"

"Well--"

"Then, you'll stay!" He pointed across the table at me. "Our Japanese friend was about to play something on his -- whatzit?"

"It's an invention," I said. "It hasn't got a name."

"Then we'll find a name for it."

"Yes!" cheered the swarthy fellow. He sat down again. "But first, let's hear what kind of noise it makes."

I started unlatching the case. "It sounds like a sextet of viola da gambas," I said. Then I lost my nerve and latched up the case.

"Let's cut out the shit!" said the yellow-haired man. "Strike up a tune!"

All three of them tried to wear me down by clapping and cheering.

"Look!" said the Iclander. "He is opening up the box. He will play it for us!" She rapped her knuckles on the table.

"My God!" the swarthy fellow said. "It's a monstrosity!"

As they watched me limbering up, I realized, for the first time in my life, what horribly stubby fingers I had. It was best not to think. I let my mind clear; my br'n-child and I merged into on.

Then the group was silent. I struck up a blissful

rendition of Offenbach's Valse des Rayons. Everyone was intoxicated with ecstasy as I scaled the heights of the decadent, sweet-flowing melody. Then, with a rollicking crescendo, I brought the waltz to a glorious finish.

"Bravo! Olé!" said the yellow-haired man. The swarthy fellow was stupified. The Icelander said:

"Very interesting. But I'm afraid I must offer one minor critique." She tapped the B-flat key. "You see -- it isn't your invention."

"What!"

"Forgive me," she said. "I don't want to be unkind; but you should know the truth."

"What truth?"

"That four-hundred years ago a Nuremburg artisan named Hans Hayden invented the very same instrument."

"That's impossible!"

"Listen! The instrument worked by a series of strings which were rubbed by a rotating rosined wheel when manipulated by the keys -- exactly like yours."

"Did it sound like a sextet of viola da gambas?"

"Exactly! And yet, as things turned out, the viola da gamba itself became defunct."

"Congratulations!" the yellow-haired man burst out. "You've built some contraption that sounds just like a sextet of defunct--"

"It is not a contraption," said the Icelander. "It's called a geigenwerck."

A geigenwerck. While I packed up my brainchild, the geigenwerck, the Icelander's words sank in. Was this the crisis for which I had spent my life preparing? I was too numb to care either way. Despite my despair, the others continued to chatter away. For me, the end of the world may have come, but my yellow-haired friend didn't give it a thought as he rolled his eyes in their sockets, pretending to gag on his cup of caffè espresso. He said: "How could civilized people drink this slop?"

The swarthy fellow replied with a sing-song accent which I noticed for the first time: "Unless I am dreaming, I could have sworn I saw you put seven spoons of sugar in your cup! It is no surprise you would blame a whole civilization for one bad cup of coffee!"

"And it's no surprise that you'd say that -- being of national fabrication."

"You think I'm Italian?" The swarthy fellow looked mortified. He pounded himself on the chest with his fist and shouted: "I am a Sardinian!" Everyone drew back in surprise at this outburst. Glancing at the mélange of umbrellas that rioted on the terrace, the Sardinian said: "At any rate, this is Caffé Campo Santo -- a bona fide dive! Hence the dregs at the bottoms of our cups."

The Icelander agreed: "It's a simple matter of cause and effect."

"So, I'm in the presence of intellectuals," said the yellow-haired man.

"I would rather you called me a mystic," said the

Sardinian. "There is a custom among my people. We read the past, present and future in the dregs."

The two others smirked.

"I tell you, people call me the prophet of the cups!"

"Then you make a fool of yourself as a habit."

"We'll have to see about that! Why don't we put my foolishness to the test?"

"Yes, test it on me!" I said without thinking -- in an unconscious attempt to forget my despair.

He asked me to empty my cup, then to turn it three times clockwise in the air and to place it upside down in its saucer. A moment later, his eyes became pensive. Uprighting the cup, he revolved it under his eyes and said:

"This is one of the strangest cups I have ever seen." He looked at me quizzically. "I am tempted to say that you are naïve, but it's not that simple; your cup defies interpretation. Still, something about it suggests a gentleness of spirit."

He couldn't have known what it was like to be half-Japanese, but I nodded anyway.

"It seems that your mother is dead. She came from far away and died in the land of your birth. You must be a half-caste."

I looked at the tablecloth.

"Don't be ashamed."

"But, where I come from...."

He shrugged philosophically. Looking deeper into my

cup, he said: "Aha! You must have been a gifted child."

That I had been a gifted child was undeniable. Having been raised by my widowed father (a well-known psychopathologist), I always considered myself a brainchild, a fabrication. Who could have dreamed what extremes my father would go to in order to raise a prodigy? His teleological view of evolution left nothing to chance. He postulated that by means of stimulation a parent could increase a child's brain growth, thereby increasing his intelligence. Taking this theory to extremes, he provided me with as much intellectual stimulation as possible, surrounding me with a multifarious sensory environment and treating me like a sponge that soaks up every drop of information to which it is exposed. My enrichment program included the famous Suzuki method of music instruction. And though my education in music began when I was but five days old (through exposure to classical music from dawn until dusk), it was not until my third birthday that I received my first violoncello. By the time I was six years old, I was a virtuoso cellist.

"You are a strange man," said the Sardinian. He handed me back my cup. He repeated the ritual with the Icелander's cup; revolving it under his eyes, he gasped:

"My God! This is unbelievable!"

"What?"

"Your cup! It is full of contradictions."

The man with the moustache snickered.

"Hush!" the Sardinian said. He addressed the Ice-

lander: "But all the conflicts of the past will be resolved. You have a very big future."

"Mezzo-rilievo or alto-rilievo?" asked the yellow-haired man.

"One thing is clear," the Sardinian said to the Iceland. "You are on a collision course with a yellow-haired vulgarian!"

The vulgarian rubbed his hands together and winked at the Iceland. She made a wry face. The Sardinian sighed:

"What more can I say? Your cup is full of--"

"Shit!" The vulgarian roared with laughter.

"So! You think you can make an ass of me!" The Sardinian sprang to his feet.

"Sit down! You still haven't read my cup."

"You can shove your cup up your--"

"Come on! I didn't mean to upset you. I believe you're a genuine prophet."

"Oh?"

"And I want you to read my cup."

Gazing up at the heavens, the Sardinian mumbled a curse, then sat down again. "Shall we get back to business?" he said. He seized the vulgarian's cup and, repeating the ritual, turned it quickly under his eyes.

"Aha! No contradictions here!" He waved the cup at us, snickering: "Look, all of you! Can you see it? Our friend is all alone in the world! No mother! No father!"

"That's...that's true!"

"Of course!" The Sardinian shook with laughter. Then he apologized, saying: "I'm sorry.... Us prophets, you know." He focussed upon a dark blob in the cup and said: "You're a terrible cynic."

"Baloney!"

"Oh? Then, why is your heart so black?"

"It isn't!"

"It is."

"Then, go to hell!" The vulgarian took a deep breath and apologized: "I'm sorry.... Us cynics, you know."

"Tell me," said the Sardinian. "Do you cry when you are alone?"

"Never."

"Tell the truth."

"I am."

"You're lying!"

"Give me a break!"

"Why should I?"

"Just give me a break!" the cynic shouted.

"Give me a thousand breaks...! If you don't tell the truth--"

"Why should I? You're just a charlatan!" He seized back his cup and slammed it into its saucer, grumbling: "Prophet of the cups, my ass."

We sat for two or three minutes in silence. I half-expected our little party to break up; but, all of a sudden, the cynic crashed his fist on the table and shouted: "Look! It's Piccione!" He pointed across the street to

another café where Piccione was prowling. "Watch! He's zeroing in on his prey. See that helpless lamb?" A girl stood alone in the drizzling rain. She was trying to read a waterlogged map. "What's this? What saviour descends from on high? What does the helpless lamb see as she raises her woebegone eyes--?"

"Enough!" The Icелander pounded her fists on the table.

"Aren't you enjoying my little narrative?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because it gives you so much pleasure."

"On the contrary, I'm on a mission to purge the world of injustice and charlatanry."

"That's a very noble cause."

The cynic was rubbing his hands together. "In case you've forgotten, Piccione promised to introduce us to movie stars. International celebrities! s if that weren't funny enough, the first chance he gets he sneaks off and ditches us in the rain! And what do we do? We sit here drenched while he's off rounding up another bunch of suckers. That worm! That shitty little dwarf!"

"You're right," the Sardinian said. He cast a sneer across the street at Piccione. "By rights, we should be surrounded by dozens of movie stars."

"Don't be naive!" said the Icелander. "It's been twenty years since celebrities came here. They were driv-

en away by gaping tourists like you."

"Then we've been taken!"

"What the difference?" said the Icelander. "Who cares about movie stars, anyway? Do I look upset?"

"You're just hiding your feelings," said the cynic. "And that's why I'm here. To cheer you up!"

He draped his trenchcoat over his shoulders and cast a lopsided smirk at the group. With his fedora at an impossibly rakish tilt, he donned a cheap pair of sunglasses. "Ecco!" he said. "Behold! I am Tartufo Imbottito -- celebrated motion picture actor and galantuomo -- leading man of a thousand tragi-comic musicals."

"Pardon me, Signor Imbottito," said the Sardinian. "I would be honoured to read your cup."

"Never mind! Only I can reveal my true self; only through my own gift of expression can my audience be infected with the condition of my soul."

"Oh, please -- infect us!" said the Icelander.

"You are asking too much!"

"But, why?"

"I will tell you: it has been years since I had so much as a walk-on part. A disgrace to a genius like myself. And why? Critics say that Tartufo no longer projects a mood of rustic simplicity. What once delighted millions -- his air of casual affability -- went down the toilet years ago...."

"I cannot believe it!" said the Icelander.

"You are too kind," said Tartufo. "Nevertheless, my

greatness is behind me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I am content to dwell in the past."

"Yes, of course," the Sardinian said. "I can see that in your cup."

"Then you know -- it's going on twenty years since we haunted the sidewalks of Via Veneto. Who could forget? It was the heyday of Angelo Fiato d'Oro and me. Every afternoon, we would meet at Caffé Campo Santo. For hours, we'd debate which of us was prettiest -- which of us was most devil-may-care."

The Icелander listened impassively.

Tartufo went on: "Of course, every night I would return to my splendid semi-detached castle. All of my twenty-three sons and daughters -- each the child of a different mistress -- would greet me. Together, the whole flock would chirrup: 'Papa! Papa! You're home at last! How we missed your casual affability, your rustic simplicity! And how many movies did you make today?'

"Lesser humans, far and wide, at every extremity of the earth, adored him. Everywhere he went, Tartufo was known; he was loved by all. In every city across the land, the most exclusive hotels gave him free accommodation. On the other hand --" (he tore off his sunglasses, glaring around the table) "would you care to guess where I slept last night? In the waiting lounge of the bus station! Me, a cripple!" He waved his crutches in the air. After catch-

ing his breath, he said: "As you may have guessed, I'm experiencing a slight pecuniary problem at the moment."

"Can I help you out?" I said.

"I wouldn't hear of it...even though you'll probably make a fortune on your -- whatzit?"

"A geigenwerck," said the Icелander.

"No, I'll destroy it!" I said.

"But, why?"

"It's not my invention! It's..." I faltered. "It's a throwback."

"So what?" said the cynic. "Who on earth ever got rich honourably?"

"No-one where you come from," said the Sardinian.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you Yanks; you're all alike."

"I'm not a Yank."

"But your language? Your accent?" The Sardinian furrowed his brow.

"Canadian!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's nothing. Besides, I'm pure Wallachian." Abruptly, he pounded himself on the chest with one hand. "I am first and foremost a Vlach!"

"And second?"

"Why don't we change the subject. My friend and I were about to discuss our little partnership." He reached across the table and shook my hand. He was smirking. "No self-respecting Japanese boy ever passed up a chance to

get rich!"

"Obviously, you can't see any further than the blackness in your heart!" The Icелander shifted her chair an arm's length away from the Vlach.

"You're being unfair; you think I'm a beast! But I'll have you know, my faith in human nature is bullet-proof."

"And you also taught Jesus to walk on water!"

"Not exactly, but I'm a realist. You know, the earliest form of religion known to man was ritual cannibalism."

"Perhaps," the Sardinian said, "you should read the Bible."

"No thank you. I'm an atheist."

"Even I have read it three times," said the Icелander.

"Why?"

"To confirm my disbelief in it. To emancipate myself from ideological damnation."

"You make the Bible sound like some textbook," said the Sardinian. "Don't you know God's will is inscrutable?"

"No!" The Icелander looked the Sardinian in the eye. "To know freedom, you first must be a slave; to know the meaning of truth, you must first be a slave to myth -- fall into its darkness; only then can you see the light."

"The truth is obvious to me," said the Vlach.

"It is obvious to no-one! You only confuse it with the burden of doubt you carry -- your cynicism -- your guiding star."

"What's the difference?" the Vlach said. "I still refuse to read the Bible. Jesus never did me any good."

"He would not have been born unless someone needed him," said the Icelander.

"Everyone needs him!" said the Sardinian. In his frustration, he turned to me. Not having a clue what to say, I turned to the Icelander.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Even Jesus can't help us any more. Our faith cannot stand up to modern times. We can only drift aimlessly. We haven't got anyone or anything to believe in any more."

The Vlach shrugged his shoulders.

"What makes you so sure?" the Sardinian asked.

"Because we are world-weary," said the Icelander. "Our days of worshipping heroes and manufacturing saints are almost over. Maybe some people still impersonate heroes and saints -- but in the end, they either make fools of themselves or we gladly do it for them. We mortalize them. We gloat on the fact that no-one is sacred -- that we're no nearer the image of God than chimpanzees! We know that our species is at an impasse!"

"If you would open up your heart," the Sardinian said, "you would know what it really means to be made in the image of God."

"In the meantime, we'll all keep on preparing ourselves for extinction," said the Icelander. "Just smell the air around us. It stinks of self-destruction. The dead ideologies stifling humanity murder imagination; they

desiccate the brain until it's a stone rattling in its cranium; they fill our minds with a dread of thinking, a dread of the truth; they fill our hearts with a burden of doubt. And now that we've wiped out our myths, we have nothing to guide us; we're caught in a downward spiral!"

"What a pity," said the Vlach. "Let's all join hands and abandon hope."

"You should live so long! If we have to join hands, it will be on my terms."

"What terms? I wish you'd stop talking in circles -- wiping out Jesus one minute, mourning his death the next. Let's face it, we're hand-in-hand at an impasse."

"No!" the Iclander said. "The truth is, we need a new myth."

"And how will we manufacture this myth?" the Sardinian asked sarcastically.

"We may be needing a prophet after all," laughed the Vlach. "Are you available?"

"Well--"

"We don't need a prophet!" cried the Iclander. She stood up so abruptly that she knocked her chair over backwards. "We're going to make the myth ourselves; we're going to grow it in the soil of truth -- in the ashes of a world of burnt-out myths and ideologies!"

"Very nice rhetoric," said the Vlach. "Do you really expect us to believe it?"

"You have to believe it! Can't you see? We need

faith even more than the myth itself." She creased her brow. "On the other hand, faith without doubt is faith without imagination; it dooms the mind to a vegetable existence. That is why we need a new myth -- a myth that thrives on doubt -- a true myth!"

"At last! The eternally elusive answer to everything!" said the Vlach. "If it only made sense!"

"It makes sense to me."

"And to anyone else who's over the edge."

"Maybe so."

"You admit it!" laughed the Vlach. "Then, you have no reason to question my sanity."

"What is sanity?" asked the Icелander. "In your case, it's nothing but nihilism. Just like the rest of us, you must choose between salvation and damnation!" She wrenched the hood of her raincoat down, baring her head to the drizzling rain. "We've reached a threshold; we must dare to face the truth; we must dare to plunge ourselves into a state of limitless consciousness. For the sake of our own survival we need an indestructible myth. A myth we can consciously shape, thereby consciously shaping ourselves!" She suddenly crashed her fist on the table, still sermonizing as our cups rattled in their saucers:

"Everyone, here is the new myth, the true myth: humanity willfully evolving higher and higher, forevermore! Our only hope of surviving ourselves is to evolve into something new!" The Icелander paused to catch her breath. "Of course," she added with a sigh, "you haven't a clue

what I'm talking about."

"Tell us," said the Vlach. "What will we become? A species of hairless, three-headed mutants?"

"It doesn't matter what we will look like; all that matters is what we will be!"

"Don't give us that shit! The human species will never change. We'll go on entrenched in our wicked ways until we destroy ourselves. The truth is, we're at an impasse."

"No!" the Sardinian said. "It's not true!"

"It always has been, and always will be true."

"Nothing is always true," said the Iclander.

"That's true," I heard myself say.

"Not always." She turned around, glaring across the street at the crumbling basilica. She muttered: "Eppur si muove."

"What's that?"

"'It does move, nevertheless.' It's a quotation from Galileo."

"Very impressive," said the Vlach.

Still standing beside her toppled chair, the Iclander was trembling. Her cheeks were flushed and wet from the rain. She drew the hood of her raincoat over her head and turned away, heading straight for the curtain of beads.

"Oh, no!" I said. "I think she's leaving."

"Relax," said the Vlach. "She's just gone to the powder room to cool off."

The Iclander was gone for so long that I started

having doubts that she'd ever come back. In her absence, I tried to imagine what kind of person she was in everyday life. Could she cook? Could she play a musical instrument? Was she fond of animals? Did she ever have pillow fights with her sister Inga on sleepless summer nights in the midnight sun? When I tried to imagine being married to her, I found it impossible; she would have been too self-willed to provide her womb for the spawning of my descendants or anyone else's.

The Vlach grew restless. He started humming to himself. Gazing up at the brim of his hat, he straightened it, then shoved it back at an even more rakish tilt. He gawked at a stunning ginger-haired girl passing by on the side-walk.

"You think she's beautiful?" asked the Sardinian.

"Well, she's no dog's breakfast --" the Vlach said, "unless you compare her to--"

"To what?"

"So, you want to intrude in my private affairs," he laughed. "Good! I'm itching to tell a story."

"About a love affair?" I asked.

He nodded: "Two months ago in Belgrade. But first, imagine if you please, the opening melody of Igor Stravinsky's Petrushka played by a sextet of viola da gambas. I don't mean to condescend, but not everybody has my sensitivity. A musical prompt here and there might help you respond emotionally to the story -- just like in the movies. Would you care to provide a little orchestral accompani-

ment?" he asked me. "No?" Leaning forward, grinning fiendishly, he began to tell his story. The words came flowing out in a torrent:

"I was on a crowded railway platform, sitting bored stiff on the side of my suitcase, when out of nowhere she appeared -- a raven-haired angel in the flower of maidenhood -- an innocent lamb with her fat old mama, waiting to catch the overnight train. She struck an alluring pose, leaning against a post, and put on a show of reading some paperback romance. All the while we kept making eyes at each other. We carried on with this little game until the train rolled into the station.

"There was a moment when I nearly went out of my mind: in the turmoil of boarding the train, I lost sight of her in the crowd; then, searching the corridors up and down, I finally spotted her violet dress as she took a seat in a crowded compartment. I followed her, breezing through the door with my suitcase and grabbed the last vacant seat, which happened to be right across from her -- not to any advantage, since our compartment was totally packed: all ladies, except for myself and some displaced village idiot who sang lullabies to his kitten and fed it sardines.

"We weren't five minutes underway when the girl's fat mama broke the ice with the rest of the ladies. They all spoke a boorish Bosnian dialect, and, without the least delay, began a ritual of flattering one another on their

dresses and shoes and various shades of peroxide-blond hair. The girl's mother, as it happened, was quite a socializer. She had everyone in stitches, pulling her whole summer wardrobe out of her suitcase, including a polka-dot bathing suit which would be several sizes too large for a full-grown elephant seal. While she amused the peroxide mob with jokes about how risqué her bathing suit would have been in the priggish fifties, in the thick of this matronly banter, her daughter and I made eyes at each other.

"I must say, the train was completely packed. Old men and women stood asleep on their feet in the corridor, leaning their heads against the walls. About an hour into the ride, the peroxide mob suddenly fell silent and glared at the idiot. He had quit serenading his kitten and started wriggling his tongue at the elderly folks in the corridor. One of the ladies -- evidently the idiot's mother -- drew the curtain across the door. She smacked her son on the head and ordered him to behave. The next thing I knew, everyone was gawking at a sunset outside the window. The idiot crooned to his kitten again. Myself, I escaped the compartment and gave my first-class seat to some poor old man.

"There was barely room to stand in the corridor, even for those who could sleep on their feet. I slowly squeezed my way through the crowd. At the end of the corridor, I escaped to the vestibule. At least it was empty. I watched the last flicker of the sunset through a window in the

door, and got to wondering how I would get through the night with nothing to do but sit on a stone-cold radiator. Just when I was beginning to get depressed, who should come traipsing into the vestibule but the girl. She too had given her seat away to some poor old soul. We sat side by side on the radiator.

"She blushed when I told her how pretty she looked in her sleeveless dress. She confessed that violet was her favourite colour. We introduced ourselves. Her name was Yasminka and she had one wandering eye: it moved around restlessly in its socket while the other one looked straight ahead. There was something familiar about her."

"Did she remind you of someone?" I asked.

"Not exactly. Maybe it was her voice: it was pleasantly husky. When she tried to say, 'I love you,' she got the subject and object confused and it came out: 'You love me.' We held hands. But after gazing into each other's eyes for five minutes, I still couldn't reconcile myself to Yasminka's wandering eyeball. It gave me the shivers. Just then, she said: 'It is necessary that boys and girls should kiss.' I nearly fell off the radiator.

"Then I kissed her on the back of the head. She giggled, and I kissed her on the neck, then the cheek and the lips. She tried to squirm away when I licked her on the throat; but she licked me back when I started to fondle her small firm breasts. Then we went into the lavatory."

"The what?"

"You know -- the toilet."

"You're joking!" I said.

"Not at all. How else could I investigate the myth that Bosnians shave their private parts?"

"So, now you're an anthropologist," said the Sardinian.

"Yes!" the Vlach agreed. "An anthropologist doing field research!"

"What were your findings?"

"I found Yasminka virgo intacta. I was mystified by the wall I was throbbing against. Then the train came lurching to a halt; the bull came crashing through the fence. Yasminka shrieked. Her left eye did violent acrobatics while the right one glared straight ahead. She struggled, clawing to free herself, but I held her tight, knowing how much she yearned for my seed as she sprawled on the cold metal sink.

"It was deathly silent outside the toilet. The train had stopped at some back-country station, and all we could hear was the chirping of crickets...I mean, when our moaning at last subsided. All of a sudden, the calm was shattered: hooting and howling erupted outside. A mob of drunken ruffians got on the train and took over the vestibule. Their cackling went on for what seemed an eternity. Yasminka and I kept still, until it was finally quiet outside; trusting that the vestibule was clear, I poked my head out the door -- only to find seven soldiers, five sprawled on the floor, two slouched on the radiator. Re-

coiling, I shut the door. Yasminka looked at me, terrified, as the soldiers crashed their fists on the door. Her face became deathly pale; every limb of her body trembled; with fumbling hands, she tried to button up her dress as the walls of the toilet quaked under the fists of the drunken soldiers. They started hollering for a conductor. We had no choice but to leave our love nest: holding my head up, I opened the door to face the soldiers. Yasminka was weeping convulsively. She hid her face in her hands and fled. Then the soldiers applauded, stomping their feet and mimicking groans of ecstasy.... And so ends the tale of Yasminka's initiation to love. What I hadn't foreseen was that--"

Before the Vlach could finish, the Iclander reappeared. She calmly uprighted her chair and sat down.

The Vlach continued: "Anyway, at dawn we arrived in Laputski. I followed Yasminka as she climbed off the train with her mother. From the way she glowered at me, I knew well enough to keep my distance. Without a word, she stormed down the railway platform with tears gushing down her cheeks. You've never seen such a pitiful sight. But such are the perils of the lady wayfarer." Grinning at the Iclander, the Vlach said: "Wouldn't you agree?"

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"I mean, it's a dangerous world out there for a lamb like you."

"Don't worry! I can take care of myself."

"That's what you think!"

"You would think so too if you had seen my act of heroism last night."

The Vlach smirked: "Won't you tell us about it?"

"It happened at twilight in the gardens of Villa Sciarra," began the Icelfander. "I was strolling along a lonely footpath, bordered by hedges of spruce. Suddenly, I heard panting and footsteps behind me. At the same time, someone came darting out of the shadows in front of me. I found myself trapped between two maniacs wielding knives. I could tell from the festering sores on their arms that they were dope fiends. They spoke in hissing voices, and ordered me to hand over all my money."

"Of course, you refused," said the Vlach.

"Of course! You cannot imagine how outraged I was. Two meaner wretches you've never seen. They hadn't shaved or even combed their hair in days! I noticed they both had rotten teeth -- just as one of them lunged at me with his knife!"

"Did he hurt you?"

"He didn't even touch me! I jumped aside. The assailant plunged on his face in the dirt; his eyes were blinded by dust. But, while he was busy clawing his hands at the air, his partner pounced at me like a wildcat! That was when I stabbed him."

"Stabbed him!" the Vlach gasped. "A lamb like you couldn't stab such a fiend!"

"I did!"

"With what? A nail file?"

"No." She paused. "With my cigarette holder...my thirty-centimetre-long, rhinestone-encrusted cigarette holder."

"Did you hurt him?"

"You never heard such a howl in your life! His partner ran off like a gazelle!"

The Vlach said: "You stabbed the poor devil...with a foot-long (I still haven't learned the metric system) rhinestone-encrusted cigarette holder...?"

"Yes."

The Sardinian shook his head: "But, it is plain that you do not smoke."

The Icелander stammered: "Well...now that I think... it may have been that I stabbed him with...a mechanical pencil."

"So, you think we're a bunch of fools!" the Sardinian said.

"You better believe it," said the Vlach. "She shovels us load after load of the same--"

"It's true!"

"As true as your little story about being born on the Isle of Surtsey!"

"And who are you to question my motherland?"

"Let me tell you about your motherland: some thirty years ago, off the southwest coast of Iceland, there was an undersea volcanic eruption of such incredible force

that it spewed a column of ashes four miles into the sky! It caused a new island to rise from the ocean. That is how Surtsey came to exist. Now, do you expect us to believe you were born on a mound of volcanic rock?"

"If you'd let me explain."

"Well?"

"You see, my mother, a famous geologist, was the first human being ever to set foot on Surtsey -- I mean, after the island cooled off. Along with her research team, she was there to study undersea seismic activity when, at the very height of her pregnancy--"

"Enough!" the Vlach shouted. He clapped his hands over his ears. "I know you think I'm a blubberhead, but give me a little credit. I have at least a spark of worldly wisdom."

"Worldly wisdom!" laughed the Icelander. "Is that what you're hiding under your hat?"

"I'm sorry," the Vlach said, "but wisdom cannot be displayed in a jar; it cannot be tapped from the kitchen faucet, nor can it be soaked up effortlessly--"

"Which means you're as permeable to wisdom as a rubber boot to the rain."

"And you?"

"I know my limitations; I judge myself more severely than you could. I'd rather be the world's biggest fool than share your damnation: mistaking cynicism for wisdom!"

"Baloney! You're just not deep enough to appreciate me, to explore my mental intricacies."

"And why should I want to explore the vacancies of your mind? I've already seen the empty skulls of 4,000 monks!"

"Because," said the Vlach, "you're more at home in a sea of bones than amidst the living. Skulls and vertebrae -- that's your department. Mine is human nature."

"I wouldn't trust a man who claims to know so much about human nature," said the Icelander. "Just the same, let me tell you a story:

"Imagine a downhearted tramp in winter: he trudges along through the blistering cold. He can't see the road for the blinding snow. He is ailed by rheumatism, hepatitis and several other diseases. To be alive is so unbearable that he wishes he was dead. But then, as he trudges along the road, he hears the cry of another human. He sees her lying in the gutter, and quickly recognizes her face as that of a local prostitute. 'Dear God!' he cries. 'She has been run down by a car!' His heart cannot help but bleed for the woman. She is his sister in misery."

"So, what does he do?" I asked.

"The only thing he can do: out of the kindness of his heart, the tramp climbs into the gutter, picks up a stone, and shatters the prostitute's skull! In this way, he puts her out of her misery. Now, would you say that he did the right thing...?" The Icelander looked at me. She said: "Well?"

I looked at the Vlach and repeated: "Well?"

"Why not?" he said. "The old boy deserves at least a gold star."

"And just like him, you don't know that the whore wasn't dying at all but having labour pains; she was giving birth to a baby -- a future prophet! That's right! The tramp unknowingly slew an unborn prophet!"

The Vlach groaned, holding his face in his hands as he rocked his head from side to side.

The Icelander was beaming: "It was a good story, wasn't it?"

"Interesting," said the Sardinian. "Yet I'm at a loss with respect to the metaphorical drift. Was this a parable?"

"No, an allegory. You see, insofar as the tramp himself wants to die, he cannot imagine that another tormented human should want to live."

"What a lot of crap," said the Vlach. Still holding his face in his hands, he glared through the spaces between his fingers. "Do you think we're a bunch of pigeons -- to be affected by some whimpering whore in a ditch?"

"In your case," she said, "not a pigeon. A worm!"

"Oh, yeah!"

"A worm that wonders why a bird would rather fly in the sky than crawl in the dirt! You try to absolve yourself of guilt by thinking others are guilty of worse offences than you. You see nothing but greed in your very own species, because it's the only thing you see when you look at yourself!" She sprang to her feet; her chair top-

pled over.

"What's wrong?" I said. "Do you have to leave?"

"That's right!" she snapped. "I cannot stand another minute with...with..."

"What a shame," said the Vlach. "I don't think she loves me any more."

"The Icelander trembled with indignation, clenching her fists so hard that her knuckles began to turn white. "I'm afraid we are seeing each other for the last time," she said. Without another word, she set her chair back on to its feet. Then, turning away, she walked straight out of Caffé Campo Santo. Rushing up Via Veneto, she faded into the drizzle.

I started chasing her up the street. After running a block, I lost sight of her. At the same time, I realized I'd left the geigenwerck behind. I suddenly had a crisis of conscience: I froze, not knowing whether to turn back or to keep searching for the Icelander.

For as long as I could remember, I had been burdened with the most insufferable conscience, thanks to my father, the psychopathologist, who formulated a method of self-castigation for instilling morality in naughty children. The method required that the subject wear around his wrist a thick rubber band, which was painfully snapped whenever punishment was in order. The fact that the subject had to administer his own punishment was believed to insure the formation of moral conscience. Once the conscience had

been formed, the rubber band could be thrown away.

Granted, there had been past crises of conscience in which I hadn't known what to do. On this particular occasion, for once, I decided to do nothing. I cleared my mind rather than grind it to powder through mental self-castigation. I shuffled my way down Via Veneto. In time, I found myself back at Caffé Campo Santo. There I was greeted by the Vlach:

"You must be schizzing out," he said, "chasing that dyke around in the rain!"

"I was worried about her."

"Relax." He patted me on the back. "Just think: we're free of our conscience at last!"

"And yet..." the Sardinian heaved a sigh, "she had a certain charm, don't you think?"

"My friend, you can polish a rock till your arm breaks off, but that doesn't make it a gem."

"So?"

"Listen, no two-fisted man would look twice at her... after seeing my dreamgirl."

"Who?"

"You haven't forgotten Yasminka already?"

"Who could forget?" said the Sardinian.

"Then, I'm sure you'll enjoy the second half of my story," said the Vlach. "Let's see, now? Where did I leave off?"

"In Laputski," I said. "Yasminka was rushing down the railway platform with tears gushing down her cheeks."

"Of course! I'll never forget the pangs of conscience I suffered. That morning, I wandered off to a dingy café full of boorish factory workers. I felt obliged to debase myself. When my conscience was clear at last, I ordered a cup of coffee -- the Turkish brew that leaves a lump of molten lead in the pit of your stomach. Looking across the street through the window, I saw Yasminka and her mother loading their luggage onto a bus. Then the bus rolled away. I was overcome with conflicting emotions: even as I breathed a sigh of relief, a great emptiness swelled in my chest and throat. I picked up my suitcase and left the café.

"Outside, I found a public phone and tried to ring up old Zoran Dravic, a sometime councilman, sometime black marketeer, who also happened to be my paternal uncle and the trustee of my inheritance. As a child, I remember him hanging around our house all hours of the day, potbellied and lit to the gills, with his constant guffawing and doubling over, as if he were having an asthma attack. The man sounded just like a drowning swine. He was an insufferable storyteller, forever in need of an audience -- as if having to purge himself somehow by spinning yarns -- like someone without any qualms about breaking wind in public. What I could never figure out was the indivisible tie (besides the blood relationship) between Zoran and my late father.

"I dialled his number several times, but there was no

answer. It was still early in the morning, and already sweltering. Knowing Zoran, he wouldn't roll into his office for hours, and I was damned if I was going to wait there, sweating it out in what promised to be a scorcher of a day. I made up my mind to go directly to our estate in Slapovi Kakovnik. I flagged down a battered, bottle-green taxi."

"You have an uncanny memory for detail," said the Sardinian.

"True," said the Vlach. "I am blessed with a photo-graphic memory. Even now, I can picture the face of the old taxi driver: one lens of his glasses is cracked in half; the telltale scars of a youthful acne problem blemish the wings of his nostrils. And I remember every last thought that ran through my head as I rode in the taxi: my suspense; my cowardice; all my worst expectations of the home I hadn't seen for twenty years.

"You cannot imagine the pain I went through in the course of a half-hour ride. Slapovi Kakovnik is only fifteen miles from Laputski as the crow flies, but the winding dirt road between became a ride through the depths of hell -- with that crackbrained driver practically tearing up the earth. What was worse, I'd lived in such dread of returning home that I'd put it off for years since coming of age. The grim reality of inheriting my father's estate was the cause of more sleepless nights than I should care to think about. As I sat there, racking my brains in the taxi, I hadn't a clue what was really bringing me back to

Kakovnik.

"For reasons I wasn't completely sure of, I was tormented by my memories of the estate. My darkest memory was of the centuries-old château where I was born. The longer we lived there, the more I abhorred its sickening grandeur; even the high stone walls surrounding it made my flesh creep. I would have died of despair if it hadn't been for the yard, my only refuge, the place where my childhood comes to a focus. In the centre of the yard, there towered an age-old chestnut tree; its massive limbs spread in every direction; in springtime its blossoms filled the yard with a pungent odor. At the foot of the chestnut tree squatted the family privy. Imagine a privy without a roof! Some spark of unorthodoxy must have driven my predecessors to build it that way...or else a need to divert their attention from their bodily emissions -- gazing up at the Celestial City, at the clouds drifting by, not to mention the turtledoves soaring above. At the crack of dawn every morning the same brood would dart across the stone wall from the neighbour's sunken garden and roost in the chestnut tree for hours, mournfully cooing in the low branches -- so near the ground I could have snatched one in my fist. Such a wicked impulse never entered my head; I just wanted to flock with the doves in the chestnut tree; but the moment I'd start climbing up, the whole brood would panic and dart back across the wall. Then, all I could do was keep to my own lonely refuge,

perched high on a massive branch jutting over the neighbour's sunken garden. If nothing else, I had the solace of watching over the doves where they nested in a hollow, on top of an ancient Roman pillar. For hours, I'd watch them from behind a thick curtain of leaves -- till our housemaid's ear-piercing dinner cry jolted me back to reality. Then I'd scramble down from the tree, skulking into the house, never letting on where I'd been hiding all afternoon. But the moment I'd get another chance, I'd clamber back up the tree to my perch.

"That was all I could do to elude my despicable parents. Both of them were drunkards. My father was one of the few survivors of a noble Wallachian bloodline -- an ancient family near extinction, which had somehow clung to its fortune after the founding of the Socialist Republic. As far as I know, the old sponger never worked in his life; his only purpose was to stay home all day, drowning in booze, till the dreaded hour when he'd start climbing the walls from boredom and have to release his frustrations by thrashing his only son to a pulp with a horse-whip. To this day, I can't believe the unspeakable things that he did to me while my mother watched in a drunken stupor. Not a minute went by when I wasn't on guard for his footsteps. The hours I hid myself in that tree! You might wonder what good it ever did me. Even behind my curtain of leaves, there was no escaping the endless harangue of my parents bickering over the fate of their stinking marriage. How many years this battle went on, I couldn't

say; nor how many generations of turtledoves came and went. All I really know is that, with every new brood of doves my parents' bickering got more malicious, my father's thrashings got more sadistic -- that I spent the best hours of my childhood up in a chestnut tree, behind a curtain of leaves."

The Vlach paused for breath, gazing into his hat with a malignant grin on his face. He went on:

"I was drenched in rivers of sweat as the taxi closed in on Slapovi Kakovnik. A torrent of memories rushed through my brain. The only clear image was of the neighbour's sunken garden, the brood of turtledoves nesting on top of the ancient pillar -- and, of course, the human inhabitants: a widow and her child. Every summer morning, they would come out of their thatch-roofed cottage to sunbathe au naturel until dusk--"

"Excuse me for interrupting," said the Sardinian. "Maybe that's why you forgot how many generations of turtledoves came and went: you had your eyes on the widow's tits!" He started to snicker, but checked himself when he realized that nobody else was laughing.

"This is no joke!" said the Vlach. "I'm talking about a devastating experience. You cannot imagine how I felt when the taxi came to a huge suspension bridge -- a bridge which spanned the whole valley of Kakovnik!" He gave a huff when he noticed our lack of concern. "Can't you see? All my happy memories of my birthplace -- a verdant para-

dise in the sky -- were shot down in the twinkling of an eye by that horrible bridge...! As the taxi crossed the bridge -- right over my father's estate -- I tore out my hair. I told the driver to stop the car; but he thought I was crazy; he thought I wanted to jump off the bridge; he started to panic and gunned the engine. That's when I reached from the back seat, grabbing him by the wrist. He cursed me and told me to let him go. But the louder he screamed, the harder I gripped -- until, finally, halfway across the bridge, he stopped the car. He refused my fare. After wrenching my suitcase out of the trunk, he flung it down on the asphalt. He told me to go to hell. Then he made a screeching U-turn, howling some Macedonian curse out the window, and started racing back to Laputski.

"I was all alone on the bridge; there wasn't a sign of traffic coming in either direction, and I was free to gaze over the balustrade at the valley sprawling below. Right under my eyes, the River Kakovnik made a winding gash through a crowded forest of pines. In the distance, the spires of our château towered over the treetops. Perched on the highest spire was a buzzard. Its deathly stillness gave me a chill. I had to force myself to look away and broke into a flood of sweat. I crossed to the far end of the bridge, then went a little ways down the road and changed course to follow a zigzagging path through the forest of pines and into the valley.

"To judge from the entrance to the estate, it was plain that something was amiss: the gate hung agape on

broken hinges; the driveway was so full of craters, it would've been un navigable by car. By the time I had woven my way up the driveway to the château, my head was reeling. I put down my suitcase in the portal, where I stood trembling from head to foot. I knew I couldn't have come to this place of my own volition, that I'd surrendered to my father's curse -- his inheritance. At a glance, I could see that the place had an aura of doom. Trees grew rank, throwing darkness on every corner. Tangled weeds as high as my waist infested the lawns. Broken glass lay heaped under gaping windows. The walls of the château seemed to decay before my eyes.

"As I was looking at the façade, out of the corner of my eye I saw a silhouette plunge through the trees. Only then did I find the courage to enter the château. I had laid one hand on the door handle, ready to pull it open when, from the other side of the door, I heard a high-pitched humming sound: it warned of a pelting storm of dung flies gone mad with captivity. My hand recoiled from the door handle. Who'd have thought any form of life could have survived in that château? It was so long abandoned that even the rats should have died or found sustenance somewhere else. I backed away. I left my suitcase in the portal and followed a path along the front of the château. Then I sidetracked along the west wing, hurdling mounds of broken glass, fighting my way through a jungle of shrubbery. Briars tore at my pants. Every crack in the path

was choked with moss. The carcass of a muscat vine cankered the west wall of the château.

"As I went through the garden gate, the first thing that caught my eye was the roofless privy. Its door was bashed in; the whole thing was tilting to one side. After all the years that Uncle Zoran had been administering my estate, everything was in ruins. I could have torn up the earth. Then I looked up and saw the ancient chestnut tree. It was exactly as I remembered it -- only three metres higher, with branches reaching further and thicker with leaves. I went up to have a closer look. Then I lost my head. I hoisted myself to a low branch and clambered up the trunk. My heart was racing by the time I reached my old lookout at the end of the massive branch. Before I could think, I was looking down through the curtain of leaves and into the neighbour's sunken garden; there, I laid eyes on a wonderful sight: nesting on top of the ancient pillar were seven newborn turtledove chicks. I wept for joy. But then another sight caught my eye.

"I've mentioned in passing the thatch-roofed cottage; more specifically, I've mentioned its human inhabitants: a young widow and her child. Now, in your wildest imagination, what mother and daughter would you think had taken their places? What overgrown heifer with quivering flesh at the point of bursting out of her polka-dot bathing suit would you think was raking a potato patch under my perch? What bare-breasted nymph would you think was lolling in the grass? Naturally, I was stunned I fell off my perch,

plunging through the curtain of leaves and landed in the potato patch. As soon as I came to my senses, I felt a racking pain in my thigh; I started howling and gnashing my teeth. Through my tears, Yasminka's bleary face came into focus. She let out a scream as she recognized me. Then she flew to her mother's side. The two of them gawked at me as I lay there, howling in the dirt. The old woman shrieked; she wrapped her arms around Yasminka to hide her bare breasts; for lack of a more convincing threat, she bared a row of yellow teeth and snarled at me. Then she pushed Yasminka toward the door of the cottage. Meanwhile, I made an agonizing attempt to release my leg from its twisted position; but the old woman saw me move. She raised her rake. What a horror she was, looming hugely above me with yellow teeth and quivering flesh -- and that garden rake hovering in midair, ready to strike. She ordered me to get out of the potato patch, but the pain was unbearable; I collapsed before I could move an inch. At the same time, Yasminka was in tears at the cottage door. Our eyes locked together. Then the old woman told her to run to a neighbour's cottage to phone the police.

"As soon as Yasminka was out of sight, her mother flourished the rake and ordered me, with a maniacal glare, to get out of the potato patch at once. I managed to raise myself on my good leg before the pain in my thigh made the slightest movement impossible. I made no attempt to walk. All I could do was stand at the mercy of that rag-

ing old hag in her polka-dot bathing suit. Don't ask me why, but she had it in for me; maybe she thought I was some kind of sex fiend.

"With Yasminka out of the way, I found out how furious her mother really was. She spread her lips in a gruesome smile; then she dropped the butt-end of her rake and jabbed it with lightning force at my thigh. I was blinded with pain. I screamed so loud that the old hag herself couldn't help but scream. When my eyes cleared, I found her right in front of me, pale as a corpse and beaded with sweat. Then I blacked out, falling flat against her. I came to, sprawled on top of the old woman's huge, limp torso. We must have blacked out simultaneously. Rolling off her belly, I somehow managed to catch a balance on my good leg.

"There are times when I truly amaze myself with my own ingenuity. Using the old woman's rake as a crutch, I managed to drag myself out of the garden and up a steep slope in front of the cottage. I'll spare you the details of my flight. Thanks to some mystical force, I made it all the way up that rocky slope, through a grove of pines and out of the valley. Up by the bridge, on the winding road leading out of Kakovnik, I flagged down a transport truck bound for Zadar. The driver, a Bosnian peasant built like a gorilla, was hauling a load of live goats to the Adriatic coast. Even though we spoke no common language, my moans of pain were the only communication I needed.

"As it happened, the fellow was practically an aspir-

ant for sainthood; he went way off course just to deliver me to the hospital in Laputski. I spent the rest of that afternoon in a waiting lounge packed with emergency cases, with nothing to do but sprawl on a wooden bench, stifling my moans till the nurses could squeeze me into a miserable lineup of patients waiting for x-ray examinations -- which only proved what I already knew: that I'd fractured the shaft of my left femur -- that is, my thighbone. After the break had been set and my leg put in a groin-to-toe plaster cast, I began the worst ordeal in my life: three weeks immobilized on a concrete bed in a sweltering infirmary. What was worse, there was no escaping Uncle Zoran when he dropped by for his nightly visit. The fact that he never gave a damn about me didn't stop him from falling into the role of a long-lost uncle. If he had wanted to do me a favour, he should have done everything he could to preserve a deathly silence between us. Instead, he kept breaking into his fits of asthmatic laughter, flailing his arms, gasping for air and sounding just like a drowning swine -- spinning yarns about the good old days, and telling me how much I reminded him of my good-for-nothing father. He couldn't open his scumsucking mouth without making my blood boil. While he was trying to prove what a bleeding heart he was, all he really wanted was to shake off the yoke of trust administration. Now that he'd leeched my estate for all it was worth and let it crumble to dust, he wanted nothing to do with it. If it hadn't

been for my condition, I would have strangled him to death.

"When it came time to check out of the hospital and to have the property transferred to my name, Uncle Zoran was merciful enough to give me a ride to the district courthouse. From there, he drove me out to Kakovnik. A crew of workmen had spent the past three weeks renovating the east-wing interior of the château. Uncle Zoran wanted to show me how shrewdly he'd invested my dwindling fortune. When we arrived, I found the place in a livable state, beyond recognition: a brand-new privy complete with a roof had been built in the yard; the kitchen was stocked with a month's provisions. Whether I liked it or not, I was destined to be the master of the house. And that was the last I ever did see of Uncle Zoran.

"Now, you're expecting me to tell how I rediscovered all the familiar rooms of my childhood, how my old school chums and I were reunited after twenty years. You'll be sorry to hear that I lived all alone in that huge château for the next five weeks...just me and my shadow nursing each other. Except for a cranky old housemaid who came by to cook my meals and to clean the place, I saw not a soul. Before long, I was stupefied with boredom. The only thing I really loved on the whole estate was the chestnut tree; with that cast on my leg, I wasn't in any condition to climb it; I couldn't do anything but sit, contemplating its splendour through the gaping door of the privy.

"Through the lonely summer nights, my only diversion

was to wander beyond the renovated east wing, dragging my cast up and down decaying hallways and stairs with a flashlight to guide me, aimlessly searching through rooms so old that they'd never known the cruel glow of electric light. I would feel a perverse rush of excitement whenever I trespassed into some corner or cubbyhole where I'd once been prohibited to enter. The house was in parts one-storied, in others two- and three-storied; for the first time in my life, I explored the upper floors with their hallways of dark walnut paneling, lined with rows of antique chairs. At every turn, I was shocked by the disarray that confronted me -- the awesome state of decay. There were bedrooms with walls that hadn't been painted in fifty years, caved-in ceilings, broken-down four-poster beds, furniture of all descriptions, blanketed in dust, which seemed to ride the crests of waves on floorboards as choppy as the sea. Wherever curtains hadn't been looted by local gypsies, they hung in tatters. Wherever paintings hadn't been looted by local art connoisseurs, a few gruesome portraits remained. In every room there were blank yellow rectangles, clashing with black walls where once old canvases had hung.

"The only inviolable realm in the whole château (the place I'd been most prohibited to enter as a child) was the west-wing cellar. Its solid-oak door was barred with a half-dozen heavy locks. Its impregnability made me want desperately to break through. I was sure that the cellar

was really a crypt where the bones of all my demented ancestors were entombed. I longed to desecrate their remains. But the keys were nowhere to be found. I had to pacify myself with visions of digging up hundreds of skeletons -- in my infinite spare time, disassembling them, piecing them together into geometric motifs and images and the devil knows what. My frustration reached a point where I lost all control and raided every closet and drawer in the house, systematically burning every last stitch of my ancestors' clothes in the drawing-room fireplace.

"As the days dragged on, I got into a habit of sleeping at uneven hours, taking catnaps wherever I pleased. I slept on huge Chesterfields in the drawing room, stretched out on rows of antique chairs, even on dusty old Turkish carpets. One morning, I woke from a nap in the woodshed, sprawled on a pile of decaying logs. Dust was revolving in a slanting sunbeam which cut through a gap in the wallboards. It lit up a corner of the woodshed, where a big rusty axe caught my eye. I rolled off the wood pile, seizing the axe. Limping off on a single crutch to the west wing, I started chopping through the solid-oak cellar door. Within half an hour, I'd smashed it to splinters. Just before storming into the pitch-dark cellar, I tried to get hold of myself. I went to the east wing and brought back a flashlight. Only then did I enter the most forbidden realm in the whole château.

"Now, try to imagine my descent into the unknown, to the accompaniment of the most unworldly Atracura chant. At

the foot of the stairs, I took a quick look around with my flashlight. It was the deepest, most cavernous cellar you could imagine. One corner was heaped with ancestral relics: three empty coalbins, a broken-down furnace, a millstone, a dismantled threshing machine. The rest of the floor was crammed, wall to wall, with rows upon rows of dusty bottles, several huge fermentation vats and a big copper pot still. It dawned on me that my father's lifeblood, the fountainhead of the family fortune, must have been this domestic enterprise. Dropping my crutch, I grabbed a bottle, which I dusted off with my shirtsleeve. As I sat at the foot of the stairs, I made a vain attempt at gouging out the cork with a rusty old nail. In the end, I smashed off the neck of the bottle against the stair banister. Lukewarm spirits flowed over my hand.

"It was no turpentine. It had the heavenly aroma of slivovitz brandy in its prime. And thanks to the jagged edge of the bottle, I cut my lip on the very first sip. The liquid amber inside the bottle was stained mahogany from my blood. I took another sip and held it on my tongue. It was so well-matured, so deceptively smooth, that I couldn't have known how potent it was. I took a long guzzle. Then another. Before I knew what had happened, the bottle was almost half-empty. It might have been just some interaction between the brandy and the dope I'd taken to ease the pain in my leg, but it left me stunned at the foot of the stairs. I haven't a clue how

long I sat there; all I remember is what felt like an awesome wind blowing through my head and, finally, thinking that my skull was about to pop. I got up, forgetting about my fractured thighbone, forgetting about my cast. My legs drove me madly around the cellar, plowing down everything in my path, till I'd made a full circle. Back at the foot of the stairs, another compulsion got hold of me: using my crutch as a club, I went up and down the rows of bottles, smashing them one by one. But I quickly lost patience with such a systematic method of destruction. I was aching for a more cataclysmic effect; I set to hurling the bottles into the corner, two and three at a time. All the while, I was gripped with convulsions of laughter. How many hundreds of bottles I smashed, I don't know. There was nothing left in the end but a mountain of broken glass in the corner. The whole floor was swamped; the atmosphere reeked of ethanol. The destruction was total. I had made a world and was pleased with what I saw.

"But before I could even catch my breath, another compulsion got hold of me: to set my ancestral home on fire. After all, it was mine to burn if I wanted. Thanks to that ethanol swamp, I knew I could burn the château from top to bottom in nothing flat. There was only one thing I needed: a match. I stormed upstairs and scoured the whole château -- every floor, every cupboard and drawer, every dark hole and corner -- but I couldn't find a single lousy match! I ended up in my parents' old bedroom. It was a rat's nest of decaying luxury, but I

hardly gave it a passing glance. I shut my eyes and sat down in an armchair, holding my aching head in my hands to stop the feeling that my skull was about to pop. It wasn't until I opened my eyes that I caught a glimpse of myself in my father's old shaving mirror, propped on a washstand in the corner. Pouncing, I smashed the mirror to bits with my crutch; then I set to charging from room to room, up and down stairs, smashing every last mirror I could find in the whole château. At last, I collapsed on the hallway floor, panting like a dog. It was in this state that I came to a terrible conclusion: I would never destroy my ancestral home until I destroyed myself; the more I resisted my ancestry, the tighter it held me in its grip. The only alternative was to escape and never come back.

"The next thing I knew, I was outside, fighting my way through a jungle of weeds and brambles into the yard. As soon as I reached the newly built privy with its shiny tin roof, I threw my crutches down. I thrust my shoulder against the privy in a final burst of rage. It crashed on its side at the foot of the yard wall. My heart was pounding like mad. I fell on the ground in a sweat. There I lay till I caught my breath and the warmth of the sun on my back caused me to look up.

"Above me towered the chestnut tree; its massive limbs spread against the sky; its leaves stirred gently in the breeze. I got up without the help of my crutches. My mind looked on passively as my physical body made its way

to the foot of the chestnut tree. An explosion of brute strength carried me, cast and all, up the tree to my hidden perch. Through my curtain of leaves I scanned the neighbour's sunken garden. I saw the doves on top of their pillar. I saw Yasminka...all alone. She stood on a stepstool, clutching a wicker basket, plucking grapes from a vine that clung to a trellis behind her cottage. I longed to take hold of her young body -- to sink my hands into her flesh. Somehow, I had to get to her.

"I scrambled down from the chestnut tree, grabbing hold of my crutches, and scanned the high stone wall between me and the sunken garden. The top was a metre out of my reach. Then the toppled privy caught my eye. It lay face-down at the foot of the yard wall. I hoisted myself up onto its back. Tearing off my shirt, I folded it twice and draped it over the top of the wall where jagged shards of glass stuck out. I dropped my crutches down before me. Swinging my cast up over the wall, I let my body roll over the top; then, hanging down by the tail of my shirt, I landed as silent as a cat in the sunken garden.

"Still perched unwarily on her stepstool, Yasminka was facing away at the trellis. I snuck up behind her and leaned on my crutches. She was wearing a violet sundress, filling her basket with bunches of grapes. I stood behind her, breathing heavily, watching her work for a minute or so. She suddenly froze and dropped her basket. Her hand still hovered in midair, clutching a bunch of grapes. She turned around with her mouth agape, her eyes open wide. It

didn't occur to her to come down from her stepstool; she gawked at me standing there, naked from the waist up. From the demonic glare in my eye, she must have thought I'd come seeking revenge; not two months had passed since I'd come to blows with her raging mother in the potato patch.

"She burst into tears: 'Go away! I swear, I never called the police! Just for you, I disobeyed my mother.'

"Whatever she meant by this little outburst, it didn't prove anything to me; the only testimony that mattered was my own:

"'I've come to reveal my true identity,' I said, 'to confess that I am the beneficiary of a vast fortune, of which the castle beyond the wall is scarcely a crumb.'

"Yasminka stood stock-still on her stepstool with a bunch of grapes in her hand, in awe of the freshly-crowned monarch who swaggered across the sunken garden on crutches. She saw him halt at the foot of the pillar with a demonic glare in his eye. He raised his crutch to bludgeon a brood of nestling doves. Panic-stricken, the brood took wing from their nest. With many a pitch and a plunge, they ascended into the sky on their maiden flight. The weakest fought the wind in vain; she failed to keep pace with her sister doves who soared o'er the trees. Ere long, she spun helpless. A buzzard plummeted down from above to snatch her up in his talons and spirited her away.

"When I hobbled back across the garden, I found Yasminka melting in tears, still holding a bunch of grapes in

her hand. I leaned on my crutches and watched as she buried her face in the grapes and turned away. She wailed: 'You beast!' Her voice was muted by the grapes. 'We'll never see those doves again!'

"She halted her blubbering long enough to make a clumsy attempt at hurling the grapes at my face. But I snatched them in midair and tossed them aside. Coming up from behind, I kissed her between the shoulder blades. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but they were just a bunch of pigeons.' My hand, as if of its own accord, crept up between her calves, exploring above the hemline of her dress. Her knees clamped together (coquette that she was) as if I would give up so easily. She sighed when I wrapped my arms round her waist and nuzzled my face against her buttocks. She moaned as I ran my hands along her rib cage and fondled her small firm breasts.

"'Not here,' she whimpered, pressing her cheek against the trellis. 'My mother will catch us!'

"So, what could I do? I managed to lure her down from her stepstool. I convinced her to give up picking grapes to come with me to the falls of the river Kakovnik. We left the garden and went down a path in front of the cottage. I hobbled behind her with remarkable dexterity -- given the fact that I was on crutches -- and contemplated her slender torso and naked shoulders as she made her way down the slope. Down the path a ways, we changed course and cut through a grove of pines; then we came to the headwaters of the river, where the falls begin a thunder-

ing descent from lake Kakovnik and plummet step by step down a series of rocky ledges. We followed a narrow dirt path along the steps of the falls, pausing now and then to toss stones into glittering turquoise pools of all shapes which the falls had hollowed out on every step. We threaded our way toward the bottom; but only halfway there, we came to a point where we couldn't go any further. Our path was blocked by a rock the size of a two-storey house. There was no way around it. All we could do was climb over it.

"That was the idea when Yasminka mounted the face of the rock and helped me up by tugging the end of my crutch. We stood on top of the huge black boulder, looking down the other side. It was hellishly steep, not to mention an unhealthy plunge to the earth. If nothing else, we had a dazzling view of the falls. We inched our way along a ridge, onto an oblong projection of rock as flat as a table. Below us, the falls cascaded into a glittering pool. We stopped to rest on the table of rock.

"To set the scene a little more vividly, let us imagine the opening bars of the overture from Povera Butterfly played at a feverish crescendo on the geigenwerck. As I caught my breath and smelt the pine-scented breeze, I reached a level of fleshly desire more overwhelming than I could remember. I was thrilled by the burning glow in Yasminka's cheeks. She didn't pretend to resist when my hand came between her thighs. In spite of the weight of

my plaster cast and our position on the boulder with its perilous drop to the pool, Yasminka was happy as a clam to receive my seed...not to mention the wonderful view she commanded of the falls of the river Kakovnik.

"She was just getting over the mountain when her secret got out at last: she had such an eye-popping, earth-shaking climax that her left eye-socket disgorged a glass prosthesis. Her hand flew out to catch the glass eye. But she groped in vain. The eye went rolling across the table of rock and plunged off the edge of the boulder, into the glittering pool below. She struggled to break away from my clutches, pawing my chest and clawing my back, but I had her pinned against the rock. She went hoarse from screaming at me to release her -- but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't tear myself away from my monocular dreamgirl, Yasminka.

"I don't know how long it took for the candle to burn down. In the course of time, Yasminka managed to drag herself out from under my dead weight and climbed off the boulder. Then I heard her sobbing below. I crept to the edge of the table of rock and peered down at her. Holding the hem of her dress, she gathered it up at her waist as one hand groped for her prosthesis at the bottom of the pool. She was more captivating than ever; it was a torture to see her and not be able to get her into my clutches. So overwhelming was my lust that, in spite of my cast, I succeeded in climbing down from the rock. I limped to the mossy brink of the pool. She was still out of reach. She

faced away sobbing. I had half a mind to plunge in and seize her gorgeous buttocks; thanks to my plaster cast, however, such a venture was out of the question.

"As far as Yasminka was concerned, no distance could have been safe enough. She shrieked: 'Get away from me!' At the sight of her sobbing, groping for her prosthesis, with her buttocks up in the air, I started laughing myself hoarse; my crutches flew out from under me; I toppled over the brink of the pool. Then, lying flat on my back in the water, I watched as one of my crutches drifted away with the current. It vanished, pitching down the falls. My plaster cast started turning to mush; it exposed my leg to the rush of the current. The partly meshed bone-tissue of my femur snapped like a twig. I gnawed at my lip. When I couldn't stand the pain any longer, I burst into tears. This was just the start of a whole new adventure which would land me back in the hospital. It was all the same to Yasminka; she kept shrieking: 'Get away from me!' She couldn't have cared if I lived or died. All she cared about was her damned prosthesis.

"At last, she retrieved it from the pool. She rolled it across her palm, inspecting it for damage. Sobbing, she twisted it into its socket. Her face was like stone as she waded out of the pool and left me floating helplessly in the water, crying for mercy. From the bank, she glared back at me. And what a hellish glare it was with that slash on her cornea. Turning away, she left me to drown

in the waterfall. Not until that evening did a wandering gypsy find me lying unconscious by the pool...."

At our table in Caffé Campo Santo, the Sardinian and I sat staring numbly at the Vlach.

"And that was the last I ever did see of my monocular dreamgirl," he said. "Hats off to the man who didn't fail her in her initiation to love. Even as we speak, she may be carrying my child!"

He hushed. With a grimace, he suddenly shook his fist at the street: the Icелander was coming down Via Veneto. "What evil wind could have blown her back here?" he said.

She approached our table aloofly. The Vlach said: "Why has God sent you back here?"

Leaning against the back of her chair, she said: "I'm afraid I left something here." She bent down, groping under the chair. Her hand emerged at once, triumphantly clutching a thirty-centimetre long, rhinestone-encrusted cigarette holder. "Don't mind me," she said, straight faced. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

We looked at her, numb with disbelief. Then the Vlach gave a grunt and resumed his story: "It's time I confessed what a tragedy my life has been. Until now, I've barely mentioned my childhood." Peering into his crumpled hat, he seemed to grope for some nebulous memory.

Nibbling the tip of her cigarette holder, keeping her eyes peeled on the Vlach, the Icелander slowly cracked a smile. By stealth, she sank into the empty chair. Then she put a cigarette into the holder and struck a match. On the

very first puff, she broke into a violent, hacking cough. In spite of a thick wall of smoke, her eyes never left the Vlach as he tried to invoke his nebulous past.

"My stinking childhood...." he said. "For so many years I've been picking my brains for the bits and pieces of my past...." He creased his brow; a look of possession came over his face. "You've all heard about the chestnut tree. Another story comes to mind. It was one summer day when I was twelve: the time I hid myself up in the tree for thirty hours. What a cruel trick to play on my parents! In fact, I was keeping out of my father's reach to avoid my daily thrashing. No-one could find me. Not my mother; not my dear old father: he stalked around the garden, clenching his horsewhip in his fist for what seemed an eternity. With my mother, he spent the whole afternoon searching the valley of Kakovnik. That night, the police came looking for me. All the while, I was hiding behind my curtain of leaves, nearly peeing my pants from trying not to laugh.

"At the end of one night, sitting cold and half-starved on my perch, the amusement began to fade. I nearly faded away myself. At least, I thought I was going to die -- all alone in that chestnut tree, where my corpse would never be found. I got to wondering what had happened to my parents. Why had they given up searching for me? Not that I was dying to see them again; but I would have been glad to submit to a thrashing in exchange for food and

shelter.

"At daybreak, a miracle occurred. The turtledoves darted across the yard-wall to the chestnut tree -- just this once -- to flock with me. I was one of their brood, cooing mournfully, sharing the condition of my soul. If my contentment was short-lived, it was because I cooed too mournfully. The turtledoves darted back across the wall to the sunken garden, leaving me all alone in the tree, looking down at their nest on top of the pillar.

"As always, the midday sun brought that pretty young widow out of her thatch-roofed cottage. My heart raced wildly as I peered through the curtain of leaves, unable to tear my eyes away from her naked breasts. Her little girl knelt by her side in the long green grass, in the same state of nature, tugging the widow's long golden braids. Soon the child got restless; she tumbled dreamily in the grass till she came to the foot of the ancient pillar and stood on her tiptoes, trying to catch a glimpse of the doves. My sight went dim. The whole sunken garden took on an aspect of unreality. Even the widow became an apparition, floating across the grass to her daughter's side at the foot of the pillar. She put a lump of black bread in the little girl's hand and lifted her up on her shoulders. They tore the bread into bits, tossing them up to the doves.

"My head was spinning; I couldn't see the curtain of leaves; I thought the mother and child could see me, that they could hear me breathing and see the perspiration on

my forehead. All of a sudden, as if my perch swept out from under me, I crashed through the curtain of leaves, plunging down to the widow's feet in the garden.

"When I came to, I was flat on my back. The widow's face came into focus, floating above like an apparition. The gentle murmur of her voice brought me back to my senses. But I couldn't understand a word she said; as it happened, we spoke no common language; we gave up on words. The widow kept sobbing as she looked at me; she smiled softly through her tears, then picked me up as gently as one would pick up a bird with a broken wing, and carried me out of the garden, into the thatch-roofed cottage. There, she put on a loose-fitting gown and gave me a good looking-over under the bright kitchen lights.

"Except for a few scuffs and bruises, I was as healthy as ever. My only complaints were fatigue and hunger. I wondered why the widow couldn't hold back her tears as she looked at me. But she finally got hold of herself. She sat me down at a big wooden table and served me a meal of lentils, dates and sardines. I washed it all down with a glass of syrupy muscatel. I've never experienced a more contented moment. The little girl gawked across the table at me while I ate. The widow watched me with folded hands, her long golden pigtailed slung over her shoulders. By now, she'd given up trying to hide her tears and I'd given up wondering what upset her so. I was too tired to think.

"I nodded off, but the widow caught me in time to keep my head from thudding against the table. She led me into a small sunny room where the three of us snuggled up in the middle of an enormous feather bed. A latticed curtain covered the window, billowing softly in the breeze; it filtered the sun so that it dappled us half in light and half in darkness.

"Well, two weeks went by. I took for granted that life would go on just the same, that we would stay together forever: a trio of nudists, spending the days in the sunken garden, the nights snuggled up on that vast feather bed. We would love and worship one another without exchanging a single word. Whenever the widow shed a tear as she looked at my face, I would console her with a hug. I would not stop to wonder why she sheltered me; nor would I wonder what had become of my evil parents.

"It was on a typical afternoon, spent picking grapes and tossing bread crumbs to the doves, that our little trio was torn apart. Lunch was barely half-eaten when Uncle Zoran and two detectives showed up at the door. With no explanation, they stormed in, forcing their way past the widow. She tore at her hair as the three of them seized me. Before I knew what had happened, they took me away in a car, leaving the widow and her little girl in tears at the cottage door...."

We sat, reflecting on what had been said, until the Icelander broke the silence: "You still haven't told us what became of your evil parents."

"It's not exactly a pleasant subject. Without wasting words, I'll have to go back to the night of my vigil in the chestnut tree. When my parents couldn't find me on the grounds of our estate, they searched Kakovnik high and low; they searched every grove, over every hillock; they combed the valley up and down. The story goes that a band of gypsies who were down by the falls at twilight happened to witness their untimely end; you know, just one of those freakish accidents that happen from time to time: they were combing the path by the steps of the falls -- no doubt, calling my name so loud that it echoed through the heavens -- when a meteorite the size of a two-storey house fell from the sky and crushed them dead.

"At any rate, the widow must have known from the moment I fell from my tree that she was harbouring the freshly orphaned son of her freshly dead neighbours. News of the accident spread like wildfire across the country; it put Kakovnik on the map; which explains why the widow couldn't look at me without dissolving in tears. She hadn't the heart to turn me over to the authorities; that is, until Uncle Zoran hunted me down.

"I spent the next six months held captive in the Ljubostinja monastery while Uncle Zoran took his sweet time deciding my destiny. Little did I know I'd be sent overseas to some godforsaken corner of Canada -- to be raised and indoctrinated in a Jesuit pensionnat -- to come of age under the guidance of his holiness, Abbé Derville, who

claimed to have breakfast with Saint Thérèse de Lisieux every morning. You need not ask where I got my aversion to the clergy. If fate had been kinder, I would be telling a different story: I would have stayed with that pretty young widow in the thatch-roofed cottage forever. She would have raised me as a son, a faithful companion to her daughter, a defender of her--"

The Vlach's jaw suddenly dropped, as if something had cut him to the heart. "Of course!" he said. "The widow's daughter!"

"Well?" said the Iclander.

"She was the prettiest little girl I ever saw...but there was something about her...something strange...." He was gazing into his hat. His wavering voice became almost inaudible: "Who could forget? She wore...over her left eye...a violet patch."

The drizzle had let up for some time now. The Vlach kept gazing into his hat while the rest of us looked up at a widening crack of blue sky. A pleasant breeze began to pick up, but, within a few minutes, a deathly stillness took its place. We saw the crack of blue sky disappear as, high above, two enormous cloud banks collided together. Such a rumble of thunder ensued that no-one could hear the first hailstones crashing down on the pavement. Then came an onslaught of hailstones like chicken eggs, plummeting everywhere around us, making tatters of our umbrella.

My three friends panicked. They left their chairs to clear out of Caffé Campo Santo. Myself, I sat tight. I was sorry we hadn't had a chance to say farewell. I watched the Sardinian dash up and down the adjacent stretch of Via Veneto, waving his arms like a lunatic, shouting, "Tassi! Tassi!" -- without success; no taxi driver in his right mind would have been out in such a storm. At last, the Sardinian dashed out of sight. I hoped he would have enough sense to get out of the storm. I wondered if he would make it back to his island and carry on in his capacity as the prophet of the cups.

Afar, the Icelander made her way up Via Veneto -- in the opposite direction the Sardinian had taken. I wondered what would become of her. Would she found a sect? Gather disciples? Build a new world on the ruins of the old? The Vlach hobbled close behind her on crutches, in the limbo between survival and extinction, as it were. I had to wonder what would become of him as well. Would he go on raging against his ancestral spirits? Would the Icelander try to save him from himself? Would they evolve into something new? Neither of them paid the storm any mind; they both kept up an unyielding pace. In her fist, the Icelander still clenched the impossibly long, rhinestone-encrusted cigarette holder.

Hailstones had fast made ribbons of the umbrella over my head. A frantic dog scurried by in the street; it knew well enough to take shelter under a nearby table. I did

the same. Given the circumstances, I didn't feel so ridiculous. I huddled alone with the geigenwerck, trying to make up my mind what to do. Would I return to the Basilica of the Atracuras, climb to the heights of its crumbling bell tower, only to put an end to the geigenwerck, dashing its vitals out on the pavement of Via Veneto? Would I drop it off the Ben Trovato bridge? Would I take it back to Yamagata?

This was the crisis for which I had spent my life preparing. I'd never felt so alone in my life as I did then, crouching under that table, with hailstones crashing all around me, so faraway from Fräulein von Helslope; my mentor, Maestro Spawnstretto; my father, the psychopathologist; Piccione Viaggiatore; the Sardinian; the Iclander; and the Vlach. A few days before, in Yamagata, I couldn't have dreamed it would come to this. Despite all the musical mutations that had miscarried in embryo; despite Fräulein von Helslope trying to convince me that I was labouring in vain; despite the countless hours of lost sleep, I had persevered -- an individualist with total dedication -- with no idea of what I was trying to create.

Now I knew the eternally elusive answer to everything: not to think; just to surrender to the mystery of becoming, the absurdity of fate. Again, I imagined that the geigenwerck was expanding and contracting within its case. Whether I had borne it into the world or it had given birth to itself, whether or not it was my invention, it was more akin to an accident than a brainchild. There had

been no conscious plan that I was aware of; only the urge to give birth to something nonhuman, higher, nearer perfection, out of the bones of old instruments. Why couldn't the utterly unpredictable chance that had given birth to the geigenwerck give birth to something new? Perhaps a new and beautiful soul lay hidden within its bones: a seed in utero; a wildflower, waiting to burst into bloom. I wondered what sort of noise it would make.